

FRIENDSHIP, FREEDOM, ETHICS, AFFINITY

*TOWARDS REVOLUTION
& DECOLONIALITY
THROUGH RELATIONALITY*





Excerpts drawn from

“Joyful Militancy:

Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times”

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gathered by **LA SELVA**



There are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt. —Audre Lorde

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To become what we need to each other, and to find
power in friendship, is to become dangerous.
—anonymous

I have a circle of friends and family with whom I am
radically vulnerable and trust deeply—we call it coevolution
through friendship.
—adrienne maree brown

THE URGENCY OF MAKING KIN

Empire works in part by constantly attenuating and poisoning relationships. Kinship has been enclosed within the nuclear family, freedom within the individual, and values within morality. Together these enclosures sap relationships of their intensity and their transformative potential. If relationships are what compose the world and our lives, then the “free individual” of modern Western capitalism (an implicitly straight, white, able-bodied, cis-gendered, property-owning man) is a sad and lonely vision: a strange fiction invented by a violent and fearful society, walled in by morality and self-interest. This is an uprooted being who sees his rootlessness—his very incapacity to make and sustain transformative connections— as a feat of excellence.

We suggest that Empire’s grip on relationships is being broken by new and resurgent forms of intimacy through which people come to depend on each other, defend each other, and become dangerous together. Friendship as freedom, in this story, names interdependent relationships as a source of collective power, a dangerous closeness that Empire works to eradicate through relentless violence, division, competition, management, and incitements to see ourselves as isolated individuals or nuclear family units.

Spinoza helps us dissolve the fiction of the modern Western in-

dividual—and its oscillation between self-interest and morality—into a relational ethics. A lot of people already navigate their everyday lives in this way, attuned and responsive to their own situations and relationships. Along these lines, we draw on a minor current of anarchism associated with Gustav Landauer and others that centers relationships as the basis of resistance and movement. We bring these currents into conversation with Indigenous worldviews and practices, along with the ethical questions that are being asked and answered in a multiplicity of ways, in different places, around decolonizing relationships between settlers and Indigenous people. This conversation always includes questions of how to sever harmful relationships. Freedom, in this sense, is not just the capacity to generate “good” relationships, but also to draw lines in the sand and fight.

FRIENDSHIP IS THE ROOT OF FREEDOM

“These are not just words; they are clues and prods to earthquakes in kin making that are not limited to Western family apparatuses, heteronormative or not.”

—Donna Haraway

Freedom and friendship used to mean the same thing: intimate, interdependent relationships and the commitment to face the world together. At its root, relational freedom isn’t about being unrestricted: it might mean the capacity for interconnectedness and attachment. Or mutual support and care. Or shared gratitude and openness to an uncertain world. Or a new capacity to fight alongside others. But this is not what freedom has come to mean under Empire.

Look for the dictionary definition of “freedom” today and you’ll find rights, absences and lack of restrictions at the core, applied to an isolated individual. Here are some of its definitions in the Oxford English Dictionary:

*The power or right to act, speak, or think as one
wants:*

“we do have some freedom of choice”

The state of not being imprisoned or enslaved:

“the shark thrashed its way to freedom”

The state of not being subject to or affected by (something undesirable):

“government policies to achieve freedom from want”

At bottom, all of these definitions are about getting away from external restriction or influence: being unhindered, unaffected, independent. Under capitalism, freedom is especially associated with free markets and the free agent who chooses based on individual preferences. In spite of colonization and capitalism, this vapid form of freedom still can't get a foothold in many parts of the world. Even in Europe, where so many tools of colonization were refined, the roots of freedom were different. Centuries ago, some Europeans had a more relational conception of freedom, which wasn't just about the absence of external constraints, but also about our immersion in the relationships that sustain us and make us thrive.

“Freedom” and “friend” share the same early Indo-European root: *fri-, or *pri-, meaning “love.” This root made its way into Gothic, Norse, Celtic, Hindi, Russian, and German. A thousand years ago, the Germanic word for “friend” was the present participle of the verb freon, “to love.” This language also had an adjective, *frija-. It meant “free” as in “not in slavery,” where the reason to avoid slavery was to be among loved ones. Frija meant “beloved, belonging to the circle of one's beloved friends and family.” As the Invisible Committee writes in *To Our Friends*,

“‘Friend’ and ‘free’ in English... come from the same Indo-European root, which conveys the idea

of a shared power that grows. Being free and having ties was one and the same thing. I am free because I have ties, because I am linked to a reality greater than me.”

A few centuries later, freedom became untied from connectedness. The seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes imagined freedom as nothing more than an “absence of opposition” possessed by isolated, selfish individuals. For Hobbes, the free man is constantly armed and on guard: “When going to sleep, he locks his doors; when even in his house he locks his chests.” The free individual lives in fear and can only feel secure when he knows there are laws and police to protect him and his possessions. He is definitely he, because this individual is also founded on patriarchal male supremacy and its associated divisions of mind/body, aggression/submission, rationality/ emotion, and so on. His so-called autonomy is inseparable from his exploitation of others.

When peasants were “freed,” during this period, it often meant that they had been forced from their lands and their means of subsistence, leaving them “free” to sell their labor for a wage in the factories or starve. It is no coincidence that these lonely conceptions of freedom arose at the same time as the European witch trials, the enclosure of common lands, the rise of the transatlantic slave trade, and the colonization and genocide of the Americas. At the same time as the meaning of freedom was divorced from friendship and connection, the lived connections between people and places were being dismembered.

As Empire was enclosing lands and bodies, it was overseeing the enclosure of thought as well. The Age of Reason was marked by a new kind of knowledge that could subdue and control nature and the human body, enabling capitalist rationalization and work discipline. Time and space would become measurable, stable, and fixed. Bodies were no longer conduits for magical forces but machines to be harnessed for production. Plants, animals, and other nonhuman creatures were no longer kin but objects to be dissected and consumed.

