Making a Mess: Expanding Anarchist and Feminist Worlds

ANASTASIA MURNEY

The University of New South Wales

In this article, I propose a method of worldmaking that is attentive to the value of *mess.* I approach mess in two ways. First, I take up 'mess' to refer to surplus: the excessive and illegible material that is left out of authoritative historical narratives. Second, I want to critique the use of mess in a pejorative register, to accuse someone of being wrong or distorting something; to *make a mess* or *mess things up.* I find messy affinities in Saidiya Hartman's book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, which uncovers the rebellion of young black girls and gender nonconforming people in Philadelphia and New York at the turn of the twentieth century. She explains how the legal category of 'waywardness' was strategically deployed to capture and contain young women under the guise of 'imminent criminality.' Hartman flips the term into a fervent practice of freedom, "an avid longing for a world not ruled by master, man or the police" (2019: 227). Waywardness is anarchistic but it is also *more* than anarchism. As Hartman writes, "only a misreading of the key texts of anarchism could ever imagine a place for colored girls" (230). This quote invites tracing the paths of subjects whose encounters with anarchism (and other political struggles) are framed with a negative prefix: as misunderstanding, misinterpreting, misreading. I want to suggest that a distortion of anarchism is precisely what is necessary for leading us to lost comrades and developing a more generative, a *messier* framework for what anarchism can be. However, as Kathy E. Ferguson argues, the familiar canonical version of anarchism is itself a distortion, skewing favor to those with the power to publish (2011: 265). So, what I am doing, in solidarity with those who have been vilified as messy or whose activities have been consigned to the murky hinterland of political struggle, is a kind of corrective misrepresentation, *distorting the distortion.* To embrace mess as a method is to begin uncovering the vibrant textures of lives and worlds that were never permitted to flourish.

But first, I want to make some initial remarks on the relationship between anarchism and feminism. Ferguson dispels the common refrain that Emma Goldman was 'ahead of her time,' arguing that her time was, in fact, populated with a large number of women active in radical politics (2011: 12). Martha Ackelsberg's writing on Mujeres Libres in the context of the Spanish Civil War exemplifies how radical women can be

adrift between anarchism and feminism (2001). On the one hand, these women perceived feminism as a white, middle-class movement pledging allegiance to the state. On the other, the dominance of men in trade unions and anarcho-syndicalist societies meant there was inadequate recognition of patriarchal oppression and a deferral of women's liberation until 'after' the revolution. In this case, organized forms of anarchism were not consistent in advancing the emancipation of women. But feminism lacked the rigorous class politics, the ambition and imagination to engage radical women. *Anarcha-feminism* names a lesserknown tradition that emerged in the 1970s, aspiring to a productive synthesis between the two. It entails a resistance to heteropatriarchal oppression and domination as manifest through capitalism and the state (Bottici 2021; Dark Star 2012; Kowal 2019). In the midst growing innovations and diverse perspectives, such as the recognition of Indigenous praxis, queer anarchism, tranarchism, and Black anarchism, (Kēhaulani Kauanui 2021; Shannon, Daring and Rogue 2013; Herman 2015; Bey 2020) I want to ask whether anarcha-feminism is sufficient. Or perhaps this question is: how to configure an open relation to different struggles without losing the specificity of sex and gender as axes of oppression? I follow Marquis Bey, who declares a resistance to "claiming" various thinkers and absorbing them "into the fold" of anarchism (2020: 4). Instead, I hope to contribute to a strengthening web of critiques and solidarities.

In the first section of this article, I will initiate a critical engagement with mess, drawing from a range of scholars working across multiple disciplines. I address the aversion to mess, looking closely to detect what exactly is being identified as mess or messy. I then engage with the work of several scholars and activists who have sought to find creative potential in the idea of mess. In the second section, I undertake an analysis of two artistic practices that exemplify the approach I am taking to mess. Both examples are rooted in a Russian context and question the centering of a masculine revolutionary subject in two different historical moments. The first is Cary Cronenwett's reimagining of the 1921 Kronstadt Rebellion "with a twist of gender anarchy" in the film *Maggots and Men* (2009). He references Sergei Eisenstein's classic film *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), dramatizing the 1905 mutiny on the Potemkin of the Black Sea fleet, which took place during the abortive revolution of that year. Cronenwett transforms the sailor-mutineers into 'queer revolutionaries' on this mythological island utopia. This combines and gives expression to two lost futures: the undelivered *social* promises of the Russian Revolution, such as gender emancipation, and Kronstadt's self-governing communism. The second example is the street activism of Russian punk feminist group Pussy Riot. Their actions during 2011 and 2012 contributed to—and bristled against—a public outpouring of discontent in response to Vladimir Putin's return to presidential office for a third term. This culminated in their infamous *Punk Prayer* (2012) and the subsequent imprisonment of two group members. Support for the group within Russia was mixed at best. At the same time, as Pussy Riot hurtled into the Western media sphere, coverage of

the group often neglected their anarchism, repackaging them as a lucrative feminist image of rebellion. I want to advance a reframing of mess not as extraneous excess but as offering an abundance of political opportunities in and against the heteropatriarchal authoritarianism of the Soviet Union and Putin's Russia.

