**Lost Comrades of Emma Goldman:**

**Anarchist Feminist Assemblages from the Paris Commune to the Spanish Revolution**

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**Introduction**

When asked what anarchism had to offer to women, Emma Goldman replied, “More to woman than to anyone else – everything which she has not – freedom and equality” (1897, 9). Yet, women have often had trouble finding their place in anarchism, as anarchism has had trouble finding its place in feminism. Histories of anarchism frequently overlook or exclude women, often with the lament, “If only there were more Emma Goldmans!” Similarly, accounts of feminism often overlook or exclude anarchists, sometimes mentioning Goldman’s work for birth control but omitting other women as well as the anarchist movement as a whole.

Because of this double erasure – of women from anarchism and of anarchism from feminism - a specifically anarchist feminism has struggled to make itself heard. The goal of this essay is to reverse this process, to reformulate our understanding of “First Wave” feminist histories to bring anarchist feminism more fully into view.[[1]](#endnote-1) While anarchist women joined other feminists in working for women’s economic, political and interpersonal liberation, they put little faith in suffrage as a meaningful reform because they viewed the state as itself illegitimate. Anarchists reject centralized, hierarchical authority in all its guises, including states, corporations, churches, patriarchies, and empires. They instead cultivate egalitarian relations within which individuals can develop their freedom while organizing themselves into voluntary, self-governing communities. Chicago anarchist and labor leader Lucy Parsons (2004, 96) succinctly stated, “the principal of rulership is in itself wrong; no man [or woman] has any right to rule another.” “Our modern fetich [sic] is universal suffrage,” Goldman wrote in her 1911 essay “Woman Suffrage” (1996, 190). She argued that the promise of representative democracy conceals “what people of intellect perceived fifty years ago: that suffrage is an evil, that it has only helped to enslave people, that it has but closed their eyes that they may not see how craftily they were made to submit” (1996, 192). Anarchists’ rejection of states has sometimes led commentators to explicitly declare that anarchists are by definition not feminists. For example, Linda Lumsden, professor of Gender and Women’s Studies, calls Goldman’s critique of women’s suffrage and women’s entry into the professions “an anti-feminist agenda” (2007, 31). In her biography of Goldman, journalist Vivian Gornick writes that “Emma Goldman was not a feminist” because “she was not a proponent of women’s rights as that term is generally understood” (2011, 75). But it is precisely women’s liberation “as generally understood” that Goldman questioned. By bringing anarchists’ critique of all hierarchy, including the state, into the broadened contours of First Wave feminist histories, I aim to reformulate this dispute over the state as a lively argument *within* feminism rather than a clear-cut marker *between* feminists and their opponents.

Making more room for a specifically anarchist feminism within our histories can multiply the available feminist agendas for change. Most people today probably only hear the word “anarchist” in tandem with the adjective “violent,” applied to activists no matter what they are doing. Few people, maybe even few feminists, know the long and fertile history of anarchist activism, including their creative invention of autonomous institutions and communities. Anarchists have a penchant for politics that creates worlds, prefiguring a better arrangement by acting as though it is already here. A stronger anchor in First Wave anarchist feminism could deepen contemporary feminist connections to the prefigurative politics of the Occupy movement and to mutual aid communities that are self-organizing around the world during the Covid-19 pandemic. It could enhance feminism’s links with indigenous politics, such as the Native Hawaiian protectors at Mauna Kea and the pipeline protests at Standing Rock. It could build stronger bonds with the Black Lives Matter activists taking over city blocks and parks to protest police violence against Black people by creating self-governing communities without police. A stronger appreciation of anarchist feminism in the First Wave could expand our understandings of the feminisms we can inherit as well as those yet to come.

**Two erasures**

Anarchist women aimed to create just and beautiful communities of free, self-governing individuals. Historian Margaret Marsh (1981, 4) summarizes their struggle:

“The women who embraced anarchism worked to restructure the society as a whole, but they also wanted to transcend conventional social and moral precepts as individuals in order to create for themselves independent, productive, and meaningful lives.”

