

Emptying cages: abolition, accountability and dialogue

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Introduction

Confronting the prison system plays an important role in anarchist movements for social transformation. Historically, prison abolitionism intersects with movements for the abolition of slavery and other mobilisations against racialised and class-based social control, including campaigns against police violence, migrant detention, and campaigns for animal liberation. Anarchist decarceration movements not only 'point out how prisons don't keep us safe', they also aim to 'point to real alternatives that do.'¹ There are other ways, they argue, to secure the safety of individuals and communities, and more restorative ways to respond to harm than inflicting further harm. As we shall see in this chapter, authors working within anarchist indigenous, feminist and transformative justice paradigms draw on visions of social order premised on relational, community processes instead of punishment and imprisonment. From the anarchist point of view, we manifest the kind of society we want through the relationships we create, and in turn these relationships support the values that we build our communities upon. Thus, building relationships around new, shared anti-militarist and non-dominating values is crucially important political-movement-building work for anarchists.

Anarchist and abolitionist movements agree that non-hierarchical, participatory community organizations and practices are better placed than state administered institutions to decide how to meet the needs of the victims and perpetrators of crime, and how to make larger changes that might prevent harms of the same character occurring again. These organisations and practices embody the deep conviction that accountability is crucial for justice, engaging in grassroots, dialogue-based responses to harm that are founded on principles of restorative and transformative justice. An accountability process can be a finite project that forms in response to a particular incident or a longer-term, open-ended endeavour. This reclamation of conflict by the communities in which they occur (rather than as mediated and legislated for by the centralised state) is understood by anarchists to be part of the process by which individuals and communities learn to find and negotiate collective solutions to social problems, and it is an important part of the anarchist vision of social order (without prisons, borders or cages). This radical position insists that no being must be caged; it fully tests the limits of conventional intuitions about justice, community, safety, and compassion. From a mainstream perspective, it is a challenging part of anarchist thinking, and perhaps for this reason it is most revealing of anarchist ideas. In this chapter I will argue that what is revealed is a distinctive call for deeper engagements with dialogue skills that build community by drawing us all into lifelong processes of collaborative self-and-other transformation. This includes the development of models, methods and skills for engaging in dialogue and for addressing conflict across a wide range of needs, conflicts, problematic behaviors and harms. Anarchists have turned to the work of Marshall Rosenberg's relational programme of Nonviolent Communication in order to build their capacity to effect interdependent relational transformations on the individual level, the social level, and also in the field of justice. This chapter explores the positive potential of the dialogical skills training of Nonviolent Communication for supporting extra-legal strategies of transformative accountability.

Abolitionist anarchism

Anarchists argue that the very origin of the prison is entwined with eighteenth-century histories of enclosure, slavery, dispossession and genocide and, further, that it has developed to defend capitalism, ecological destruction, patriarchy and white supremacy in the twenty-first century. From the early twentieth century, anarchists specifically identified prisons as mechanisms for silencing dissidents and maintaining unjust relations of domination. In the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, they have argued that contemporary trends of mass incarceration around the world play a central role in maintaining state and global capitalist power and allow the state to pursue unpopular neoliberal economic policies, including resource privatization, environmental destruction, welfare withdrawal and curtailment of worker rights. Contemporary anarchist decarceration movements take their inspiration from black liberationist (or abolitionist) analyses of the prison industrial complex. Critical authors from various fields agree that since the invention of prisons in western countries in the 1700s, they were inequitably applied to people of colour and the economically disadvantaged.² Throughout the world, these authors argue, racism has become embedded in criminal justice and imprisonment practices, not least through unjust sentencing, racial profiling, police brutality and juvenile justice. From the United States to Australia to Europe, a disproportionate number of people of colour and people from the global South are incarcerated. Abolitionism was, in the first instance, the name given to the movement to abolish slavery, and prison abolitionists highlight the historical and legal continuities between slavery and contemporary patterns of racialized incarceration. As recent work on these links by legal scholar and civil rights activist Michelle Alexander argues, 'We have not ended racial caste... we have merely redesigned it.'³

