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Against Identity Politics

Spectres, Joylessness, and the contours of resentment

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Identity Politicians (IPs) are a particular kind of leftist who use the *spectre*¹ of an identity-category (gender, race, sexuality, etc) as a lever to obtain power. In the sense discussed here, they should not be considered coterminous either with groups of people oppressed by identity categories, or even that subset who prioritise identity as a key site of struggle. Not all women, Black people, People of Colour (POC)², or members of other specifiable groups are IPs; not all feminists, anti-racists, or even separatists are IPs. Racism, sexism and other oppressions along identity axes are sociologically real, and not every person involved in the struggle against such oppressions is an IP.

Intersectionality - the recognition of multiple forms or axes of oppression, with complex interacting effects - is an effective theoretical response to the problems of Identity Politics, but there have clearly been difficulties putting it into practice. In identity-linked movements, some people use intersectionality as a way to avoid the idea of principal contradiction, although occasionally in practice, people who claim to be intersectional end up treating one

¹Ed. note: In *Der Einzige...* Stirner uses *spuk*; the English cognate “spook,” while a decent enough translation in 1907, is currently an inappropriate (to say the least) option. We chose to use *spectre* (especially and deliberately retaining the British spelling) for its non-colloquial impact.

²Ed. note: There was a time when the term POC was inclusive of everyone who so self-identified (regardless of the term exacerbating certain unarticulated and unavoidable tensions about homogenizing the distinct experiences of people from diverse ethnic backgrounds, as well as the different ways those distinctions resulted in particular experiences of racism); in the past few years, however, the analytical category of Blackness/Anti-Blackness has become more popular in post-colonial discourse, especially among academics and activists. Michael P Jeffries writes that Anti-Blackness is “not simply about hating or penalizing black people. It is about the debasement of black humanity, utter indifference to black suffering, and the denial of black people’s right to exist.” The recent twisting of “Black Lives Matter” into “All Lives Matter” is a good example of how deeply the threat of a recognized Black humanity runs in the US. Despite the increasingly problematic term POC, we have retained it out of respect for the many who continue to embrace it as a self-description.

or two oppressions as primary. Nevertheless, the fact that not all identity-related theories or movements need to be treated as Identity Politics does not mean that the influence of Identity Politicians is trivial. The writers and activists discussed here not only exist, but their ideas and practices are often insidious and unfortunately widespread. Recognizing the importance and necessity of countering that deleterious influence is my motivation for writing this essay.

It should here be emphasised that *this is not a critique of all forms of radical theory focused on racial or gender oppression*. This critique of IPs is by no means a critique of every position which focuses on a particular type of oppression (such as gender or race). Indeed, aspects of this critique are already present in a number of theorists who work with identity. For instance, the iconic anti-colonial writer Frantz Fanon argued that dualistic identities deform interpersonal relations and reproduce colonial power. While the struggle against colonial power is in fact an irreducible antagonism, and moves similar to those of IPs are strategically useful to fight it, the ultimate goal is to overcome such binaries in a future of the disalienated “whole [hu] man” (*Wretched of the Earth*, 238-9). He even articulates an almost Stirnerian’ claim that “the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence ... I am endlessly creating myself” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 204). Similarly, in her later works, Gloria Anzaldúa argued that we are citizens of the universe, sharing an identity at a cosmic or subatomic level which is wider than any racial or social category (*This Bridge We Call Home*, 558). She came to criticise IPs for putting up walls and causing violence between groups (*Interviews*, 118). Neither of these authors arrives at a Stirnerian position: Fanon moves towards humanism, and Anzaldúa towards spiritual holism. However, their rejections of fixed identities overlap and intersect with mine, and serve to counter any suspicion that the rejection of Identity Politics entails a failure to take patriarchy, colonialism, or racism seriously.

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Some feminists and Black radicals do not deploy the reactive affects discussed below, and instead seek to regenerate a force of becoming to one degree or another (e.g. Mary Daly, Germaine Greer, Audre Lorde, Edouard Glissant). Others, notably dependency theorists and socialist-feminists, emphasise structural oppression, and struggle primarily against macro-structures - destroying capitalism, modernity, or the world-system - rather than focusing on the micro-politics of privilege. None of these approaches falls within what is being critiqued here. Academic approaches that draw on poststructuralism are also distinct from Identity Politics, in that they typically reject the primacy of any particular position. Academic theories related to oppression and identity - for example, Queer Theory, Critical Race Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and post-structuralist feminism - generally reject the idea of principal contradiction. The popularity of Identity Politics among radicals is partly due to the influence of academic work on identity, but, in academic spaces, most strategies of IPs would be rejected as essentialist (there are other issues of disagreement between post-left anarchy and poststructuralism, and between post-left anarchy and leftist types of structuralism, but these issues will not be covered here).

What is being criticised here is a particular *political style*, rather than a theoretical orientation - a style which labels as oppressive any deviation from a particular political line, which resorts almost immediately to public denunciation and exclusion, and which entails analytical and categorical rigidity, with corresponding boundary-policing. They can be distinguished from those whose approaches pursue open-ended becomings through the deconstruction of identity-categories (eg Heckert), which are *minoritarian becomings* rather than minority identities.

IPs see *one* axis of oppression as primary - the *principal contradiction*³ They demand that everyone focus on this axis. If someone fails to do so, IPs label them racist, sexist, white supremacist, patriarchal, etc. Ditto if they refuse leadership by the oppressed group (often meaning the IPs themselves), deviate from the IP's proposed political line, or criticise an IP. Such terms are deployed only by a member of the correct group, and are used to silence criticism - in the case of Patriarchy Haters, even the word *violence* is monopolised; those who oppose them "do not get to decide what counts as violence" (Voline). The idea of a principal contradiction leads to contempt for other issues and priorities. For instance, IPs in APOC, who focus on race, argue that "bleating about gender and class" is an instance of "diversionary tactics" to deflect from race (Anon, Open Letter). Early CWS work treated issues other than racism as "distractions" (Dot Matrix), and Lorenzo Ervin demands that "anti-racism/anti-colonialism" be made "the core concern" of every activist group (315). He also dismisses anything outside his own agenda - from climate change to anti-fascism - as a "white rights" issue (133, 290, 302).

