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Paths Towards Radical Becoming

Mothering and Anarchism

Mary McKelvie

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Introduction

My mother and I sit opposite each other at the dining room table that has traveled across space and time to meet us here. The wood creaks when I lean across the table to turn on my iPhone's microphone. Antique furniture surround me in my parents' home and I sit in men's clothing with a binded chest, holding an amazingly intricate piece of technology that is meant to connect — but often separates. I realize suddenly that I am caught between the past and the future, lodged between seemingly oppositional states of being. I look at my mom across from me as if I'm looking into a mirror. We have always butted heads, symbolic of our stubborn star signs, but we also have always understood each other. Our relationship in and of itself is in transition, a constant merging of minds and experiences. This notion of transition is a reoccurring theme in my research. If we are constantly changing, then we are constantly vulnerable, constantly existing intimately between various states of being. It is precisely this vulnerability that could serve as a catalyst to building intimate and radical relationships.

This paper is meant to do three things. First, it is a comparison. I link mothering techniques with anarchism as a belief system, defining both as different yet strikingly similar paths to creating intimate relationships and thus radical becomings. Second, it is an analysis. I dissect data collected from a conversation I had with my own mother, analyzing her language, view-points on personhood, intimate relationships, and the journey that mothering turned into for her. It is with these two ideas that I come to my third objective and overall argument that mothering and anarchism are states of being that are defined *individually* and through *actions* rather than specific words. We must harness our individual ability to build community while simultaneously honoring individuality. And it is through these individual actions that we can collectively move towards a more radical and intimate state of being.

To get to these three points, I first critique historic anarchist literature and discuss the importance of an intersectional analysis of anarchism. I then pull from different texts published by mothers and anarchists alike and use their profound words, theories, and analyses to link the two ideologies. In the methodologies section I discuss my choice for oral history and how that method was informed by anarchism and mothering. In my analysis I combine the data collected from the conversation with my mother and recognize the importance community building, working together towards a more inclusive relational state of being, and the complexities of individual epistemologies. I use my conclusion to argue that mothering, like anarchism, is a technique and tool that can be used to radicalize relationships, the self, and, over time, the state.

Background

A main concern with feminist research is the question of knowledge production. Who is the producer of knowledge? For whom is it produced? This section will briefly discuss the definition of anarchism, the history of anarchist theory and the changes occurring in activist and academic anarchism today.

To start, I want to define anarchism. In addition to the American Heritage Dictionary's definition of anarchism as a "rejection of all forms of coercive control and authority," I look to CrimethInc. Ex-Worker's Collective's assertion that anarchism is "the belief that everyone is entitled to complete self-determination." Anarchism is based upon the idea that we must destroy and dismantle the hierarchical borders or boundaries that force us into spaces of segregation and oppression. We must instead use loving and positive communication techniques to encourage voluntary association, and inspire direct action and mutual aid to better ourselves and our communities. Further, these everyday micro-rebellions and techniques can help us understand anarchism as "the production of conditions

within our histories. It is only through collective knowledge production that we can gain, or lose, power. When we learn from each other we are given the opportunities to understand, and thus, create. Mothering and anarchism are both states of liminality, both ideologies are personal and political, and both accept present limitations and simultaneously work towards radical paths to becoming. These movements of transition are both individualistic, in that they differ from person to person, but are simultaneously social, political and even spiritual, linking the self to the greater community – however that community may be defined.

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every person is in a constant state of liminality and transition, which renders us all vulnerable. Because of this, we are constantly becoming, unraveling, and redirecting ourselves and our realities. Within this constant state of movement we are able to position ourselves within a world of endless possibilities. What *does* it mean to be? What *does* it mean to become? What *does* it mean to mother? The very movement from one state of being to another is how I am choosing to define “becoming.” So mothering, motherhood as well, are general states of becoming. A transitional period within a physical and emotional space that sufficiently transforms the reality of one or more person(s). The techniques of mothering as well as the action and identity of motherhood itself is a path towards radical becoming. It is a transformation of the self as well as an effort to make change in a life, or lives, of others, regardless of the vast possibilities, either negative or positive. Similar to mothering techniques, I argue that anarchism, theoretically and methodologically, is a way, a path, towards radical becoming. Anarchism is a political philosophy that honors voluntary association and strives towards the elimination of social, political and personal hierarchies by encouraging direct action. Anarchism is an ideological refusal to be silent and a physical refusal to continue to allow the authority of the state to control our bodies and minds.