Even among intellectuals in Europe, not everyone agreed with Hobbes's fearful vision of freedom and the divisions imposed by Cartesian thought. Descartes's contemporary, Baruch Spinoza, articulated a philosophy in which people were inherently intertwined with their world... Most importantly, for us, Spinoza's philosophy is grounded in affect. Things are not defined by what they are but by what they do: how they affect and are affected by the forces of the world. In this way, capabilities are not fixed for all time but are constantly shifting. This is a fundamental departure from the inherently ableist and ageist perspective that measures all bodies in relation to the norm of a "healthy," "mature," or "able" body. When starting right from a body's material specificity, without any intervening "should," learning becomes fundamentally different: rather than detached categorization or observation of stable properties, it happens through active experimentation in shared, ever-changing situations.

FROM MORALITY TO ETHICS

By creating a philosophy based in affect, Spinoza initiated a radical critique of ruling institutions and authorities and the ways they exercise control through subjection, including toxic morality inherited from centuries of Christianity, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and the state. But Spinoza's philosophy did not just undermine Empire's dominant morality in order to replace it with a different one; it undermined morality itself. His worldview was at odds with any notion of an ultimate ground of right and wrong that was uniform for everyone, abstracted from the lively flux of relationships and situations. For Spinoza, life was an exploration of the forces of the world, not conformity to a fixed ideal.

For moralists this is dangerous because there's no guarantee against evil, and no ultimate foundation for moral judgment. Yet the Spinozan lineage is not about everyone doing whatever they please, according to isolated

interests and preferences. On the contrary, recognizing our interconnectedness means becoming capable of more fidelity to our web of relations and our situations, not less. This fidelity is not moral; it is ethical.

Ethics is often spoken of colloquially as an individual morality: a static set of principles held by individuals (ethical consumption, codes of ethics, and so on). In fact, dictionary definitions conflate ethics with the “moral principles that govern a person’s behavior.” But as Deleuze explains, a Spinozan conception of ethics results in a completely different set of questions:

“There’s a fundamental difference between Ethics and Morality. Spinoza doesn’t make up a morality, for a very simple reason: he never asks what we must do, he always asks what we are capable of, what’s in our power, ethics is a problem of power, never a problem of duty. In this sense Spinoza is profoundly immoral. Regarding the moral problem, good and evil, he has a happy nature because he doesn’t even comprehend what this means. What he comprehends are good encounters, bad encounters, increases and diminutions of power. Thus he makes an ethics and not at all a morality.”

Whereas morality asks and answers the question: “what should one do?” a Spinozan ethics asks: “what is one capable of?” Unlike the cold abstraction of morality, a body’s capacities can only be discovered through attunement and experimentation, starting right where you are. You never know until you try. In trying, whether you “succeed” or “fail,” you will have learned and changed, and the situation will have changed, even if only slightly. This sounds simple, and in many ways it is. It speaks to the ways that many of us already try to navigate our everyday lives: not by adhering to fixed commandments but by learning to inhabit our own situations in ways that make us more capable and more jointly

alive.

Someone gets in touch with bird migrations, insects, weather patterns: they affect her more and more deeply as she times into their rhythms, over months and years. They begin to make her up. The loss is palpable as fewer return each year, and her hatred of the destruction grows alongside her love of the few remaining refuges for nonhuman creatures where she lives. Her rage and despair finds resonance with others, similarly entwined, and they figure out how to fight together. This is neither individual self-interest nor moral altruism. It is relational ethics: the willingness to nurture and defend relationships.

Two friends fold their lives together; they draw new capacities out of each other. They hurt each other, and they work through it, emerging more intertwined than before. They are no longer sure which ideas and mannerisms were “their own” and which belonged to the friend. They know each other’s triggers and tendencies intimately. One finds himself in trouble, and the other drops everything to help, at great personal risk. But this risk and sacrifice is not because it is morally right or because they have calculated that it is in their own self-interest. It is not even felt as a choice; it is something drawn out of them.

...Spinozan ethics is attuned to the singularity and openness of each situation: what are we capable of here and now, together, at this time, in this place, amid the relations in which we are embedded?

From this perspective, it is not about creating self-contained units but about participating in complex, shifting, relational processes. We always begin in the middle: amid our situations, in our neighborhoods, with our own penchants, habits, loves, complicities, and connections. There is no individual that comes before the dense network of relations in which we are embedded. This relational space eludes the traps of individual self-interest and moral duty. It is a space beyond isolated individuals and altruistic saviors. We are always participating in the making

of our worlds and being made by them. From this perspective, freedom can mean nothing other than the ethical expansion of what were capable of—what we're able to feel and do together. In this vein, the Invisible Committee writes,

“Freedom isn't the act of shedding our attachments, but the practical capacity to work on them, to move around in their space, to form or dissolve them ... the freedom to uproot oneself has always been a fantasmic freedom. We can't rid ourselves of what binds us without at the same time losing the very thing to which our forces would be applied.”

Freedom here is not the absence of restriction or attachment but the capacity to become more active in shaping our attachments. This becoming-active is not about controlling things but about learning to participate in their flow, forming intense bonds through which we become implicated in each other's struggles and capacities. Within the Spinozan current, friendship is being revalued: not as a bond between individuals but as an ethical relation that remakes us, together, in an ongoing process of becoming otherwise. Similarly, feminist philosopher Donna Haraway has argued that “making kin” across divides of species, nation, gender, and other borders is perhaps the most urgent task today. Through friendship or kinship we undo ourselves and become new, in potentially radical and dangerous ways. In this sense, friendship is at the root of freedom.

WHAT CAN FRIENDSHIP DO?