Much of the black liberationist work that underpins anarchist analysis of the prisons system is associated with the work of Angela Y. Davis. In her work on the links between prisons, capitalism, racism and empire, she urges her readers to widen their thinking beyond incarceration and punishment as the 'inevitable' result of crime and to understand imprisonment more fully as the consequence of other political forces. She is not arguing here that people in prison have not committed 'crimes' as such. She is prompting us to think more broadly about whose activities are understood to be 'criminal', whose crimes are seen as more dangerous, which criminals are more violently 'othered' and demonized and which communities are more intensively policed.⁴ Mass incarceration is also understood in this analysis to be the result of the criminalization of social movements (notably the Black Panthers, the American Indian Movement, anti-colonial movements, environmental protest and, more recently, anti-austerity, anti-fracking, Extinction Rebellion and animal liberation movements) and a response to the unmanageable politics of neoliberal economic restructuring.⁵ Dramatic increases in incarceration rates and the intensification of militarized policing strategies have coincided with major shifts in the structure of the global economy since the 1970s as neoliberal policies of economic deregulation and privatization have stripped away health services, social services and welfare funding, and redistributed wealth upwards. From an abolitionist, decarcerationist and anarchist point of view, 'tough on crime' domestic militarization and the expansion of the carceral state are designed to offset resistance from the people of colour and poor communities most affected by the results of neoliberal restructuring, and to criminalize their dissent and their economies of survival.⁶

Angela Davis, in common with other abolitionist writers and anarchist decarcerationists, understands prison abolition as a critique of society that goes beyond the prison buildings themselves. She employs African-American sociologist W. E. DuBois's concept of 'abolition democracy' in this context. With him, she argues that substantive democracy calls for the abolition of institutions that advance the dominance of any group over any other, and it also calls for the creation of social institutions that address the problems that set people on the track to prison.⁷ DuBois argued that when slavery was abolished, black people were liberated only in a very limited sense because they still lacked the material resources that would enable them to live fully free lives. Domination and criminalisation have continued partly due to the absence of those resources. Thus, abolition requires: dismantling economic, social and political inequalities; understanding the links between eroding educational opportunities, poverty, global capitalism, war and imprisonment; and building alternative institutions based on equity, mutual aid and self-determination. Further demonstrating the structures of domination underpinning incarceration trends, statistics quoted by the UK anarchist decarcerationist group The Empty Cages Collective show that nearly half of the children in prison had been on the child protection register, and of adults in jail more than half had been emotionally, physically or sexually abused as children. Of women in prison, 46% reported a history of domestic abuse.⁸ In their workshops on prison abolitionism, the Empty Cages Collective focuses on dismantling the idea that prisons are natural, normal and necessary, and they attempt to challenge concepts of punishment and social domination in everyday life. They do this through community and relationship building activities that run alongside its more direct attacks on the dramatic prison-building plans of the UK government. So, a big part of its decarcerating or abolitionist work is in building radical educational alternatives, stronger relationships through community gardens, squatting and occupying buildings to defend domestic violence services. Mostly, the Empty Cages Collective sees its work as supporting each other to 'learn to love people without abusing them'. For collectives like this, 'the work is in the now' through all these initiatives. 'This for us is anarchism,' they argue. 'A new society that makes prisons obsolete.'⁹ Abolition work in practice is '[n]ot so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society.'¹⁰

Anarchist approaches to crime, punishment and prisons are rooted in classic anarchist statements of abolitionist solidarity such as this statement by 19th century political activist Eugene Debs: 'While there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.'¹¹ This position of solidarity rests on an integrated theory of self, society and nature that focuses on need as a principle of justice according to the socialist slogan 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.' For Marx this statement referred to the full development of unfettered productive forces under communist socialism such that there will be enough to satisfy everyone's needs. Anarchism's approach takes a wider perspective on needs, centring need itself as the basis for a radical rethinking of justice, conflict, crime and human flourishing. Some of the clearest elaborations of anarchist needs based justice comes from the work of Dennis Sullivan and Larry Tift in the fields of anarchist criminology and restorative justice:

[A] needs-based approach towards justice puts a great premium on the participation of everyone, and on the expression of the voice of each. If the well-being of everyone involved in a given social situation is going to be taken into account, the thoughts, ideas, and feelings of everyone involved must be listened to, [and] taken seriously.¹²

In his work on anarchist criminology, Anthony Nocella makes a similar, related point: 'Alternatives to punitive justice are possible if we take from ecology the reality that all elements and life are interwoven and interdependent.'¹³ In the words of anarchist author Jamie Hockett: 'Human beings are extrusions of the ecosystem – we are not separate, independent beings. We are interdependent bodies, embedded in a natural world itself embedded in a vast universe.'¹⁴ It is an ethic which has found resonance and further inspiration in some African political philosophy, indigenous scholarship and other sources which have recently been more fully recognized as important parts of a network of current anarchist scholarship and activism. Ubuntu is a Southern African concept that refers to the shared humanity that comprises our own selfhood. The insight is that our individuality and independence (as we understand them) depend on solidarity, interdependence and community. The concept is often depicted by means of the Nguni saying: 'A human being is a human being through (the otherness of) other human beings.'¹⁵ With this kind of thinking we are encouraged to practice connection as interdependent equals and to see that the process of understanding ourselves, our connections with each other and with the land is crucial to liberation and to well-being. The idea brings us into a much closer relationship with the needs, actions and motivations of others for, if indeed my humanity is connected to the humanity of others, then I have a share in their capacity for love or cruelty or compassion or violence. This means that we can relate to the actions of the criminal and the experiences of the victim, if we choose to.

