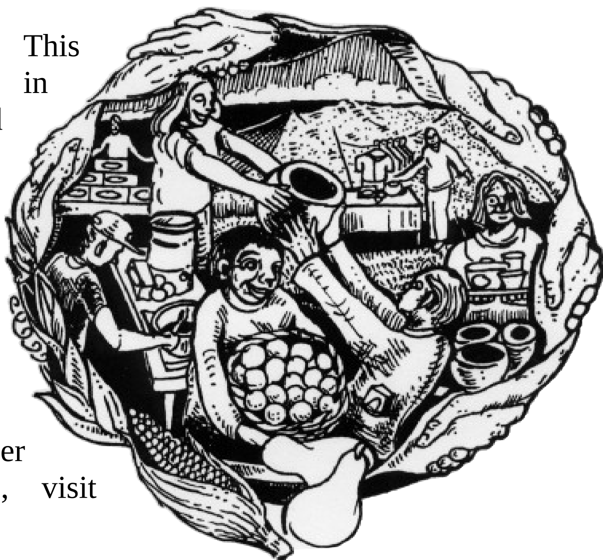
'Centering Relationships'

Above: The Swedish *allmänningar* system of commons; on top of stolen Sámi land (see "Their Greed Never Stops")

Below: The 2011 encampment in New York, where radicals, liberals & a middle class enraged by its own proletarianization following the latest financial crisis gathered to occupy the initial line, coming to be known as Wall Street, which separated the Manna-hata known to its Lenape inhabitants from the commons of the Dutch, Swedish & English settlers



Note from *Return Fire:* This interview was conducted in February 2019, transcribed and published here as a supplement to the magazine *Return Fire* in winter 2024-2025 (vol.6 chap.7-8 double-issue). To read, download or print the other texts from the same volume, cited by title in the footnotes (or as in older volumes of *Return Fire*), visit returnfire.noblogs.org.

Although not really defined in the interview itself, the topic at face value is that of the commons and commoning. What are these? "The commons are resources self-managed by communities who need and use them," write the Usfruct Collective:

> Commons are managed through dialogue, deliberation, and collective-decision-making as well as through mutual aid to meet needs. Commoning refers to the process of developing commons. Commons can include land, water-ways, fields, factories, workshops, instruments/tools, dwellings, recreational facilities, general infrastructure, miscellaneous infrastructure, fruits of re/production, mixes of all of the above, and beyond. Flourishing commons provide communities and participants with shared means of existence, production, and politics as well as access to the fruits thereof in ways that meet the needs of all.
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> The commons have been under attack by the last several thousand years of hierarchy and class society as well as the last several hundred years of capitalism. Capitalism developed through multiple factors including continuous privatization of the commons enforced through state violence. Despite such systemic violence, pockets of the commons continue to exist through people developing both new and enduring commons to meet their needs and the needs of others as well as through people resisting domination and exploitation. Commoning is not only under attack by multiple entangled forms of

> hierarchy (institutionalized domination) such as capitalism, statecraft, patriarchy, racism, imperialism, colonialism, and nationalism; commoning is also under ideological attack through widespread propaganda and belief systems that deem various hierarchies beneficial or inevitable.
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> Arguments claiming that commons inevitably lead to tragedies of overuse and collective ruin deny the history of the commons while also assuming that commons are rooted in crude competitive acquisition without the very collective rules, agreements, and practices that enable them to be functional. Such straw men of the commons reflect the norms of competitive and hierarchical societies rather than the kinds of organized cooperation to meet needs so crucial to any well-functioning-commons.

For a deeper dive into exactly what the commons meant historically in our own context – and what their enclosure by the State and land-owners achieved – we've added an appendix, the second chapter of Jay Griffiths' *A Country Called Childhood*, based around the famous story of the poet John Clare who lived through enclosures that drove him into a distant asylum, which he then left to walk home. Yet while the framing and imaginary around the commons in anti-capitalism can suffer from a Eurocentric leaning (as the interviewee below is at pains to point out), commons by some name or another have existed all across the world, and on a global level it was white-supremacist capitalism which reduced them to pockets or memories. Beyond a simple matter of access to 'resources' or land in the abstract sense that many Marxists might talk of it, it has always first and foremost been *social relationships* between beings of many hues, forms and customs which that system sought to destroy, and which we need to re-kindle in order to resist. In the 'New World' (and not only), the desire of settlers for commons dovetailed with an idea of land which was ultimately compatible with extractive capitalism: land as 'resource', not a web of relationships. Rupa Marya and Raj Patel neatly tie these threads together:

> As Christian missionaries landed on the eastern shores of what is now the United States, they encountered the Haudenosaunee, whose women had equal rights to land, territory, and family and were powerful in stewarding the commons. This social order was perceived as a threat in the so-called Western Hemisphere as much as it was in Europe. As the Senecan scholar Barbara Alice Mann notes: “*Since the Christian legend of Eve’s responsibility for*

humanity's "Fall" prevented women from acting as instruments of creation or salvation, a good Grandmother ... was out of the evangelical question. The missionaries therefore reposited Grandmother as Evil, a twist on the original story of Skywoman as a "Bad Medicine" woman. Since missionaries uniformly denounced medicine people as devil worshippers, they casually linked Skywoman, the original Medicine Woman, to their Devil, even as they linked "witches" to Satan in their own culture."

Maintaining loving and treaty-bound relationships with plants and animals, as many Indigenous civilizations and nations still do, prevents the transformation of those beings into resources. Jesuits in Europe and Peru hunted women who had sophisticated repositories of medical information, developed over the course of centuries, if not millennia – knowledge not only of how to administer plants but also of how to manage and be a nonextractive part of the ecosystems that produced them. Tens of thousands of women who resisted the privatization of the commons were executed.

It wasn't enough to displace ways of understanding the possibilities of worlds that existed without private property – bearers of this knowledge had to be put in their place: the household. Although the nuclear family has been the norm for centuries, in the United Kingdom at least, the legal creation of the household, with a man at its head, in charge of its private property and people, was a central project of early liberalism. For [Thomas] Hobbes *[R.F. – see Return Fire vol.4 pg20]*, the household was modeled on the state, in which a local Leviathan *[R.F. – see another supplement to these chapters of Return Fire, 'The Temple Was Built Before the City']* – the man of the house – would protect family members in exchange for obedience, just as the sovereign of state would do for society writ large. Liberalism required a firm distinction between the public and private realms, the making of which was part of a global "great domestication" under capitalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Men could be kings in the castle of their homes, just as kings ruled over them in public. Crucially, though, the making of this order also demanded that men *be* men. When you make private spaces in which men are judges, juries, and executioners of order, you also make men in a particular image. A patriarchal household requires a patriarch. Installing one meant destroying other orders. In Yoruba cultures, at

> the time of colonialism, hierarchies of age, not gender, defined the social order. Gender, as a fixed category in a binary structure, didn't exist. That was why, the Nigerian scholar Oyèrónk# Oyeˇwùmí argues, the British had to invent it.
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> Many civilizations have rich and fluid understandings of the relationship between one's self and one's body: the Lyg'oravetl'a, Arctic people in far northeastern Russia, for instance, have nine gender categories. But colonialism forbade two-spirited and queer Indigenous identities, so that households could be properly heterosexual and patriarchal. Bodies that didn't already fit the binary mold were forced to fit, sometimes through surgery and medicine. (Those same tools today are being used to liberate some people in gender quandaries, showing how it is not the tools themselves that are problematic, but the mindset behind their application.) In the process, the medicalized disciplines of reading a body at birth, and writing its destiny as patriarch or housewife on a birth certificate, became ordinary matters of law and medicine.

However, it is precisely the separation of thinking around the commons from that around colonialism which this piece takes issue with. Several important social movements from the years 2010-2020 are mentioned in this piece; not least of them, the Occupy phenomenon of 2011. Starting as a mass protest in New York City against wealth disparities and the financialisation of capitalism, it became a live-in protest camp in Zuccotti Park, before the protest-and-camp model spread to over 100 cities in that country and 1,500 encampments in 25 countries worldwide. We'll leave it for elsewhere to detail more of the interesting and problematic parts of this movement before the camps were disbanded by the US police, which gave much space for anarchists to organise and communicate with society at large, but in an environment often failing to have moved on from the prior anti-globalisation movement in clamouring for a more reformed, 'just' democracy.[*] See the interviewee's book for some of the specific ironies of

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* Peter Gelderloos noted the ironic parallels between the (generally) left-wing populism of the Occupy Movement and the right-wing populism of the Tea Party shortly before: *"[both], in making claims to a true, regenerated democracy, were at times saying the same thing. Leaving aside the versions (like Occupy Oakland) that were more anarchistic and critical of democracy, the chief difference was that Occupy was prefigurative rather than passive. They didn't demand change, they put it in practice. But when the centralized assemblies inevitably failed, a consequence of the ideological fallacy of believing there exists a difference between representative*

the New York occupation (and its reductive framing of struggle as the 99% of society against the super-rich 1%) from an anti-colonial perspective.

