Introduction

TAMMY KOVICH AND ADAM GARY LEWIS
York University

Anarchism’s engagement with the question of gender is at once ambiguous and contradictory. Historically, the anarchist response to the “woman/sex question” was mixed. During the period of ‘classical anarchism’ (1840-1939), women took on active roles in anarchist movements – they were active in anarchist organizations, publications, and projects across the globe. They took part in uprisings, rebellions, and revolutions, as well as in the work of day-to-day anarchist organizing, propaganda, and more. While many (though not all) rejected the label of feminist, they nonetheless spoke out against sexual subordination and called for the emancipation of women with the overthrow of all forms of social, political, and economic hierarchy. At the same time, many others were at best ambivalent to the idea of sexual equality and at worst outright hostile to it. Frequently credited as the founding father of anarchism, Pierre Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865) was an outright misogynist who spoke out against the idea that women could (or should) ever be anything other than wives and mothers, and claimed that the only option available to women outside of the family was prostitution. Sonn in his study of the early anarchist movement in France describes the pervasiveness of an “anarchist antifeminism” (2005: 32). Similarly, Gemie in his historical survey of anarchist political culture across North America and Europe notes the prevalence of “anarcho-sexism” (1996: 417). During the period of ‘new anarchism’ (1940-1990), emphasis on the politics of everyday life grew and an explicitly feminist strand of anarchism emerged. Under the banner of anarcha-feminism, efforts were made to integrate radical feminist and gay liberation ideas into anarchist movements. Most recently, the period of ‘contemporary/post-anarchism’ (1990-present) has been marked by an emphasis on incorporating queer struggles and developing a distinctly queer anarchism. Against this backdrop, anarchism’s relationship to feminism has remained strained.

From the so-called first-wave of feminism until our present moment, anarchists have been considered both ally and adversary. In the early days of the women’s movement, some anarchists were active participants and a few even claimed the feminist label. Chinese anarchist He-Yin Zhen (1884-1920) exerted considerable influence and wrote extensively on women’s liberation. She spoke out against prominent male intellectuals, critiqued the nationalism of a burgeoning Chinese feminism, and
discussed feminist struggle as “the beginning and outcome of a total social revolution that would abolish the state and private property to bring about true social equality and the end to all social hierarchies” (Liu et al. 2013: 7). In Puerto Rico, Luisa Capetillo (1879-1922) was a pivotal figure in both anarchist and feminist movements respectively. She organized women workers, published pamphlets and books on gender equality, and infamously made waves when she donned a pair of trousers to stroll the streets of Havana, becoming “the first Puerto Rican woman to wear pants in public” (Romeu Toro 2013: 178). In America, Voltarine de Cleyre (1866-1912) developed an anarchism that was inextricably connected to an analysis of sexual inequality. She publicly identified as a feminist, and in her own words became an anarchist because of her “anger at the institutions set up by men” and her “disgust with the cramped, subordinated circle provided for women” (cited in Marsh 1978: 540). While some anarchist women openly allied themselves with feminists, many more vehemently rejected the label and were at times hostile to the women’s movement. Somewhat ironically, one of the few anarchist women to be given considerable attention by feminists – Emma Goldman – was intensely critical of the women’s movement during her lifetime. While Goldman centered considerations of gender and sexuality in much of her work and contributed to related discussions in both anarchist circles and society at large, she frequently criticized feminists’ pursuit of suffrage and more or less saw the women’s movement as a bourgeois endeavor incompatible with revolution.