Towards a Critical Engagement with Mess

Perhaps a good place to start is with the denaturalization of clarity, the antithesis of mess. As Trinh T. Minh-ha writes, "clarity is always ideological" (1991: 84). She is describing the Western reception of cultural knowledges and the requirement to be made legible and therefore commodifiable. The unfamiliar is met with claims of incompetency or inadequacy: "knowledge is no knowledge until it bears the seal of the Master's approval" (1991: 85). This reveals the costs and compromises of clarity, underscoring its function as part of the apparatus of patriarchal colonial knowledge production. The insistence on clarity flatters our capacity to know in our own language. Clarity cuts, compresses, and categorizes what is valuable, discarding the nonsensical and opaque. I began thinking about the creative and critical potential of what is left out of political struggles when I encountered Cindi Katz's feminist critique of Marxist geographer David Harvey, her colleague and friend. In a chapter titled "Messing with 'The Project,'" she articulates a frustration with the "stubbornness of his modes of engaging other kinds of theory… eschewing the messy in favor of the elegant and systematic" (2005: 235). The masculinist tenor of 'The Project' equates to an unwavering faith in certain theoretical frameworks to the exclusion of (feminist, anti-colonial, queer) others. In contrast, Katz proposes 'minor theory,' drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, foregrounding perspectives that are embodied, situated and inseparable from the "mess of everyday life" (1996; 2017). To be minor expresses a discomfort with dominant academic discourses, where 'major' theory persists with methodological habits of exclusion or strategic reductionism. However, I want to venture deeper into mess to explore not just its marginal status but the particular *qualities* that are assigned to it. What kind of potential might be lurking beneath the surface of words such as 'unclear', 'illegible', 'inadequate', and 'excessive.'

A critical reappraisal of mess could quickly become a vast and unmanageable exercise. So, I am restricting my analysis to three areas aligned with the larger goal of expanding anarchist and feminist worlds. This will help to structure my approach to Cronenwett's *Maggots and Men* and Pussy Riot's *Punk Prayer.* First, I address the demarcating of what constitutes legitimate political expression and the disparaging of folk, affective, and 'nonscalable' practices in social movements. To push back against the charge of messiness in this regard is to question the reproduction of norms, hierarchies, and structures that can be stifling. I consider messiness in relation to bodies, sex, and

gender. Too often, the dissenting voices of women, queer and gender nonconforming people are deemed both *too much* and *not enough*. However, I am skeptical of corralling messiness into a fixed subject position—mess defies stable representation. I then reflect on the hagiographic tendencies that persist within anarchist scholarship and the challenge of engaging with partial histories. In this vein, I find inspiration in creative and speculative interventions into missing or ambiguous histories. Svetlana Boym is instructive in proposing the term *off-modern;* she carves anti-authoritarian routes through the Russian avant-garde, lingering on missed opportunities—the "edgy excess" and "margins of error" (2017: 3). This is consonant with my approach in terms of learning to move sideways through time and taking a speculative leap into possible worlds. John Law also helps to identify what can be gained from a serious engagement with mess. He argues that methods do not just reflect reality but *produce* some realities and not others. This means it is vital to rethink the tools and methods at our disposal. Mess is a "topography of reality-possibilities" waiting to be tapped into (2004: 34).

Nick Montgomery and carla bergman give the name 'rigid radicalism' to organizing spaces and attitudes that are stifling and dogmatic. It can also refer to a more general atmosphere of melancholic impotence. Too often, the work of politics is presumed to be sober and serious. Part of this has to do with the hardening of critique into a reflex that functions too much in the register of fault finding (2017: 14). Where critique serves to valorize cynicism, fatalism, or is too prescriptive about what radical change is and what it looks like, this can narrow the scope for political action. Critique is important, it can be loving and generative, but it is not enough. An example of rigid radicalism can be seen in Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek's disparaging of 'folk politics' in the new social movements of the 2010s. This broad sweep involves a superficial treatment of feminist, queer, Black and Indigenous struggles engaging in 'folk' tactics and sensibilities: "fetishization of local space, immediate actions, transient gestures, and particularisms of all kinds" (2015: 17). Public demonstrations are "hasty or misplaced action" to the detriment of a "more finely tuned analysis" while folk activists are accused of privileging "feelings" over "strategic gains" (2015: 27). Marxist positions such as this risk treating social movements as something that can be boiled down to a neat formula. Their language is reminiscent of what Argentinian group Colectivo Situaciones describe as the figure of the 'sad militant': "keeping for himself a knowledge of what ought to happen in the situation, which he always approaches from outside, in an instrumental and transitive way…" (2007: 81-82). The sad militant affords himself the power of foresight and stakes out the terrain of 'real' politics, chastising the rest as misguided mess.

There are strong anarchist and feminist lineages that refute the limits set upon what constitutes legitimate political expression. One of the earliest examples comes from Emma Goldman's memoir, where she describes attending an event and being pulled aside by "a young boy" and told "it did not behoove an agitator to dance." Indignant,

Goldman writes: “I insisted that our Cause could not expect me to become a nun and that the movement should be turned into a cloister” (1970: 65). In this instance, the attempt to suppress dancing exposes a puritanical politics that Goldman desires no part in (the Latin root of the word cloister, *clausura*, means to ‘shut up’). This is a potent reminder of the still prevalent belief that revolution isn’t supposed to be fun or pleasurable. I also want to untangle joy from happiness, which are not the same thing. For instance, Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Smile or Die* (2009) explicates the coercive and anaesthetizing project of ‘positive thinking’ in neoliberal America. In this sense, happiness promises comfort and security whereas joy is much more complex. It is not another version of optimism but an enlivening of the capacity to act. According to Montgomery and bergman, joy is aesthetic, not anaesthetizing, in that it intensifies emotional and affective relations; it is to *do, feel, and think* together. They propose *militant joy* as a critical and affirmative antidote to rigid radicalism. Joy defies totalizing frameworks: “in fact, to grip it, to nail it down, to claim to represent it fully would turn it into a dead image divorced from its lively unfolding” (2017: 33). So, to embrace a messier approach is to loosen our grip on what kinds of activities constitute a sufficiently revolutionary politics.