It is through the discourse of commoning which we find affinity with certain non-State forms of leftism – such as that posited by Peter Linebaugh, Silvia Federici and others, though that discourse in no way belongs exclusively to them – while also the lever to push away from the institutional Left leaders who cling to State (and, ultimately, capitalist and colonial) forms: those who, since the origins of the left-right terminology in the French Revolution, in struggles have consistently undermined the commons in favour of private or State ownership. This interview urges one step further, a step to encourage those (potential) comrades towards betrayal of the leftist fetish of the State-form itself. Simultaneously, it outlines – through the examples the interviewee experiences as a supporter-participant in indigenous reclamation and revitalisation fights – a tangible form for de-colonisation struggles to avoid the traps that the 20th Century laid in their path: to focus not on political change which only spread to colony model and trained the (elite) colonised to act like colonisers, but to focus on the land and the quality of relationships forged in the process (relationships which every State in history have only harmed). Such efforts cannot fail to have ripple effects throughout the galaxy of resistance, not least on these shores from whence so many settlers took sail for the lands he is speaking from, from the early capital-accumulation and cultural insertion of the fur trade, through the scorched-earth wars, cynical 'treaties' and genocidal spread of the Hudson's Bay infected blankets (see the companion piece to *Return Fire vol.3; Colonisation*), to the extractive industries and touristified landscapes of today under the 'benign' visage of President Justin Trudeau and his false 'reconciliation' with the indigenous First Nations. Hence, the advice for how to work across cultural boundaries should serve us here too in our attempts to cultivate relationships with a diverse and international anti-authoritarian current against patriarchy, utilitarian relationships, and the State underpinning all colonialism.

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democracy and true or direct democracy, all that remains is a rejection of establishment politics and an inarticulate demand for renovation. ” Indeed, such a core participant in the Zuccotti Park occupation as Justine Tunny took a hard turn to the right, taking a software developing job at Google after the demise of the movement and claiming that its CEO should become president, attacking her former comrades.

– R.F., March 8th, 2025

13.02.10: Hudson Bay Company store in Vancouver (official department store of that year's Winter Olympics hosted by Canada) smashed on second consecutive day of down-town disturbances during the mobilisation around 'No Olympics on Stolen Native Land', before a march on the hotel where the International Olympic Committee members were staying

You are listening to From Embers, a weekly show on CFRC 101.9 FM about anarchist and anti-authoritarian ideas and practice. We are broadcasting from the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples, on land that has come to be called Kingston, Ontario, Canada, because of the thievery and brutality of the Canadian State and its empire-loving parents. From Embers is about fires; some real, and some metaphorical. Fires started generations ago and tended to over the years. Little sparks all across this territory that we hope will grow, spread and engulf the thieving State called Canada and the capitalist system that has plagued this land since the fur trade.

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Today on From Embers we have an interview with Craig Fortier, who is an organiser and academic based in Toronto. Among other things, Craig is involved with No-One is Illegal, and helps coordinate the Field of Dreamers cooperative softball association, which was recently featured on an episode of Talking Radical Radio. Craig is the author of the short book *Unsettling the Commons: Social Movements Within, Against, & Beyond Settler Colonialism*, which was published in 2017 by Arbeiter Ring. In it Craig draws on more than 50 interviews with organisers within what he calls the “anti-authoritarian current” across Canada and the United States, and discusses what it means to struggle for the commons in the context of settler colonialism. He forcefully argues that a politics of unsettling and decolonization is foundational to the success of liberatory struggles in settler colonial states such as Canada. I reached him by phone in Toronto: we discuss the book, the ideas in it, how it informs his practice, and more.

So my name is Craig Fortier. I'm currently working as an assistant professor at Renison University College, which is an affiliated college at the University of Waterloo. But yeah, this book really came about from the intersection of doing a PhD dissertation at York and doing movement organising, and wanting to try to intentionally and thoughtfully work with other people in the movements I was a part of, to get our ideas down and start to think about the ways in which particularly people organising in urban centres, were building relationships with indigenous activists, whether that be in urban centres or land base struggles.

And can you just tell us a bit about how the book turned into a book, as a project?

Yeah. So really, it came out of maybe about 2005 or 2006. And I was organising as part of No-One is Illegal Toronto, which is a migrant justice organisation in the city. We had been having conversations with a formation that was building in the city called the Coalition in Support of Indigenous Sovereignty, and we decided it would be really important to have the coalition set up speaking events and engagements with various organising groups in the city (that included the Coalition against Israeli Apartheid, included the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty [OCAP], No-One is Illegal...) and to have these conversations about what it what it would really mean to tangibly organise in support of indigenous sovereignty.

It was a really profound moment for us in organising, and challenged a lot of the rhetoric that we had been using, the concepts that we had maybe borrowed from European 'No Borders' movements, and made us confront the idea that organising in a settler colonial state (like Canada, United States) required that we had a different relationship with indigenous communities. And that was really important, and it was really profound. For me, it shifted the way that we were doing movement organising within No-One is Illegal. The work that we began to do, I think, particularly in 2006, in support of the reclamation at Six Nations,[1] as well as work that

1 R.F. – Months-long stand-off in resistance to attempted placement of a 600-home subdivision upon land of the Haudenosaunee at Six Nations – the most populous native reserve in Canada, still in control of just 5% of its original land. In July 2020 another attempted development was site of a reclamation action and dubbed Land-Back Lane, until cleared by rubber-bullet-firing Ontario Provincial Police.

was ongoing and tied to Tyendinaga[2] and other surrounding nations; and eventually with Grassy Narrows.[3]

So those relationships that were built made me really think through what it might mean for other organisations, other groups in different cities, to develop those relationships as well. And so when... as we all are... when my precarious job in the city was coming to an end, I considered going to grad school. And I thought this would be a really important project and worked on it for, I guess, the entirety of my PhD, which was almost seven years, so that it became my dissertation. But I really never wanted it to be an academic work only: I want it to be something that would be returned to the movements where it came from, and serve the movements in organising. And so I was approached by folks at Arbeiter Ring to make it into a small book for their Semaphore series. And I thought that was just the best possible outcome for me, because Semaphore was just something that was really easy and readable. And that's really what I wanted this particular book to be. And I really wanted the discussions and stories that came out of, you know, I interviewed... I think it was about 50 or 51 people, in nine different cities. So I really wanted those interviews to come out in the stories that they were sharing, to come out as the primary thing that I was working with.

And for our listeners, I'll say that I've read the book: it is nice short book, which I personally really appreciate, because I almost never finished the books that I started. And it is very readable. It doesn't come off as an academic jargony kind of piece. It's very easy to interact with (I found, at least).

I actually think that it's such a challenge, because this *is* a book of political theory to some degree. It's not like a how-to book in terms of how to

2 R.F. – Tyendinaga is the main reserve of the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte First Nation.

3 R.F. – In 2022 the blockade at Grassy Narrows (known as Asubpeeschoseewagong) against logging and mining on Ojibway land celebrated its twentieth consecutive year with a constantly-burning sacred fire, and sadly today resistance is as needed as it was in 2002 as Ontario's Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry prepares a new 10-year forest management plan in the Whiskey Jack Forest, and there are around 3,200 mining claims in the area. The blockade has developed permanent sleeping quarters, a Sun Dance ground, and a traditional structure that functions as a land-based education space, continuing the cultural re-vitalization.

unsettle the commons, per se. But it's political theory, I think, that is emerging from movements themselves, and not from academia. I think that's really important to highlight. And it was something that I really wanted to centre in terms of how the book was written. So it really flows from small little vignettes and stories (that try to centre the reader in terms of my experience, and what was going on while I was writing it), but also interspersed with the interviews themselves and the discussion as it was ongoing.

Yeah. And I noticed that there were a lot of interviews that informed the different issues that are explored in the book. I think you mentioned in the book that you focused on people that you considered in the anti-authoritarian current: I think that's the term that you used. And I've seen that with Chris Dixon stuff; it seems to be a category that has emerged as a way cross-movement conversations. Do you have any comments on what you consider to be the anti-authoritarian current?

It's a good question. So Chris Dixon was definitely a mentor for me when I was developing this project. I was reading his book as I was developing my own plan of going out and doing research and trying to figure out who it was I really wanted to talk to. It really spoke to me, this generalness and vagueness of "the anti-authoritarian current," but that it had a specificity to it: and that we can kind of see it and understand it if we're involved in the movements we're involved in. I think for me, it was an opportunity to speak about the ways in which anti-racist struggles, indigenous struggles, women-of-colour struggles, so on and so forth, exists within anti-authoritarian spaces yet don't want to be (or don't feel the language of anarchism to be)... …to fit what they're doing that emerges, in fact, from long histories and traditions within their own cultures and struggles. That's something that we need to affirm, and recognise that the multiplicity is really an important part of the learning and interconnection that we have as movements. I think that just using the term "anti-authoritarian current" gives at least some kind of bound to the types of movements that we were interested in (both Chris and I) in terms of our research. So movements that weren't necessarily focused on electoral politics, or fighting the government for more services, but were both movements of resistance and prefiguration.