For them, anarchism and feminism were an obvious match. Yet accounts of both movements, and both philosophies, have often lost that synergy. The neglect of anarchism within feminism is not entirely unexpected: a steady diet of demonization and ridicule of anarchy has not encouraged historians of feminism to take anarchism seriously. Carol Ehrlich (2002, 55-56) rightly quips, in her classic essay “Socialism, Anarchism and Feminism,” that “anarchism has veered between a bad press and none at all.” For example, both Nancy Cott’s well-regarded history of the U.S. women’s movement and Christine Bolt’s useful comparison of the U.S. and British movements mention Goldman’s work on birth control but otherwise take no note of anarchist women.

In contrast, the neglect of women within anarchism is more about trivialization than demonization. Histories of anarchism, mostly written by men, tend to minimize women’s presence by recognizing only a few isolated heroines within a sea of men and their unnamed wives. Highly-regarded historian Max Nettlau, to take just one example, in his 400 page book *A Short History of Anarchism,* summarizes the contributions of countless men, with brief mention of a dozen women. Even though his book was translated by and dedicated to anarchist Ida Pilat Isca, no notice is taken in the book of Isca’s work for the anarchist Modern Schools, the release of Sacco and Vanzetti, the Mutual Aid League, or her numerous translations of anarchist texts (Isca n.d.). British researcher Judy Greenway (2010, 17, fn 23) notes that in partnerships such as that between Ida Pilat Isca and anarchist bookseller Valerio Isca, their “lifetime of shared politics” fades from historical accounts and whatever the men did comes to count as the “real work.”

This two-part erasure of anarchism from feminism and of women from anarchism works as a “one-two punch” to muddy our accounts of both. Addressing these absences entails more than adding a few new elements to otherwise stable accounts; rather, it requires a substantial rethinking of both theories and both movements. How can such an historical rethinking be accomplished? I see three scholarly strategies:

The first is to focus on individual anarchist women, bringing them out of obscurity and engaging their political ideas. Emma Goldman has achieved significant visibility in academic and activist circles due to a critical mass of biographies and assessments (Hemmings 2018, Hsu 2021, Ferguson 2011). Recent scholarship has brought Chicago labor leader Lucy Parsons (Streeby 2013) and Philadelphia poet and writer Voltairine de Cleyre (Avrich 2018) to greater visibility. Biographies and autobiographies of Portland anarchist Dr. Marie Equi (Helquist 2015), French Communard Louise Michel (Thomas 1980) and Wobbly leader Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (Flynn 1973) expand our access to anarchist feminist worlds. This approach has generated some fascinating life stories, the elements of which are crucial for building a larger account, but the women tend to come across as exceptional, larger-than-life figures, rather than as participants within the anarchist movement. Bringing anarchist women one by one into a frame that largely dismisses them from the get-go does not fundamentally rethink the frame itself.

The second strategy, by far the most common, focuses on the conceptual harmony of anarchism and feminism. Numerous commentators have noticed that anarchism and feminism share commitments to plural, intersectional thinking about power. Both critique hierarchy and affirm the development of free individuals within just communities. In the important collection of anarchist feminist work, *Quiet Rumors*, Lynn Farrow (2002, 15) finds “feminism practices what Anarchism preaches.” Peggy Kornegger (2002, 26) argues that “feminists have been unconscious anarchists in both theory and practice for years.” Alix Kates Shulman (1996, 17) observes that anarchism and feminism “are both fundamentally and deeply anti-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian.” These writings focus largely on shared political consciousness: anarchists are critical of all forms of hierarchy; patriarchy and heteronormativity are forms of hierarchy; therefore anarchists are, or should be, opposed to patriarchy and heteronormativity. Anarchist women generally use this argument to prod their male comrades away from “manarchism” (Jeppesen 2019, 111), while anarchist men may unfortunately rely on this assurance to stave of feminist demands, assuming that “we’ve already got gender covered” or that gender and sexual equality, while important, are less compelling than other aspects of “the social question” and can wait until after the revolution.