Other anarchist theories of law and authority, notably the anarchist legal scholarship of Nils Christie, frame crime as social conflict and depict social conflict as a community resource in so far as it provides important information about whose needs are not getting met in a given community.¹⁶ Christie's idea of 'conflict as property' articulates this distinct and characteristically anarchist belief in the spontaneous and organically emerging nature of social order and the anarchist faith that conflict is something better trying to happen (something better than exploitation and domination). Other authors writing in the same vein talk about conflict as a 'resource', conflict as a 'possibility for the release of counter-power energies' and conflict as an opportunity for 'establishing dialogue and seeking solutions, in a process leading to wider relationships and wider mutual knowledge'.¹⁷ In line with Christie's perspective, according to the anarchist criminology of Anthony Nocella, we need to begin to have 'truly transformative critical dialogues' with those we do not agree with or deem an enemy in order to 'listen, share and learn'.¹⁸ Even police are not 'machines' he argues; they are often 'working-class people, many of whom want to make their communities safer', so they too are needed in the work of critical transformative dialogue. In the optimistic spirit of 19th century anarchist Peter Kropotkin, Nocella concludes that a just community is possible when we build 'critical' and 'holistic' dialectical bridges against all systems of domination, including the domination of other species, in the hope of ending 'police, prisons, property, and punitive justice'.¹⁹ These are the dialogues that need to happen in order to create alternatives to the prison system because it will not be enough just to dismantle prisons and disband police forces. Anarchists and others realize the wider necessity to engage in deeper learning about how to create safety and justice when we have all been taught by the media and in schools, colleges, and police academies that the only way to make everyone safe is through control, force, weapons and punishment. For anarchists and abolitionists, decarceration work is primarily an exercise in building different models or ideas of social order through building different sorts of relationships. 19th century anarchist Peter Kropotkin argued that a society that organizes its relationships around private property and institutional law will always cultivate individuals inclined towards possession and acquisition, and the abdication of personal conscience and community solidarity – which inevitably leads to what are commonly known as crimes and to the construction of individual transgressors as deviants. This is the sense in

which he claimed that 'society as a whole is responsible for every anti-social act committed.'²⁰ Patterns of social relations built on capitalism, racism and patriarchy support traits such as competition, domination and obedience. As a move towards the creation of alternative institutions and communities, ones not shaped by hierarchical relationships of capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy and species, anarchism focuses on tools and methodologies which can support more choice about how we can build alternative relationships. This is in the spirit of David Graeber's distinctively anarchist claim that 'The ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently.'²¹ This sense of agency through relationship is rooted in the sentiment expressed in Gustav Landauer's classic statement of anarchist ontology: 'The state is a relationship between human beings, a way by which people relate to one another; and one destroys it by behaving differently to one another. [...] we are the state – and are it as long as we are not otherwise, as long as we have not created the institutions that constitute a genuine community and society of human beings.'²²

At the intersection of all these anarchist, abolitionist and decarcerating movements is the belief that there are other ways of addressing harm, acts of violence, injustice, assault and even murder; ways that care for and protect those that have been harmed, hold people accountable for their actions and make room for understanding why they acted the way they did. These transformative ways of addressing problems appreciate that harm, abuse and assault are often the result of histories of oppression and/or personal traumatic histories. It is for this reason, from the point of view of post-colonial feminist and women-of colour writers like Andrea Smith and Julia Chinyere Oparah, that the state is not a legitimate collaborator in anti-violence work due to state perpetration of gender violence in the contexts of colonialism, slavery, border patrols and prisons.²³ As abolition activist Amanda Aguilar Shank writes, 'I have seen how these systems harm me and my family and the families of millions in the name of safety for the few.'²⁴ And she adds: 'Any time the state steps in to deliver safety, it is always a white supremacist model of safety that sees our communities as the threats to be protected against.' Aguilar Shank concludes that 'We never win when we expand the powers and resources of the state to control and punish.'²⁵ The contexts for much of the interpersonal harm that happens within families and communities are longer term histories of colonialism, patriarchy, intergenerational abuse and economic exploitation; and the violence and loss experienced in these traumatic histories must feature in accountability dialogues in the present. As harm reduction practitioner and community organiser Blyth Barnow writes 'The violence of poverty, white supremacy, militarism, assault – they are woven together. No court can ever pull them apart. A prison can never protect me. Isolation cannot heal isolation.'²⁶ What community justice practitioners deeply comprehend is the shattering truth that survivors of abuse in one relationship are often abusive in other relationships. So often perpetrators of abuse and harm are replaying 'harmful lessons' they were 'forced to learn' in formative relationships (in interpersonal, familial and structural contexts).²⁷ Transformative accountability is key to the visionary abolitionist project, it is part of the process of imagining and building the alternatives to current criminal and immigration systems, police, prisons, imperialism, and militarization. As Aguilar Shank writes: 'Abolition is a hopeful vision that means each moment where harm happens is an opportunity to transform relationships and communities, build trust and safety, and grow slowly toward the beautiful people we are meant to be, in the world that we deserve.'²⁸ For this, she argues, 'We need to develop the capacity to struggle with each other, and we must be committed to learning this new skill movement-wide.'²⁹ And as she concludes, 'It is about realizing that we have a responsibility to align the ways we relate to each other with our values – from the most intimate relationship up to larger systems like the criminal and immigration system.'³⁰