“Friendship will be the soil from which a new politics will emerge.”
—Ivan Illich

Can friendship be revalued as a radical, transformative form of kinship? We are not sure, but we want to try. Maybe the concept of friendship is already too colonized by liberalism and capitalism. Under neoliberalism, friendship is a banal affair of private preferences: we hang out, we share hobbies, we make small talk. We become friends with those who are already like us, and we keep each other comfortable rather than becoming different and more capable together. The algorithms of Facebook and other social networks guide us towards the refinement of our profiles, reducing friendship to the click of a button. This neoliberal friend is the alternative to hetero- and homonormative coupling: “just friends” implies a much weaker and insignificant bond than a lover could ever be. Under neoliberal friendship, we don’t have each other’s backs, and our lives aren’t tangled up together. But these insipid tendencies do not mean that friendships are pointless, only that friendship is a terrain of struggle. Empire works to usher its subjects into flimsy relationships where nothing is at stake and to infuse intimacy with violence and domination. Perhaps friendship can be revalued in an expansive but specific way: friends, chosen family, and other kin intimately connected in a web of mutual support.

SOLIDARITY BEGINS AT HOME

While friendship is made vapid by Empire, coupledness and the nuclear family become the container for all other forms of intimacy. As anti-racist, Indigenous, and autonomist feminists have shown, the nuclear family—where one generation of parents lives with one generation of children, separated from everyone else—is a recent invention of Empire. It was (and is) a crucial institution for the privatization and enclosure of life. It is also central to the maintenance of a culture of authoritarianism, abuse, and neglect that underpins heteropatriarchy and white supremacy. It evolved as a way of reproducing wage-laboring men through the unpaid labor of women. Violence against women and children within the family was condoned as part of a civilizing process, and it became a

conduit for intergenerational violence and for the accumulation of white wealth and property through inheritance.

Through feminist struggle, some of the most brutal, state-sanctioned violence of the nuclear family (such as legalized rape and abuse) have been challenged, but it remains a site of isolation and violence, for children in particular. One of its most brutal effects is that it makes other forms of intimacy difficult or unthinkable for many of us. Through suburbs and apartments designed for a privatized existence, the nuclear family is even coded into the built environment.

...As Silvia Federici writes,

“We also have a return to more extended types of families, built not on blood ties but on friendship relations. This, I think, is a model to follow. We are obviously in a period of transition and a great deal of experimentation, but opening up the family—hetero or gay—to a broader community, breaking down the walls that increasingly isolated it and prevented it from confronting its problems in a collective way is the path we must take not to be suffocated by it, and instead strengthen our resistance to exploitation. The denuclearisation of the family is the path to the construction of communities of resistance.”

These kinds of non-nuclear kinship networks have been sustained in the face of state terrorism and incarceration, residential and boarding schools, and Empire’s ongoing attempts to privatize and destroy non-nuclear kinship networks, extended families, and webs of relationship that include nonhuman kin. Nourishing and sustaining these communal forms of life throws into question some of the dominant ideas about what counts as political work, about separation of activism or organizing from everyday life. They challenge the segregation of kids from the rest of the

world (and from organizing and politics in particular) and the ways that elders are isolated and intergenerational connections are lost.

Creating intergenerational webs of intimacy and support is a radical act in a world that has privatized child-rearing, housing, subsistence, and decision making. Challenging the nuclear family is not about a puritanical rejection of anything that resembles it; it is about creating alternatives to its hegemony, to the dismembering of social relations, to the spatial division of people through suburbanization, incarceration, schooling, dispossession, and displacement. This entails the proliferation of relationships that may or may not be based on blood but are built on care and love. The Latin American political theorist Raul Zibechi argues that non-nuclear family and kinship networks are at the heart of Latin America's most transformative and militant movements, including those of Indigenous peoples, peasant farmers, landless and homeless movements, piqueteros, and women's and youth movements. These collective forms of life are based in new forms of dwelling, subsistence, and resistance. At the same time, Zibechi is clear that these are "only tendencies, aspirations, or attempts in the midst of social struggles". Relationships of mutual support are not a destination but a continual process of struggle.

As people renew intergenerational relationships and bring their whole lives into struggle, new forms of politics emerge. In this context, Silvia Federici argues,

"This is why the idea of creating 'self-reproducing' movements has been so powerful. It means creating a certain social fabric and forms of cooperative reproduction that can give continuity and strength to our struggles, and a more solid base to our solidarity. We need to create forms of life in which political activism is not separated from the task of our daily reproduction, so that relations of trust and commitment can develop

that today remain on the horizon. We need to put our lives in common with the lives of other people to have movements that are solid and do not rise up and then dissipate. Sharing reproduction, this is what began to happen within the Occupy Movement and what usually happens when a struggle reaches a moment of almost insurrectional power. For example, when a strike goes on for several months, people begin to put their lives in common because they have to mobilise all their resources not to be defeated.”

Federici here gets at the way in which care is not only a means of maintaining struggles but also a transformative part of struggle itself. While Empire works to privatize and individualize our daily lives, many movements are reproducing themselves more autonomously by collectivizing care: from cooking to cohabitation to learning to just being present with each other.

...In the context of queer, anti-racist disability justice, Mia Mingus speaks to the centrality of strong relationships for undoing oppression:

“Any kind of systematic change we want to make will require us to work together to do it. And we have to have relationships strong enough to hold us as we go up against something as powerful as the state, the medical industrial complex, the prison system, the gender binary system, the church, immigration system, the war machine, global capitalism.

Because we’re going to mess up. Of that I am sure. We cannot, on the one hand have sharp analysis about how pervasive systems of oppression and

violence are and then on the other hand, expect people to act like that's not the world we exist in. Of course there are times we are going to do and say oppressive things, of course we are going to hurt each other, of course we are going to be violent, collude in violence or accept violence as normal.

We must roll up our sleeves and start doing the hard work of learning how to work through conflict, pain and hurt as if our lives depended on it—because they do.”