In spite of its non-hierarchical tenets, anarchism is not immune to universalizing and androcentric tendencies as well as outright hostilities toward marginalized groups. In this vein, anarcha-feminism and anarchistic feminisms should not be reducible to the cisnormative figure of “woman.” A robust praxis requires a commitment to denaturalizing and exploding Statist configurations of sex and gender. Intersectional feminism, with its roots in Black feminism, has been a vital tool for examining the interlocking oppressions of race, class, gender and sexuality (Crenshaw 1989). However, some feminist critics have voiced concern that intersectionality has been taken up as an all-inclusive version of liberal feminism, enabling superficial assurances of diverse representation (Nash 2018). Jasbir Puar productively complicates intersectional feminism with the notion of assemblage. “Intersectional identities,” she writes, “are the byproducts of attempts to still and quell the perpetual motion of assemblages, to capture and reduce them, to harness their threatening mobility” (2012). For Puar, the main problem rests with a reinvestment in the humanist subject as the dominant platform for political intervention. Assemblages, on the other hand, are messier and more flexible, de-privileging the human and the discreteness of bodies that might otherwise blur and merge into each other. In *AnarchoBlackness*, Marquis Bey also warns against the making of a prototypical subject and the pitfalls of representation: “flipping the script is not enough… Wanting a representational subject that embodies all the marginalized demographics we can (and can’t) imagine will not—I repeat: *will not*—actualize a radical anarchic world” (2020: 64). So, the point is not to assign an ideal subject but to refuse stasis and accommodation within capitalist, neoliberal and patriarchal structures. To become unfixed and illegible is to treat anarchistic sex and gender as a forever unfinished project.

When it comes to anarchist histories, the idea of a 'canon' seems paradoxical but the conceptualizing of anarchism as the brainchild of European white men persists. Kathy E. Ferguson observes the recurrent habit of isolating and elevating individuals from anarchist movements, a product of the "highly attenuated, individuated and celebrity oriented way that memory is produced, leaving us with a stunted version of our radical history" (2011: 254). This is true of the handful of anarchist women often cited as inclusions in the anarchist 'canon' as a belated acknowledgement of their contributions and to offset an obvious gender imbalance. Ferguson strives to reverse these exclusions and repopulate a forgotten female presence in anarchism through her research on the contemporaries of Emma Goldman. She collects bits and pieces of information about these radical women, compiling them into a long list, aspiring to recreate their worldmaking presence (2011: 252). Reading the list, it is striking to note the "unbearable lightness" of these historical imprints, scattered with question marks and single line entries. Saidiya Hartman's work unfolds from a similar dilemma of scarce material. Like Ferguson, she confronts the problems of history writing, questioning "who is endowed with the gravity and authority of a historical actor" (2019: xiii). These are important efforts to expand and bridge between anarchist and feminist worlds. But I am also convinced this process must do more than recover nameable individuals and fold them into official narratives.

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. One such exploration is Clare Hemmings' engagement with the life and legacy of Emma Goldman. She takes Goldman's vexed relationship to feminism as a central concern and urges readers not to 'scrub up' an image of Goldman to suit their needs. Rather than seeking to resolve these tensions, Hemmings works in and with the mess. She terms the *imaginative archive* that which "represents the straining to hear the voices that have never been heard… and the utopian desire for another future grounded in a different past" (2018: 8). She fills in the missing letter correspondence between Goldman and a devoted anarchist comrade Amelda Sperry, authoring Goldman's absent replies. Hemmings reflects on this intervention as yearning for an alternative history of sexual freedom: "… a desire not to diminish their passion because it does not fit the proper narrative of sexual rights or identity" (2018: 166). Saidiya Hartman pursues a more radical approach in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments,* departing from saturated historical figures such as Goldman. She describes her method as *critical fabulation*, working with "scraps in the archive" to retrieve minor and anonymous figures, rearranging the shape of stories to give space to divergent trajectories (2008: 11). Hartman does not attempt to insert or reconcile the young black girls with anarchism but emphasizes their dissonance. For instance, animating the life of Esther Brown, she writes: "walking through the streets of New York, she and Emma Goldman crossed paths but failed to recognize each other." (2019: 229) This misrecognition performs a refusal

to defer to familiar and canonical histories of anarchism. It is a generative 'failure' that invites us off the beaten path.

There are few revolutions as captivating as the Russian revolution. At times, however, it seems as if its most recognizable actors hover above the mess, the nameless revolutionaries, and conflicting visions of what could have been. In her book *Yesterday's Tomorrow*, Bini Adamczak revisits the catastrophes of the Soviet Union, sifting through decisive events such as Stalin's 1937 pact with Hitler and the violent suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion. She argues that we must learn from these concrete historical failures in order to cultivate a renewed hope in a communist project. Similar to Hemmings and Hartman, Adamczak mobilizes desire, a "communist desire" for a lost future that never materialized. She does this through creating space for mourning, tracing the faint imprints of forgotten and abandoned revolutionaries, such as the sailors of Kronstadt and the antifascists who fled the Nazis, seeking asylum in the Soviet Union, and were sent back as prisoners. "How do we remember those of whom there is so little left to remember?" asks Adamczak, "And above all, with whom do we remember them?" (2021: 13). Significantly, she moves to reclaim an anti-authoritarian tradition of communism, gesturing to a diverse radical milieu filled with activists of different ideological stripes: anarchists, syndicalists, libertarian socialists. This fractures a monolithic reading of the revolution as 'won' by the Bolsheviks, opening onto multiple, messy dimensions. I find it useful to read Adamczak's evocative notion of 'the future buried in the past' in companion with Boym's off-modern. I think of Cronenwett and Pussy Riot as moving in an 'off' register, embracing tangents, zigzags, sidesteps, doubling back and stumbling forward again. This functions to honor lost futures and the people who fought and died for them. At the same time, it gathers up and gives expression to the fervent aspirations that were swept off the table in the twentieth century. In other words, it is an investment in a revolution that *has not yet come to pass*.