Punishment inhibits transformation: challenging the dominant paradigm of accountability

As well as emphasising the race, class and gender injustices of state criminal justice systems, anarchists, abolitionists and women of colour transformative justice movements also highlight the particular failing of these systems to meet the needs of victims, perpetrators and the wider community for deep, healing accountability. As the authors of a transformative justice guide *Ending Child Sexual Abuse* write, 'over and over, people who have been sexually abused report that what they need is to observe that the person who sexually abused them feels remorse and is accountable for their actions.'³¹ Accountability is also what perpetrators of abuse need in order to reconnect to their feelings and to the feelings of others and transform their behaviour. These shifts in understanding can support wider cultural and structural shifts. In a recent collected work on transformative justice *Beyond Survival* edited by Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, various authors emphasise the importance of building capacities for accountability into extra-legal justice movements. As Kai Cheng Thom writes in this volume, real accountability foregrounds support not only for people who have survived abuse but also for those who are attempting to learn how not to abuse. This is in the spirit of the feminist slogan "We shouldn't be teaching people how not to get raped; we should be teaching people not to rape". Transformative justice authors and practitioners stress the need to build relational, dialogical skills to facilitate these 'life-changing conversations.'³² Dialogical skills include the capacity to listen with empathy, the awareness to create compassionate and safe conversational spaces, and the linguistic skills and vocabulary to express experiences, thoughts and feelings honestly. The threat of punishment entirely forecloses the possibility for this kind of dialogue.

Authors and practitioners share the insight, learned through their work in community justice, that judgement and punishment do not facilitate accountability, transform people's behaviour, or meet the needs of survivors. Still less do punitive systems of criminal justice teach people "not to rape." The claim that punishment inhibits accountability is a striking expression of one of the recognised failings of state administered criminal justice. It is very challenging to some deeply held cultural assumptions about accountability and behaviour change. As the authors of *Ending Child Sexual Abuse* write 'Most of us have been deeply shaped by the false notion that in order for people to behave better they need to feel worse and be punished.' But, as they note, 'In practice, we see that humans are, in fact, far more likely to change in desirable ways when they are more resourced, not less.' And, as they conclude, 'Given current punitive interventions, there is very little incentive for any of us to acknowledge sexually abusive behaviour to others.'³³ Punishment inhibits the safety, honesty and connection which could resource us to work towards accountability for our behaviour. At a recent screening of a new documentary *Words That Liberate*, Lucy Leu, founder of the Freedom Project (supporting prisoners after release), invited a curious attendee to reflect on the truth of the inverse correlation between punishment and accountability with the following question: 'Imagine being a little child, you have just done something that ended up with your little brother all bloodied up and crying. Your parent comes down hard on you with punishment. You've done something wrong, you're going to get punished, you'll pay for it. Where is your attention going to go?' The attendee answered: 'Into myself, feeling hurt, feeling attacked.' Leu concluded simply, asking 'Is that a state of mind that is conducive for your actually wanting to know what the impact of your actions has been?' This concise demonstration reflects the insights upon which various transformative

justice endeavours are founded. Placing punishment at the centre of our thinking around accountability and justice leads to individuals desperately trying to avoid accountability out of fear. In the words of therapist and social change educator Nathan Shara:

If we know or believe that our physical, sexual, or material safety will be violated if we disclose either the harm that was done to us or the harm we have caused, then concealing these things is an understandable and fundamentally adaptive way to maintain our safety. If we experience social rejection, ostracism, and isolation by disclosing our experiences of harm (whether surviving harm, causing harm, or both), then concealing, minimizing, and denying these experiences are logical and fundamentally life-affirming strategies (albeit with huge costs).³⁴