THE ETHICS OF AFFINITY IN ANARCHISM

Ultimately, nourishing these kinds of intimacies means putting relationships before abstract political commitments and ideologies. At the same time, we think it is possible to recover relational currents within anti-authoritarian political traditions without appropriating the ideas and struggles of others. Within anarchism, the Spinozan current flows through Gustav Landauer's relational conception of anarchism. Landauer's philosophy ran against the grain of the dominant strands of revolutionary Marxism and anarchism of his time, which conceived revolution as a dramatic event that would take place in the future. Instead of envisioning a future event of transformation in which capitalism and the state would be destroyed and all of humanity could be liberated, Landauer insisted on the importance of a living, present anarchism and on transforming our relationships here and now.

Landauer also argued that the state's power lies not only with armies or police but also in its capacity to get us to govern ourselves and each other and to re-create its hierarchical and divisive relationships through our conduct: “A table can be overturned and a window can be smashed. However, those who believe that the state is also a

thing or a fetish that can be overturned or smashed are sophists and believers in the Word. The state is a social relationship; a certain way of people relating to one another. It can be destroyed by creating new social relationships; i.e., by people relating to one another differently.”

The state and capitalism are systems designed to amass wealth for a tiny minority, and while Empire's figureheads are people with names and addresses, others will replace them when they are gone. Instead of destroying Empire, Landauer raised the question of how to undo its hold on relationships and how to generate new and different relations in its place. This is an ethical question, not a moral one. Like Spinoza, he suggested that there was no single answer for everyone. He insisted that a notion of worldwide socialism-or anarchism was too totalizing and he recognized that other people and cultures would have different answers to the question of how to live...

In a way that resonates with many anti-authoritarian currents of today, Landauer refused to hold anarchism up as a single moral or ideological project that would free of humanity from oppression. But while refusing this universalizing project, Landauer was also critical of individualist anarchists like Max Stirner, who also refused morality but rooted his philosophy in the liberation of the individual ego or desire. In contrast, Landauer insisted that individual people could not be abstracted from their already existing relationships, values, and communities. Like the state, the self-enclosed individual is a fiction of Empire. “I” am already a crowd, enmeshed in others.

For Landauer, then, transformation was an immediate, situated, ethical project that could only be based on transforming ourselves, collectively, starting from where we are and seeking out affinities with others. “Only when anarchy becomes, for us, a dark, deep dream, not a vision attainable through concepts,” Landauer wrote, “can our ethics and our actions become one.”... Freedom is the capacity to grapple with some of the toxic habits and relationships fostered by Empire and

to “recover other ways of relating. This anarchism can only be an action or a process.

Anarchist political theorist Richard Day has drawn on Landauer, Kropotkin, and others to reveal a current of anarchism that is about the capacity to create immediate, living alternatives to the state, capitalism, morality, and Empire’s oppressive divisions. There are always forms of alliance and mutual aid that exceed Empire, from the ways plants and animals support each other symbiotically to everyday forms of cooperation and solidarity that crop up in spite of subjection. Day calls this the logic of affinity, which is “ever-present, even in the most advanced forms of (post)industrial bureaucratic control. It is not a dream, but an actuality; not something to be yearned for, but something to be noticed in operation everywhere, at every moment of every day. From this perspective, affinity can be discerned in every process of joyful transformation, large and small, in which people discover new capacities together, resist, invent, or activate something that is already in play. The capacity to carve out autonomous forms of life is always under attack by Empire and always resurfacing.

This concept of affinity is important to us because it gets at the way forms of life can connect based in shared commitments or desires without erasing differences. We follow Day in suggesting that there is an “affinity for affinity” among currents of Indigenous, anti-racist, anti-colonial, migrant justice, anarchist, feminist, ecological, queer, and autonomist currents of thought and practice: a penchant for linking up and supporting others based on shared values and commitments without trampling on each other’s autonomy. It can be seen, for example, in the Zapatistas’ vision of a world where many worlds fit.” Similarly, affinity is resonant with what Gloria Anzaldua calls “bridging” in *This Bridge We Call Home*:

“Bridging is the work of opening the gate to the stranger, within and without. To step across the threshold is to be stripped of the illusion of safety

because it moves us into unfamiliar territory and does not grant safe passage. To bridge is to attempt community, and for that we must risk being open to personal, political, and spiritual intimacy, to risk being wounded. Effective bridging comes from knowing when to close ranks to those outside our home, group, community, nation—and when to keep the gates open.”

These notions of affinity and bridging turn connection into an open-ended ethical question rather than an assumption, a goal, or a moral imperative. How do we relate? Who is this “we”? How do we affect each other? How and when to be open selectively? How might we be able to work together? These questions can only be answered by people in their own situations, as relationships unfold.

RELATIONALITY AND INDIGENOUS RESURGENCE

While we hope some of the affinities between Spinoza currents and Indigenous worldviews are emergent throughout this chapter, we want to spend some time thinking about them directly, especially in light of the relational conceptions we have outlined above. We think the relational conceptions of anarchism and friendship are resonant with (though necessarily distinct from) the lifeways of Indigenous peoples and many other societies that ground their worlds in connectedness to each other and the places they inhabit. For instance, writer and facilitator Zainab Amadahy offers a “relationship framework” that sees all life as fundamentally interconnected:

“We two-leggeds are inter-connected with each other and with other life on the planet—indeed, even to the planet itself and beyond. What we think, say, and do impacts, directly and indirectly, everything

and everyone else, which also affect us. We are further impacted by ancestors and will impact generations to come. Some of us even believe the reverse; that we can impact our ancestors and that our descendants impact us. In any case, we are clearly “in relationship” whether we acknowledge, fully understand and respect the concept or not.”