And in terms of the audience that you had in mind for this book when you're writing it: who's the book written for, in your opinion?

For the most part, the book is written to be served back to the folks who contributed to it. Organisers within various currents of the anti-authoritarian movement; people who maybe are starting to get involved in organising and feel often intimidated, maybe, to ask these type of questions in a bigger group, but want to do reading on their own. Folks, I think, who are at the fringes of our movements, and maybe could be persuaded to shift towards our struggles and to increase the strength of our movements. And, obviously, I'm also interested as somebody who's in the academy: I do see it as a space where we can proliferate these ideas to a mass public. So ensuring that students and other academics are willing to read it and engage with the work is really important to me, too; but especially the students. That's, again, why I think length is really important for me. And having shorter books that are more succinct, and maybe don't go into as much depth as some of the other academic works I've read them in my life, I think, makes for an easier read for undergraduate students, for instance, or even high school students.

The context of the Occupy movement seems to be a major starting point for how the premise of the book starts to unfold. Were you involved with (or around for) Occupy Toronto? Or are you more drawing on the debates and conversations out of Occupy Wall Street and Occupy/Decolonize Oakland?

That's a really good question. I would say that most of my research and most of my interviews took place between around 2011 to 2014. And so it was really at the height of both the emergence of Occupy as well as Idle No More,[4] which I think were the two movements that really did inform and bring the discussions that were coming out of the book into a more mainstream milieu. I wasn't day-to-day involved with Occupy, but I was there for a number of days and ran workshops, particularly through No-One is Illegal in Toronto. But a lot of the people I interviewed for this research were either very closely connected or peripherally connected to various Occupy struggles. And it was really in that moment. in terms of

4 R.F. – see **Return Fire vol.1 pg66**

when I was doing the research: the potentiality of Occupy and its limitations were laid bare in those years. I think it was really interesting to be able to talk with people (a couple of years after it had occurred) about their experiences, about what really positively came out, and what issues that they foresaw coming out – and particularly in Oakland, when folks really talked about that split that took place between Occupy Oakland and Decolonize Oakland. Many people had various interpretations in terms of why that split happened. But I think it was an important conversation to have in terms of the erasure I think oftentimes of indigenous struggles within upswings of radical movements. And it was funny that within months after Occupy had had its crest, we saw the emergence of Idle No More, using a similar hashtag model to really spread from city to city.

Were these debates present in Toronto during the Occupy camp, and what they look like? What were the terms of those discussions?

I would say each camp, I think, was different. Each city was different. I think it really depended on the context that people were organising in. In Toronto itself, I would say it had been about four or five years that some of the more active groups (like No-One is Illegal, or OCAP, or the Coalition against Israeli Apartheid) had really been trying to be more intentional about reimagining their struggles within within a broader indigenous sovereignty framework, and what that might mean. A lot of those folks, particularly even folks who are coming out of the environmental justice movement: that conversation was already happening. It had been messy in the mid-2000s, and I think a lot of real mistakes had been made. And folks were trying to learn from those mistakes.

In Toronto – while we saw similar maybe erasures that happened in New York, or in Oakland, or other Occupy camps – I think there was an openness and a willingness to engage. One of my favourite memories from the Occupy Toronto movement was when we held a march that essentially targeted the Hudson Bay Corporation at a time where the whole re-branding and [re-marketing of] Hudson Bay blankets were really ongoing. And so there was an Occupy march that that was led by indigenous people in our community, and that marched onto Hudson Bay to remind them about the history of those symbols. So to some extent I think that that conversation was happening in Toronto; and it's an ongoing conversation,

and an important one.

And so, yeah, I would say it was a little bit different than what took place in Oakland, or what took place in New York City, because the political terrain had shifted (for us, at least).

In your book, you have a very interesting exploration of the history of Wall Street in Manhattan, and the colonial and pre-colonial history of Wall Street, and how it was historically actually a wall that was constructed to claim a settler commons over and against an indigenous commons that existed in that same area.

The history of Manhattan is so interesting. I was really moved to do some of that research from a letter written by Sandy Grande, who is an indigenous academic in New York State. She had written one of those open letters to the Occupy Wall Street movement, where she had started to tell some of that story in the history of Occupy Wall Street, and where the idea of Wall Street came from. It was really important to talk about the ways in which we re-inscribe meaning to things in the same area over and over and over again, and that we can wage struggle as “the Left” in North America against the capitalist elite, and erase that whole history of continuously claiming the territories of the people on whose territories we're living on. I think that for me that was really indicative of the gaps that Occupy Wall Street was showing, in terms of its politics and its ability to understand the ways in which we were interconnected (and for the most part entwined) in the ongoing occupation on Manhattan.

You use the term in your book about the crisis of legitimacy (I think is what you called it) that Left social movements face in settler colonial contexts. And you talk about how a lot of Left social movements implicitly or explicitly rely on this idea of the creation of commons, as the basis for an anti-capitalist struggle. But in a settler colonial context, we face this crisis of legitimacy because of the colonial and genocidal histories that we're engaging in. Can you speak a bit to those ideas, and how they unfold in your book?

For sure. I think the first thing that I wanted to just say is that the comments is a really important idea: and it's not something that I think the

book attempts to deny. This notion – that we wish to build societies in which we can all benefit from the resources and the experiences and the relationships that we have – is a really important one. But I think oftentimes, like we do in a lot of Eurocentric social movements or ways of thinking, we tend to see things as really homogenous. And so this idea of the commons can become really homogenised to this reclamation of a particular time in European feudal history, in which people shared land: agricultural land. And that, while it's important, is not the only form of commons. Just like the way in which we use "anti-authoritarian movements;" that while there may be affinity with anarchist movements, there may be some incommensurabilities between the way in which, say, indigenous anti-authoritarians and anarchist anti-authoritarian see particular relationships or ways of being.

The book really tries to push us, I think, to recognise those commensurabilities; to recognise the multiplicity of commons: and then to be able to develop the relationships necessary to move through those incommensurabilities rather than to avoid them or to imagine them away (or to simply just claim and erase what continues to exist on these lands, which is the unseeded sovereignty of many indigenous nations).

One point that you make in your book is about shifting from ideas around occupation to ideas around decolonization. Decolonization is a word that has become somewhat of a trendy kind of word and academic or activist circles, but doesn't always have (in my experience) a lot of material substance to. Or, people lack an imagination around what that actually means. I'm not asking you to fully spell out decolonization is! But what what kind of things are you gesturing towards in saying that?

Yeah, it's a challenge to speak to it. Because I think for the most part, I've been guided by various allied indigenous peoples who have multiplicities of ideas in terms of what decolonization might mean. And so really, when we were getting to the point of naming the book, the idea of unsettling was really interesting to me, as a responsibility of non-indigenous peoples on these territories. The word "unsettling" has that sort of double entendre, right? It has the idea of something feeling kind of icky and makes you feel anxious and nervous, that unsettling feeling: but also this notion of the

work that needs to be done to dismantle the structures of settler colonialism.

And I think, for me, that *could* involve occupation. But it would need to involve occupation that is in conversation with indigenous peoples in struggle. And so I'm thinking here of (for instance) the work of some of the activists who were organising around Line 9,[5] who organised with the indigenous folks in Aamjiwnaang[6] and occupied pipeline areas, chained themselves to trucks and chained themselves to pipes, and so on and so forth. There's aspects of that sort of *movement tactic* “occupy” there. But the purpose and the intentionality is to do it in relation with the indigenous communities on whose territories we share.

I think for me that that's that whole unsettling aspect: which is that it's vulnerable to take guidance and leadership. It's vulnerable to try to build relationships where you've had none prior to it. It's vulnerable when you don't know if you're going to make mistakes, or you're going to do things that are offensive to people. But I think that is the work that needs to be done in order to really build our movements and make them stronger as we engage in this particularly nefarious era, where capital and colonialism and white supremacy are really consolidated (and hetero-patriarchy and so on and so forth).

So in the case of No-One is Illegal – there's some discussion of that in the book as well, in terms of the rhetoric of No-One is Illegal is about freedom to move, freedom to stay, freedom to return, and it has a strong anti-border perspective, which I'm 100% behind. And then given that these movements are happening in a settler colonial context, and that there's a desire to relate [to] and respect indigenous sovereignty: imagine that's a challenging thing to bring those two things into conversation without just reifying notions of statehood and just applying it to indigenous people. And there's a nice effort in the book to sort of redefine these questions of boundaries; not in this statist idea around borders, but as relations. Can you speak a bit to that?

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5 R.F. – see **Return Fire vol.4 pg16**

6 R.F. – The Aamjiwnaang First Nation is an Anishinaabe First Nations Band located on reserve land by the St. Clair River in Ontario, Canada, three miles south of the southern tip of Lake Huron.