This political style boundary-polices identities in a way which renders them rigid and authoritarian. In many cases, fighting alleged racism or sexism *inside radical groups* is seen as the most important issue in radical politics - more important than fighting racism/sexism in the wider society. Ervin calls white radicals the worst kinds of racists, worse than hardcore conservatives (240, 272-3). Usually, these attacks take the form of militant struggle from the Maoist milieu: public denunciation and/or disruption, criticism/self-criticism, purging/ exclusion, and the policing of micro-

³Ed. note: The fundamental aspect of tension/destructiveness of class society; for traditional Marxists, it's bourgeoisie-proletariat within the framework of capitalism. When resolved through the teleological process of dialectical materialism (The Revolution™), the resulting synthesis is supposed to make the secondary (and tertiary, etc) contradictions like sexism, racism, and other ostensibly trivial forms of institutionalized oppression, melt away.

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oppressions within the movement or scene; activists refuse to draw distinctions between allies and sympathisers, active enemies, and anything in-between. Ostracism, "the ultimate form of social control," "is very infrequently used" in indigenous cultures (Peaceful Societies), but is used almost immediately by IPs for the smallest perceived transgressions.

Ervin's repeated tirades against white anarchists provide a textbook case of this approach; his recent antics include labelling the entire Anarchist Black Cross racist because, at their recent convention in Denver, someone - at the request of Black political prisoner Jalil Muntaqim - read aloud a racist letter by a prison guard. Roger White's *Post Colonial Anarchism* exemplifies this too, as do the faction of APOC who disrupted the Crimethlnc convergence in Philadelphia in 2009, verbally abusing participants and damaging their belongings. Kill Whitey, one of the cheerleaders for this attack, later extended the disruptors' accusations of "white supremacy" to Food Not Bombs and other anarchist groups, demanding that all such groups accept black leadership. The attack by activists from the Qilombo social centre on the CAL Press table at the Bay Area Anarchist Book Fair in 2014 is another case; subsequent comments online by Qilombo supporters clearly show the same rhetoric. Patriarchy Haters, the group which emerged from the Patriarchy and the Movement event in Portland, represent a feminist variant; their most notorious intervention was to shout down Kristian Williams at an unrelated event for criticising their political style in his article, *The Politics of Denunciation*.

Identity and Spectres

From a Stirnerian anarchist perspective, at the root of the problem with IPs is the *spectre* - the use of an identity-category as a transcendent, abstract category which possesses and defines values. In Stirner's theory, the problem of oppression is the problem that peo-

ple value spectres and the things which benefit spectres - *instead of valuing the things which they desire as a "unique one."* All categories, words, concepts, can become spectres if they are allowed to possess and dominate us - even those which refer to our properties or attributes (59, 151). If people are defined as essentially and primarily *something* - whether it be humanity, whiteness, blackness, masculinity, femininity - this is always alienating, because the category is always "his *essence* and not he himself" and therefore something alien (28), which requires "my valuelessness" (145). As a real person, each of us is a processual being, an embodied self, located in a field of becoming.

From a Stirnerian perspective, systems of oppression such as racism and patriarchy are oppressive impositions of a particular spectre. Systems of oppression based on gender, race, and so on are *sociologically real*, but ultimately rest on *other people imposing a particular spectre* - treating another person not as a unique one, but as an instance of femininity, or "just another X." Such systems entail valuing a particular category to the exclusion of others, leading to violence against those excluded.

However, the subordination of one spectre to another is not the base level of the problem; the problem is that spectres do not liberate or empower those who belong to the category they value, because those belonging to the category are valued only as instances of the category, not in their full, unrepresentable being. Hence, a *right of humanity* or a *white privilege* is never *my* right or privilege, because my *unique being* is not identical with humanity or whiteness. Even if I qualify as human or white (by falling within the extensional set of each category), there is some residue of uniqueness which is prohibited by the spectre. Stirner's concept of the *un-person* expresses this clearly. An un-person falls within the category *human*, but is deemed to deviate from the essence, for instance by putting uniqueness before humanity. The un-person is not liberated, but jailed or hospitalised. Indigenous people always fell within the extensional set of humans, but were historically ex-

and direct connection, that we destroy the power which spectres exercise over us. Let us start always from this joy, share it with others when we can, and use it as a weapon to break down common sense, to rebuild and redefine community, to replace the graveyard of spectres with a world of life. May the alien privileges of spectres and the alien oppressions they engender never come between a unique one, a free being, and its immanent becoming. @

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(and therefore more objectively) true. It shuts down dialogue and reinforces the enclosure of common sense. And in many cases, everyday common sense is also extremely oppressive, accepting and imposing normativities complicit with, and directly reinforcing, institutionalized forms of power. In addition, many key terms in IPs' discourse - structural oppression, privilege, patriarchy, trauma, framing, supremacy, *senzala*, *quilombo* and so on - are not everyday common sense terms, but imports from university cultural studies texts or historical reading. Anti-intellectualism handily insulates IPs from rebuttal, but does not make their poorly based strategies any more effective.

For a World Without Spectres!

From all of this, we must conclude that IPs are just another type of leftist, promoting sacrifice and renunciation, posing as liberators of the oppressed. IPs are seductive in the ways they have of identifying and channelling the anger of the oppressed, the guilt of the (relatively) privileged, experiences of trauma, and awareness of the possibility of unintended oppression. But they channel these affects into political power, using them to entrench the role of IPs as Experts. This role requires that privilege/oppression be theorised as an ineliminable original sin.

Against this prevalent form of disguised vanguardism, let us hold forth the beacon of a *world without spectres*. Structural oppressions are sociologically real, but their roots can be traced deeper, to the structures of statism and representation. If we must theorise a primary contradiction, then let it be the contradiction between ourselves - as unique ones, forces of becoming, irreducible and unrepresentable beings - and the entire regime of spectres and alienation. Let us dispense with boundary policing, and instead nurture affinities *across* social categories. It is in rediscovering the level of immanent, abundant becoming, the joy of life, the flow of desire

terminated or assimilated because they fell outside the essence of what colonisers defined as having human value. *The hierarchising of representational categories is secondary to the initial oppressive gesture of subordinating real becomings to abstract categories.*

By analogy, white or male privilege is the privilege of the spectre, not of the extensional set. There is the spectre as a category, which usually has a set of normatively defined characteristics (such as masculinity, whiteness, humanity). And then there is the set of people who are classified as part of the spectre, who may or may not have these characteristics. A male white person becomes *un-white* or *un-male* when he ceases to conform to dominant ideas about the category. We might say that white privilege is not something which is *owned* by a person defined as white; it is owned by an alien spectre (112), the category of whiteness.