Both anarchism and feminism cultivate global analyses, bringing indigenous, transnational, and anti-colonial perspectives to bear on issues (Jeppesen 2019, Goodyear Ka’ōpua 2011). Both develop their thinking and their activism together, cherishing constitutive linkages and feedback loops between theory and practice (Shulman 1996). Both insist on the integration of means and ends; as philosopher Todd May (2009, 16) notes, “How we struggle and resist reflects our vision of what a society should look like. We cannot resist now and create equality later.” The argument for a shared political logic is critical for developing the connections among the movements; however, it does not fully engage anarchism’s encounters with feminism because it is too abstract. Political theorist Joel Olson rightly insists that a moral condemnation of all forms of hierarchy does not substitute for “a political and strategic analysis of how power functions” (2009 37). To avoid what anarchist studies scholars Ruth Kinna and Alex Prichard (2009, 271) call “an endless celebration of a few de-historicized and de-contextualized principles,” we need to look, in particular places and times, at what specific groups of anarchist feminists did and how they did it.

For this I turn to a third approach that aims, methodologically, between micro level close-ups on individual lives and macro level charting of big ideas and large-scale historical processes. The missing middle is the arena of networks and collectives constituting groups and connecting them to one another through shared projects. This meso level is of course informed by the close-up work on individuals, and guided by the context of big ideas and events, yet pivots to look for the collective presence of women in the anarchist movement, within the records they have left, to pull together an account of their interactions.

A few scholars have already explored this ground. Historian Margaret Marsh’s 1981 book *Anarchist Women* parses a dozen or so women active in the U.S. movement by locating them as either middle class, non-immigrant individualist anarchists or working class, immigrant communist anarchists. She presents short but compelling accounts of U.S.-born anarchists Helena Born and Florence Finch Kelly, Russian immigrants Emma Goldman and Mollie Steimer, bohemian editor Margaret Anderson, Philadelphia writer Voltairine de Cleyre, and others. Marsh’s book looks at debates about sexuality, marriage, and motherhood among anarchist women, especially as expressed in the long-running Boston journal *Liberty*, but does not include anarchist women’s activism regarding labor, war, or imperialism; nor does she examine other publications more receptive to women’s writing, including the San Francisco, later Chicago, journal *Free Society,* the New York monthly *Mother Earth,* or the San Francisco semi-monthly *The Blast*. A second relevant study is political theorist Martha Ackelsberg’s influential 1991 book on anarchist women in the Spanish Revolution, *Free Women of Spain*. Acklesberg (1991, 32) analyzes anarchist women in light of “the importance of communal/collective networks in constituting people and providing the contexts for consciousness and empowerment.” The women of Mujeres Libres brought together over 20,000 women to fight fascism while also creating maternal and child health clinics, literacy campaigns, labor actions, and other avenues to imagine and invent the lives they fought to lead. A third example is Jennifer Guglielmo’s 2011 book, *Living the Revolution: Italian Women’s Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880-1945,* which argues persuasively that her subjects’ anarchist feminism “becomes visible only when we expand our understanding of early twentieth-century feminism to include diasporic, working-class activisms that were not produced in English” (2011, 4)*.*  Guglielmo delves into the influential Italian-language journal *La Questione Sociale* and finds transnational networks of women organizing labor actions, theater groups, choirs, publications, bookstores, discussion groups, and schools.