My main interest in doing this research has roots in my desire to dissect our relationships and our intimacies. How can we make any kind of political change without making changes to our relationships, how we relate and understand others? Is it possible to change an already complex and cloudy world? Is it possible to change the self? What does it mean to change? In reference to change and movements and knowledge production — who has voice? Who is free to speak? Alternatively who is free to listen? These are questions that are essential in shaping our understanding of community relationships and all intimate relationships in general. We cannot understand ourselves without understanding the inequality laced

that support and nurture the development of human potential for sustaining relationships with themselves, each other and our living planet” (Heckert 2005; 2010). Anarchy then is whatever happens when order or power is not imposed or demanded. Anarchy lies within the quiet nods and grins from across a classroom, a picnic underneath an oak tree with a lover, the freedom and community understood and created by Appalachian Trail thru hikers. Anarchy is not and cannot be defined and understood simply as chaos or terror. Anarchy, like being a mother, could be understood as a performance that differs greatly from person to person, community to community.

The anarchist movement is a historically European, white, male revolutionary ideal that focuses on personal/individual liberation and denounces any kind of political or governmental control and authority. Scholars, activists, and writers who have historically engaged in anarchist thought tend to focus on textual analysis and ethnographies. Only when discussing feminism do scholars cite Voltairine de Cleyre or Emma Goldman focusing on their publications, public speaking, and relationships with other anarchists. Otherwise the voices of women, queer people, and people of color have frequently gone unnoticed. Inside and outside of academe, talk of anarchism is often surrounded by libertarian ideals within white, male dominated spaces. It is essential to say here that there does exist a steady-hum, a growing indication of hope and possibility within academia and activist circles regarding mothering, experiences of queer women, women of color, and trans* identified individuals, and polyamorous queer relationship ideologies. These voices are bashing back against the white patriarchy and challenging preconceived notions of gender, identity, personhood, and community involvement. So when I argue that there needs to be a radical re-centering of voices within the anarchist movement I, by no means, am trying to silence or negate preexisting struggles against oppression that challenge straight, white, male centered ideology. I instead mean to focus on the growing intersectional narrative of

anarchism and why mothering and feminist research is essential to critiquing and finding similarities within techniques and ideologies in order to build paths towards radical becoming. I want to move forward towards motherhood research and specific anarchist and feminist texts.

Literature Review / Theoretical Framework

Currently, the growing body of work from anarchists around the world centers queer voices and radicalizes social relationships. Deric Shannon, J. Rogue, Laura Portwood-Stacer, and Jamie Heckert are some of the current activist voices engaging in scholarly anarchism that centers on the queer experience. There is also a small body of work centering the Black experience or QWOC organizing within the anarchist movement. For example in Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin's article "Anarchism and the Black Revolution," he successfully critiques the white-washing of the anarchist movement and challenges anarchists to refocus marginalized groups so that we can form radical relationships and begin to dismantle the white supremacy. So then scholars, activists, and especially anarchists and feminists need to be concerned about the production of knowledge within their critiques and movements towards liberation. Who is producing knowledge, and for whom? Like Ervin suggests, we must decentralize whiteness and focus our revolution on re-centering marginalized groups. In relation to mothering and feminism, there is virtually no scholarly conversation that exists between motherhood research, mothering techniques, and anarchism. This is a relationship I am deeply interested in exploring.

Anarchist academic and spiritual activist Jamie Heckert identifies "two crucial tools for dismantling borders" as "systematic analyses and compassionate strategies" (2002). This is to say, we must not only theorize methodologically, but we must also act intentionally. "Another crucial aspect of the anarchist tradition" he

ways try to keep that in mind you know. How important it is to care for others.."

Conclusion

I believe that human beings exist radically and intellectually outside of constructed ideologies, identities and borders. Our ideas are more complex than our words often are. Our radical intellectualism expands beyond what we can verbalize. Because of this inability to fully express ones inner dialogue, I want to fully and purposefully state some of my struggles with this research project. In the beginning, I had an idea of what I wanted to study, and how I wanted to study it. I would connect mothering and anarchism, argue towards radical becoming and everyday actions as a kind of lifestyle politics. Everything, I believe, is connected. That being said, I also feel like there is a possible disconnect with my written words and with my lived actions. My argument states that collective individual actions are ways that we can move towards a radical political becoming. But where does my research lie in such an argument? Have I successfully and appropriately interpreted my mother's stories? Have I included enough of her voice?