Spectres are connected to sovereignty, as theorised by Agamben. In sovereignty, a political ruler has the power to decide which instances of the extensional set conform to the essence of the spectre and are accorded value - who is "person" (qualified life) and who is "un-person" (bare life). This leads to "abyssal thought," the devaluing of those who fall outside dominant normativity (de Souza Santos). In Maoism and Leninism, sovereignty operates in the form of vanguardism or substitutionism. The Party or leader defines the spectre and hence claims to speak for all those covered by it - but such statements are really political decisions rather than empirical claims. The IP, the leader, claims to speak as and for POC, Black people, women, and so on - but never for all those covered by the category. In a sneaky semantic move, the moment the oppressed criticise the vanguard, *they are no longer the oppressed*, but objectively have become allied with the oppressors. An enemy of the IP becomes an enemy of the entire category - the spectre.

Identity Politics and Maoism

IPs IMAGINE SPECTRES TO BE MATERIALLY REAL. Whereas Stirnerians insist that becoming is unrepresentable, IPs follow Marx's view that it can be identified with an essence. For Stirner, binaries are artificial effects of spectres; for Marxists, they are correct theoretical reflections of binary structures within reality itself. The IP's style is descended from Maoism. Younger IPs are unlikely to have been directly influenced by Maoism, but important elements of Maoist political grammar were imported into earlier forms of Identity Politics and continue to operate.

Maoists and IPs are strong structural determinists. This means that they work with a model of social life in which macro-social structures determine people's identities and political outcomes. For instance, Ervin says that any white radical has "middle class racial privileges... and it does not matter about their personal beliefs" (268). IPs deny that people exist as unique individuals at all; people are simply instances of spectres. As an APOC writer says, "It's completely arrogant and pretentious to think you are unique. You are just another white person" (Anon, Open Letter). People are taken to be effects of, and reducible to, particular social structures: these structures determine their material interests, which determine their unconscious investments, which determine their beliefs and actions. People's real, unconscious desires are always "racialized desires" stemming from "racialized, classed, and gendered subjectivities" (comments on Anon, Smack a White Boy Part Two). In the case of privileged people, desires are not to be liberated, but purified. In the case of oppressed people, what they desire is automatically, instinctively right — *provided* it follows from the spectre.

This approach depends on the conflation of the spectre (eg whiteness, masculinity) and the extensional set it covers (eg white people, men). Roger White asserts that "white, Christian men have held power and privilege" - without distinguishing between the spectres, the elite, and all members of the categories. And the

claims are often displaced onto the issue of who *has the right to decide*, which is returned to the question of spectres

Black radicals don't have to listen to white critics, male experts have no right to expound on survivors' experiences, etc. This is a category-error, to which the appropriate answer is: *I've not exposed your mistake because I think you need my permission - I've exposed your mistake because it leads to oppression, bad politics, or ineffectiveness*. This strategy gives power to those who define which issues are urgent. In fact, none of the cases discussed here were anywhere near to being life-or-death situations. And paradoxically, to heal from trauma, one *needs* to theorise and intellectualise it.

In fact, the idea of obvious experiences is fallacious. There is no simple divide between reality/experience and thought/theory. Humans process experiences through conceptual categories, and in many cases, these categories affect the impact of an experience - or what, subjectively, is experienced. People don't lack theories simply because they are not formally educated or academically trained. Rather, everyone has their own stock of theories and concepts through which they unconsciously process the world, and without which the world would simply be an incomprehensible mess of sense-impressions. Whenever somebody claims that their own conceptions are *real*, or are unmediated *experience* in contrast to others' mere ideas or opinions, they are actually reifying and naturalising their own socially constructed beliefs - usually beliefs based on capitalist common sense. There is no such thing as direct, unmediated knowledge from experience (as distinct from unmediated experience, which is *felt as unrepresentable*). In any case, IPs create a regime of roles, which in Vaneigem's terms, "express lived experience, yet at the same time they reify it" (131).

This does not mean that academic theories are always best. Academic thought is often tied-up with corporate and state power (Dot Matrix, Science As Capital). Everyday, local knowledges can also be effective ways of theorising the world. But it is a mistake to reify them into unmediated experiences which are somehow directly

some kind of political education or political de/resocialisation of the poor (not primarily of ourselves, though most critical pedagogy is also reflexive and dialogical). Otherwise, anarchists pursuing such projects will simply be overwhelmed by the unreflexive common sense of those whose perspectives they idealise.

The theme of *urgency* is closely connected to the community orientation. IPs often posit immediately apparent realities, which are deemed extra-theoretical and extra-political. Disagreement with the IP's perspective or actions is belittled as a "topic ripe for a drunk PhD" (White) or "some intellectual's grad thesis" (Weaver). The oppressed are said to "know oppression" from experience: "we lost the need to understand pain philosophically when we learned it physically" (Ribeiro). Ervin postures as having no particular expertise, except "a decent supply of good common sense and street knowledge" (10), and urges us to "trust the best instincts of the people" (119). Patriarchy Haters condemn political debate as contrasting with real, life-or-death stakes for them: "We do not agree with people having a 'political argument' at our expense" (*Statement*). They suggest that their positions come from their "BODIES," which are not "to be politicized, theorized, speculated upon" (Weaver).

IPs advance a framework in which theory distracts from reality. The historical origin of this framework is the Maoist emphasis on "experience" (suitably processed by the party) as superior to "book learning," and the corresponding "Red versus expert" struggles of the Cultural Revolution. The basic gesture is to split issues between the *real reality* posited by IPs and associated with experience and the principal contradiction, and a field deemed secondary or tertiary, and therefore trivial. This grounds apparently obvious, self-evident claims and is used to create a sense of urgency: IPs are doing real, life-or-death politics, and everyone else is just messing around (notice once again the prejudice against play). The function of this gesture is to "declare certain questions off-limits" because "the answer is already known" (Williams). Arguments against IPs'

founder of CWS writes of "the guilt that comes from being who I am: a white person of conscience in a white supremacist society" (Dot Matrix).