Yeah, for sure. And so I definitely want to give credit to Harsha Walia in Vancouver (Coast Salish territories), who is an organiser at No-One is Illegal there and who had a really profound impact on myself (and many people, I think, in Toronto) in terms of thinking these things through. And for her, I think that comes from really deep intimate relationships that she's developed of building a discussion and a dialogue and care with a number of the Coast Salish and other indigenous nations in British Columbia. And I think that really rings true in a number of ways, not just in terms of building relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous, but this notion of moving towards an understanding of the spaces we occupy as having boundaries that need to be negotiated through relationship and consent, and conversation and discourse and dialogue. We do this in our movements in terms of how we interact; in terms of intimate relationships; we should be doing this in terms of how we play with each other; how we organise with each other.

But I think also we need to think about it in terms of the ways in which people have organised historically to designate and signify space. I think it's important to understand that, for us here in Toronto, that the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee and Wendat peoples[7] have had long relationships with these lands and these territories. They've tended these relationships; they've tended to the various plants and waters and so on and so forth. And we're being invited to engage in those relationships in a good way as well. We're not being excluded from that, and I think that's a really important thing to move forward with. And if that requires us to follow protocols that respect those relationships, I think that is a much more viable way to both *recognise the types of sovereignties that indigenous peoples claim on the land* and to also *fight the nation-state borders and Westphalian sovereignty that claims territory to create to turn it into property to be sold*. And I don't necessarily think they are as contradictory to each other as I think many people have tried to make them.

You see this in the work of many of the indigenous communities who have opened their lands up and their communities up to refugees, when the Canadian state has refused them; who have worked to help people cross borders when the Canadian state has claimed their nation which crosses

7 R.F. – As well as the Mississaugas of the Credit.

both maybe a Canada-US or US-Mexico border. And I think that's a really important guidance that is being offered to us.

Being a part of some of the same kind of movements and discussions over the years, a lot of those discussions in terms of indigenous solidarity and centering indigenous sovereignty in our practices: when it goes into the nitty-gritty level, oftentimes it's about how indigenous communities are not homogenous. There's always multiple voices coming from particular communities. And how do you navigate all of those dynamics that are internal to those communities in a way that's respectful and also true to yourself? Do you have any sort of comments or thoughts about those challenges?

I think it's both a challenge for non-indigenous folks, but it's also a challenge for indigenous folks, right? They are also trying to fight these structures of power like settler colonialism and capitalism and so on and so forth. And they have to look out in the sea of non-indigenous folks who... everyone wants to be their ally. But, as we learn, people like Justin Trudeau may talk a good game, but are really invested in the expansion of capital. But also, a number of us in our groups (because of ego, or because of non-understanding): we want those communities to do the work of our movements without really building that relationality and care.

To me, it really comes back down to who do you have relationship with? Who are you willing to make relationship with? What kind of relationship do you foresee? And in that relationship doesn't mean that you're always going to be 100% politically aligned on every single issue: that doesn't happen within our social group movement groups, even the most small affinity groups of a few people have disagreements in terms of what their fundamental goals are in certain things. And so I think the idea is, can you build the relationships that are caring enough, and trusting enough, that even when you disagree, you can trust that you're still working together, and you're still building together?

And for me, that is fundamental to this process that's being offered to non-indigenous radicals, is that we're being offered relationships. And some of us are trying to take them up. And I think some of us are wanting to bring those relationships back into the kind of utilitarian model that we often

use: which is like, “how do we win this small campaign in front of us without thinking about the big picture of what type of world we want to create?” And I think that that world, for me, is a world in which when we have disagreements – when we have falling outs – that we're able to work through them.

I'm reminded a bit of some of the stuff that was being put out by the Native youth movement years ago around their rejection of the BC treaty process. And some of what they were talking about was this anxiety on the part of settler communities to have this kind of final answer, final solution to “the Indian problem” (so-called); and how that always pushes things towards – like you said – these utilitarian relationships, or these programs of assimilation through the State. And centering relationships (as opposed to blueprints or final answers or something like that) I think is a is a nice way to think about unsettling. I that that's got to be the compass moving forward, as opposed to “how are we all going to live together? Who's going to live where? What is going to be our international protocols?” Those things are good to think about, but to some extent, we have to give up control over the answers of those things and enter into relationships with a more open mind than that.

Yeah, for sure. And I think that's really at the crux of it, is that we have to be able to put ourselves in positions where we're uncomfortable. That we're vulnerable. That we're unsettled. Maybe that's a very common thing amongst white Western folks; but this idea, that's very troubling for people. People don't want to move; and they'd rather people be in really dire, awful circumstances, than [themselves] feel uncomfortable.

I was on strike when I was at York University, and even going to talk to people who were being delayed for 10, 15, 20 minutes in their cars as they went through the picket lines: people were more angry about being delayed for 10 or 15 minutes than they were angry about the conditions in which we were working. They would say “you know, I understand why you're doing this, but I don't agree with why you're delaying me.” And I think that on a bigger level is really fundamental. I've had so many conversations with friends and family who are like, “well, I understand the need for indigenous sovereignty, but how else are we going to get the oil from one

place to another?”

People are like, “well, are you willing to give up this and that?” And I think the reality is that we have to be willing to at least to reimagine the societies we want to live in. A lot of that reimagining will require moments and periods of discomfort and unknowing and vulnerability. I think if we work in good relation with each other, it won't require as much pain and hardship and death that that this current system works on: fear, death, pain, hardship.

Another dynamic at play that I think of is, a lot of what we do (at least here) as anarchists is we are trying to encourage people to build up their confidence to some extent as well. So we want to build up people's confidence so that they're willing to risk things to themselves, so that they're willing to stand up for what they believe in, so that they're willing to act when it seems like the odds are against you. And I don't think that has to come into conflict with the discomfort of unsettling (or especially I like the word vulnerability that comes with unsettling). But yeah, what do you think about this idea that we also need to build up people's confidence? And how does that interact with the less productive “white guilt” version of unsettling?

I remember watching this show on TV or something, which basically was asking people: “if your dog or somebody who you love, or your best friend, was taken, and you had to do something about it – you would do it, right?” You'd have that confidence. But if somebody who you're not connected with, it happens to them: you may act somewhat, but you're maybe less likely to feel that need to act.

And I think that really comes from the fact that in our society, we are isolated. Capitalism creates a situation which we are isolated, alienated from not only from our labour, but from everybody in our community: even sometimes our own families and friends, that we don't feel connected. And that means that we're afraid – if things happen – to do things. I think being vulnerable to the point where you're allowing yourself to come into relation with people, and to recognise that relationship isn't always going to be an even flow, and great, and a honeymoon, but it's going to have its ups and downs and you're going to make mistakes, and you're going to

have to be humble and learn from those mistakes. That's what I think gives us confidence to fight for each other. And that's the confidence that I think we want to build; not the ego confidence, but the confidence of relationality. That we're interdependent upon each other, and that we're willing to be vulnerable with each other in the face of states that have far more military and physical power than we do. But I think our strength has always been in our relationality, and our ability to connect with people at a mass scale.

Can you speak a bit about the Oshkimaadziig Unity Camp and the impact it had on you?

I think Oshkimaadziig was a really interesting moment. Because it emerged and disappeared in the length of the writing of the dissertation. But I think it actually serves well; because the relationships that were formed from Oshkimaadziig have really sustained me, beyond the camp itself. And so to give a little context: a friend of mine, Giibwanisi, and another friend of his, Johnny, were two people who (up near Christian Island, Penetanguishene and Midland, Ontario, as part of a settlement on their reservation) were offered essentially one of the Canadian government's termination settlements, where the people would give up their claims to the land for a cash payout for each member of the nation. They wanted to refuse that payout and to assert sovereignty on the land. So they started up a camp in Awenda Provincial Park, which is just outside of Penetanguishene. And, really interestingly, was one of the places where a treaty was signed between early English settlers and the community (the Anishinaabe community) in that area. And so they showed us the Council Rock, where that signature was carved into stone on the rock.

We went up there as part of our union (the CUPE 3903’s First Nations Solidarity Working Group) to just help build some structures, because the plan was for them to have the camp over the winter, to have people come from all the different nations. Oshkimaadziig is a word that derives from the Seven Grandfather teaching (so the prophecies, and the lighting of the eighth fire, which is where this prophecy – as it was told to us – would bring about what are called the new people, or the Oshkimaadziig). And so we were invited as a supporters of this group of folks to come up and help build structures and so on.

I think it was a really important moment for us to actually just take guidance and leadership, and to kind of have some of the discussions I think people were having in Occupy camps: but to have them in a way that was rooted in the indigenous Anishinaabe knowledges that were guiding the people who set up the camp in the first place. And so I think for me, that's a really important thing: is that it really centred this relationality. And it really had a profound impact on what I brought back to organising in the various spaces that I continue to organise with today.