In our conversation with Glen Coulthard, he elaborated on his notion of place-based Indigenous ethics, which he calls “grounded normativity.” Coulthard shows how Indigenous resistance and values are literally grounded in the ongoing renewal of reciprocal relationships with land:

“I don’t think you come to these things on your own. We’re always kind of embedded and constituted by what’s around us. The whole book I wrote [Redskin, WhiteMasks] is based on this. I’m nothing; I’m just a product of the messy relationships that have formed me over time. And the point about the book is, we’ve tended to think of these relationships as anthropocentric. But we’re also shaped by the other-than-human relations that we’re thrown into, including relationships to place and land itself, and that can have an effect on our perspective; it can shape our normativities or what we think is right or wrong.”

Red Skin, White Masks shows how these relational webs have been foundational for Indigenous resurgence against settler colonialism and inexorably connected to the struggle over land:

Stated bluntly, the theory and practice of Indigenous anticolonialism, including Indigenous

anticapitalism, is best understood as a struggle primarily inspired by and oriented around the question of land—a struggle not only for land in the material sense, but also deeply informed by what the land as system of reciprocal relations and obligations can teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms.”

From this perspective, settler colonialism is an attack on Indigenous bodies and lands and on the grounded normativities that sustain them. It is an attack on Indigenous forms of life. For the same reason, Coulthard suggests that recovering, sustaining, and defending these forms of life becomes crucial to decolonization and resistance:

“... Now what we’re doing with Dechinta and other land-based-practices is we’re re-establishing—in an impure form because we’re all learning again—these different normative practices and worlds. And an important part of that is our relationship with land and other-than-human kin. So prefiguration is that emphasis on the importance of practice, and shaping even what we think our ends should be... it’s a very practical ethics... That’s not to devalue it; I actually hold this more valuable than abstract normative traditions where you have to dissociate yourself from your relationships in order to come up with pure principles, and that just results in a never-ending, always-there gap between what our ideals are and where our shitty world is at. It justifies that. In theory we have it nailed down, we just haven’t quite approximated that in our lives and institutions. In contrast, the grounded normativity, practical, prefigurative

starting place is saying no, those ideals are formed by what we do with our lives—by the relationships that we sustain and renew”

In a way that resonates with the relational conception of anarchism we explored above, Coulthard speaks to the importance of prefiguration: nurturing relationships informed by reciprocity with human and other-than-human-kin. Similarly, in her book *Dancing on Our Turtles Back*, Leanne Simpson writes that she is “not so concerned with how we dismantle the master’s house, that is, which set of theories we use to critique colonialism; but I am very concerned with how we (re)build our own house, or own houses.”

Recovering forms of life that have been subjugated or ruled out entails resistance and transgressing of laws or norms, but these negations are only what is visible from the perspective of Empire. It is clear that this is not resistance for its own sake or (only) because Empire is monstrous: resurgent forms of life are also about values and connections worth defending and nurturing.

In our conversation with Coulthard, he spoke to the potential of recovering Indigenous and non-Indigenous subjugated knowledge and forms of life and exploring affinities between them:

“Coulthard: ... So when you say “the problem with settler life is that it’s doing this,” I would say, in my more generous moments, that the hegemonic settler form of life is destroying Indigenous forms of life, but settlers have a whole host of other grounded normativities that have themselves been violently ruled out of existence. Whether that’s radical ecological stuff to anarchist stuff to Marxist stuff—whatever: they’re subaltern knowledges and practices. And there are affinities between those that we can map out and explore. There’s a lot within non-Indigenous

settler traditions that have suffered their own erasure that might be brought back to-the fore. And that's way better than the alternative, which is stealing what we've got. So what Foucault would refer to as a resurgence of subaltern knowledges. There's a rich history of overlap and affinities that I think need to be drawn on, and are crucial to avoid the violence of cultural appropriation and 'becoming Indigenous.'”

How can settlers and Indigenous people explore affinities between autonomous forms of life? What are the potentials and pitfalls of re-vitalizing non-Indigenous traditions (or inventing new ones) on stolen ground?... Instead of the narcissistic shame that impels settlers to ask for and demand absolution from Indigenous peoples, ethical questions can shift people towards active responsibility that is rooted in consent, as Indigenous people often emphasize. For us, this means finding the wiggle room of freedom—the capacity to work on our relationships—and participate in new and old forms of nurturance and resistance.

FRIENDSHIP AND FREEDOM HAVE SHARP EDGES

“If one would have a friend, then must one also be willing to wage war for him: and in order to wage war, one must be capable of being an enemy.”

—Friedrich Nietzsche

Working on relationships also means the capacity to dissolve and sever them and to block those which are harmful. Affinity and bridging require selective openness, with firm boundaries. In this sense, cultivating joyful militancy not only requires cultivating “good” relationships, but also severing those that are unhealthy and damaging. Coulthard drove this point home when we talked with him:

“Part of the effect that you see in joyful militancy is

an attentiveness to cultivating healthy relationships. And I think that that's great; there is a productive line of flight... but sometimes—and this is kind of what I've been thinking a lot about since writing about reconciliation and resentment—is that the whole idea of a “good relationship”—a positive one instead of a negative one—is almost entirely co-opted by relationship-destroying structures that entrench violence, dispossession, disappearance, all these things, where we're always compelled to be productive. It's a compulsion that's insisted on and that is done asymmetrically across certain bodies. So it's a demand that's placed on us as Indigenous peoples, even in terms of having a conversation. It can even be about tone: your tone is negative....

Some relationships are just bullshit, and we shouldn't be in them. We should actually draw lines in the sand more willingly, in order to avoid the kind of status quo outcome that's caused by the compulsion to always be in a positive relationship to others. Others might suck. We shouldn't be relating to them; we should be fighting them; we should be seeking to destroy them in some circumstances.