All of these positions entail the view that *we are our spectres*. As Williams argues, it classifies people as "particular types of people who are essentially those things," and reduces oppressed as much as abuser/oppressor to "political symbols used by others to advance some specific ideological line." Normatively, anything which aids the oppressed spectre is good; anything which harms it is bad. The same action - silencing, violence, abuse, eviction - is praised in the former case and condemned in the latter. A person's intent is irrelevant; the real significance comes from the effect, as defined in the IP's frame. Duplicating the historic role of the activist or militant (Vaneigem, 111; Anon, *Give Up Activism*), the IP makes her/himself indispensable as an Expert on oppression, based on claimed knowledge of the spectre and the correct response to it.

Such spectres are used to channel the anger of the excluded into controlled political forms. Maoism is a power-politics of ruthless control, but it is seductively appealing to marginalised people because it contains a moment of empowerment. Especially when out of power, Maoism encourages the expression of accumulated anger against real oppressors such as landlords and government functionaries. This practice is the origin of the culture of denunciation, and the reason why Black and feminist groups in the '60s were attracted to Maoism. Once in power, however, Maoists cannot continue to allow attacks on power-holders. Instead they channel anger onto folk-devils, such as disempowered former oppressors, in carefully managed denunciation campaigns (Perry and Li, 7). In the Euro-American context this method takes the form of moral panics.

This contradictory role is also channelled theoretically. Maoists and IPs deploy a contradictory fusion of two incompatible ontologies: *realism* and *perspectivism*. Realists maintain that an external reality is knowable through rational methods by anyone, whereas

perspectivists maintain that everyone's standpoint is culturally unique, and there is no way to establish any standpoint as more true than others. Maoists/IPs are ontological realists in identifying the principal contradiction and depicting the actions of the privileged (which can be reduced to externally knowable structures), but perspectivist in their treatment of the standpoint of the oppressed: if a Black person says something is racist, it is racist (comments on Jarach et al); if a woman alleges abuse, the allegation is self-evidently true (comments on Black Orchid Collective). This turns women and Black people into Experts, to be unquestioningly listened to and obeyed - a position dehumanising for them as well as others. In contrast, the *real* meaning of a white person's or a man's actions is externally knowable, and intent is irrelevant.

There is method in this madness. In Maoist theory, knowledge is a fusion of experience, which comes from the masses, and rational theory, which comes from the vanguard (Mao, *On Practice*). In practice, this meant that knowledge emerging from mass meetings, denunciation campaigns, speak-bitterness campaigns, and so on was systematised and reprocessed by the Party into the Mass Line, which was presented as the unmediated experience of the masses. Disagreements within the movement are "resolved by the method of criticism and self-criticism" (Mao, *On Contradiction*). In practice this meant denunciation and self-denunciation. During the Cultural Revolution, different Maoist factions began denouncing each other as "objectively counter-revolutionary," as part of a competition for resources. Elements of both of these approaches can be seen in the actions of IPs, the former as an insistence on leadership by members of a particular group (Black, women, etc), the latter in the distribution of prestige to allies based on conspicuous self-abasement and political performance.

Ultimately, denunciation, exclusion, border-policing, promoting us/them binaries among the oppressed, and harping on principal contradictions are the methods through which IPs/Maoists mould autonomy into political power. Anarchism is a threat to Maoism,

a movement of politically conscious, socially networked poor people.

IPs believe that anarchy is irrelevant to the community because anarchists are privileged, and separate from the community. In fact, anarchy seems irrelevant to the community because most people who've been conditioned to live within such system-constructed communities have internalised repressive, statist beliefs, and accept capitalist common sense (the Gramscian notion of an incoherent everyday philosophy or ideology prevalent among subaltern people, which embeds uncritical, hegemonic, and reactionary beliefs). The idea that the oppressed are just waiting for the right activist leadership, which is blocked by the allegedly inherent racism/sexism in social movements, is a delusion. Working in wider communities entails putting up with (and even glorifying) a lot of common-sense ideologies, prejudices, and bigotry on a scale far greater than anything within radical scenes. The real problem is not organisation, or the correct line, or the right leadership. The problem is whether people actually *desire* revolution/insurrection. In fact, no revolutionary "people" exists, because of what Stimer terms the *police sentiments* of actually existing people (116).

The hypothesis that the community is more radical than so-called privileged anarchists is simply false. Most anarchists already oppose work, police, prisons, government, and so on whereas most community members do not. It is not uncommon for anarchists fighting gentrification, CCTV and other forms of the surveillance state, or morality-policing to be pitted against other local residents. It might be in poor people's material interests to oppose dominant institutions, but for the most part they don't. People who lack formal or informal political education tend not to become anarchists because they tend to remain stuck in capitalist common sense, dependent on the discourses made available by the mainstream, and caught up in the pursuit of values of individual advancement. Their supposed interests have little effect in mitigating these influences. Any anarchist project directed at the worse-off need to start from

strange, disconnected ‘communities’ of family, school, work) nor the chance encounters (at the market, on the bus, at some public event) have much chance of sparking a real and intense interest in another, an impassioned curiosity to discover who they are and what we might be able to create with them” (7). Bey argues that simply coming together is already a victory over capitalism (*Immediatism vs Capitalism*), and the Situationists exposed the emptiness of everyday life and the role of urban residential areas as state-controlled warehouses for workers (Debord, sections 169-76). Even where some kind of community life persists, it rarely entails a unitary set of beliefs, demands, and interests, or even (outside of certain subaltern social movements and indigenous groups) any kind of collective power. In looking to “the community,” IPs are seeking a source of strength which is at once a product of the system, and thereby constituted as weak. If they want dense, mutually supportive, socially meaningful communities, then they - like the rest of us - will have to *build* these communities, often from scratch, on the basis of affinity and living-otherwise. When IPs speak for the community, they typically do so as a vanguard, a representative, who substitutes for a community which is absent in practice.

A short time ago, the new BBC class survey (Heyden) became a fad among those activists who use social media. Nearly everyone who completed it came out in a category called “emergent service workers” (ESWs). The survey has eight categories, and ESWs are the second-bottom category, defined by low income and precarious work. They differ from the worse-off precariat in only two ways - “social and cultural capital.” In other words, the average anarchist is in the same position as the poorest group, except that we have more education and stronger social networks. ESWs are not some middle-class elite, hovering over the authentic poor. The precariat make up only 15% of the population according to the survey. ESWs are well below halfway. And the moment a precarian becomes politicised, they tend to gain education and networks, and become ESWs. So, realistically, anarchy is not a movement of middle-class kids. It is

not because it denies oppression or comes from privileged groups, but because it carries the self-expression of the oppressed further.