Shara goes on to explore the pivotal centrality of engaging safely with shame, dignity and guilt in order to develop transformative responses to harm, both individually and collectively. He quotes the work of therapist and author Harriet Lerner in this context: “If identity – who you *are* – is equated with your worst behaviours, you will not accept responsibility or access genuine feelings of sorrow – because to do so would invite feelings of worthlessness. How can we apologise for something we are, rather than something we did?”³⁵ As she writes, the slide from guilt (“I did something bad”) to shame (“I am bad”) keeps us closed and unable to engage with the impacts of our behaviour and we remain defensive, numb to our own feelings, and unable to hear about the experiences of others. The tragedy is how much we need this feedback about our impact on others in order to connect and experience ourselves as parts of the world around us. Accountability requires a process of un-numbing so we can experience compassion for the people we’ve harmed. Often that means that we need to receive empathy for experiences of being harmed ourselves before we can feel or acknowledge the impact of our own actions. If we cannot be honest about our experiences without being seen as inferior, monstrous or irreparable, then, out of a core human drive towards dignity, we will not do it. Shara identifies this as a psychologically stuck pattern of overaccountability leading to underaccountability: ‘I can’t stand how bad I feel and can’t imagine making it right (overaccountability) so I’m going to hide that it (whatever it is) even happened, or lie about it or blame someone else (underaccountability).’³⁶ Transformative accountability can begin to happen when our shame is handled with compassion. Then the shame can retreat to reveal the pain of both being hurt (including grief, rage, helplessness, despair) and the agonising remorse of having hurt others (grief, regret, loss of self-integrity and humanity). As Shara writes, ‘This pain and remorse often signal the return of feeling and empathy after having been numb, like the pain of feeling returning to a limb that’s fallen asleep.’³⁷ Then we can offer meaningful, congruent, authentic accounts of our remorse, recognizing the harm that we have caused and acknowledging its impacts, on the other as well as on ourselves. As part of this reconnecting effort we must see that abuse happens when one person or group believes or has believed, consciously or unconsciously, through whatever stories of entitlement, frustration or victimhood they hold, that their wants or needs take precedence over others.³⁸ Transformative accountability means learning to feel our deep remorse for behaviours that do not feel like our fault, in circumstances that we did not cause, in the context of global structures for which we are not to blame. This experience is sometimes described as mourning. We are mourning for needs we could find no other way to meet at the time in which we inflicted harm. It is a deeply transformational encounter.

Transformational paradigms of accountability encompass our personal stories and the wider structural contexts of our responsibilities, needs, feelings and behaviours. We all mess up, we tell lies, and sometimes we betray, hurt and abandon each other. Wider contexts of shame include the

ways in which we benefit and the ways in which we suffer from our position in relation to ‘capitalist, eco-murdering, settler-colonial, ableist, white-supremacist heteropatriarchy’.³⁹ The ideologies embedded in these structures concerning who is valuable and who is expendable can leave us all feeling frozen with numbing shame and despair, both where we have been targeted and ‘denied our full humanity’ and where we have ‘benefited from unearned privilege’.⁴⁰ Facing shame can release the pain of internalised inferiority and make space to take action for social justice and care for the planet. It can also ‘unstuck us’ from the ‘immobilization of privilege’ and make space to connect with others in solidarity and interdependence.⁴¹ As Nocello writes in his work on transformational justice, ‘all are connected in a complex relationship of oppressors and oppressed, only able to become free if we address and challenge all systems of domination and violations toward the individual.’⁴² Once we start to unpick the deeper histories and conditions around an incident of harm, we find threads that spread and split and weave into other tangled stories and histories. The ‘why’ of the transformative accountability response to harm often leads to deep stories of grief, abuse, trauma, mental illness, difference, socialization, childhood, scarcity, loneliness. These stories can rehumanize those that have caused harm in our eyes. The answers to this ‘why?’ also show that anyone might be capable of similar transgressions in similar circumstances.⁴³ ‘What mistakes might you need to face in order to trust yourself?’ asks Shara, and ‘What hurts are you carrying that remain unmourned?’⁴⁴