Because their whole identity, their whole form of life is predicated on our negation. So that's why, in Canada, Canadians can't cease to exist in the sense that they understand themselves, because it's predicated on a genocidal relationship. And there can be no mutual recognition, there can be no mutual respect, because the relationship itself negates that possibility. And that's a pretty somber situation. It's not a joyful acknowledgment.”

Relational freedom necessarily includes undoing destructive rela-

tionships, dissolving or attacking depleting or harmful forces. Freedom is the capacity to make friends and enemies, to be open and to have firm boundaries. Joyful, deeply transformative relationships are only possible through vulnerability and trust, but they also entail the risk of being deeply hurt. In this context, Mia Mingus speaks to the importance of a kind of love that is assertive and accountable:

“What I ’m talking about is reinventing how we love each other and knowing that solidarity is love, collaboration is love. And really, isn’t that what queerness is about: loving? I am talking about growing and cultivating a deep love that starts with those closest to us and letting it permeate out. Starting with our own communities. Building strong foundations of love.

And I just want to be clear, I am not talking about love that isn’t accountable. I am not talking about staying in harmful and dangerous or abusive relationships. The kind of love I want us to grow is accountable and assertive. Really, I am talking about collective love, where we look out for each other.”

For this kind of collective love to exist, sometimes it is necessary to sever relationships. Sometimes friendship and close bonds are a messy mix of closeness, struggle, and distance. In this sense, Empire destroys our capacity to identify enemies too: morality, policing, law, and prisons are all designed to monopolize the power to decide whose actions are right and wrong, and how they should be dealt with.

For the same reason, if reduced to an imperative to always have “good relationships” with everyone and everything, joyful militancy and friendship become simplistic, reactionary, and colonial in their erasure of

power relations and systemic violence. This is the hegemonic morality of Empire—the notion that Indigenous people have to “get over” the past—and it plays itself out not only in state-based efforts at “reconciliation” but also among everyday relationships between settlers and Indigenous people that reinscribe settler entitlement. Leanne Simpson spoke to this forcefully when we asked her to share her perspective on the potential of friendship between settlers and Indigenous people:

“Nick and Carla: One of the themes that emerged in a lot of our interviews is the important of trust and friendship for creating and sustaining joyful militancy and transformative movement infused with love. Under conditions of settler colonialism, trust and friendship between settlers and Indigenous people seems especially difficult, because settlers and our governments have violated this trust over and over, and broken trust is the status quo. What makes trust and friendship possible? Do you see it as an important part of decolonization.?”

Leanne Simpson: My honest answer is no, I don't. Friendship has been and is used by so-called white “allies” in pretty horrible ways—everything from “my friend is native and therefore ...” to using friendship as a mechanism to protect against white guilt, to using friendship to appropriate. Friendship for me is a crazy-intimate, personal decision and it isn't helpful for me to feel pressure to trust or be friends with people I don't trust and don't want to be friends with. The white allyship takes up a lot of space and it's a lot of work for Indigenous peoples. White people love being friends with Indigenous peoples. For me, there is huge gap in our life experiences, often our interests and our politics. That doesn't mean we can't find useful and strategic ways of working together but don't make me go to potlucks or backyard BBQs and make the assumption that my personal life is part of the

movement. My personal life is not for the taking. I also see that I have a responsibility to build trust and friendships within the Indigenous community. That is important work because the forces to divide us and make us hate each other are enormous. This does indeed make our movements strong because it's community building."

For us, this gets at the danger of setting up friendship or affinity as an ideal, norm, or expectation, especially across the colonial divide and other hierarchical divisions created by Empire. While Simpson speaks to the importance of building trust and friendship among Indigenous people, she is clear that settlers (particularly white settlers seeking to be allies) often end up perpetuating extractive, entitled tendencies. For settlers, getting out of the way might be more important than seeking connection.

Just as intimacy and closeness can be enabling, they can also be sources of coercion, manipulation, and exploitation. To insist on, seek out, or use friendship—and to pathologize its refusal—tends to reinforce these divisions and hierarchies rather than unravel them. It regenerates the worst of Empire, where oppressed people are expected to stay in oppressive relationships and their refusal is dismissed as “counterproductive.”

Similar patterns arise to pathologize women and genderqueer folks who refuse to “get over” heteropatriarchy. Black folks and people of color who refuse to “get over” racism, and everyone else who has experienced the liberal trope of “let’s all get along.” Entitlement to others’ time, energy, and love can be an unconscious strategy that reproduces domination through intimacy. Love and friendship can be contorted to erase power and exploitation, enforcing obedience to oppressive norms of politeness or devotion.

Joyful militancy is not a way of dividing the world into “positive”

and “negative” ways of being or asking that we all get along and be happy together. Freedom always needs to retain the potential of refusal, negation, and resistance. To turn friendship into a solution or a goal is to erase the form of freedom we are getting at, which is the freedom to work at relationships—to participate more actively in the shaping of our worlds.

THE ACTIVE SHAPING OF OUR WORLDS TOGETHER

What makes people fight for each other, support each other in radical ways, and construct durable, loving bonds? What makes it possible for people to sever or dissolve stifling attachments or relationships? We do not think the answer is ideology; abstract political values might support short-term alliances, but we doubt their capacity to be the glue that holds people together in the long term. Instead we suggest that strong relationships are the foundation of resistance. Recovering and sustaining deeper forms of friendship and kinship are indispensable for undoing Empire’s hold.

We can’t all be friends, and some forms of life will never be compatible. This is the ethical basis of the logic of affinity, as well: it can never be a totally inclusive, come-one-come-all process, because this would mean welcoming the worst of Empire and all of its toxic ways of relating. Some differences might mean that people cannot work together. Maybe. Differences might also signal potential for practices, orientations, and priorities that are resonant and complementary without becoming the same. Differences might then become starting points for new complicities and the growth of shared power.