In the years following the ‘classical period’ of Goldman’s time, particularly over the last 40 years, it has become more and more common for anarchists to ask: what can anarchism learn from feminism? The political culture, language, and practice of contemporary anarchism (while by no means free from sexism, queerphobia, or transmisogyny) draws from and is influenced by the theories and practices of feminists. Further, there is also a growing chorus of anarchists arguing for deeper engagement with Indigenous feminisms and political interventions, and their particular forms of resistance to settler colonialism, capitalism, the state and patriarchy (Warburton 2016). Given the ongoing nature of settler colonial dispossession in places like so-called ‘North America’, this raises some questions as to how to situate anarchism and feminism in such a context. Recent work on anarcha-Indigenism takes up some of these questions and explores the ways that exchange and dialogue can occur between anarchism, Indigenous resistance/resurgence practices and feminism (see e.g. Hall 2016; Coulthard, Lasky, Lewis and Watts 2011). For example, Laura Hall (2016), writing from an Indigenist anarchist perspective, argues for a specifically Indigenist intersectional feminist approach that “should challenge the interferences of policing and state entities in the lives of Indigenous women by contextualizing the violence Indigenous women face as an issue of state and settler colonialism” (88). This work further pushes anarchism to consider the settler colonial implications of theory and practice.
Importantly, as Warburton (2016) cautions, seeking out intersections between bodies of theory has a limited ability to illuminate the contradictions in theory and practice that exist within anarchist movements themselves; “such work does not help us understand how those structures become manifest in radical communities, using radical political logic and language” (75). Therefore we must seek an assessment of anarchism’s promise, but also its limitations, specifically regarding questions of anti-colonialism and structures of settlement. Here anarchism can continue to learn from “other practitioners of counter-power” (Perspectives 2016: 6) in Black, Indigenous, queer, trans etc. communities who continue to grapple with the ongoing realities of state, capitalist and colonial violence with their gendered intersections.

On the flip-side of anarchism’s interest in feminism, it is rare for feminists to ask: what can feminism learn from anarchism? There are exceptions to every rule, and there were some within the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s in North America who sought to center anarchism in their feminism. It is to these women of the second wave that we owe the specific term anarcho-feminism (Shannon 2009). That said, this was a minority position. Anarchism and by extension anarchists are rarely included in feminist discourse. Contrary to those who see anarchism and feminism as an obvious match (Kornegger 2002), Ferguson notes that “anarchism has had trouble finding its place in feminism” and “a steady diet of demonization and ridicule of anarchy has not encouraged historians of feminism to take anarchism seriously” (2021). This does a disservice to everyone involved. From its successes to its failures, its dreams to its nightmares, and everything in-between, anarchism is a living tradition with much to offer. The potential for more direct anarchist influences on feminism remains a question that needs more explicit discussion. All feminisms, after all, are not created equal. This special issue of Coils of the Serpent sets out from the premise that despite its shortcomings, anarchism has much to offer feminism and is worth being taken seriously and explored in greater detail.

Before going any further, let us offer a brief definition of anarchism, in the words of one of the earliest writers to bring anarchism and feminist concerns together. Emma Goldman, in Anarchism and Other Essays suggests the following:

Anarchism, then, really stands for the liberation of the human mind from the dominion of religion; the liberation of the human body from the dominion of property; liberation from the shackles and restraint of government. Anarchism stands for a social order based on the free grouping of individuals for the purpose of producing real social wealth; an order that will guarantee every human being free access to the earth and the full enjoyment of the necessities of life, according to individual desires, tastes, inclinations. (1969 [1917]: 62)
Anarchism, therefore, espouses an anti-state, anti-hierarchy, anti-capitalist stance against all forms of oppression and domination. These core tenets, from early articulations of the anarchist theory and practice in the 1860s, also included an understanding of patriarchy and male domination as equally part of the struggle as fighting capitalism or the state (McKay 2007: 69). Due to the nature of anarchism – its foundational commitment to both individual and collective liberation, its multifaceted understanding of power, and its enduring critique of hierarchy – there have always been anarchists who spoke out against gendered norms, expectations, and oppressions. From the beginning, there have been those within anarchism who centered politics of gender liberation in their understanding of struggle and everyday life. At a time when such politics were far from commonplace, there was space within anarchism for discussions and activities that today would clearly be labelled as feminist. Many anarchist women were far ahead of their time in their analysis of gender and their activities were truly innovative.

These contributions should be considered a fundamental pillar of anarchism and feature prominently in our histories. They enrich anarchism, and furthermore, are of relevance to feminism as a whole. In an era of girlboss feminism – of “leaning in” and celebrating affluent celebrities as “feminist revolutionaries” – the ideas put forth by anarchist feminists of the past (and present) offer a crucial corrective. Bottici (2022: 5) elaborates:

Why anarchafeminism? Because it is the best antidote against the possibility of feminism becoming a privilege, and, thus, a tool in the hands of a few women who dominate them. In an epoch when the election of a woman president is presented as liberation for all women, when feminism can become a tool for corporate branding, the fundamental message of anarchafeminists of the past is more urgent than ever.