Through a quick overview of the history of the anarchism movement and reference to current scholars engaging in anarchist thought, I hoped to exemplify the anarchist movement and epistemology. I went into mothering techniques, employed by individual mothers as well as a more community based mothering in reference to Maparyan. I tied anarchism as a movement and mothering as a technique together by centering the importance of individual agency and voluntary association/community building. I argue that these are both paths towards a radical becoming. When I say radical, I am referring to any moment, movement, idea, or theory that works towards deconstruction and reconstruction – of the state, of our personal relationships, of our selves. To me,

to have that foundation of kindness and goodness...that was important to us” (McKelvie). Similarly, the desire for individual agency, free will, and the notion of voluntary association are intimately reflective of an anarchist gathering. “And that’s child rearing,” my mom tells me matter-of-factly. “There’s no set rules,” only guidelines that she and my father followed in hopes to create a safe and welcoming environment. “Love. Be kind. Be compassionate. Be fair” (McKelvie).

Amber Kinser writes that we should move “away from simple claims about nature and instinct and toward more complex claims about maternal labor and resources” (9). This recognition of mothering as emotional and physical labor rather than an instinctual knowledge is directly reflective of my mother’s experience with motherhood. Understanding that, although there was a passion and interest in becoming a mother, there were specific sacrifices and compromises made to create a physical home and emotional safe space for her family. Towards the end of our conversation, my mother went back to what it meant to raise children and to create a safe and protected space for her family.

“So you just go with it. And try. Just try your hardest at whatever you do. That’s what we’ve always done. Whether it’s raising kids, building a house, training a dog, riding a horse....going to college. You know. Just try your best. That’s all we want you to do” (McKelvie).

My mother’s definition and understanding of herself is deeply rooted in how she was raised and what life experiences she had had up until this point in her life. It is also intimately connected with her current relationships with my father and her three grown children. Although my mother does not explicitly identify as a radical or overtly political person, through her use of language and her open and loving demeanor, I have always read her as radical. “...it doesn’t matter you know, it doesn’t matter who you love. Its important that you love. That’s the biggest thing. Love. And we al-

goes on to say “is the importance of people joining together freely into relationships for particular purposes” (2010). Here Heckert displays how voluntary association, in regards to personal relationships as well as political rebellion is essential in anarchist thought and methodology.

From the Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement I draw from theories, methods and experiences introduced by Amber E. Kinser, Adwoa Ntozake Onuora and Angela Wignall. My outline for actively forgiving, actively educating and actively becoming stems directly from the work and experiences of these activist-scholars. I believe that simple and intimate interactions like loving, nurturing, listening and giving are essential tools to human connection and radical rebellion. Tools that could be used to facilitate social or political change. Rather than using “the Master’s tools,” we could instead create an entirely new tool-box to dismantle pre-existing systems of oppression (Lorde, 110).

Kinser writes about her emotional and physical experiences with mothering, and the “utterly human parts of maternal emotional life” (11). Her article outlines her experiences and her need to forgive herself, her children, and ultimately her own mother. She suggests that in order to inspire some kind of change in our “social structure, or resources, or institutions” we must first invest in personal relationships (16). She goes further to say that in forgiving, we can also reckon “with the expansiveness of the mother’s response to her life and the people in it,” thus honoring and recognizing the individual experiences had by different people in different times. She argues that it is this specific recognition of difference that could ultimately create “difference in maternal empowerment” (16).

Adwoa Ntozake Onuora understands her motherhood as a way to compassionately educate. She writes about her emotional experiences and challenges with motherhood, but ends her article by refocusing on her main point: her daughter understands (211). In

valuing and focusing on her Blackness and her individual identity and the struggle of her community, Onuora references the use of music and dance. Community connectivity is essential in her mothering technique. Similarly, Angela Wignall writes about a revolutionary becoming through mothering. She centers herself and her experiences she says “because [she] cannot start without [herself]” (221). She acknowledges that we exist within the patriarchy, but that by deconstructing and recreating the mother subject “from passive conduit into active creator” we can resist (221). This emancipatory theory of mothering/motherhood is a way for us to further understand the importance of feminist research and the fight towards creating radical relationships.