Messing with the Revolution

The Russian Revolution is synonymous with 1917, a charismatic lightning strike, producing the death of Tsarism and the sudden birth of communism. In fact, there were two revolutions in 1917—the abdication of the Tsar in February and the installation of the Provisional government, and the Bolshevik-led seizure of power in October. To broaden the frame even further is to catch a whole series of tumultuous events; the strikes and unrest of 1905 through to the civil war that ensued after 1917 and the waves of Bolshevik repression that extended into the 1920s. But I also want to track the retrospective making of the revolution into clear representations that inaugurate heroes and dramatize events, ironing out the ambiguities and the mess. For instance, in 1920, theatre practitioner Nikolai Evreinov led a recreation of the Bolshevik-led Storming of

the Winter Palace, celebrated as pivotal to overthrowing the government. The mass spectacle attracted over 8,000 participants with 100,000 spectators. In fact, the re-enactment was much better organized than the original. According to Boym, ten years later, people mistook their participation in the re-creation for participation in the actual revolution. "Thus," she argues, "the foundational event of twentieth-century communist history—the October Revolution—become a prime example of 'mis-memory' and mythification" (2017: 104). Given there is little documentation of the original storming of the Winter Palace, Evreinov's representation supplants the event itself and consolidates a possessive claim to the revolution through the sheer force of aesthetic spectacle. The actual event was a chaotic affair riddled with errors, postponed several times until Lenin pre-empted the assault and claimed the government had been overthrown. As Adamczak writes, "after all the revolution is, among other things, the experience of mutual understanding, and at the same time a misunderstanding multiplied a million fold" (2013).

Unlike Evreinov's mass spectacle, which was militaristic in execution, both Pussy Riot and Cronenwett borrow from different traditions of amateur theatre. Cronenwett's *Maggots and Men* incorporates references to the amorphous network of agit-prop brigades that flourished during the early years of the revolution. Pussy Riot emerged, in part, from Moscow Actionism, a form of artistic and political activism that gained traction in the 1990s amidst a process of profound social and economic fragmentation. Both traditions are interventions into, and attempts to remake, the public sphere. Both are unpredictable due to an emphasis on decentralization and improvisation. In this vein, I want to focus on the *adjacent* character of *Punk Prayer* and the Kronstadt rebellion, unfolding in the shadows of the main action. First, Kronstadt is adjacent in a literal sense: its island location and geographical separation from Petrograd. Further, as historian Israel Getzler notes, "Kronstadt was left alone to enjoy a lengthy period of political and social incubation" (1982: viii). It was adequately provisioned and developed a dissenting version of communist life 'off' stage, so to speak. Pussy Riot can be understood as adjacent to the cycle of mass protests occurring in Russian between 2011 and 2013. Their controversial performance inside Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour drew significant international attention and became a lens through which Western audiences understood (or misunderstood) the social movement, pulling focus from more established opposition leaders. Moreover, Pussy Riot's action introduced a strident feminist agenda and funneled more attention towards the role of the church in legitimizing Putin's regime. In effect, Pussy Riot changed—or broadened—the central critique of the movement. So, both Pussy Riot and the Kronstadt rebellion were adjacent elements of larger struggles, passionate 'misunderstandings' that mess with the revolution. Eventually, they became too visible, too incongruous, too *threatening*, and were stamped out.

At times, the weight of representation devoted to October eclipses the revolution in February and the integral role of women in sparking the fires of mass dissent. Women textile workers first took to the streets, protesting the lack of food and wages and calling for the abdication of the Tsar. Later, Trotsky wrote of the women: “They go up to the cordons more boldly than men, take hold of the rifles, beseech, almost command: ‘Put down your bayonets—join us’” (1930: 81). And many of the soldiers did. However, some historians have diminished the February revolution as “spontaneous” and depict the women as catalyzing the revolution “almost by accident” (McDermid and Hillyar 1999: 2). In *Midwives of the Revolution*, McDermid and Hillyar suggest that women’s grassroots organizing efforts were not *legible* through the prism of the party form. Women were on the streets all the time, queuing, working, and gossiping (so often dismissed as vacuous chat). To see women workers in this messy, informal, and conspiratorial context offers a more textured understanding of revolutionary process. However, larger questions of gender and sexual liberation were more complex. In the socialist milieus of Russia and Europe, critiques of the nuclear family and of moralistic views on love and sex were commonplace (Healy 2009: 4). The Bolsheviks started strong: Tsarist penalties against homosexuality were abolished months after the revolution. In 1918, the new government instituted the most progressive code on marital relations the modern world had ever seen. It secularized marriage and made ‘no grounds’ divorce easily obtainable. The Bolsheviks did, to their credit, recognise the double oppression of women, the compounding forces of gender and class. However, they also feared feminism as a divisive issue. The prevailing view was that such ‘private’ matters should be deferred until the revolution was secured—the social must be kept out of the political (Healy 2009: 5). So, we are left with an ephemeral sexual revolution; a not-quite revolution that deteriorates over time.

Coming back to Kronstadt, the sailors were also pivotal in enabling the rise to power of the Bolsheviks, celebrated as “the pride and joy of the revolution” (Avrich 1970: 3). The naval port of Kronstadt is located on Kotlin Island in the Gulf of Finland, an important strategic asset for Petrograd. The stringent conditions of War Communism placed significant strain on peasants due to the requisitioning of grain to nourish the army fighting the Whites. The severe food shortage led to outbursts of rebellion, unleashing a toxic current of disaffection that spread to the cities, where conditions were also deteriorating. In the factories, the Bolsheviks implemented a militaristic regimentation of the workforce, extending centralized control and eviscerating the Leninist slogan “all power to the soviets” (Avrich 1970: 33). During the bitter winter months, strikes broke out in Petrograd. Racked with starvation and cold, the protestors demanded an end to the unequal distribution of rations and the removal of armed forces from factories. This escalated into bigger grievances with the fledgling Soviet state, such as the widespread repression of political and civil liberties. In February of 1921, the sailors of Kronstadt declared solidarity with the striking workers and issued the

Petropavlovsk resolution, a list of fifteen demands targeting not just the disastrous consequences of War Communism but the heart of the Bolshevik project. In short, the Kronstadt sailors sought to reclaim the revolution for the workers and peasants (Avrich 1970: 73). Not one of their demands were considered. The Bolsheviks did not negotiate and engaged in a fierce propaganda campaign to discredit the rebels, painting them as White sympathizers and counterrevolutionaries. This led to a brutal suppression of the Kronstadt rebels, resulting in around twelve thousand casualties. And it was the state's violent retaliation that prompted a number of prominent anarchists, such as Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, and Peter Kropotkin, to declare the revolution lost.