We don’t need a woman president; we need to get rid of presidents altogether. We don’t need feminist corporate branding; we need the abolition of capitalism. Against this backdrop, anarcha-feminism specifies an anarchism with renewed and explicit focus and analysis of heteropatriarchy, sexism, gendered violence and women/queer/trans experiences with an overall goal of the destruction of all forms of oppression and domination. It brings forth an orientation to the state and patriarchy as deeply connected forms of oppression and domination that must be both opposed. As the editors of the Perspectives special issue on Anarcha-Feminism (2016: 6) clearly lay out:

Making feminism explicit in anarchism is a choice of emphasis and interpretation, among other possible emphases and interpretations. It’s an argument that gender is one of the primary structures of oppression, and that sexuality is a fundamental mode of exercising domination. And it’s an acknowledgement that where power systems affect different people differently, certain issues, such as health and
incarceration, take on additional implications when viewed through the lens of gender.

Anarcha-feminism is a perspective that can respond to the varied contexts and situations in which gender affects and influences broader systems of power. As Peggy Kornegger argues, anarcha-feminism is a means for struggling for the broader goal of human liberation: “It is women who now hold to new conceptions of revolution, women who realize that revolution can no longer mean the seizure of power or the domination of one group by another – under any circumstance for any length of time. It is domination itself that must be abolished” (2002: 25).

As the history and present state of anarcha-feminism shows, this continues to be an essential perspective and way of seeing the world for anarchists, as well as all those interested in resisting all forms of oppression and domination. Given the continued attacks on bodies, identities, abortion access, and generalized right wing/state reaction, anarcha-feminism continues to be a potent perspective with which we can engage the world. This issue has aimed to add some further discussion to renew this relationship between anarchism and feminism, and continue to expand its bounds and spheres of influence and possibility.

With this aim each of the articles below draw from the range of anarchist and feminist influences, while also going very much beyond them as well. Themes of refusal, expanding commitments to radical ethics and care, unearthing repressed and dominated knowledges and enacting future possibilities come through in some fashion in each of the articles presented here. This, we think, speaks to some of the ongoing promise of engaging anarcha-feminism in the here and now. Our issue begins with Scott Branson’s “For a Tranarchist Feminism: Transition as Care and Struggle.” Weaving together writings on gender, transness, refusal, non-Western feminisms, social reproduction and abolitionist politics, Branson takes up the notion of trans refusal as an essential and much needed response to the ongoing violences of the world, and in the lives of trans folks specifically. The concept of transition, as movement, as resistance, as possibility presents opportunities to resist the current structures of violence and bring forth other ways of being. “To define transness through transition,” Branson argues, “does not simply reproduce the violence of the social order; it understands the discipline and coercion that puts us into immutable gender categories and refuses those terms (destroys the world) in order to offer a lived pathway towards a different world.” It aids in the creation of something different through processes of collective care, and collective refusal.

Against the ongoing cooptation and recuperation of once-radical gay, queer, feminist or identity politics, refusal of the dominant ways and means of doing things, coupled with an embrace of transition as method of reimagination, suggests a means to work –
perhaps literally transition – towards future trans anarcha-feminist possibilities. The aim here is not simply to refine the theories or lenses we use to see the world (though this is likely to occur and carries its own strengths as well), the point must be material and practical forms of resistance – “Our knowledge must be partisan,” Branson says, “and it must be grounded in action, not ideas.” Much in line with the intentions of this special issue, we must continue to refine our tools and ways of seeing the world, towards liberatory and transitory futures, but always with an eye towards action and resistance and refusal. Branson brings forth these possibilities and leaves us with a series of provocations that ought to reconfigure and disrupt both our theory and action.

Approaching the idea of refusal from a different vantage point, E. Ornelas in “Pedagogies of Refusal: Opportunities and Obstacles to Anarcha-Feminism in Contemporary US Academia” considers the possibilities for disruption within the Leviathan of US academia and beyond through the possibilities of generative refusal. Acknowledging the difficulties in moving towards a state of ‘not being governed’, Ornelas argues, “can help anarchist, feminist, and anarcha-feminist pedagogues rethink and restructure our refusals to the rule of formal educational institutions.” Drawing from practical classroom experience and examples in Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies (GWSS), and complemented by anarchist, feminist and critical pedagogical theories, this article pushes for a greater consideration of the values and ethics of an anarcha-feminist pedagogy situated in cooperation, reflexivity, multiplicity, egalitarianism, anti-hierarchy, and autonomy. Such ethics and values present possibilities for refusal of the dominant forms of academic and pedagogical practice, while also showing other possible routes forward.