From these three women’s perspectives of mothering, motherhood, and the maternal subject, we can understand the importance of individual agency within a collective rebuilding of community. To go further, I want to reference specific techniques and tools we can use to move towards a radical becoming. In Layli Maparyan’s *The Womanist Idea* eight techniques are mentioned as a means to methodologically transform social and ecological inequalities. Maparyan outlines these methods as “harmonizing and coordinating, dialogue, arbitration and mediation, spiritual activities, hospitality, mutual aid and self-help, motherhood, and physical healing” (52). Of these eight, I want to specifically engage in harmonizing and coordinating, dialogue, and mothering as techniques to describe and inform anarchism and radical becoming. Relationships must always be consensual – power dynamics must always be consensual and negotiated. “The only legitimate authority is that which is freely accepted, in the complete absence of coercion – e.g., free association,” Dave Neal suggests in his essay on ideology and methodology (7). Leadership then must be attained through direct conversations (dialogue) and without coerced or forced power (harmonizing and coordinating).

Through anarchism as belief and theory we are given the idea of free-will, autonomy and personal choice. Anarchy, “any freely oc-

reach for my phone again, and suddenly realize that there is so much more than capturing every word. In this moment, and in many moments after, I recognized the way that technology and data gathering hinder us in our research methods. I will talk more about this in my conclusion.

Once I turned on the microphone and began recording our conversation, the first thing my mother talked about was her ever-present interest in one day becoming a mother. “At a young age, I always wanted to be a mom,” she told me as she recalled her experiences growing up with five other siblings. In the same breath, she told me that although her interest in mothering was important, there were other key factors that lead to her decision to start a family. “As my parents divorced,” she told me, “I also knew that I wanted to be in a relationship that was gonna last so that there were two parents.” The importance of partnership, teamwork, and community building through love, forgiveness, and protection are essential to my mother’s experience with parenting. I quickly realized that my mother’s perceptions of her experiences as a mother were more so focused on parenting as a team or partnership rather than an individual identity. Soon after her discussion on her relationship with my father and the decision to have children together, she references the importance in recognizing individual “personalities and temperaments.” She realized after all three of her children were born that negotiations and compromises had to be made with her parenting techniques. “I was under the impression that there’s a certain way to raise a child I just thought you could kind of set the same rules for all of them...but you can’t really.” By allowing for personal agency and development of the individual while simultaneously creating a close-knit family group, my mother demonstrated to me Maparyan’s definition of motherly power (62). My mother continued later in our conversation to talk about the importance of allowing for this individuality. “Not all children turn out to be what their parents expect them to be. And we learned – all of us will learn- that’s okay! Because they are individuals too. But

research, and after our conversation she still wasn't sure how her story would help me in my research. I assured her that her words and lived experience were of extreme importance, and I hope to employ that in the following section.

In choosing oral history as a method, I hoped that my informants/participants/co-researchers would be actively involved in the creation and facilitation of their story-telling. With a lack of structure I was able to give complete power to my mother, my expert informant, in how honest and open she chose to be. The results were intimate, heartfelt and powerful.

Analysis

After completing the oral history, initially I was both surprised by what data I was able to gather and also mildly put off by the lack of depth my data seemed to have. However, after transcribing and annotating our conversation I began to notice complex ideas of community, identity, protection, and care-taking. During the analysis of my mother's use of language and her background, I found that the data was actually quite rich and the experience was rewarding for both of us.

Let us go back to the dining room table – a reoccurring symbolic marker of my mother's identity and placement in our family as well as an important and spiritual womanist metaphor. "The kitchen table," Maparyan explains, "is an informal, woman-centered space where all are welcome and all can participate...At the kitchen table people share truths about their lives on equal footing and learn through face-to-face conversation" (59).