Cronenwett's black and white, pseudo archival film recreates the Kronstadt rebellion, from the tumultuous early years of the revolution to the final gasp of resistance in 1921. His first encounter with Kronstadt was through a conversation with a friend referencing a vague, mythological version of the rebellion: "an island of anarchist sailors." Cronenwett describes his initial approach as "pressing my fantasies" of what this island could be onto the film. His decision to narrate the film through the fictionalised letters of anarchosyndicalist, Stefan Petrichenko, recalls Hemming's speculative letter writing, manifesting a "utopian desire for another future grounded in a different past" (2018: 8). One of the most distinctive features of *Maggots and Men* is Cronenwett's desire to feel out and inhabit the social textures of everyday life on the island. We first see the sailors lounging and picnicking on a grassy hillside in small groups. A few of them perform gymnastic movements, creating elegant, athletic shapes with their bodies. The slow and gentle sounds of a harp underscore this idyllic setting. Petrichenko's voiceover muses: "you ask about everyday life here and I don't know how to answer… Each day can be so full." Cronenwett accentuates the folk peasant heritage of the sailors, who are shown tilling the soil, planting seedlings, pickling vegetables, and engaging in collective exercise routines. It is also curious that he introduces the workers through the lens of idleness and leisure. This contrasts with the fierce conditions of War Communism in Petrograd and Trotsky's insistence, at the Ninth Party Congress, that the state must inculcate discipline and obedience given "man is naturally inclined to laziness" (quoted in Adamczak 2021: 138). *Maggots and Men* imagines a version of communist life that exceeds the 'work' of revolution and takes pleasure seriously. "The Revolution," says Petrichenko, "should be like water… something we breathe and move through that is all around us and that is in motion all the time."

Maggots and Men interweaves Petrichenko's poetic letters with structured exposition of historical events in the form of the agitprop Blue Blouse theatre troupe. These scenes use angular, Constructivist stagecraft and stylized choreography to illustrate pivotal events. This sets up a contrast between the hard jolts of the political situation under War Communism and the softer yearning emanating from the world under construction in Kronstadt. Blue Blouse was an actual amateur theatre troupe,

starting in Moscow in 1923, and belonging to the 'living newspaper' tradition, an educational format consisting of vignettes on local and international affairs performed in worker's clubs and cafeterias. In *Maggots and Men*, Cronenwett and his team sought to recreate the staged tableaux from archival photographs. Blue Blouse was part of an explosion of amateur theatre or 'theatre from below' in the revolutionary period. As Lynn Mally writes, "the very term the Soviets chose for the amateur—*samodeiatel nost*—can be translated as autonomous action" (2000: 15). Chaotic and unpredictable, the decentralized proliferation of amateur theatre meant that it could not be fully controlled by the new Bolshevik government, similar to the volatile and improvisational political culture in Kronstadt. In the 1930s, the revaluing of expertise and professionalization saw a clamping down on the unruliness and subversive potential of amateur theatre. Unlike the mobile, lightweight troupes of the small stage, with their contempt for high production values, the Stalinist era was replaced with an emphasis on mass spectacle and 'serious' culture with a set repertoire. This coincided with the rise of political and aesthetic cleansing, discrediting the mess of autonomous culture: music became "muddle," theatrical productions were condemned as "false" and "distortions," and those who continued to gravitate to amateur theatre were labelled "alien and accidental people" (Mally 2000: 201). Once again, those accused of deviating from the script of the revolution and are cut off.

Cronenwett queers early Soviet cinema, borrowing scenes from Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and excavating its latent homoeroticism. *Maggots and Men* is a landmark achievement because it features one of the biggest casts of trans actors ever recorded. He articulates the central provocation of the film as taking an all-male environment and redefining what is male. This also subverts historical characterisations of the sailors as "tempestuous" and "volatile" and "forever on the verge of exploding into open violence" (Avrich 1970: 56-57). Cronenwett offers a different kind of masculine figure, softer and more playful. *Maggots and Men* unfurls the tension around gender and sexuality during this time. On the one hand, the libertarian socialist tradition argued in favour of same-sex love and against the interference of church and state in the sexual lives of adults. On the other, the ascetic Bolsheviks appealed to a 'scientific' position, oriented to rationalising the role of procreative sex in terms of health (Healy 2001: 111). On the proposition that sex under communism should be no more complicated than drinking a glass of water, Lenin urged for moderation: "of course, thirst must be satisfied. But will the normal man… drink out of a puddle, or out of glass with a rim greasy from many lips" (quoted in Healy 2001: 114). *Maggots and Men* rebuffs Lenin's hygienist metaphor and his fear of multiple sexual partners with a riotous cabaret scene celebrating the sensuous joy of revolution. This is a glimpse into Kronstadt's promiscuous gender-diverse nightlife, full of different bodies dancing to folk music and culminating in queer sex.