Ornelas is careful to caution, however, that such possibilities may often be overstated by those who argue that such smaller pedagogical modifications will actually overturn the Leviathan of dominant forces of large institutions and structures, when in fact they often do not. This is not to say that the efforts are unimportant, or that they lack direct positive impact on students and those involved, but rather there is a sobering consideration here of the limitations of such efforts, and an even greater need for consideration of possible alternative (read: non-academic) sites beyond the Leviathan of US academia where such pedagogies and ethics and values might flourish with much less impediment. Generative refusal, in the Indigenous feminist sense taken up by Ornelas, pushes us to consider the limitations of dominant and hegemonic academic settings for the purposes of enacting anarcha-feminist pedagogies. There are likely more fruitful spaces of imagination and alternative practices that can be conceived more directly on anarcha-feminist terms. So while we should not cede the Leviathan of US academia to more conventional pedagogies, there is much more work to be done to directly and fully implement the anarcha-feminist alternatives.
Moving forward, Anastasia Murney prompts us to consider more fully the possibilities of ‘making a mess’ to expand anarchist and feminist worlds. Combining anarchist and feminist histories with the examples of Cary Cronenwett’s film *Maggots and Men* (2009) and the punk feminist group Pussy Riot, Murney considers the disruptive potentials of mess and the subversive opportunities that it creates. Referencing the Pussy Riot example, Murney advocates “a reframing of mess not as extraneous excess but as offering an abundance of political opportunities in and against the heteropatriarchal authoritarianism,” in this case, “of the Soviet Union and Putin’s Russia.” Mess, here, creates some fruitful potentials for joy, disruption, refusal and possibilities of alternative worlds and ways of being. This article dwells in the mess. Sits in it, takes it in and considers what we can draw out of it. “I want to invest in practices of worldmaking that use creative methods to draw out the undercurrents of anarchism and animate the lives of would-be revolutionaries,” Murney says, and looks at moments where the alternative, disruptive, and non-normative can show us possible pathways towards different futures. Mess, in this case, is perhaps a mix of influences, so often maligned, repressed and buried, that can enact radical possibilities for the future. Again we see some similar themes of refusal, unearthing radical possibilities and new ways of remaking the world coming to the fore.

Turning to India, Cheshta Arora and Debarun Sarkar consider the ways that feminist thought and praxis has been foreclosed within the dominant logics of the state. They suggest Indian feminist movements need to move away from the trappings of the state and have much to gain from looking at non/anti-state ways of being and doing politics. The authors illustrate the complexities of the Indian case and the lack of attention that has been paid to anarchism and its non-state influence, despite a number of historic anarchist figures. The lack of non-state thinking within the Indian context, Arora and Sarkar argue, can partially be attributed to the ready inclusion of Indian women within the state structure, as well as the state-focused radical political alternatives that gained popularity, like the Communist Party of India. The state has been reified within Indian feminist movement politics, taken as given, and maintained as a dominant structure to be worked with, rather than one to be more critically opposed or by-passed. The aim, then, must be to further catalyze non-state thinking. “It is by being open to thinking without a state that the women’s movement in India can tackle some of its political impasses,” the authors argue, and this presents possibilities for alternative forms of organizing politics and life itself.

Shifting continents, Marta Romero-Delgado takes us to Spain and the circulations of anarchist feminism before, during, and most significantly after the Spanish Revolution and Civil War. “Past, Present and Future of Anarchafeminism in Spain” lays the groundwork for the development and continuation of feminism within Spain despite Francoist repression and an era of anarchist recession. Specifically, Romero-Delgado
examines the period of exile for many anarcha-feminists and details the ongoing, though not always readily available, linkages between those who stayed and those who left. This departs from much work on Spain that focuses heavily on the Civil War and anarchist highpoints, and asks how the spirit of anarcha-feminism has been kept alive despite these periods of decreased visibility and agitation. This work sets up a research agenda for future efforts to assess and unearth the continuance of anarcha-feminism and its enduring influence in the Spanish context despite an overwhelming period of repression and violence.