Each of these fine studies look to the publications of the various anarchist groups and the correspondence among the participants (and when possible, interviews with aging activists or their descendants) to find the footprints of anarchist women during the First Wave. Anarchist groups typically organized around their periodicals, which leave intriguing traces: writings long out of print; accumulated outcomes of editing, translating, printing, and illustrating; robust correspondence among the makers and readers of the publications; reports of lectures, discussion groups, strikes, picnics, hikes, balls, fund-raisers; correspondence among collectors, distributors, and librarians. In his autobiography Peter Kropotkin (1930, 275,) the “grand old man” of anarchism, challenges researchers to take up these sources because the movement’s “small pamphlets and newspapers” reveal its world:

“Socialistic literature has never been rich in books. It is written for workers for whom one penny is money, and its main force lies in its small pamphlets and its newspapers…There remains nothing but to take collections of papers and read them all through – the news as well as the leading articles – the former, perhaps, even more than the latter.”

These journals can encourage a “tactics of memory” that challenges the erasures of anarchism from feminism and of women from anarchism, allowing fresh stories to be told while leaving room for future recoveries (Hemmings, 2007, 75). The missing middle contextualizes individual lives within collective action while enlivening and complicating wide-angle historical accounts: between outstanding individuals and big social forces there must be a living sensorium in which revolutionary arrangements can emerge and even thrive. Interactions within this mid-level do not merely house the micro or reflect the macro; they constitute the conditions of possibility for who people can be and how history can happen.

**What can anarchism do for feminism?**

As Kinna notes in her exploration of “Anarchism and Feminism,” it is widely recognized that by the beginning of the 20th century, U.S. and British feminism had largely become folded into the struggle for the vote: “It would be difficult to argue that suffragettes did not capture the political ground at the turn of the twentieth century and that feminists critical of the suffrage campaigns did not recognize this” (2018, 14). Emma Goldman exemplifies Kinna’s point: she refused to call herself a feminist because feminism had become synonymous with suffrage, while Goldman insisted on a more radical approach to “the social question.” In an April 1919 letter to her niece Stella Ballantine, Goldman writes from prison: “My quarl [sic] with the Feminists wasn’t that they were too free, or demanded too much. It was that they are not free enough and that most of them see their slavery apart from the rest of the human family.”[[2]](#endnote-2) The usual narrative of the First Wave tells the story of a family of organizations and actions that were initially widely varied, including women’s clubs working for community improvements such as playgrounds, kindergartens, and public safety; Black and white women’s groups aligned with abolitionism and anti-lynching campaigns; challenges to traditional Christianity (Elizabeth Cady Stanton famously rewrote the Bible from a feminist perspective); labor organizing; temperance; spiritualism; sex radicalism; etc. Over time, the story goes, the focus of the first wave narrowed around the struggle for the vote; once achieved, the movement faded. Governments’ entry into World War I was a turning point: By 1917 in the U.S., and somewhat earlier in Britain, as socialist feminist historian Meredith Tax (1980, 199) writes, “the mainstream of the feminist movement went with a great surge into the arms of the government.” Yet the mainstream is not the whole movement: important histories of working class women’s labor organizing (Tax 1980), anti-racist feminism by women of color (Terborg-Penn 1998), and anti-imperial feminism by non-western women (Merino 2019) have expanded the story. If the dominant thread of feminist histories still winds rather tightly around the spindle of the “great reform,” then our histories need to catch up. As Kinna rightly argues, we do not have to tell the story of feminism’s history in a way that makes suffrage definitive of past struggles. Instead, we could strain to hear multiple histories. We could excavate the work of women who sought liberation while questioning all forms of hierarchy, including those of states.