In an interview, *Maggots and Men* co-writer and cinematographer Ilona Berger describes the cabaret scene as "the revenge of the femmes" (Cronenwett and Berger 2021). She is referring to a humorous anecdote about femme-identifying actors on set who refused to take orders from the assistant director. However, this phrase also alludes to an important feminine presence in what is otherwise a transmasculine film. In fact, this reflects an interesting phenomenon during the early Soviet period where women took to dressing as men. For some lesbian women, this was an effective disguise for same-sex desire and allowed them to pursue relationships with women with little interference from the authorities. Other women leveraged their masculine appearance to appropriate the privileges of men and extend their participation in public life, joining the military service, for instance. In short, "masculine styles conferred revolutionary credibility" (Healy 2001: 61). While this historical chapter indicates a loosening of patriarchal ties, there was a limited spectrum of gender variance that was permitted. This carried worrying implications for feminine lesbians and men; there is evidence to suggest that effeminate men attracted harsher judgement than masculine women. Reflecting on the film a decade after its release, Cronenwett reconsiders the film's tagline "a twist of gender anarchy" (originating from a film festival, not Cronenwett himself). He questions whether the film's experiment to redefine male in an all-male environment is, in fact, the *opposite* of gender anarchy (Cronenwett and Berger 2021). *Maggots and Men* is perhaps less beholden to the objective of "passing" and incorporates a reflexive critique with the 'revenge of the femmes' scene. Nonetheless, this does raise important considerations for anarchafeminism where the dissolution of some gender norms is simultaneous with the problematic re-inscription of others. An effective praxis, therefore, must be mindful of the uneven distribution of vulnerabilities in the process of undoing and remaking gender. The revolution must continue to move like water.

I want to skip forward through time now and focus on Pussy Riot's *Punk Prayer*. The first encounter I had with *Punk Prayer* was through international news coverage of the event. Reporters stumbled over the names of the group members while attempting to decode their critique. The original documentation of *Punk Prayer* was uploaded to Pussy Riot's LiveJournal page not long after the performance on February 21. The low-fi video opens with a musical version of the Christian prayer *Ave Maria* ("Hail Mary") while members of Pussy Riot are seen engaging in exaggerated worship in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. The music then cuts to a heavier punk track and more of the group are seen dancing and thrashing their guitars in colored dresses, tights, and balaclavas. This is framed against the gilded backdrop of the iconostasis, an elaborate wall of religious paintings surrounding a set of glittering gates. In setting their stage on a sacred pulpit, Pussy Riot adopt the entitlements of the male clergy and attempt a feminist re-scripting of this ritualistic space. Their lyrics call on the Virgin Mary to "chase Putin out" and "become a feminist." The song refers to "black frock, golden epaulettes" and "the crossbearer procession of black limousines," images conjuring up the intimate

relationship between the Kremlin and the Orthodox church. In her statement at the trial, Pussy Riot member Ekaterina Samutsevich argued this alliance is reminiscent of Imperial Russia, “where power came not from earthly manifestations such as democratic elections and civil society, but from God himself” (Samutsevich 2012). The struggle to capture *Punk Prayer* is evident from the guerrilla footage. There is a lot of erratic movement as the church attendants move to repress the performance. In fact, the limited and mediocre footage was difficult to stitch together, and the group initially believed *Punk Prayer* to be one of their least successful actions.

When Pussy Riot exploded onto the scene in November 2011, their formula consisted of unsanctioned performances occurring in one or multiple targeted locations. The footage is then edited together and the group samples songs from punk bands such as *The Angelic Upstarts* and *Cockney Rejects* while singing their own protest songs over the top. Their first public performance, *Release the Cobblestones*, commemorating the 1917 revolution, saw group members set a precarious stage in a Moscow metro station at peak hour. One of the patterns that emerges in the literature on Pussy Riot concerns how the group is plagued with misinterpretations and misunderstandings. This is, in part, because Pussy Riot draws on tropes that are specific to Russian culture as well as tactics belonging to a repertoire of global activism. Much of their punk-feminist sensibilities are drawn from the underground Perestroika punk scene and the North American Riot Grrl movement. In terms of their queer-feminist orientation, LGBTQI activist Grey Violet argues the affirmation of an infinite spectrum of genders was a distinct component of their ethos: “Pussy Riot always considered themselves a radical queer-activist group… transgender questions were no less important, and maybe more important” (Grey Violet and Oleynikov 2016: 127). In their public statements, the group cites a range of influential scholars such as Judith Butler and Rosi Braidotti, as well as the Bolshevik feminist Alexandra Kollontai. Their lyrics are a patchwork of references to different struggles. In 2011, the group ran riot in Moscow’s fashion district, denouncing consumerism and gleefully singing “Kropotkin vodka sloshes in the belly!” Later, in sub-zero conditions, standing against the imposing architecture of the Kremlin, they shouted “Do Tahrir in Red Square!” So, Pussy Riot appeals to Russia’s neglected revolutionary past as a vital resource to be wielded against Putin’s strategic retooling of Tsarism. At the same time, they attempt to build and repair the connection between anarcho-communist and gender emancipation.

In August of 2012, St Petersburg-based art collective Chto Delat claimed that *Punk Prayer* and its harsh prosecution “only really makes sense” within the larger context of the mass protests, which attracted hundreds of thousands of demonstrators across Russia (Samutsevich 2012). Sometimes called the Snow Revolution, these protests unfolded in response to allegations of vote-rigging in the parliamentary elections of 2011. The situation was compounded by the announcement that Putin would be

returning to presidential office for a third term, prolonging what became known in media circles as a 'tandem' system, casting doubt on Dmitry Medvedev's more liberal façade (Penzin 2014). The widespread dissatisfaction with the political establishment made a lucrative stage for Pussy Riot and the peculiar traction of *Punk Prayer* recalibrated how the protests were understood outside Russia. First, the escalation of media attention meant the group came to *overrepresent* what it means to be a "feminist" in Russia. Second, Pussy Riot interrupted the legibility of opposition figures seeking to harness the energies of the mass protests for their own platforms. Some leaders, such as Vladimir Milov, condemned the group as a diversion from "serious political struggle" (quoted in Gabowitsch 2016: 198). Alexei Navalny refused Pussy Riot a role as genuine political actors, instead describing them as "fools who commit petty crimes for the sake of publicity" (quoted in Yuposova 2014: 606). However, David Riff reflects on Pussy Riot's ambivalent domestic relationship and finds promise in how the group *misrepresents* the protests to bring forth an alternative collective consciousness (2012). Their exuberant and colorful performance stood in stark contrast to the "flat" and "restrained" slogans from Russia's political opposition, who were calling for reform not revolution. So, Pussy Riot makes a mess, breaking with the liberalnationalist tone of protests. They declare a more radical social critique of Putin's Russia where "women stick to love and making babies" and "Gay Pride sent to Siberia in shackles."