In the context of ongoing attacks on abortion access and queer and trans bodies Alex Barksdale examines transfeminist autonomous health practices (AHP) for reproductive and trans wellbeing through the lens of anarchist feminism. Transfeminist AHPs are understood here as “autonomous health practices coming out of feminist and trans movements to meet the care needs of women and trans people of all genders” and as a potent pushback against the repressive and regressive attacks by the state. The autonomous health practices share close affinities with anarchist politics and mobilize the power of direct action, mutual aid, and collective care, while providing “unique tools in the struggle for reproductive, sexual, and gender autonomy. Moreover,” Barksdale argues, “these practices help cultivate radical imaginations of bodily autonomy and offer an alternative to liberal feminist and trans politics that rely on the state.”

This article takes us through the development of DIY and self-managed abortion practices and trans ethics of care that operate outside and beyond the confines of the state, firmly placing care back in the hands of communities themselves. Barksdale draws from reproductive justice and feminist frameworks while arguing that they need to go further, beyond liberal tendencies and limitations, towards abolitionist and anarchist futures. In particular, the context of criminalization needs to be carefully considered (especially as state bans and sanctions continue to grow), even as AHPs “still represent effective harm reduction measures and harm reduction activists are well versed at operating in contexts of criminalization.” They need “to be connected with organizing to address those risks, such as bail funds, legal representation, campaigns to drop charges, and the creation of sanctuary cities.” Given the current moment and ongoing attacks, this article is a potent reminder of what is to be done and what is at stake in relying on the state for protection.

As we draw towards the end of our special issue Spencer Beswick continues the discussion of anarcha-feminist contributions to struggles for abortion access, queer and trans liberation, and challenging all forms of oppression and domination within movement spaces themselves. Looking at the Love and Rage organization, and highlighting its contributions throughout the 1990s to keep the anarchist flame alive, Beswick shows the continued intersectional promise of anarcha-feminist politics against
liberal forms of inclusion and continually furthering anti-racist and feminist concerns within broader anarchism. The wide ranging work of Love and Rage shows the necessity, but also the difficulties, in expanding intersectional work within movements that continues to resonate today.

In particular, Beswick details the efforts by Love and Rage to foreground and incorporate an explicit anti-racist feminist politics as the organization grew and developed by carefully considering the interventions of Women of Colour feminists and organizers. Importantly, the growing pains of the organization are highlighted, including a critical discussion of its own internal challenges with racism, patriarchy and male domination, and they serve as a reminder of the need for continued vigilance to confront systems of domination in all movement spaces. Externally, the militant contributions of Love and Rage to confronting anti-abortion reactionaries provide lessons and points of consideration for the movements of today. “Militant confrontation of Operation Rescue was a turning point in the development of a new anarchist feminism,” Beswick argues, “feminists went on the attack in order to defend women’s autonomy and build a new world. In their uncompromising struggle for reproductive freedom, anarchists helped build a fighting, revolutionary feminist movement.” By examining the contributions, complexities and contradictions within Love and Rage “‘We’re Pro-Choice and We Riot’: Anarcha-Feminism in Love and Rage (1989-98)” charts the history of anarcha-feminist agitation and its enduring legacy, while revealing the continued work that needs to be done in the present.

Our special issue ends with a review essay by Adam Lewis that uses Theresa Warburton’s Other Worlds Here: Honoring Native Women’s Writing in Contemporary Anarchist Movements as a starting point to further assess the relationship between anarchism, feminism and settler colonialism. Warburton’s formulation of ‘structures of settlement’ is foregrounded to consider the ways in which contemporary anarchist movements continue to uphold, if not at times further, settler colonial structures in their political mythologies, relationships to land and place, and their engagement with Indigenous resurgence movements. Lewis pushes anarchists more broadly to consider the relations of settler colonial relations and structures where they are situated and continue to formulate and refine anarchist anti-colonial politics in the present.

The concerns of anarcha-feminist politics are many and only a small handful of them are addressed in the articles you will find in this particular special issue. We hope this issue serves as a means to further invigorate interest in anarchist feminist politics, and its ability to continue to contribute to a wide range of struggles in our present moment. Further, we hope that this adds to the ongoing discussion of the more general relationship between anarchism and feminism and how these bodies of theory and practice can continue to engage with one another into the future. There is much
violence, oppression, domination and reaction that persists in the world today, and we hope the articles included here serve as some essential reminders and beacons of hope for a better world amongst all the turmoil. Anarchist feminism, as an expansive way of being, doing, resisting, and imagining, has much to teach and challenge us, and many ways to expand and grow.

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Works Cited