We look at each other and start to laugh slightly. My mom shrugs and says, "well I guess we'll just start with...I just wanted to be a good mommy" (McKelvie). She went on a little bit to suggest that "good parents want to protect their children." The notions of good, moral, safe, and happy were reoccurring topics in her dialogue. I

curring process or phenomenon," is an intentional response to creating change and encouraging transformation (CrimethInc). Mothering can also be seen as an intentional response. It is a technique used to respectfully and lovingly lead "each other along the paths of individual and collective liberation and evolution" (Maparyan, 62). Mothering allows us to radically connect to each other. In womanist terms, maternal energy and radical mothering is done by facilitating "the well-being and optimal development" of other people through intentional care-taking; care-taking that can "be done by people of any sex, gender or sexual orientation" (62). In the vein of anarchism then, perhaps mothers are our most legitimate authority figures. By enacting free-will and voluntary association, mothers not only have the ability to transform their lives, but the lives of others.

Methodology

In the beginning of this research project, I started with a few different ideas. I wanted to talk to multiple mothers: mothers with different experiences, women who co-mothered, women who identified as radical, mothers who identified as queer. I wanted, initially, to create a diverse, yet relatively simple, research project that made clear the voices of my informants' experiences with motherhood as an identity and mothering as a technique and action. I planned to record two diverse and unrelated oral histories to further express the importance of the individual experience of mothering and simultaneously link those experiences to each other and anarchism.

I started my research with the basic question – what are the experiences of mothers? This general inquiry quickly evolved into more complex questions about being, becoming, activism and radicalism. Bagele Chilisa suggests that "without relationship with the other, and without reference to the other, the individual cannot be" (279). My research and methodology is intimately informed by this epis-

temology. Because my identity is deeply rooted in my relationships, specifically with my family, my research interests broadened to include not only my ideas but also my story and my family's story. My research question turned from a predominately socio-political and theoretical examination of personhood, to a much more personal and relational inquiry into becoming/being a radically loving individual. My question then became what are the experiences of *my* mother? What have we experienced together that has shaped our state(s) of being? What is it about this relationship in particular that has shaped me into a persistently curious anarchist? Alternatively, I asked myself and my data, how does mothering connect to anarchism? How can I compare mothering techniques with anarchism as both a theory and a practice, especially when the data collected does not come from someone who identifies as neither a radical nor an anarchist? I decided that the best way to begin this project was to give my mother the space and time to discuss her own experiences as a mother and what that has meant to her.

Although the research questions evolved and the original project outline changed, the method of choice stayed the same. Oral history was and still is essential to this research project. In using oral history as my main method, my intent was to create a more collective knowledge base. As stated earlier, the question of who produces knowledge is essential to feminist research. To go further, who is that knowledge produced for, and for whom is that knowledge accessible? My focus on oral history was to build a bridge together towards a collective understanding of a specific lived experience, for I believe it is through communication, relationship building, and collective understanding that we can move towards radical personal and political becoming.

During the research process, I brought my own lived experience as a student, as a researcher-in-training and as a person who likes to ask questions and seek answers while my mother brought her own curiosity and her own desire to understand and analyze the world around her. On top of that, she brought to the table her ex-

periences as a mother, what it has meant to her to parent multiple children, how her experience transformed her original perception of what parenting was going to be, and recognizing the individual differences between children and parents. That ideology can be directly tied to anarchism – the idea that every individual person has their own identity and their own belief system. However, that doesn't mean that we cannot work together to create a collective, cohesive unit. And that, according to Maparyn, is what mothering is all about. She specifically states that "motherly power evinces from a combination of love, caretaking, and authority; perhaps most importantly, it is tethered to a sense of unbreakable ties that bind a group of people, however different they each may seem" (62). It is about recognizing the individual and still building a community of different individuals.

Prior to engaging in data collection, it was important for me to prioritize equal knowledge production with my participants. Before our conversation, I typed up a general outline of my paper proposal and what I was trying to learn and why. I defined my terms (mothering vs. motherhood, anarchism, anarchy, everyday activism, radical, etc.) and I offered my mother some questions to think about. (Is motherhood a key aspect of your identity? Do you feel you have an identity outside of motherhood? How did you come to mothering/motherhood? Is mothering a natural way of being for you? What actions have come naturally? What did you have to work on to perfect/better your mothering techniques? What is important about being a mother?)

Unfortunately because of conflicting schedules, I was unable to fully disclose and discuss the entire research process with my mother. But before we sat down at the dinner table, while we cooked together, I read over the questions I mentioned previously, my ideas for my research, and how important her opinions and experiences were to me and my research. I told her some of my expectations and asked her if she had any questions or concerns. She admitted that she wasn't sure what she could offer the