Pussy Riot's aesthetic sensibilities can be productively read through Mikhail Bakhtin's writing on the medieval carnival in *Rabelais and His World* (translated into English in 1968). This was a popular text among Russian Actionists during the 1990s as well as activists in the counter-globalization movement (Kovalev 2017: 207). Medieval carnivals were periodic moments of rupture and renewal filled with role reversals, laughter, feasting and crude humor. Bakhtin also writes about the carnivalesque expression of the grotesque body, which is open, secreting, and disproportionate, associated with excess and exaggeration. We can see elements of the carnival grotesque in Pussy Riot's scatological lyrics, referencing piss and shit, along with their disdain for high production values. Nadezhda Tolokonnikova reflects on pulling together borrowed and stolen equipment for their makeshift performances: "we were choking on laughter looking at ourselves: a fur hat pissed on by a cat with narrow slits for eyes, a nonworking guitar, and for the audio system, a homemade battery that leaks acid" (2018: 35). However, Bakhtin also seeks to counter "hostile" treatments of the grotesque, finding instead the promising disclosure of another world; "the bodily participation in the potentiality of another world" (1968: 48). So, against the 'sad militant' logic of intellectualizing the revolution, the critical lesson is that alterative worlds are to be felt and known *through our bodies.* Whenever Pussy Riot are seen dancing, jumping, climbing, singing, screaming, running, what is occurring is the bodily exertion of making new worlds possible. Something similar is happening in the cabaret

scene in *Maggots and Men*, which *prefigures* Russia's sexual revolution. It is the cracking open and visceral tasting of another world even if it remains unfulfilled.

Both Pussy Riot and Cronenwett's *Maggots and Men* privilege a collective subject over a singular hero. In Cronenwett's film, there are scenes featuring Lenin and Trotsky; however, their speech is silenced and there are no subtitles given. This is a deliberate tactic aimed at countering the historiographical attention given to 'personalities' as well as an effort to hold both of them accountable for the Kronstadt massacre. It turns the Bolshevik model of politics as "an attempt to mute the polyphony of the revolution" back on itself (Adamczak 2013). Pussy Riot began as an anonymous collective with unfixed membership. Their iconic colored balaclava supplies a mode of engagement that dismantles formal barriers to political participation. It creates a facelessness that is against the 'I' and the 'you' and in favor of the 'we'. This resonates with Bakhtin's description of the carnivalesque crowd where "the individual body ceases to a certain extent to be itself; it is possible, so to say, to exchange bodies, to be renewed (through change of costume mask)" (1968: 255). The deliberate mismatching of Pussy Riot's costuming turns them into a chorus of multi-colored limbs, making it impossible to distinguish individual members. This mirrors their flat organizational structure where members join, change roles, drop off, and re-join. The collectivist ethos of Pussy Riot's work and *Maggots and Men* resonates strongly with Saidiya Hartman's figure of the chorus. The chorus manifests messy practices of freedom and resistance. It is the militant joy of the street and the dancefloor, with sweaty bodies arranging and rearranging themselves. As Hartman writes, "the chorus is the vehicle for another kind of story, not of the great man or the tragic hero, but one in which all the modalities play a part… where the untranslatable songs and seeming nonsense make good the promise of revolution" (2019: 348).

I want to come back to Boym and the way she distinguishes between 'of' versus 'off'. The extra 'f' is the slide into unwanted mess, the transition from belonging to something bigger, to something that induces fear, disgust, and confusion (2017: 3). I have sought to illustrate how *Punk Prayer* and Cronenwett's *Maggots and Men* are laden with alternative political realities suppressed under the label of mess. A host of terms flesh out the more specific and vivid qualities of mess: cheap, surplus, folk, petty, muddle, false, distortion, misunderstanding, misrepresentation. These terms function to disable seriousness and value, which, in the case of Pussy Riot and Kronstadt, translated into serious consequences. Hundreds of insurrectionist Kronstadt sailors were murdered and more were imprisoned. *Punk Prayer* culminated in the arrest and imprisonment of two group members, de-anonymized as Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina. However, in both cases, their 'messing with the revolution' was a passionate appeal *to* the revolution and *against* the co-opting of the revolution through the authoritarian consolidation of the Bolshevik state and the liberal-nationalist project to reform the

Russian state. They are distortions of their respective political moments, moments that have been distorted into reductions and simplifications, appointed leaders, winners and losers, linear timelines, and coherent narratives. According to Adamczak, "never, since October 1917, has the revolution been so true to itself, never again will the Soviet Union come as close to the goal of a union of Soviets, a communism of councils, as in these three short weeks of March 1921" (2021: 133). They did not misunderstand the revolution but understood too well.

In terms of expanding and hopefully enriching anarcha-feminism, these case studies are poignant reminders of the importance of imagination in political struggle. Contending with capitalist, colonial, patriarchal, and authoritarian regimes on the brink of climate catastrophe, we are at a juncture in which we need to be keeping our toolbox as big and as varied as possible. This might lead to counter-intuitive places that ask us to speculate, to move sideways, to slow down, to dance. Pussy Riot and Cronenwett teach the value of joy, desire, affect, and bodies in communion as revolutionary methods *in their own right.* I am also invested in an anarcha-feminism that does not assume a fixed subject. Pussy Riot and Cronenwett work with an amorphous collective subject; however, this can be extended further to divest from anthropocentricism. A messy, anarcha-feminist reading of radical histories, which are replete with powerful myths and distortions, might refuse not just the reproduction of heroes but nameable individuals. At the same time, this is a refusal to pluck a person from their context, from the mess that anchors and complicates them. To focus on and fabulate *worlds* in place of individuals can create more enabling propositions for what an anarcha-feminist praxis might look like, the pitfalls and problems we might encounter, and the tools and tactics to take us there. The approach I have taken to mess is about extending a gesture of compassion to that which has been unfairly dismissed or judged without value. But mess is porous and plural. It does not make sense in singular form. Mess can foster vital connections and conversations between things.