Kai Cheng Thom’s powerful essay ‘What to Do When you’ve Been Abusive’ foregrounds support not only for people who have survived abuse but also for those who are attempting to learn how not to abuse. He encourages us all to ‘face the fear of accountability,’ so that we can radically transform our conversations around harm and abuse and make real cultural changes that can build safer societies for everyone. He asks us to admit that the capacity to harm lies within all of us, abuse is commonplace and can be perpetrated by anybody.⁴⁵ In our transformative efforts to face the fear of accountability and address our behaviour and that of others we need deep, empathic listening skills and brave truth-telling capacities. ‘It’s more healing to tell the truth than to hide inside a lie’ writes Cheng Thom, more healing to learn about how we have harmed others, why we harmed others, and how we can stop harming others.⁴⁶ This takes enormous courage, but, claims Cheng Thom, when we decide to heal, ‘we discover incredible new possibilities’.⁴⁷ This sort of honesty unravels the myths about evil monsters, expendable, disposable, and irredeemably villainous ‘others’, even though these impulses to banish and exclude abusers are understandable. Authors and practitioners in this field argue that we must treat everyone’s need for healing, safety and connection with dignity in order to pursue genuine possibilities for transformations; of survivor experience, of abusive behaviour, of ‘bystander engagement’, and of the broader cultural and structural conditions that allow abuse to continue.⁴⁸ ‘By standing for everyone’s need for healing,’ write the authors of *Ending Child Sexual Abuse*, we challenge the dehumanizing logic that is central to systems of oppression, domination, and abuse.⁴⁹ ‘When one is abusive,’ writes Cheng Thom, ‘when one is hurting so much on the inside that it feels like the only way to make it stop is to hurt other people,’ ‘it can be terrifying to face the hard truth of words like *abuse* and *accountability*.’ We might prefer to blame others, blame society, and blame the people we love, instead of ourselves. On a community level too, it is easier and simpler to create clear distinctions between good and bad people and to create walls that ‘shut the shadowy archetype of “the abuser” out’ instead of looking into mirrors to face ‘the abuser within’.⁵⁰ In his advice for people who are trying to face their own abusive behaviour, Cheng Thom is clear: ‘You do have to forgive yourself.’ Not least, he claims, this is because we can’t stop hurting other people until we stop hurting ourselves. In support of that courageous work, he writes: ‘Anyone can heal, given the right circumstances, and everyone can heal, given the same. *You are capable of loving and being loved. Always. Always. Always.*’⁵¹ With resources like this, and ‘By

standing for everyone's need for healing,' write the authors of *Ending Child Sexual Abuse*, 'we maintain our commitment to a vision of true liberation.'⁵²

Dialogue and the interdependent liberatory praxis of anarchism

What authors and practitioners emphasise in this rich transformational engagement with accountability is the necessity for the development of deep and profoundly relational dialogue skills to support the listening, the honest expression, and the compassionate connection that this work requires. Relationship-building is the key to transformative justice and community accountability work. At the very least, access to a safe, compassionate listener is critically important in supporting survivors to heal shame and locate accountability where it belongs. And the necessity for safe dialogue goes much further, as Mia Mingus of the Transformative Justice Collective writes, 'Relationship and trust, not always political analysis, continue to be two of the most important factors in successful TJ interventions, whether in supporting survivor self-determination and healing or in accountability processes.'⁵³ This means working on our capacity to give and receive honest feedback about the impact of our behaviour on others. The truth is, however, that most of us don't have the skills set to support this kind of dialogue, even in our closest relationships. As Mingus writes, 'we have so few relationships with the deep trust, reliability and groundedness we need to respond well to violence,' adding that 'Much of this is the result of the breaking of relationships, isolation, fear, and criminalization that capitalism requires.'⁵⁴ The work requires the building of tools, skills and resources to increase our capacity for empathy, compassion, trust and responsibility, including storytelling and 'Theatre of the Oppressed' type role playing for building skills of perception and empathy, alongside pursuing further education regarding internalised oppression, privilege and the dynamics of power.⁵⁵

Dialogue practices are central to the interdependent liberatory praxis of anarchism. Anarchism insists that our freedom and security are radically dependent on our relationships with each other; that structures of domination rely on isolation and disconnection behind walls, cages, borders, categories and boundaries; and that making change requires making, repairing or remaking our relationships with all beings in non-dominating ways. As Heckert writes: 'One of the key challenges anarchism attempts to put into practice... is the task of combining individuality *and* community, or, in other words, making space for difference while being able to live well together.'⁵⁶ Anarchist-inspired movements focus on dialogue as a key form of relationship-building practice. Through deepening dialogical practices and skills, they hope to contribute towards building our capacity to connect in the present, to think into the future and to develop strategies that address environmental, human and non-human needs in troubled political, economic and environmental times. In this context, dialogue is the art of listening without prejudgement, with cognitive and existential significance. Through listening to the other without judgements and assumptions, one learns about the world and the self. This means endeavouring to see the world through someone else's eyes and also being willing to be affected by what you hear. From an anarchist point of view, dialogue presupposes a 'plurality of consciousnesses of equal value', and a radical equality between 'independent and unmerged voices'. In these ways dialogue expresses the anarchist commitment to 'groundless solidarity.'⁵⁷