References to liberation, autonomy, decolonisation, and so on notwithstanding, in such perspectives, liberation necessarily means *liberation of a spectre*, not of concrete people - not even of concrete people categorised by a spectre (as women, Black people, POC, etc). By implication, leadership or authoritarian rule by a member of the spectre is unproblematic. It is still *self-determination by the spectre* - the spectre itself remains *autonomous*, even if its members do not. This is clear in Ribeiro’s essay *Senzala or Quilombo*: “[the quilombo] was no communist society” but had a king; “this is neither here nor [there] ... [it had] freedom and self-determination.” It does not matter if an autonomous zone is hierarchically structured, as long as the leaders are POC.

To enforce this primacy of the spectre, IPs encourage massive simplifications, reproducing the wider equivalence between stereotypes and roles (Vaneigem, 134). Members of entire groups (white, male, straight, middle-class) are deemed *privileged*. Privilege is often alleged despite being a result of the actions of a third party (the police, for example), rather than one’s own. But it carries implications that the privileged individual is somehow a direct oppressor of the oppressed individual (Kill Whitey, in *True Colors*, refers to “white people” as the oppressor), that they are part of a small, isolated elite (Ervin, 309), and that they’ve “got it good” in an absolute sense (Anon, Open Letter). Strategically, the focus is on the privileged person, rather than the person who actually discriminates against or oppresses the oppressed person. Such a person is to admit, identify with, unlearn, or give up their privilege, as if it were an attribute they controlled, rather than an attribute of a spectre, assigned and reinforced by others.

In terms of political strategy, IPs declare that people should do what the Expert defines as structurally responsible, *rather than following their desires*. This encourages people to focus on their weaknesses or internal conditioning, rather than their strengths or outer

struggles (Gelderloos), situating oppression mainly in individual activists' psyches rather than the dominant social system. IPs insist movements must have leaders, and these leaders must come from the oppressed group (Dot Matrix, CWS; Ervin, 291). Spaces must implement extensive policies of normative regulation and enclosure to meet criteria of safe space, reflecting a "need for protection and security that eclipses the desire for freedom" (Landstreicher, 12). Any refusal to do so is taken to be an instance of racism/sexism within the radical movement - an instance which is tied to occasional cases of insensitive or prejudiced comments or actions to paint a misleading picture of a radical scene in which oppressive behaviour is pervasive and out of control. Normative policing through safe space policies often makes spaces *less* safe, by creating risks of denunciation and purging which are greater than the risks of micro-oppression (Anonymous Refused). Mixed movements are labelled not as *incidentally* white/male, but as *deliberately* white supremacist and patriarchal. The illusion is that exclusion creates inclusion; this rests on the implication that the power to exclude is unproblematic, provided it is vested in or exercised by the in-group. For anarchists, the best way to help people feel safer is to recreate autonomous forms of self-organized control over the basic economic and social conditions of life, and to provide care and support within networks of affinity. Without roots in material scarcity, spectres would lose their power to wound.

To create a politics of sacrifice, people have to be taught they have no inherent value, so they believe in and support the systems of compensation associated with roles (Vaneigem, 139). IPs convey this message by defining privilege as an ineliminable attribute of identity and encouraging guilt. Experiences of different groups - separated by social categories - are taken to be incommensurable and incomparable, whereas those of individuals in the same group are taken to be equivalent or identical: incidents of alleged anarchist racism are likened to slavery and genocide, but instances of police brutality against black people and white protesters are ab-

people (Ervin, *Racism in ABC*; Veranasi, comments on Smack a White Boy Part Two). This reflects a broader irresolvable predicament: radicals are both told to be part of the people, and told they cannot (since their perspective is incommensurable and their privilege is ineliminable). The glorification of ghettos as autonomous zones runs up against the reality of imposed racial segregation.

There is a strong tone of *ressentiment* in the position: *I can't drop out so you mustn't*. If I was jailed and unable to escape from power, I would take courage and hope from the fact that others are still able to do so. The objection to separation tries to force radicals back into avoidable systems of authoritarian domination, such as work and schooling, thus reinforcing these institutions. IPs glorify escape from controlled spaces, such as fleeing the *senzala* (slave quarters) to the *quilombo* (autonomous zone). Yet in practice, they tell us never to flee the *senzala*, but instead to work within it as overseers, conditioning children into conformity, or as exploited, joyless workers. There is nothing radical and empowering about getting a job. In a context of generalised entrapment, to separate is not to alienate, but rather to escape, to slip out of place, to flee dominant categories and those who impose them.

Community politics is hamstrung by a major problem: the community are not especially radical. The IP assumption that "the people" or "the community" has revolutionary instincts is an effect of its construction as a spectre, not a result of observation of actual people. It also embeds vanguardist assumptions that the role of radicals is to locate, lead, and imbue these communities with revolutionary interests. The orientation to liberate a spectre rather than concrete people is the source of IPs' hostility to individualism, personal freedom, and supposed selfishness among radicals.

IPs also run up against the realities of contemporary capitalism. Today, most of us do not belong to real, substantive communities. As Landstreicher argues, "the dominant forms of relating are economic, based on the domination of survival over life ... Today, neither the daily interactions of one's 'communities' (these

Common sense and the community

Instead of seeking to escape the system, IPs place great emphasis on serving the *community*, the *people*, the *oppressed*, or a particular oppressed group. Ervin insists that the usefulness of revolutionaries depends on whether they serve the community (136), as opposed to “Declassé punks with red Mohawks” (276). White suggests that the “first priority of resistance” is community consciousness raising. Ribeiro argues that the “people” are failing to flock to existing anarchist groups because they represent “a white, petty-bourgeois Anarchism that cannot relate to the people,” an anarchism which is “individualistic, self-serving, [and] selfish.” A Qilombo supporter goes as far as to argue that “involving oneself in the school system” is an “excellent... investment,” far superior to drop-out anarchism, while another posits a “need to emphasize community norms and practices” (Kurukshehra), and Veranasi tells anarchists to get a job so as not to separate from the oppressed (comments on Smack a White Boy Part Two). There is also a wider accusation, particularly in Ervin’s work, that the allegedly bad race, gender, or class politics of radical movements is the reason for their continued failure (303, 310). This is the Maoist view that a tide of latent energy is always waiting to be released, which is currently fettered by the principal contradiction and inadequate leadership (Mao, *On Contradiction*; Bouc, 137; Howe and Walker, 176; Gurley).