...Friendship and resistance are interconnected: when we are supported, we are more willing to confront that which threatens to destroy our worlds. Friendship and affinity are not things but processes and open questions, which produce partial responses, further questions,

flashes of certainty and confidence, but never definitive answers.

OUTRO

“This is a book that does not have an ending. It is a definition that negates itself in the same breath. It is a question, an invitation to discuss.”

—John Holloway

It can be difficult to talk about the ways that radical milieus can be stifling and rigid: how we don't always treat each other well, how we hurt each other, and how shame, rigidity, and competition can creep into the very movements and spaces that are trying to undo all this. Of course there are tangles of despair, resentment, pleasure, and pain. Of course shitty encounters provoke anxieties and frustrations. Of course people bring their scars-and fears. In his interview, Glen Coulthard put his finger on something we have carried with us throughout this process, about the way that sadness and anger often stem from love:

“I think that for the somber, melancholic militant, I get it. I understand it. How could you not be? And this is my point—the only way you respond to the world like that is because of some base sort of individual and collective self-respect. Some love for oneself and others, or the land, that you see being violated in a profound way. This produces melancholy, anger, whatever. They're not separable. So when we're leveling our critiques, you just have to understand that, yeah, it's a rational response to an irrational, violent, unthinking machinery. So how do we direct that in ways that are able to topple these power relationships? And that's when the kind of navel-gazing, defensive, puritanical radical

becomes an obstacle, even though they may rightfully be that way, because of the position that they occupy. And the process of redirection comes from community, a community that we aspire towards and is always already there. So that's the question: What do we do with that situation? How do we make that community stronger? I don't know what the answer is, but the question is there, or else we wouldn't be having this conversation. We need it to be there more, with more people."

We have attempted to approach rigid radicalism with care, so that we wouldn't just be finding movements lacking in a whole new way. We have tried to convey a conversation, a set of questions rather than a set of answers. How do we talk about rigid radicalism in a way that doesn't just heap more shit at the feet of those who are already fighting? What can support conversations that provide space to think and feel through all this in milieus and movements? How can we pull each other into other ways of being together?

We have suggested that rigid radicalism is not a solid thing outside of us but an affective tendency we are amid. It circulates, constricts, suffocates, recirculates. It brings its own pleasures and rewards. Maybe it is driven in part by a desire to heal. The real enemy is Empire itself, and rigid radicalism is a poisonous reaction that presents itself as the cure. As such, rigid radicalism is one of the ways that Empire calls forth some desires and attachments and conjures away others, keeping its subjects stuck in a desolate form of life. In the twilight of Empire's legitimacy, it has become more and more difficult to sustain the fantasy that capitalism is good for us or that elected leaders represent us. Governments announce sustainability initiatives alongside new forms of resource extraction, multiculturalism alongside militarized policing. But Empire doesn't need our faith, only our compliance. As Empire's subjects, we are increasingly fastened to an automated, industrialized infrastructure

that consumes and poisons the living world. Through the glow of our screens, we are induced to express ourselves in perpetual performance and collective surveillance. The crisis is not coming: it is already here. It has been here for a long time, and Empire is administering the wreckage. We are permitted to be as cynical and pessimistic as we want, as long as we remain detached from capacities to live and relate differently.

In this sense, Empire cannot be confronted only by inculcating others with the right set of anticapitalist and antistate beliefs. People do not need some special training or education to be capable of transformation. On the contrary, we are constantly trained away from aliveness to change. It is not a question of being right but of assembling enabling ways of thinking, doing, and feeling in the present. This is most palpable in exceptional situations of disaster and insurrection, when everyday people have a little space from Empire's exhausting anxieties and routines. Amid a lot of suffering and scarcity, there are upwellings of mutual aid and connection. This is not evidence of some innate altruism. For us, it is evidence that everyone is capable of joyful transformation, and the ongoing disaster is the brutal isolation and exploitation of life organized by Empire. An increase in the capacity to affect and be affected—joy—means being more in touch with a world that is bleeding, burning, screaming.

Transformation might begin with rage, hatred, or sorrow. Refusing to “get over” some things can cut against the grain of obligatory productivity and optimism structuring capitalist life. Shared power might arise from accepting, refusing, hanging on, or letting go. This is the wiggle room of freedom: not the absence of constraint or a do-what-you-like individualism but an emergent capacity to work on relationships, shift desires, and undo ingrained habits.

We believe that close ties of friendship and kinship, far from isolating us into cliques or enclaves, actually enable people to better extend themselves to others and participate in transformative encounters.

Close friends and loved ones are what enable us to gripe and vent so that we can be more compassionate and patient with those who don't know us as well. They help us process fears and anxieties so that we are better able to trust people up front and move towards trouble and discomfort. They sit with us when we inevitably fuck up and flail. In turn, transformative struggle can deepen these bonds and generate new ones.

We have suggested that the challenge is not to build a unified consciousness or position but to find ways of coming together, collaborating, fighting, and discovering shared affinities. This is not about everyone getting along and becoming friends. Vulnerability is important but also risky and needs to be selective. As Coulthard said, "Some relationships are just bullshit, and we shouldn't be in them. We should actually draw lines in the sand more willingly." Joy needs sharp edges to thrive. How to create spaces, then, where vulnerability can happen and joyful encounters can take place? When to be open, and to what, and how to create and maintain boundaries? What can we do together? How can we support each other? How to create space for consensus and dissent and difference? How to ward off imperatives to centralize and control things without creating new divisions and sectarian conflicts? How to ward off rigid radicalism and its attachments to purity and paranoia?

These are all ethical questions that people are exploring rather than answering once and for all. We have suggested that in the space between abstract morality and vapid individualism, common notions can help us remain open and responsive.