Do you have any thoughts on... every place is different, but some of the differences between how this plays out in urban spaces compared to how it plays out in rural spaces? Say in a land-defence or -reclamation situation as opposed to urban social movements like Idle No More?

Yeah, I think that's a really important question. Because there's a tendency amongst folks in the radical Left to fetishize land-based struggle; to think of land-based struggle as this originary indigenous struggle. And I think it erases – very much erases – the fact that urban indigenous struggle is just as originary. It is just as vital. It is people who are protecting these places. And here in Toronto, for instance, the work of No More Silences, the Native Youth Sexual Health Network, Idle No More (in the various formations that it takes) are still engaged in that work. It's just a work that is different from the particular context of land-based struggle.

And at times, it *is* land-based struggle. We had the really important project that took place I guess it would have been about three years or four years ago now, the Ogimaa Mikana project where activists were changing the street signs of Toronto to reflect on the Anishinaabe names for the spaces. I think that is a really important intervention that requires engagement from non-indigenous folks in major cities; to observe, to affirm, and to build relationships with. For me, that's always been important. You know, the, the fact that you know, groups like the Native Youth Sexual Health Network and No More Silences have continued to build and mobilise around missing and murdered indigenous women and trans-folks and Two-Spirit peoples.[8] As well as the way in which Idle No More has really responded to major events in this city over the last few years, whether it be

8 R.F. – see **'All That Wildness Names'**

the the acquittal of the person who murdered Colten Boushie[9] or Tina Fontaine.[10] And most recently with the the federal government's violation of Wet’suwet’en sovereignty.[11]

Yeah, and sometimes we forget that cities are also made up of land; and the dichotomy can fall apart sometimes for us as well.

Totally. Yeah.

Those of us who are not indigenous, engaging in these social movements: what do you think are most immediate weaknesses with respect to centering indigenous sovereignty? What do you think is the immediate priority that we should be discussing in terms of improving our practices?

I'm probably going to start to sound like a broken record. But I do think it's this idea of actually building relationships. And when you have relationships, you will centre things: because they're central to your life. You're not going to forget to do things, you're not going to put it aside, you're not going to erase, you're not going to make it seem less important if your relationships are central. And we know this just from the fact that that's how we operate as humans, is that we give precedence to the relationships that matter most to us. And I think that that's an important work that needs to be done: for activists (particularly non-indigenous activists), but obviously important for indigenous folks as well, to connect with each other, to build those relationships, to listen.

I think sometimes we want to tell everything that we're doing and show off all the good things we want to do. But I think it's also important just to listen; and sometimes that listening might involve being uncomfortable, because people have anger and frustration built up that they need to get out. And sometimes you're the receiver of that anger and frustration: even if maybe you didn't directly contribute to it, you know I'm saying? So, I think that that's really important.

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9 R.F. – 22-year-old of the Cree Red Pheasant First Nation shot down on a rural Saskatchewan farm by its settler owner, Gerald Stanley, while trying to steal a vehicle.

10 R.F. – 15-year-old found murdered in 2014, one of the high number of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in so-called Canada.

11 R.F. – see **'It Depends on All of Us'**

That just means (similar to what you were talking about my experience) sometimes showing up uninvited, or being asked for allies and just showing up and not knowing what you can do. But being committed and humble and willing to take direction, but also willing to take action and leadership. And I think sometimes when social movements/groups are in the process of building those relationships, they wish to do everything by checking back in with whoever they believe they're in allyship with. And I think that's actually kind of problematic in and of itself: because you should be able to make those decisions and choices and do that work, as long as you're communicating and making sure that you're taking direction that doesn't impede on the work that is ongoing by the people you're trying to support. And so that's something I very much learned from folks in Montreal, who I think model that in a very good way in groups (like No-One is Illegal), but other groups in the city [too].

For you do those relationships mostly look like informal relationships, or do they look like sort of organisation-to-organisation relationships with processes in place, and that kind of thing?

You know, I think we probably need both. One thing I think that I've seen in my work that I think can be really tough is when one person holds a number of relationships, and no-one else in the group does. Because then what happens is that puts a lot of pressure and power and responsibility on that one person to be an intermediary. And I think that creates a significant problem.

I recognise that it takes a long time for people develop the type of trust that usually comes with having that that place. But finding ways to spread your relationships, to make sure that not one person in a particular group is forming relationships with other groups or other communities or leaders from other spaces, is really important. Because in the end, we want to make sure that that relationality is felt across the board for each other. And so I think maybe answering your question means actually saying that both are important for different purposes.

Are there any ideas or concepts or stories that we didn't get to that you want to talk about?

I guess the only thing that maybe speaks to the way in which this process and doing this research really affected me personally, is that I started to see the way in which even in the most mundane parts of our lives, we could really start to try and shift the way we do things. And so a really good example is that for years, folks in No-One is Illegal and other social movement groups in Toronto: we've been playing in just one of those mainstream corporate baseball leagues, rec. softball leagues, as a team called The Uncertainty. And we started to really have conversations about the fact that we were provocative and weird in terms of how people read us in those mainstream leagues; but we hadn't been doing a lot of that relational work. And so we formed our own league called Field of Dreamers back in 2017.

And it's really had this big impact: because it's not just like we're playing baseball (or softball) together or whatever. You noticed people organising a whole bunch of things in the city, and actually starting to build really deep relationships. Because we see each other every week, it's a no-pressure situation, we're building each other's skill sets, we're modelling things that we want to do. But we're also doing that same work that we've been talking about, which is acknowledging that we play at Trinity Bellwoods Park: Trinity Bellwoods has a long, contested history in terms of white settlers occupying that land (that was for a long time a Seneca space that that was lived in and that was used for agriculture). And it was on the banks of what we now call Garrison Creek, which is buried underneath the park.

So having those conversations and really bringing those into... We do opening ceremonies where we take leadership from the indigenous folks in the group in terms of how to thank the land properly and how to do that work. And so despite the fact that it's play, it's also been an important part of really building that relationality into that aspect of my life as well. For me, that's been a really important takeaway: that we can't just have movement spaces focused on the political task. We have to have movement spaces that focus on modelling the sociality and relationships that we wish to create.

Because it's actually really hard. It's actually really hard to build those

relationships. It's not just a simple thing of like, “Oh, we got to build relationships.” It's actually really hard to build relationships that aren't invested in the same logics – of capital, of utilitarianism, and misogyny, and patriarchy – that run through our social lives.

Are there other kinds of books or texts or other kinds of projects that you want to shout out and encourage people to check out to explore these ideas more fully?

Yeah, for sure folks should read Harsha Walia's *Undoing Border Imperialism*. It's one of my favourite books of all time. I think it speaks to a lot of the themes that are in my book, but probably way better. And I would say really, for me, Glen Coulthard's *Red Skin, White Masks* has been really eye-opening. It's a more challenging read, but still worthwhile in terms of thinking through the limits (in our current era) of recognition and reconciliation as things that basically white people are pushing out there as being the solution to the “indigenous problem.” And I would say, if I gave a third book, I really, really did appreciate reading Audra Simpson's *Mohawk Interruptus*. And it spoke to this notion of her home community – which is a community that is split by the Canada-US border – and talking about living life across that border and boundary, despite that border boundary existing. And so for me, I think those are three books that really inspire me.

Well, I want to thank you so much for coming on the show and encourage everyone to check out your book. If you're in Kingston. I ordered it to the library so you can get it out of the Kingston Public Library. Otherwise, how do you get the book?

You can get it from Arbeiter Ring. So if you're in the United States, you can get it from AK Press. I think it retails for under $15. So it's not super expensive, but you can I think you can also get it in a number of different libraries across Ontario. So if you're not in the Kingston area, you should be able to check it out there. And hopefully we can get it into as many hands for as little cost as possible.

That's great. Well, thank you so much for coming on the show.

Above: Reclaim the Streets party (see 'Mobilising Disaster Relief')

APPENDIX:

'The Only Commons He Still Had Access To'

Reading the poetry of John Clare is like reading the autobiography of a robin. Perched on a spade, tucked into a hedgerow or gleaning seed-syllables in a field, England's 'peasant poet' sang the songlines of his native Northamptonshire.

Like a bird, he made nests for himself in particular trees including one called Lee Close Oak. When the robin sings 'A music that lives on and ever lives,' Clare could be writing of himself. The nightingale sang 'As though she lived on song' and in Clare's own life there were times when he lived on little more. Both boy and bird were 'Lost in a wilderness of listening leaves,' and his fledgling childhood was spent 'Roaming about on rapture's easy wing' in the circle of land around Helpston in the wheel of the year, as time turned in its agricultural cycles and reeled in its festivals.