Works Cited

Ackelsberg, Martha A. (1991). *Free Women of Spain: Anarchism and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.

Adamczak, Bini (2013). "Gender and the new man: Emancipation and the Russian Revolution?" *Platypus Review* 62: <https://platypus1917.org/2013/12/01/gender-andthe-new-man> [accessed March 10, 2022]

— (2021). *Yesterday's Tomorrow: On the Loneliness of Communist Specters and the Reconstruction of the Future*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Avrich, Paul (1970). *Kronstadt 1921*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Bakhtin, Mikhail (1968). *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

bergman, carla, Nick Montgomery, and Hari Alluri (2017). *Joyful Militancy: Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.

Bey, Marquis (2020). *Anarcho-Blackness: Notes Towards a Black Anarchism*. Chico, CA: AK Press.

Bottici, Chiara (2022). *Anarchafeminism*. London: Bloomsbury.

Boym, Svetlana (2017). *The Off-Modern*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Colectivo Situaciones (2007). "Something More on Research Militancy: Footnotes on Procedures and (In)Decisions." Trans. Sebastian Touza and Nate Holdren. *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations, Collective Theorization*. Ed. Stevphen Shukaitis, David Graeber and Erica Biddle. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 73-93.

Cronenwett, Cary and Ilona Berger (2021). "MM 19: Interview with Cary Cronenwett and Ilona Berger (July 11th, 2021)." *Yes We Cannibal*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4LJ1Q0Nn2w&t=3201s. [accessed December 10, 2022]

Dark Star Collective (eds.) (2012). *Quiet Rumours: An Anarcha-Feminist Reader*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.

Ferguson, Kathy E. (2011). *Emma Goldman: Political Thinking in the Streets*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield.

Gabowitsch, Mischa (2016). *Protest in Putin's Russia*. London: Polity.

Getzler, Israel (1983). *Kronstadt 1917-1921: The Fate of a Soviet Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Goldman, Emma (1970). *Living My Life, Volume 1*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.

Hartman, Saidiya (2008). "Venus in Two Acts." *small axe* 26: 1-14.

— (2019). *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Healy, Dan (2001). *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

— (2009). *Bolshevik Sexual Forensics: Diagnosing Disorder in the Clinic and the Courtroom, 1917-1939*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Hemmings, Clare (2018). *Considering Emma Goldman: Feminist Political Ambivalence and the Imaginative Archive*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Herman, Elis L. (2015). "Tranarchism: Transgender Embodiment and Destabilisation of the State". *Contemporary Justice Review* 18.1: 76-92.

Katz, Cindi (1996). "Towards Minor Theory." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14: 487-499.

— (2006). "Messing with 'the Project'." *David Harvey: A Critical Reader*. Ed Noel Castree and Derek Gregory. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 234-246.

— (2017). “Revisiting Minor Theory.” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35.4: 596-599.

Kauanui, Kēhaulani (2021). “The Politics of Indigeneity, Anarchist Praxis, and Decolonization.” *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies* 1: 9-42.

Kovalev, Andrey (2017). “Against All: Toward a History of Protest Art in Russia*.” Art Riot: Post-Soviet Actionism*. Ed Andrey Kovalv. London: ABC Design Studios, 196-249.

Kowal, Donna M. (2019). “Anarcha-Feminism.” *The Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism*. Ed Carl Levy and Matthew Andrews. London: Palgrave MacMillian, 265-279.

Law, John (2004). *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*. London: Routledge.

Mally, Lynn (2000). *Revolutionary Acts: Amateur Theatre and the Soviet State, 1917-1938*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

McDermid, Jane and Anita Hillyar (1999). *Midwives of the Revolution: Female Bolsheviks and Women Workers in 1917*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

Minh-ha, Trinh T. (1991). *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. London: Routledge.

Nash, Jennifer (2018). *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Oleynikov, Nikolay and Grey Violet (2016). “Investigation Report.” In Nikolay Oleynikov, Keti Chukhrov, Oxana Timofeeva, Grey Violet and Kirill Medvedev. *Sex of the Oppressed*. Trans. Jonathan Brooks-Platt. Ontario: Studio Guelph.

Penzin, Alexei (2014). “Tumult in the Land of Managed Democracy: An Introduction.” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 113.1: 162-168.

Puar, Jasbir (2012). “‘I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess’: Becoming Intersectional in Assemblage Theory.” *Transversal* 10: https://transversal.at/transversal/0811/puar/en. [accessed December 10, 2022]

Riff, David (2012). “A representation which is divorced from the consciousness of those whom it represents is no representation. What I do not know, I do not worry about.” *Chto Delat* 34: https://chtodelat.org/b8-newspapers/12-38/david-riff-arepresentation-which-is-divorced-from-the-consciousness-of-those-whom-itrepresents-is-no-representation-what-i-do-not-know-i-do-not-worry-about. [accessed December 10, 2022]

Samutsevich, Yekaterina, Maria Alyokina, and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova (2012). “Pussy Riot Closing Statements.” Translated by Marijeta Bozovic, Maria Corrigan, Chto Delat, Elena Glazov-Corrigan, Maksim Hunukai, Katharine Holt, Ainsley Morse, and Sasha Senderovich. https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/pussy-riot-closingstatements/. [accessed December 10, 2022]

Shannon, Deric, C.B. Daring, J. Rogue (2013). *Queering Anarchism: Essays on Gender, Power and Desire*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.

Srnicek Nick and Alex Williams (2015). *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work*. London: Verso.

Tolokonnikova, Nadya (2018). *Read & Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism*. San Francisco, CA: HarperOne.

Yuposova, Marina (2014). "Pussy Riot: A Feminist Band Lost in History and Translation." *Nationalities Papers* 42.4: 604-610.