Bringing anarchism more fully into feminism helps develop a more robust history of intersectionality and a stronger global presence. Philosopher Chiara Bottici (2019) notes that “in all the literature engaging intersectionality, there is barely any mention of the feminist tradition of the past that has been claiming exactly the same point for a very long time: anarchist feminism.” Bottici (2019) suggests that a stronger infusion of anarchist feminist thinking might illuminate how “different factors increasingly converge to intensify the oppression of women by creating further class, cultural, and racial cleavages among them.” All of the studies of anarchist women’s networks emphasize their intersectionality. Guglielmo (2010, 164 fn 133) could be speaking for all of them when she notes, “They sought revolutionary change to end all the systems of oppression and hierarchical authority, whether in the form of industrial capitalism, the government, the church, or the men in their families and communities.” Bringing the state into intersectional analysis repositions suffrage; while still significant, it is framed as more limited in what it can accomplish, and governments in general are more of a problem than a solution. Finding ways forward that attend simultaneously to all manifestations of hierarchical power, and theorize the state as one of those manifestations, could help create feminisms that do not reproduce new versions of the inequalities we fight.

Further, including anarchist feminists in feminist histories expands the global reach of our accounts. Benedict Anderson (2005), in his detailed history of anarchism in *Under Three Flags*, notes that anarchists were persistent global organizers, moving not just from “the west” to “the rest” but connecting transnationally in all directions. Marsh’s book shows the links of Russian immigrants to U.S. domestic anarchism. Ackelsberg’s account shows the women of Mujeres Libres in Spain were connected internationally through global anti-fascist movements of the 1930s and 1940s. Guglielmo’s book traces the linkages of Italian-American anarchist women to politics back in the home country as well as to the Italian diaspora in Argentina, Brazil, and other parts of South America.

Finally, including anarchism enriches the periodization of feminist history, so that, instead of the interwar “doldrums,” the First Wave can be seen as salient through the 1920s and 30s, and through World War II in the form of the anti-fascist resistance, rather than as curtailed by the achievement of the suffrage. The Equal Rights Amendment was one direction, not the only direction, taken by post-suffrage feminists. Anarchist feminists after 1920 continued to create schools, publish journals, conduct lecture tours, organize against war and rising fascism, and advocate on behalf of political prisoners, most notably Italian anarchists Niccolo Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. Not legislative victory but state brutality curtailed anarchist feminism: the “Red Scares” after both world wars, the rise and consolidation of fascism, and the corrosive Cold War. Yet the anarchist movement did not die out, and with feminism re-emerged strongly in the 1960s.

**What can women bring to anarchism?**

Numerous commentators have asserted that anarchism of the classical period, roughly the same time as the First Wave of feminism, was a male-dominated movement. Christine Stansell, for example, states in *American Moderns* that both Emma Goldman and Rosa Luxemburg were “token women in their respective milieus” (2000, 131). Of the ten leading anarchists featured on the website of *Anarchy Archives* (Ward, n.d.), only one, Emma Goldman, is female. Out of fifty-nine “lesser lights,” seven are women. This assessment appears to be based on the historical visibility of anarchists who *wrote* *and published* material that has stayed in, or come back into, print, rather than on a close reading of a greater variety of textual and organizational sites within anarchist landscapes. Historian Sherif Gemie (1996, 435) recognizes somewhat greater feminist promise in anarchism: while charging anarchists with a “general insensitivity towards female emancipation,” he nonetheless finds that “often anarchist and socialist organisations encouraged the creation of informal, proto-feminist networks among working-class and peasant women.”

I want to push Gemie’s anemic characterization of anarchism’s “proto-feminist networks” toward a more enthusiastic assessment. While anarchist feminists respected suffragists for their determined militancy, they scorned the pursuit of the vote as a wrong-headed reform strategy and instead pursued a revolutionary transformation of individual and collective life for everyone. This is not a lesser feminism; it is a different feminism. Digging into the scores of anarchist publications in this period, and the accompanying correspondence of those who wrote, edited, illustrated, printed, collected, distributed and read these publications, I find many hundreds of women. Their political work issued in more than “proto” feminism – it produced radical, intersectional anarchist feminism. Like Marsh, Acklesberg, and Guglielmo, I see scores of radical women active in anarchist spaces, usually right alongside the men who nonetheless bemoan women’s absence or belittle their impact.