A collective proprietary attitude to geographical areas corresponds to this political bias. White anarchists active in poor communities are accused of failing to get community consent, disrespecting locals, and gentrifying areas by inserting whiteness (Kill Whitey, *Smack a White Boy*; Kurukshehra). Ervin suggests anarchists have no “right to be” in a Black area (282), Kill Whitey tells white radicals to “get the fuck out of POC communities” (*True Colors*); in effect, white radicals are banned from Black areas in an inverted reproduction of segregation. This is a double-bind, since anarchist events in rural locations are declared inaccessible to poor

soluately incomparable (Ribeiro). Objecting to IPs’ abuse is “entitlement,” which is always a bad thing, since privileged people need to “know their place” as docile subordinates of the new rulers-to-be. In some cases they are also expected to funnel resources to IPs’ groups, without anything in return, all the while respecting the group’s “autonomy” to bad-mouth and exclude them (Ervin, 291; Qilombo).

Despite their rhetorical radicalism, IPs, like all good Maoists, do not challenge capitalism. On the contrary, Perlman argues that national liberation movements - the inspiration for IPs - are actually means of capitalist nation-building. *Why is a supermarket packer not a manager, or a security guard not the chief of police? Because of racism.* “There’s no earthly reason for the descendants of the persecuted to remain persecuted when nationalism offers them the prospect of becoming persecutors” (Perlman). The point, however, is that they become persecutors and not free beings. The overall system remains intact, dominant, with the spectres reshuffled.

Between anarchy and identity politics

There is a common misunderstanding, going back to Marx’s critique of Stirner and exhibited in Roger White’s critique of Lawrence Jarach, that anarchists believe that spectres are simply figments of the imagination - “pretending [racist/sexist] discourse doesn’t exist just because you didn’t create it” (White). This means we can wish away spectres. *Stop believing in them, and they lose any power to oppress.* This is a mischaracterisation. While it is true that Stirner believes that spectres lose their *normative* force when we disbelieve them, we can also be oppressed by other people who continue to believe in and act on spectres. Structural oppressions are sociologically real but are not material in the Marxist sense. This simply means that one’s own will is pitted against the wills

and beliefs of others - most of whom continue to be possessed by spectres.

For anarchists such as Stirner, normative thought, or statism, is a deeper structure of oppression which generates the various other axes. Binary thinking is itself closely tied to European thought and the underpinnings of patriarchy and colonisation. Eurocentric statism and capitalism are bound-up with colonialism, modern thought, rationalism, and the modern world-system, but at a deeper level, Europe was also *self-colonised first* (Clastres, Perlman). While European countries became the global imperial powers, the problem of imperialism and ethnocide are inherent to *all states* (Clastres). The irony is that IPs are in fact Eurocentric, relying on European concepts such as rights and strong binary oppositions Aragorn!, *Non-European Anarchism*, 10). On a deeper level, to be anti-Eurocentric and anti-ethnocidal requires a rejection of the state.

With their inversions of binaries, IPs seek to reproduce institutions of hierarchical power. The alternative here is affinity: the attempt to form connections, informal groups, and unions of egoists without these groups being mediated by spectres. Creating *unmediated intercourse* across socially operative hierarchies (race, gender, etc) is complicated, but by no means impossible - nor necessarily more difficult than creating unmediated intercourse between members of the same category. Where radicalism works well, it manages to construct such direct connections. As Landstreicher argues, “[t]he awareness each has of the others’ individuality creates a basis where decision and action need not be separate” (21). Relating to others as unique beings, as non-disposable creatures valuable in themselves, makes possible communication *even in contexts of radical difference*. Anarchic affinity is undermined by the inability to challenge others’ views, the construction of oppressed people as Experts, and the idea of incommensurability (Dot Matrix, CWS). This actually reinforces binary thinking and relations of domination.

but that they *should not*: dropping-out contradicts the IP’s political agenda, resting on strong spectres and identities *within* the existing frame. Structural determinism precludes escape on principle. IPs celebrate their current blockages, internalise their cage, and insist that the cage is both inescapable *and* revolutionary. This is not a perspective of escape — it is a perspective of entrapment in the guise of solidarity.

IPs’ emphasis on community really comes down to a fear of *placelessness*. Their ideological vision of society requires that everyone have definable positionalities: a conservative vision, but inverted. This requires that categories remain dominant over lines of flight, escape, and becoming. Hence the need to enforce a prohibition on exodus - a prohibition which reveals their similarities with states and other hierarchical systems, which similarly prohibit the withdrawal of participation and restrict mobility. It is easy to see how the fear of the uncontrollable and unknowable - and the parallel desire to order all of reality into a fixed schema - lies beneath these discursive strategies.

A lot of the objection to exodus comes down to a hatred of *play*. Drop-outs are accused of turning poverty into a *game*, of saying someone can be poor and *have fun* (Anon, Smack and White Boy Part Two). This may just as well be said of important strands of peasant resistance such as carnivalesque and folk culture. IPs flourish on a culture of deadly seriousness and urgency, tied up with a celebration of trauma. *Real* activism, after all, is hard work, sacrifice: *I cant have fun, so you shouldn’t either*. This entails denying pleasure to others whenever possible. Of course, dropping out does lead to a kind of privilege - the person who has escaped clearly has a better life than the person still trapped in the system. This is equally true of *quilombos*, maroon communities, pirate utopias, and so on. But is this really a case against dropping-out?

white fantasy world” (comments on Jarach et al). Kill Whitey labels dumpster-diving as privileged, condemning “white college kids and middle-class punks hiding in drop-out culture” (Kill Whitey, *Food Not Bombs*), while Ervin classifies criticism of the “state’s ability to hold back a free lifestyle” as middle class (110). IPs allege that the entire tactical repertoire of horizontalism is privileged, in contrast with their preferred focus on community organising or intra-movement struggle.

The grain of truth in this position is that tactics of escape, exodus, and physical resistance carry different levels of difficulty and risk for different people. It’s easier to quit a job than to escape from prison. It’s easier to run from the police if one is physically fit. But anyone can adopt a *perspective* of escape, and *attempt* to create lines of flight from the system. While it may be easier for some than others, nobody should be under a moral obligation to remain oppressed just to avoid being different from others; any such obligation only reinforces oppression.