It is hard today to imagine what children's lives were like before the Enclosures and it is impossible to overstate the terrible, lasting alteration which those Acts made to childhood in Britain. Although it is not, in the great scheme of things, so very long ago, we today are effectively fenced off from even its memory. My grandfather's grandfather would have known what it was like to make himself a nest on the commons of mud, moss, roots and grass but neither the experience nor a record of it is my inheritance and, for that, I hold a candle for John Clare, patron saint of childhood, through whose work we can see what childhood has lost: the enormity of the theft.

The commons was home for boy or bird but the Enclosures stole the nests of both, reaved children of the site of their childhood, robbed them of animal-tutors and river-mentors and stole their deep dream-shelters. The great outdoors was fenced off and marked 'TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED.' Over the generations, as the outdoors shrank, the indoor world enlarged in importance. PRIVATE: KEEP OUT

You see that sign in two places: on the bounds of the landowner's domain and on a child's bedroom door; and they are wholly related for, when children were banished from the commons, they lost their nests on the land. Over the years, as they came to be given their own bedrooms, a perfect and poignant mimicry evolved. Wanting some privacy but deprived of their myriad dens in the woods and on the commons, children have retaliated against the theft by sticking up signs on scraps of paper in wobbly writing: their last – unconscious – protest against the Enclosures which robbed them of all their secluded nests in the denning world, while giving them in return a prefab den, one small cage of a room. It was not, as children say, a good swap.

Born in 1793 to a sense of freedom as unenclosed as 'nature's wide and common sky', John Clare knew that the open air was his to breathe, the open water his to drink and the open land, as far as his knowledge of it extended, his to wander, and he began to write poetry of such lucid openness that it can best be described as light: his poems are translucent to nature, which shines through his work like May sunlight through beech leaves. Clare writes of the land as if he were a belonging of the land, as if it owned him, which is an idea one hears often in indigenous communities. His childhood belonged to that land and to its creatures; he knew them all and felt known in turn. One day, Clare writes, he wandered and rambled 'till I got out of my knowledge when the very wild flowers and birds seemed to forget me'.

And then, to his utter anguish, came the Enclosures, the acts of cruelty by which the common land was fenced off by the wealthy and privatized for the profit of the few. The Enclosures threw the peasantry into that acute poverty which would scar Clare's own life and mind so deeply. His griefstricken madness, alcoholism and exile as a result of this land-loss encapsulates in one indigenous life the experience of so many indigenous cultures.

In 1809, there was a parliamentary act to enclose his home territory, Helpston, and Clare saw the bitter effects at first hand as the Enclosers fenced off site after site of his memory. 'The axe of the spoiler and self interest' felled his beloved Lee Close Oak, and felled something inside himself. He lost one of his actual childhood nests but he also lost the metaphoric nest which is childhood itself where the young adult can, in a vulnerable moment, flit. Trying to console Clare for his loss, a local carpenter who had bought the timber gave Clare two rulers made from the tree. It is a poignant image for, despite the good intentions of the carpenter, the rulers represented the linear remodelling of Clare's world, wrenching the cyclical qualities of the commons (the rotation of crops and the slow cycles of time, the rounds of nests) into the strict fence-lines of Enclosure. 'Rulers' also suggests the ruling class of the Enclosers who invaded the land of the poor like an imperial army: Enclosure came 'like a Bonaparte,' wrote Clare.

One of the greatest poets of childhood, Clare is without rival as the poet of Enclosure in part because of his identification with his homeland. The Acts of Enclosure signified the enclosure and destruction of his spirit as well as his land. Winged for the simplest of raptures, he now limped at the fences erected by the 'little minds' of the wealthy. His own psyche had been as open as the footpaths of his childhood, paths which wend their way 'As sweet as morning leading night astray' but with sudden brutality 'These paths are stopt –' and

Each little tyrant with his little sign
Shows, where man claims, earth glows no more divine.

It is winter. It is always winter. In one of Clare's poems, the overarching metaphor is that the Enclosures have brought a bleak, cold, unseasonable season, 'strange and chill'. Partly, this was a direct description of the physical cold which children experienced when commoners lost their right to collect firewood for warmth; it was only because of common rights that people could 'maintain themselves and their Families in the Depth of Winter'. The Enclosures also brought a

coldness of spirit, a winter of the heart. It was as if the wheel of the year had stopped turning, frozen at midwinter all year, and summer childhood would never roll round again.

Eastwell fountain never froze in winter and Clare describes how, every Whit Sunday from time immemorial, the young people of Helpston had gathered at that particular spring to drink sugar-water for good luck. He recalls tying branches together to make a swing and fishing with crooked pins, not catching anything. It's easy to picture the giggles, flirting and games. But after Enclosure, Eastwell fountain was made private property and the children were fenced out. Later, unchilded and unsung, the site had become 'nothing but a little naked spring', he writes, and it makes me wonder why he says 'naked'. I imagine that they literally clothed the spring with ribbons as children have so often garlanded wishing wells and lucky fountains, on the Well-Dressing Days which used to be a part of a child's calendar but, further, I imagine that their custom clothed the spring with meaning and memory. Not only are the children bereaved but the land too, once possessed by children's voices, is now owned, as it were, by silence. Bereft of its children, the land is 'all alone'. The sense that a site may be lonely without its children recalls the beliefs of Indigenous Australians, the Emu waterhole grieving.

So the children of Helpston lost Eastwell fountain, site of their festival, and the festival itself died. This was one example of a widespread effect of the Enclosures, for carnivals typically had been held outdoors on the commons but when Enclosure stole those commons both the sites of carnival and the customs themselves disappeared. When the rights to the commons were abolished, the rites of the commons were lost: Enclosure made carnival homeless and it affected children badly because carnivals were once an enormous part of the glee of childhood. Today's few festivals are the shreds, the tattered remains, of the rites which once ribboned a child's year with dozens of carnival days and festooned it with Mischief Nights. There were Feasts of Fools, Apple-Tree Wassailings, Blessing-of-the-Mead Days, Hare-Pie-Scrambling Days, Hobby-Horse Days and Horn-Dance Days, the Well-Dressing Days which John Clare recalls, and Cock-Squoiling Days, Doling Days, Hallooing Largess led by the Lord of the Harvest, and all the variations of Hallowe'en (the Celtic festival of Samhain which archaeologists say has been celebrated for at least five thousand years), including Somerset's Punkie Night, when lanterns were made of mangel-wurzels. Mangel-wurzels. Give me mangel-wurzels, for the love of all that is good: mangel-wurzels.

It is not only a matter of the quantity of festivals but of their quality too. Carnival used to be a very public affair, sited outdoors with children playing a crucial role in this open, flamboyant theatre of exuberance. Carnival was public play but the Enclosures privatized it and over the years play moved indoors, so children today, enclosed in their bedrooms alone in an Xbox-fest with their PRIVATE: KEEP OUT signs on the door, cannot even know what used to lie on the other side of the fence, the public, excessive, inebriated, unbridled effervescence seizing a whole community.

When children were robbed of their carnivals, they lost a particular aspect of their relationship with nature, something at once intimate and political. For carnival renders political facts in personal ways, it plays its public roles in individual masks. Carnivals were part of children's political education in, for example, the joint-stock merrymakings which celebrated rights of grazing, gathering and gleaning on the commons, or in the 'beating of the bounds' by which a parish mapped its territories. In one case, at Scopwick in Lincolnshire, boys were made to stand on their heads in holes to make them remember the extent of their land.

Children lost the festivals, but they also lost something of the spirit of carnival, that ancient principle of reversal which subverts the *status quo,* which turns things upside down, as topsy-turvy as boys standing on their heads in holes. Carnival, rooted in the land, sends up its shoots of play, of rudeness and licentiousness, and sends up the authorities, too, with its days of misrule. But with the Enclosures, the authorities had a field day. Children suffered, not only from a loss of freedom and of carnival but because they were prosecuted under other laws passed to protect newly enclosed lands.

There was a small common near my childhood home, called Cow Common, one tiny patch which had escaped the historical Enclosures. My first memories include the cow parsley there, which was taller than me, a parasol between me and the sun. In my memory, Cow Common was all commonness. It was the scruffy-normal from which all else diverged. It was what happened when things were left alone. It had no manners, no wealth, no restriction and no clocks. On the common, everything breathed easy and wild.

Particularly children. They are born commoners on the common ground of earth. Children, whatever their parents' class, are commoners; they come from beyond the ha-ha, beyond horticulture, decorum and

dedicated grapefruit spoons. In landscape terms, they belong on the heath. They don't like the spirit of the Enclosures which mows its lawns and minds its manners, which strictly fences neatness in and untidiness out, and speaks of it all in clipped language. Nature under control. Paved patios. Miniature golf. Children prefer the spirit of the commons. Dirty. Open. The Unoccupied Territories.