Not surprisingly, anarchist women were often more aware of each other than their male colleagues appear to have been. Goldman often called attention to women’s underrecognized work in the movement (“Talk with Emma Goldman” 1901). British novelist Ethel Mannin (1938, 4), in her book *Women and the Revolution*, asks: “Such fearless, active women as Maria Spiridonova, Louise Michel, Rosa Luxemburg – where are such women today?” and she answers “There are such women, hidden in the ranks of women of all countries and all classes, working for freedom and a better way of life for all.” Following Goldman’s and Mannin’s lead, my goal for the remainder of this essay is to think analytically about how to identify and conceptualize these “hidden” women and to give a few examples of the political networks in which they worked.

**How to write anarchist women?**

Anarchist women’s networks are both made by their participants and constitutive of them. We need to see people as always potentially or actually creative and at the same time always influenced by social and material forces. Exploring the concept of subjectivity implicit in Walt Whitman’s poetry, political theorist Jane Bennett articulates self-ness that is emergent through what Whitman calls influx and efflux, the comings-and-goings of ideas, sensations, values, objects, and relationships that shape us and are shaped by us. Bennett (2020, xi) calls this Whitman’s “distinctive model of I: it is a porous and susceptible shape that rides and imbibes waves of influx-and-efflux but also contributes an ‘influence’ of its own.” Not sovereign individuals who then come together, but also not passive recipients of larger forces: “‘Influx and efflux’ invokes that ubiquitous tendency for outsides to come in, muddy the waters, and exit to partake in new (lively/deathly) waves of encounter” (Bennett 2020, x). The *and* between the flows of impression and expression is not a passive link, but a lively moment of concurrence: Bennett (2020, x) calls it “the *hover-time* of transformation, during which the otherwise that entered makes a difference and is made different.” We take in, we give out, we are “continuously subject to influence and still managing to add something to the mix” (Bennett 2020, xiii). By lingering on the *and,* we can highlight the “hover-time” between anarchism and feminism, where a particularly anarchist feminism and a fully feminist anarchism can be made. Anarchist women’s agency is distributed across relationships and situations; causality, that is, influence, is multidirectional and diffuse. Networks consolidate enough to produce intense, sustained sites of struggle, and erode enough to regroup or move on to new sites.

Writing the missing middle is the work of assemblage theory. Manuel DeLanda (2006, 4) usefully explores assemblage theory by focusing on multi-level processes of interaction among “inorganic, organic, and social” elements. He calls attention to recurrent patterns of repetitions and innovations, “*the pattern of recurring links*” issuing in complex feedbacks and feed forwards (2006, 56, italics in original). These emergent processes are characterized, he argues, by a certain density (the presence or absence of connections), strength (frequency and quality of interactions), and reciprocity (“symmetry or asymmetry of the obligations”) (2006, 56-57). Assemblages operate as sites of memory and solidarity (which means they can also produce forgetting and disintegration). Assemblage analysis requires a great deal of close-up work: DeLanda insists that to do an assemblage analysis we have to look for the “*actual mechanisms* operating at a given spatial level” and “giv[e] the details of every mechanism involved” (2006, 31, italics in original).

This is intriguing, but still vague. How do we really do that? How do we write about a lively, ongoing collective process without turning it into a linear sequence of bounded entities? What voice is adequate to that shifting interface? Sadiya Hartman’s powerful analysis of young black women’s anarchic rebellions in New York and Philadelphia in the early 20th century, *Wayward Girls, Beautiful Experiments,* suggests a fruitful approach. Hartman’s women are not, with a few exceptions, members of anarchist (or any) political movements – as Hartman (2019, 229-231) observes, Kropotkin failed to take note of their mutual aid societies and Goldman neglected to notice them on the streets– but they are anarchic nonetheless. Hartman develops the concept of “close narration,” a writing strategy that immerses the writer in the “vision, language, and rhythms” of the wayward world (2019, xiii-xiv). Hartman’s account gracefully weaves the writer into the lives of her cast of characters so she can stretch herself to write from “inside the circle” (2019, xiv). By combining Hartman’s and Bennett’s strategies, I am seeking tools for thinking and writing that can do justice to the political life worlds of anarchist women.