In a world of crushing monopolies, where so much is done to us or for us, some people are recovering the capacity to do things for themselves. From barricades to kitchen tables, they are generating collective forms of trust and responsibility. If such forms make people feel alive, if they deepen bonds of trust and love, militancy tends to grow along with them because people are willing to defend these emergent powers. Every moment that people find trust in each other and in their

own capacities is precious. Through these messy struggles, people are becoming powerful and dangerous together.

To be militant about joy means forging common notions that can enable, sustain, and deepen transformation here and now, starting from wherever people find themselves. Common notions are not a means to a revolution in the future but the recovery of people's capacities for autonomy and struggle here and now. This tends towards breaking down old divides between organizing and everyday existence, and opening the question of collective life itself in all its expansiveness. Nurturing common notions means refusing to separate the effectiveness of any tactic or strategy from its affectiveness: how it makes people feel, how it nurtures autonomy or dependence, what it opens up, and what it closes down. It means letting go of practices or ideas when they stagnate, and generating new ones together. Rather than fixed values or positions, in common notions we find ways of doing, thinking, and feeling that sustain the growth of shared power.

With the concept of joyful militancy, we have tried to affirm these other ways of being without pretending that we have discovered the answer to undoing Empire, warding off rigid radicalism, or ushering in some world revolution. There is no single answer. We have tried to avoid setting up joyful militancy as a new ideal to embody or a set of duties. It would be disappointing if the notion of joyful militancy ever became a handbook for transformation because it lives in questions, experiments, and openings—not answers, blueprints, or necessities.

THREE MODES OF ATTUNEMENT

We think people's militancy and autonomy—their capacity to grapple with oppression, to break from comfort and certainty in favor of risk, to maintain forms of life that do not reproduce the state and capitalism—depend on participation in transformative struggles. With

this in mind, we are interested in capacities to tune into transformative potential.

One mode of attunement involves increasing sensitivity and inhabiting situations more fully. It is in this sense that Amador Fernandez-Savater suggests that the revolutionary alternative to control consists in “learning to fully inhabit, instead of governing, a process of change. Letting yourself be affected by reality, to be able to affect it in turn. Taking time to grasp the possibilities that open up in this or that moment.” What if the capacity to be really present is revolutionary? What potentials can be unleashed by connecting with the immediate, in a world that encourages constant distraction, deferral, and numbness?

Crucially, this attunement is not a new form of optimism or a newfound faith that things will get better but something open-ended and dangerous. This capacity to be present, what adrienne maree brown called “being awake inside your life in real time,” includes more of the messy multiplicities that are: trauma, triggers, and brilliance. Joy is not the same as optimism. It is not happy, nor does it promise a future revolution. In fact, being present might be a way of tuning into the cruelty and self-destruction of certain optimistic attachments.

A second form of attunement comes through the capacity to connect with legacies of resistance, rebellion, and the struggles of the past. As Silvia Federici explained when we interviewed her, this is a pushing-back against the social amnesia imposed by Empire:

“What most matters is discovering and re-creating the collective memory of past struggles. In the US there is a systematic attempt to destroy this memory, and now this is extending across the world, with the destruction of the main historical centers of the Middle East—a form of dispossession that has major consequences and yet is rarely

discussed. Reviving the memory of the struggles of the past makes us feel part of something larger than our individual lives, and in this way it gives a new meaning to what we are doing and gives us courage because it makes us less afraid of what can happen to us individually.”

Reviving legacies of struggle can be a source of dignity and inspiration amid forces that seem implacable. In this sense, transformation is not about the modern vision of shucking off traditions and escaping the past. History can also help us tune into the ongoingness of antagonisms that Empire has attempted to relegate to the past. It can help us see and feel the ways that Empire's institutions have been resisted since their inception.

As cis-gendered white folks, we have a lot to learn from Black folks. Indigenous people, people of color, and queer and trans folks who have long resisted Empire's violence while nurturing alternatives. There is also a lot to be learned from others whose knowledge and capacities continue to be devalued and whose existence entails resistance; for us that often means looking to the kids in our lives and community for guidance and inspiration. We have suggested that we all have the capacity to recover our own traditions and engage in our own struggles (rather than appropriating others') and to explore affinities between them in ways that challenge and undo the interconnected violence of Empire.

A final mode of attunement to potential is gratitude and celebration. Especially among white, secular radicals, gratitude is often seen as a “hippie” value: something associated with New Age gurus and self-help manuals that insist that positive thinking can overcome any obstacle. Gratitude and celebration are often seen as superfluous or even counterproductive, as if feeling grateful requires turning away from the horrors of Empire or losing the desire for change. But as Whlidah Imarisha suggested, celebration or gratitude can mean holding wins attached

to losses and letting them breathe together. Grief can be attached to gratitude, pleasure to pain, and celebration to determination. Similarly, Zainab Amadahy emphasizes the power of gratitude to renew our connection to the forces that sustain life, among human and nonhuman relationships:

“You can be thankful and still want the world to be better; want your life to be better. At the same time, I don’t think it’s healthy to be grateful in every moment. Sometimes grief, sadness, or fear is the appropriate and healthy response. But when the crisis has passed or it’s a chronic situation, focusing one’s attention on what there is to be grateful for literally eases the pain—physical, mental, and emotional.”

FURTHER READING

- I. theanarchistlibrary.org/library/joyful-militancy-bergman-montgomery**
- II. ill-will-editions.tumblr.com/post/176454467209/montgomery-bergman-beyond-the-sad-comforts**
- III. friendship-as-a-form-of-life.tumblr.com/post/162453222022/friendship-as-a-form-of-life-friendship-as-a**
- IV. criticalresistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Revolution-starts-at-home-zine.pdf**









“BEING FREE AND
HAVING TIES
WAS ONE AND THE
SAME THING.

I AM FREE BECAUSE
I HAVE TIES, BECAUSE
I AM LINKED TO A
REALITY GREATER THAN
ME.”