Activist researchers have tracked how this commitment to dialogue lives in anarchist movements, in particular the way that difference is valued as a positive and constructive force in consensus decision-making practices. Social researcher Marianne Maeckelbergh notes that in the networks of meetings organizing the anti-G8 mobilizations, European Social Forums and World Social Forums, extensive space was made for conflict and disagreement. In this movement practice of 'creating conflictive spaces', 'connectivity' or the communication between differences was prioritized over 'unity' or agreement. This is based on the belief that conflict is constructive, transformative and creative, and that it can communicate hidden exclusions and insights as well as allowing for sameness and difference to coexist.⁵⁸ The important point about communication and non-oppositional conflict in this context is that movement actors come to understand the value of the other person's perspective, even if they do not agree. This requires us to understand the importance of incorporating the perspective of the other into our own understanding and to connect even when we don't agree. Sustainability researcher and activist Paul Chatterton endorses the value of this non-oppositionality when he makes the relational point that finding self comes through the co-presence of the others within a conversation. As he argues, 'We are already connected emotionally to those we think we oppose or are different from.'⁵⁹

Anarchist movements and literature focus in detail on the micro processes and interpersonal skills of dialogue. These codes of rule-making and dialogue practices blur the distinction between means and ends as process itself becomes a mode of relating differently and social/self-transformation. For anarchists, social, political and economic changes are built step-by-step, in the spaces of (unequal and sometimes incommensurable) interpersonal relationships.⁶⁰ Their agenda is to learn to share power as broadly as possible by continually reflecting on processes of dialogue, conflict and decision making, and adopting carefully considered procedural rules and interactional techniques. Process is political action in this context because it is this work of dialogue that knits unique and individual beings to each other and to the values and goals that they want to manifest through the ever-shifting contexts, conflicting perspectives, life histories and clashing ideologies they encounter. This non-oppositional approach to connection through dialogue is hard work, but there are learnable skills and practices that anarchists draw on to assist with the challenge. In particular, much emphasis is placed on learning how to really listen.⁶¹ Authors and activists who see themselves as working within anarchist traditions often must work hard to challenge themselves, revise their practices and question their assumptions in order to pursue this ideal of connection. This means that anarchists are on the lookout for ways of relating that build connection rather than undermine it. In the words of feminist academic AnaLouise Keating, activists look for ways to learn how to 'make connections through differences', embrace 'radical interrelatedness' and listen with 'raw openness'.⁶² Anarchist author and activist Jamie Heckert describes this quality of connection as 'direct relationship', and he argues that it requires an unending commitment to 'the potentially messy and emotionally challenging work of actually relating'.⁶³ According to Heckert, too, this entails 'a radical commitment to listening', 'a radical commitment to care' and 'a radical commitment to becoming'.⁶⁴

Anarchist criminologists and pioneering restorative justice researchers Dennis Sullivan and Larry Tifft have turned to the insights and practical methodologies of Nonviolent Communication in order to support the development of dialogue skills in anarchist community praxis. Nonviolent Communication (NVC) originates in the work of Marshal Rosenberg, who taught that compassionate social communication can be learned and refined through the ongoing development of four key skills: (a) observing a situation without evaluation, (b) acknowledging the accompanying feelings, (c)

understanding how those feelings are a result of a met/unmet need, and (d) clearly requesting concrete actions and exploring how to honour all parties' needs in a flexible and creative manner, without demands.⁶⁵ The process entails reframing our use of language, both by removing judgement and blame, and by reorienting our expression around feelings and needs in order to connect more fully with ourselves and others. This practice is foregrounded by inner work directed towards accepting and appreciating our own needs and integrating the awareness of compassionate connection with our own thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

In Marshall Rosenberg's approach, human needs are universal and meeting them is essential to human survival and well-being. Needs in this context are motivating values that we all share, like safety, connection, understanding, and self-worth. Some of the strategies or ways people try to get those needs met can create a lot of pain and suffering for others (and themselves), but a key principle of NVC is that the needs themselves are never wrong. This insight makes it much easier to respond compassionately to others, even if they have done something harmful. This runs counter to the primary ways that we have been taught to communicate, which tends to involve judgments and analyses of right and wrong behaviours and of good and bad people. Also, our education and culture often alienate us from connecting with our real needs and those of others. However, when we try to communicate with others in terms of good and bad or right and wrong, it makes it very hard for them to connect with what we are trying to express and virtually impossible for them to develop self-awareness or change their behaviour. Connecting on the level of needs instead of judgement or punishment makes it much more likely that someone will understand us and seek to change their behaviour because they see other ways or options of meeting their needs that will come at far less cost to themselves and others. Some people use NVC to create greater connection in their personal relationships or to communicate more peacefully at work or in the political arena. It is also used worldwide to respond to conflict at group and societal levels. In some pioneering programmes, NVC is being used in prisons to support individuals in preparing for release and managing their own conflicts.⁶⁶ A prisoner undertaking NVC training at HMP Dartmoor gave this account of his experience of the programme: 'I don't think you can do this without changing. If you don't have empathy, this'll give it to you.'⁶⁷