And today? Does Cow Common still exist? I don't know. I don't want to go back. I don't want to see how, as an Internet search has just told me, 'most of Cow Common has gone.' I would feel robbed of a bit of my childhood if I met its absence. I would cry if I saw how the Cow Common of my very common childhood has been fenced off and privatized for the profit of the wealthy. The developers think it is valuable: we children knew it was priceless. Our wreck is long gone; developers nabbed it years ago. The Enclosures of the commons are still happening, from the profiteering bank which has seized the bank of the river in Jericho, Oxford, for luxury flats, to developers across America eyeing up worlds of childhood in disused plots of land.

The *Cow* Common of my childhood recalls the way that a peasant family could keep a cow (and perhaps geese) on the common, maybe tilling a little land. The commons had given people independence, but Enclosure threw the peasantry into pauperism. Prices rose. Wages fell. People starved. While the Enclosures drove people to starvation, they were forbidden from leaving their parish by the 'Settlement Acts', which from 1662 had prevented poor people's freedom of movement. Corralled within their parish, people turned to poaching and smuggling in huge numbers.

'All our family were smugglers,' one of my grandmothers once told me proudly, and they had to be to survive. Smugglers saw their work as legitimate trade and considered that the excise men were acting illegitimately in seizing profit from it. I have seen the man-traps used to catch smugglers in the town which my grandmother and all her ancestors were from, and a shiver runs through my genetic memory at the iron jaws, shattering bones and crippling someone for life. It could have been me.

By 1816, poachers, including children of nine or ten, were given punishments of imprisonment or transportation for offences against the Game Laws, enacted to protect the hunting rights of the wealthy. Transportation often meant a death sentence through abuse, cruelty and disease on the prison ships. Meanwhile, so widespread was the practice of poaching that, by 1830, one in three criminal convictions was for a

crime against the Game Laws.

Pause a moment on this. In the 'Game' Laws, the clue is in the title. The games of the gentry – hunting for fun – were fiercely protected, while hunting for sheer starving necessity, engaged in by children and adults, was outlawed. The wealthy, engaged in sports and game shooting, were made wholly exempt from the Malicious Trespass Act of 1820, while a commoner's child, playing and breaking a branch, could be thrown in jail. Together, these acts amounted to a privatization of play. Common play – child's play – was privatized for profit.

Poaching, incidentally, something Wordsworth did as a child, has never died. Scottish artist Matthew Dalziel, from the age of seven in the 1970s, went out poaching with his dad and dog in rural Ayrshire. His mother did not always approve, tight-lipped as she cleaned the boy's clothes and berated her husband for stewing ram's horns in her jelly pan. As a boy it seemed 'a sort of human right to be able to take a fish from the river or a hare from the hill', says Dalziel. It was an adventure of the senses for a child. Chasing hares by moonlight, he recalls the rhythm of their paws 'quickening like a drumming across the earth's surface', with the grasses hissing as they ran. After the kill, the dog's heavy breath would be full of blood and sweat and would mingle with the oily woollen smell of his father's damp jumper, a madeleine of poaching.

Poachers are the hunters and the hunted. The boy feared the gamekeepers who regarded them as trespassers. 'Like the animals you hunted, your senses would get highly tuned to seeing a shape behind a hedgerow that didn't quite look right, the sound of a gate squeaking, a steel wire fence lightly ringing, birds suddenly flying off, crows circling: all became voices saying someone was coming, something was not as it should be.' It was – and has always been – a nocturnal class war, where children could get a bit of their own back, their own commons, their own unenclosed freedom, trespassing a little against those who had so maliciously trespassed against them.

John Clare fears being told that his walking is 'trespass', saying that he 'dreaded walking where there was no path'. As a child, I shared that dread of the word 'trespass' and I still feel a fear which is wholly disproportionate to any punishment meted out today. Generations of children forced to recite the Lord's Prayer which uses the word 'trespass' instead of the Biblical 'sin' or 'debt' were further frightened off their own land. I learned my fear from my mother who learned it from hers: it would only need some six such transfers of fear, mother to child, to span the

decades from the Malicious Trespass Act to my own wide-eyed fear at the fences. As a result of this act, children were sent to prison in large numbers. Mothers would have wanted to instil fear of trespass into their children as deeply as they would fear of poisonous snakes. As a girl, my mother misread the sign as 'TRESPASSERS WILL BE EXECUTED', and she was not alone. Another friend also mistook theword but not the threat, for, nailed next to the sign to frighten the children, a gamekeeper had hung a dead, executed, fox.

The figure of the Gamekeeper stalks children's fiction, acknowledging their persistent fear, so 'Giant Grum' in *The Little Grey Men* kills the animals in the woods; meanwhile TRESPASSERS WILL hangs over all the landscapes of childhood, from Winnie-the-Pooh to today's woodland privatizations, denying children their role as part of the wildlife.

The ideology of the Enclosures was driven by some of the less likeable attitudes of the Enlightenment: a loathing of wildness, a will to control nature, a love of hierarchies and subordination. Children suffered from these ideologies and childhood was to be enclosed as surely as land. This is not only a matter of shutting children off the land but also a matter of enclosing the playful spirit of childhood and prohibiting its carnival-heart and, further, subjecting it to domination, harsh discipline and punishment, as later chapters will demonstrate in more detail.

The experience of children was mirrored in the treatment of land. Although some early Enclosures had taken place in the thirteenth century, it was the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that saw a wave of Enclosures, with an extreme peak in the eighteenth century, falling off by 1830. Map this with the history of childhood and something fascinating emerges: children were subjected to increasing discipline from the very end of the fourteenth century to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, reaching its height in the eighteenth century, until the tide began to turn by about, yes, 1830. The nature of the land and the nature of the child were both to be controlled, fenced in. Enclosure, both literal and metaphoric, was enacted against land and childhood.

Clare associated the commons with an everyday arcadia, so 'Nature's wild Eden' is found 'In common blades of grass'. Eden is here and how green is that valley, how evergreen, Eden, common as chaffinches, Eden-at-large, Eden-at-will, Eden belonging to everyone who will not wall others out. Clare welcomes everything; his Eden blesses thistles and embraces

weeds, knowing that Eden is only truly Eden when the nettles are as welcome as the honeysuckle, when there is hard graft as well as moonlight, frozen well-water in winter as well as the zest of love in the zenith of summer.

His Eden is 'ruled' by nothing except 'Unbounded freedom' and, like all children given half a chance, Clare's sense of freedom included a quintessential freedom of time. He was a loafer, a dawdler, a *flâneur* of the fields, describing himself sauntering, roaming, lost in another time which existed before Enclosure:

Jumping time away
on old Crossberry Way.

Children today, peeping through the strict fences of their over-scheduled and clockworked lives, can only guess at his unenclosed sense of time. Steeped in, saturated with, drunk on the wine of time as if he had drunk it to the lees, the leavings, *laissez-boire*, the child Clare is rich on the leazings of life, the gleanings, the gatherings of memory, 'When I in pathless woods did idly roam.'

Ah, idleness, those long and lazy days when the clock is drowsy, the hours hazy and minutes erased, idleness is a friend to childhood and an enemy of the state. The 1794 Report on Enclosure in Shropshire states with nasty approval that a result of Enclosures would be that 'the labourers will work every day in the year, their children will be put out to labour early.' Children's hard labour would become necessary for survival, as families lost one right after another, including gleaners' rights to leaze after the harvest. 'Leazing' is a rich word which, like 'gleaning', means picking up what lies scattered after a harvest. Clare literally leazed in the fields but was also the poet-as-gleaner.

I found the poems in the fields
I only wrote them down.

He weaves together leaves and leazings, reading both language and nature; the birds and the words are interwoven as the yellowhammer weaves its nest of real sticks in the inspired air. 'And hang on little twigs and start again,' he writes, as if the infinite circle of a nest was a part-song sung by every bird.

Clare's was a nesting mind, delicate as tiny twigs, feathered with fellow-feeling and warm with tufts of grass tucked round the circle of his land in the cycle of the year. 'I've nestled down and watched her while she sang,' wrote Clare of the nightingale: the psyche which is well nested may sing the truest and when, as an adult, he writes about his childhood it is as

if his childhood were a nest for his spirit. Nests within nests, his whole work is a nesting-place.

As a child, Clare nested in the lands which were his home and, charmed by nests, he wrote of the martin's nest, and a magpie's nest, the nests of linnet, blackbird, nightingale, pettichap or chiffchaff, skylark, landrail, yellowhammer, moorhen, thrush and robin. He includes the nests of hedgehogs and children's burrows, their little 'playhouse rings of sticks and stone'. His work seems to suggest that as a child he could feel safely nested only when the land around him was a safe nesting-place for every other kind of creature, knowing that the human mind can nest or make a home only when the ecology provides a home for all species. (The word 'ecology' comes from *oikos*, home.) Many children are disturbed by the idea that any animal, from a tiger to a snail, could lose its home, in a kind of instinctive ecological empathy.

It was the destruction of all the forms of home which unnested Clare's mind. He was evicted from his land by forces of undwelling and his madness and misery were written into his poems. I have been with Amazonian people when they have seen the searing brutality of their lands being ripped apart for gold in today's acts of corporate enclosure, and I have watched men weep while they say, aghast, 'We are the land,' a truth which John Clare would have effortlessly understood.