There are far more people who squat, shoplift, or dumpster dive who are from poor and marginal backgrounds; in the global South there are entire strata living in squatted shantytowns, abstracting electricity, and scavenging in rubbish tips. Historical practices such as the celebrated *quilombos* show that dropping-out is a serious, and often successful, strategy for the most oppressed.

James Scott’s work shows that peasants, slaves, and marginal groups use various tactics of exodus to minimise their subservience to elite power. Similarly, when highly oppressed groups become sufficiently angry, they often use the most militant forms of protest - as we have seen in cases like Paris 2005, London 2011, Los Angeles 1992, and so on. Poor people also use all kinds of high-risk survival strategies, from undocumented border-crossing to involvement in the drug trade. There is also evidence that dropping-out *worked* to defeat aspects of capitalism in the 1970s (Shukaitis).

Why, then, do IPs oppose exodus? I would hazard a guess that the real underlying objection is not that poor people *cannot* drop out,

IPs start from a standpoint within the dominant system of spectres, and encourage us to identify with our position within systems of oppression (Gelderloos, 13). They require that “any person interested in radical transformation relinquish the ability to define her/ himself” (Jarach, 5). Instead, people are to dissolve themselves into the pre-existing social categories into which they are classified, both by the dominant system and by IPs. As Jarach argues, “they can’t conceive of the possibility that the elevation of any particular culturally constructed marker into a significant value-laden category could lead to oppression” (3). Indeed, they define the possibility out of existence: we really *are* our categories; to oppress is to oppress a category; to liberate is to liberate a category. And leadership of Experts is necessary, if the extensional set are to be reduced to the spectre.

From a Stirnerian point of view, instead of starting from a subject-position assigned by the regime of spectres and categories, anarchists should start from a standpoint of being a unique individual irreducible to any spectre or category (*including* those of uniqueness and individuality). A Stirnerian recognises racism or sexism, not as one’s own privilege separating one from the other, but as *an act of normative repression against other unique ones, and an insult against one’s own uniqueness*. The intensity of internal and external barriers to free expression vary with context, but there is a basis for networking together in the rejection of alienation and spectres. This is recognised from non-Eurocentric perspectives; some indigenous scholars argue that modern alienation is a kind of sickness, *afflicting colonisers as well as colonised* - indeed, that the colonisers infected the colonised *because they were already sick* (Duran and Duran, Burman). This position meshes with the Stirnerian view that oppressor as well as oppressed is possessed by spectres.

Anarchy does not necessarily stem from any identity at all. More often, it comes from a standpoint outside the field of available identities - as in Stirner’s idea of a standpoint unique to each person (190-1). Gelderloos argues that his own experience is that “[a]ll the

identities that society tried to stitch me into don't fit, and the fabric is coarse" (6), offering "an inheritance stripped of anything I value" (7). Similarly, for another anonymous anarchist, "Our task is not to give up some phantom privilege that has never really been our own, but to expose and move beyond the artificial identities that smother our individuality" (Willful Disobedience).

Rather than expressing white male privilege, anarchy should be seen as a form of *ethnogenesis*: the emergence of a subculture or counterculture which, if able to continue on its line of flight (or *détournement*), would become a different culture entirely (New Travellers and, historically, Irish Travellers are good examples). The emergence of new cultures through ethnogenesis is well-documented, and often stems from flight from state power (Scott), a process which begins with a choice to differ from the majority of an existing group. In other words, forming a counterculture is the first step in becoming non-white. Ethnogenesis is a problem for essentialists because it entails fluidity in the very formation of the structural basis; it frustrates border-policing. IPs denounce both dropping-out and cultural hybridity, dismissing the latter as cultural appropriation.

The Politics of Affect

If oppression is the imposition of a *structure* in which people are assigned to spectres - of which both privileged and oppressed spectre are largely effects - then IPs actually *entrench* oppression by locking-in the spectres and intensifying normativity. If one assumes that hierarchical power is wrong *because it prevents (non-white) people from living joyously, in the flow of becoming of their own desires*, then the subordination of autonomy to the primary contradiction is not an appropriate response. Anarchy goes further, because it opposes the underlying structure of domination of unique ones and flows of becoming by the order of spectres. IPs

listening to and believing a survivor's story is crucial to healing, the sources and symptoms of trauma are too diverse to be dealt with through homogenised identities and prescriptive restrictions. Furthermore, the tactics of calling-out and excluding deviants can themselves be traumatic or triggering.

IPs often turn trauma into a source of power and identity, but marking trauma as an identity is also a barrier to autonomy. It prevents us reaching the level of immediacy and joy, keeping us in a field of scarcity thinking. It's no coincidence that the most extreme regimes of oppression (such as Gitmo, supermax segregation, concentration camps, Native residential schools, and the "seasoning" of slaves) are *designed* to cause as much post-traumatic stress as possible. Trauma is also a block on active becoming and on living life to the fullest. In indigenous cultures, it is conceived as a sickness of the soul, in which part of the self retreats from the world or loses its life-energy (Burman; Duran and Duran).

Being open to people *as unique individuals* is the best way to respond to these kinds of problems. The fact that someone else has needs incompatible with one's own, or that they can't guess in advance what common action or object might be personally unbearable, *does not mean they are oppressing someone*.

Exodus versus submersion

One of the biggest disagreements between Stirnerian anarchists and IPs is on the question of exodus. IPs (and most left anarchists) generally condemn exodus as a privileged, middle-class strategy, instead favouring submersion in existing communities of the oppressed. For instance, the APOC disruptors claim that CrimethInc "encourage the culture of dropping out of society, which makes the assumption that the reader/attendee has that privilege" (Anon, Smack a White Boy Part Two). An anonymous Qilombo supporter terms the anarchist scene a "subcultural playpen" and an "all-

trying to channel anger onto the wider system, and discussing the incident one-to-one outside the conflictual setting — also known as “calling-in.” Some anarchists advocate using nonviolent communication in such contexts (Heckert). In classical indigenous cultures, harmful deviance is taken as a kind of imbalance or sickness. They would seek to understand how a person has come into imbalance, and to gently guide them back to the right path (which is also the flourishing or becoming of their own personality). Most anarchists are very reasonable if they are told *precisely* why something is problematic.