Nonviolent Communication can assist anarchists and their transformative justice allies in building their capacities to undertake the dialogical work that transformative justice requires. This includes becoming proficient in a 'more nuanced [use of] language' that 'neither idealizes nor demonizes people' so that they can offer 'empathy towards folks who have done harm' and 'create space for them to own up to their behaviours and heal'.⁶⁸ If we connect Nonviolent Communication methods with transformative models of justice we can create liberating and connecting empathic spaces for victims, offenders and community members to safely explore harm, accountability and healing in a deeply relational language of feelings and needs that resonates profoundly with anarchist ontologies of interdependence, interconnection and 'freedom as relationship'. Informed by the principles of Nonviolent Communication, anarchism asks us to become more aware of our moral pre-judgments about ourselves and others so that we can relate more directly to each other. The assumption that individual actions reflect attempts to meet needs provides greater opportunities for equality, understanding, freedom and connection in dialogue. It is a sort of radical commitment to listening, firstly to ourselves and our needs without judgment and then to others and their needs also without judgment. The empowering dignity of being listened to and listening to others without making assumptions is integral to the radically libertarian, egalitarian and participatory forms of organisation

promoted in anarchism. These intimate forms of direct action may enable us to behave differently towards each other and craft the intimate, the cultural, and the structural transformations that are necessary to reduce violence. This more direct and less defensive way of communicating tends to erode alienation, hierarchy and harm. Listening to ourselves, giving credence to our own experience, knowledge and instincts involves recognising our own authority and having a clearer sense of the boundaries of the authority of others. This is a potentially counter-cultural practice in a culture in which we learn to doubt ourselves and believe ourselves to be lesser or greater than others.⁶⁹ As activist authors argue: 'If we can create stronger ties with each other and understand our affinities more concretely, perhaps we'll have the basis to make community accountability something more than a vague and contentious dream ... making our expectations of and commitments to one another as explicit as possible.'⁷⁰ As Sullivan writes, from both an anarchist and a community justice perspective, 'if we take Rosenberg's concepts and model to heart, it means that every person has an opportunity to reduce violence in the world.'⁷¹

Conclusion

The kind of compassionate connection that writers in the abolitionist field of transformative justice call for can feel impossible. How can it be that challenging domination requires this kind of openness to those parts of others and ourselves that are the most threatening and terrifying? How can we ever attempt this seemingly superhuman work? First, we can look to anarchism to affirm some of the relational ontologies that connect us to the value and transformational power of this work. This spirit of deep relationship infuses anarchist discourses particularly in the critique of prisons and punishment for crime. In the words of American anarchist Voltairine de Cleyre: 'Out of one great soul-stuff are we sprung, you and I and all of us; and if in you the virtue has grown and not the vice, do not conclude that you are essentially different from him whom you have helped to put in stripes behind bars.' As eco-feminist and anarchist philosopher Chaia Heller writes, as if to encourage us in our relational pursuit of anarchism and justice: 'If capitalism is a set of *social* relationships based on exploitation, regularization, alienation, and commodification, then the antidote to capitalist rationalization is a new relationality, an empathetic, sensual, and rational way of relating that is deeply cooperative, pleasurable, and meaningful.'⁷² Jamie Heckert also acknowledges the appeal of the anarchist invitation to experience 'the joys and pains of relating to each other in deeply egalitarian ways?'⁷³ Secondly, we can also look to the work of women of colour, the experiences of marginalised groups and abused children to understand that state led criminal justice systems are violent and unsustainable, and thereby reaffirm for ourselves the urgent imperative to find alternative ways of doing justice. This point is ever more urgent as the awareness of the dangers that policing poses to marginalised groups continues to grow. As Aguilar Shank writes 'We never win when we expand the powers and resources of the state to control and punish.'⁷⁴ Thirdly, we can turn to the practices of Nonviolent Communication to build the resources and skills we need to even begin thinking about how compassionate dialogue in the contexts of abuse and harm might be an attempt we could feel willing or able to consider. Exploring the work of individuals and groups working in transformative justice movements alongside the liberatory dreams of anarchist visions and the learnable dialogical tools of Nonviolent Communication points to ways in which this task might in fact be a joyful and life-affirming responsibility for those who are drawn to attempt it.

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