The Enclosures spiked the nest of Clare's psyche. Where moss and feathers had been, there was now a torque of barbed wire. When Clare writes of flowers or butterflies or birds being made homeless, he notes how they lose their depth of association so the landscape of the mind is pauperized by Enclosure.

But, take these several beings from their homes,
Each beauteous thing a withered thought becomes;
Association fades and like a dream
They are but shadows of the things they seem.
Torn from their homes and happiness they stand
The poor dull captives of a foreign land.

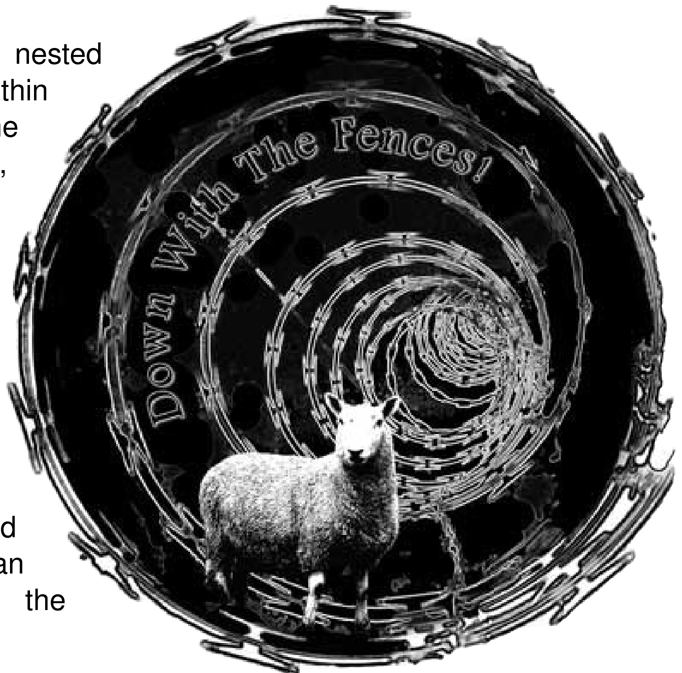
Language and meaning need to be nested in nature, and the immensity of the destruction Clare perceives is enormous. Enclosure, he tells us in various places, fenced off rapture and play, joy, customs, games, carnival and the past; it obliterated the glow of divinity, of generosity and kindness; it silenced songs and poetry; it prohibited lingering, lazing, roaming and straying; it closed the pathways; it brought the chill of winter into every season; it caged freedom, time and wildness;

it ruined dwelling, refuge and shelter; it denied belonging and so stripped the psyche of every protection. It evicted childhood from its immemorial nest on the land and it exiled his adulthood from its nest of childhood memory.

Enclosure threatens the homes of all, whether a squirrel's dray, a mouse's nest or a badger's sett. Out on the heath, after Enclosure, the rabbits had nowhere to make a warren and were left to 'nibble on the road' while the moles became 'little homeless miners' and even the birds are ordered out of their homes in the woods by forbidding signs, so they must keep flying, from felled tree to felled tree, storm-driven and nestless.

Clare, in the sympathetic magic of poetry, gives a home to everything in the only commons he still had access to: the commons of imagination. If, as a result of Enclosures, creatures no longer had their nests on the common land, he would build nests for them in that other commons: language. One creature after another is given a home and shelter in Clare's writing and each of Clare's poems is a nest. The littlest twigs are caught, laid lightly, woven of thought and love; each gentle green adjective is like moss, each soft felt word a sheltering leaf, each verb a feather for a reverie of home. All poetry is dwelling, but Clare's are daydream dwellings for both creature and human, and when each nest-song is complete the bird of poetry alights there.

But in all these nested images – nests within nests – there is one more. John Clare, building his nests of land-poetry, has in fact made a nest for us all, a home and a flitting-place for every one of us to dwell in a while, in order to know what an unenclosed childhood was like and how the child's heart can find its nestness on the land.

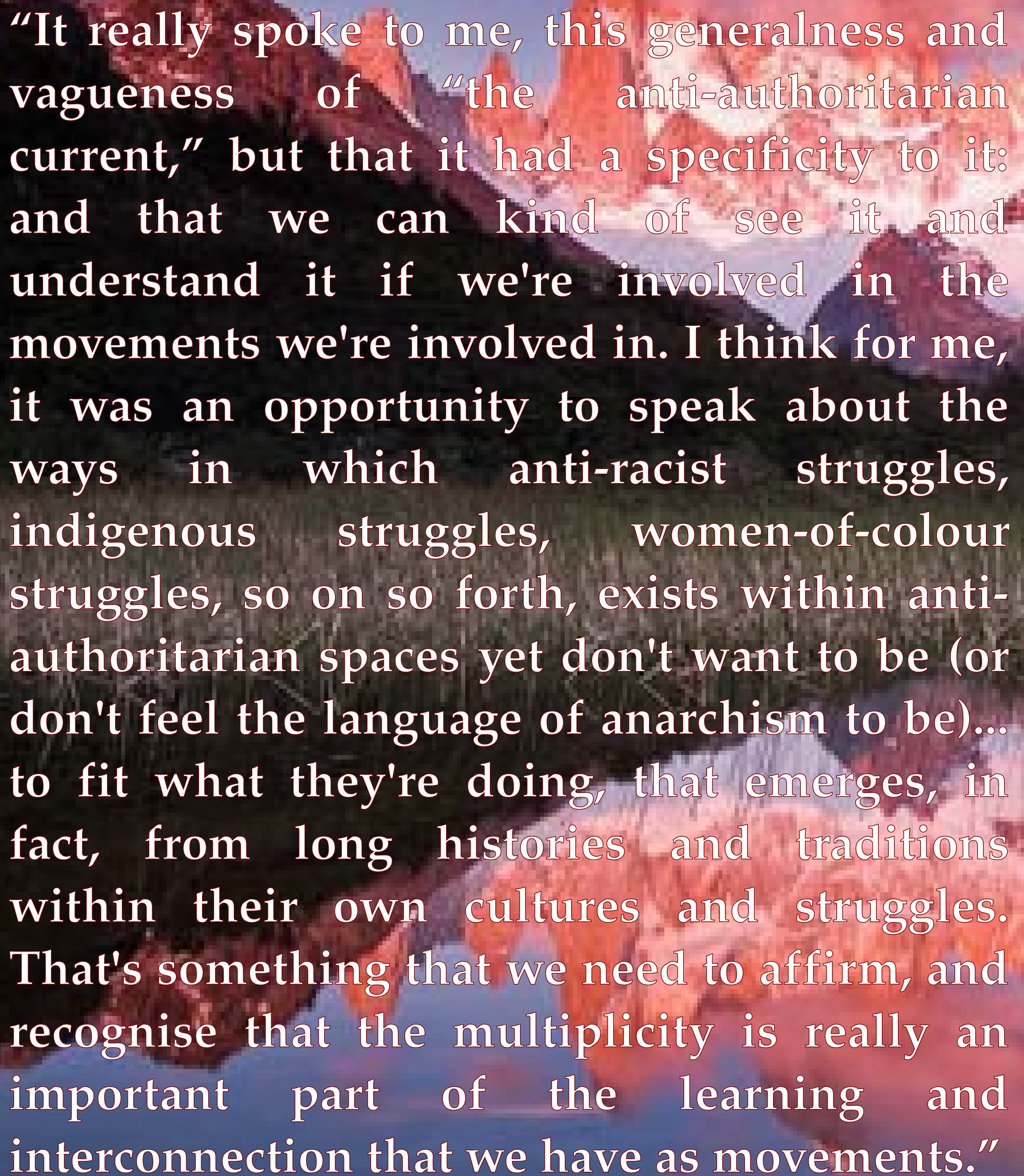


A FAYRE FOR ALL

MASS TRESPASS

CIRENCESTER PARK - 17TH MARCH

2024 invitation to resist the enclosures still happening today: in this case, Cirencester park in Gloucestershire, whose 'owner' (Lord Bathurst – whose Tory MP forefather bought the estate with profits from the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the Royal Africa Company & the East India Company – close friend of King Charles who lives nearby) was setting an entrance fee to one of the UK's largest green spaces after centuries of people using the land freely for leisure & festivities; the fee was postponed



"It really spoke to me, this generalness and vagueness of "the anti-authoritarian current," but that it had a specificity to it: and that we can kind of see it and understand it if we're involved in the movements we're involved in. I think for me, it was an opportunity to speak about the ways in which anti-racist struggles, indigenous struggles, women-of-colour struggles, so on so forth, exists within anti-authoritarian spaces yet don't want to be (or don't feel the language of anarchism to be)... to fit what they're doing, that emerges, in fact, from long histories and traditions within their own cultures and struggles. That's something that we need to affirm, and recognise that the multiplicity is really an important part of the learning and interconnection that we have as movements."