IPs tend to react aggressively to any response to being called-out which does not amount to unconditional apology. Usually, the responses are not inherently objectionable. They deploy strategies of argumentative rebuttal, mitigation by context or motive, etc, which are standard in many conversational contexts. It is never entirely clear why these predictable responses are deemed intolerable by IPs (the claim that they seem to deny the other’s perspective [Tekanji] seems spurious), but it seems to be because they entail the absence of the desired affective response of submission.

Landstreicher suggests that IPs turns us into “a bunch of shy, yet inquisitorial mice tip-toeing around each other for fear of being judged, and just as incapable of attacking the foundations of this society as they are of relating to each other” (16). Instead, he urges us to become “a certain sort of being ... capable of acting on our own terms to realize our own desires and dreams,” in struggle against domination (3). The point is “to transform ourselves into strong, daring, self-willed, passionate rebels” (6). This strength and passion is impeded by affects such as guilt, pity, and regret. We are aiming, remember, for a state of full life *without reservations*.

IPs conceive of their angry, disruptive style of politics as a way to express the authentic experience of being traumatised. But their distribution of commensurability (absolute *within* a spectre, but utterly absent *outside* it) entails downplaying the degree of specific traumas suffered by concrete people. And while it is true that

seek to abolish the privilege of a particular spectre; ideally, anarchists seeks to abolish the normative power of spectres in general — which necessarily also abolishes every spectre’s privilege. Stirnerian anarchy goes beyond unlearning privilege — the favouring of one spectre over another — to *unlearning spectres* — learning not to be subordinate to spectres.

Affectively, the orientation of anarchy is to unmediated, active joy. There is a level of immediate, free becoming which is deeper than the hierarchy of spectres. Stirner theorises a kind of intense, joyous exercise of capacities “without reservations” (171), giving “free play” to one’s capabilities (167), and playing “as freely as possible” (130). Bonanno argues that capitalism denies us an experience of active (rather than passive) joy, and counsels a “search for joy... through the search for play,” driven by a “vital impulse that is always new, always in movement.” In the excitement of play “lies the possibility to break with the old world and identify with new aims and other values and needs” (15-16). Hakim Bey argues that insurrections and autonomous zones should create peak experiences of extraordinary consciousness and intensity (*TAZ*). Such peak experiences are “value-formative on the individual level,” allowing a “transformation of everyday life” (*Occult Assault*). Various anarchist practices, from the *TAZ* to rewilding, from joyous insurrectionary struggle to dropping-out and living differently, are means of recovering this level of becoming and immediacy.

In contrast, the dominant affects for IPs are wallowing in the loss of immediacy and the inevitability of alienation (guilt, melancholy, inadequacy), a kind of joyless anger. They reproduce a style of politics which focuses on telling people “how to behave” (Dot Matrix, CWS), conditioning people into roles which reproduce the power of the spectacle. IPs reproduce conventional morality and its structures of *ressentiment* — negative affect (often including irrational, even self-destructive, verbal or physical lashing out) towards others as an expression of one’s own powerlessness, in contrast to cel-

ibration of one's power. *I have lost my capacity to enjoy; you have stolen it; you must be punished.*

On the side of the supposedly empowered, Ervin encourages ruthlessness and “cold-blooded efficiency” as key virtues (245), reproducing the affective structure of managers, soldiers, and police. The practice of calling-out frames whiteness, white supremacy, and patriarchy as *personal* moral failures, even though the underlying theory frames them as *structural* realities. The cultivation of individual guilt and blame actually reproduces dominant Calvinist normativity (Gelderloos, 13), and the development of elaborate group norms reinforces white middle-class status orientations and etiquette.

For IPs, neither (those assigned as) privileged nor oppressed are able to escape *ressentiment* and become empowered. The latter become angry, rigid, and dependent on the spectre for their sense of power; the former become docile, submissive, and incapable of autonomous action. With intense joy forbidden, people become vulnerable to the mundane manipulation of transitory pleasure and prestige. IPs create a “system of rewards... to encourage compliance” with leaders from marginalised groups (Gelderloos, 12), reflecting the broader dynamic by which “skill in playing and handling roles determines rank in the spectacular hierarchy” (Vaneigem, 131). For the former out-group, anger and frustration with the dominant system are channelled onto other radicals, which sustains continued submersion in systems of oppression by providing a safety-valve for frustration, creating a substitute for a less reliable substantive rebellion. It also renders the oppressed dependent on the oppressors as either docile allies or targets of anger, and often leads to a politics focused on demands for recognition from those one also seeks autonomy from. The binary nature of the spectres adopted by IPs preclude ever becoming autonomous from the supposed oppressor, whom they paradoxically *need* to remain in place in order to ground their own role as Experts. Hence the irony when Ribeiro says of APOC “it is not about white peo-

ple at all” — at the end of an entire article which is *all about white people*.

The structure of impotent anger, displaced aggression, and policing of etiquette is most notable in the practice of *calling-out* or denouncing other radicals — either for micro-oppressions (small comments or actions which are insensitive or latently racist/sexist), or for political disagreement categorised as racist/sexist. For instance, the CrimethInc disruptors call for a “culture of calling people out on their shit” (Anon, Smack a White Boy Part Two). In general, calling-out involves a crude, aggressive style; it carries a tone of *I get to tell you what to do, and you have to obey*.

Negative effects of anti-oppression normativity are paradoxically felt most strongly by the oppressed - poor whites, Black people, young people, people with psychological problems, and newcomers to a movement - who are less accustomed to self-policing their social appearance, less able to do so, or less aware of the operative norms. IPs thus close down radical groups into tightly bordered sects. Gelderloos deems the emphasis on micro-oppressions a kind of purism which seeks to banish deviance so as to create a monolithic personality-type (18). In practice, what is being challenged is not the person's degree of complicity in regimes of oppression, but the extent of their knowledge of the appropriate anti-oppressive terminology and related normative codes.

Conceived as a struggle against the enactment of structural oppression, calling-out confuses the individual with the spectre they are taken to represent. It is understandable that oppressed people have a low tolerance threshold for prejudice and insensitivity, but it is unhelpful to glorify and encourage such reactions as politically valuable. Aragorn! says that “I tend only to ‘criticize’ when I am willing to take responsibility for the caring of the criticized” (*Toward a Non-European Anarchism*, 6). This position is more attentive to the affective consequences of calling-out, which, without suitable aftercare, leads to guilt, despair, and apathy. Alternatives to calling-out include rational debate, parody, ignoring provocations,