Two of the conceptual tools Bennett develops out of Whitman’s poetic strategies are particularly useful: the concept of *hover-time* and the strategy of *writing-up*. Hover-time marks the work done by the bulky conjunction *and* between two or more definables: women *and* anarchism; gender, race, *and* class. The overburdened *and* is ubiquitous in assemblage theory because we are trying to express multiple pulls simultaneously. Assemblages host many pairs connected by that marker of proximity:codings and decodings, interruptions and reinforcements, deterritorializing and reterritorializing. Bennett (2020, x) gives us a way to talk about what goes on in the in-between of the influx and efflux process: the *and* is not unpurposed, but rather “marks the *hover-time* of transformation, during which the otherwise that entered makes a difference and is made different.” What happens in the *and* isinfluence, “a particularly subtle mode of causation” that holds things open for a bit to facilitate “the emergence of new voices, claims, or rights that have not yet settled into the sensibility of the judicious man or woman…” (Bennett 2020, xi, 55-56). Hover-time invites us to unpack the influences among moments in assemblages, where the elements that, as DeLanda (2006, 4) reminds us, can be “inorganic, organic, and social” enliven and contaminate one another.

What form of expression brings the *and* to life, gives it utility and grace? Here Bennett (2020, 87) turns to *writing-up* by employing “middle-voiced verbs” which evade capture as either the active initiative of sovereign agents or the passive reception of action by others. *Writing-up* aims instead at an “egalitarian encounter” that facilitates “distributed agency” rather than one-directional cause and effect (Bennett 2020, 87). “To partake” for example: “to partake is to transform by making oneself vulnerable to inceptions” (Bennett 2020, 87). “Conjure, invoke, evoke” are all examples of middle voiced verbs; they blur the distinction between finding and making, between what we bring to the encounter and what was there before (Bennett 2020, 103). Writing-up calls on “an array of words that delays landing” in either the sovereign self or the determining structure (Bennett 2020, 50). Middle-voiced verbs make room for non-human actants: they “accent a multispecied and distributive kind of agency…” (Bennett 2020, 112). Middle-voiced verbs write from within hover-time, rather than from a stable external vantage point. Writing-up is more than just putting events or actors in their context, because the idea of context already suggests background, the horizon against which action takes place. Writing-up comes from within the assemblages’ dynamic moments so that our prose can be in step with our ideas: “By ‘writing-up,’ I mean the arrangement of words that repeat, imperfectly and creatively, events that exceed those words but also find some expression in them. It is writing *up* when it amplifies and elevates ethically whatever protogenerous potentials are already circulating” (Bennett 2020, xx). Writing-up is a political and ethical gesture that delays landing so as to be adequate to the worlding that takes place in hover-time.

Hartman’s (2019 xxi) remarkable book takes us into a complicated and vigorous hover-time by recreating “the radical imagination and wayward practices” of young poor black women in New York and Philadelphia during the early 20th century. She looks at girls and women whose family histories were embedded in slavery but who were the second or third generation born after abolition. While brutally limited, their world was “*intoxicated with freedom*” (Hartman 2019, 8, italics in original). They have been “credited with nothing”: “Few, then or now, recognized young black women as sexual modernists, free lovers, radicals, and anarchists, or realized that the flapper was a pale imitation of the ghetto girl” (Hartman 2019, xv). Hartman’s (2019, xiii) goal is to “recreate the voices and the use of words of these young women when possible and inhabit the intimate dimensions of their lives…to convey the sensory experience of the city and to capture the rich landscape of black social life.” She writes “a fugitive text of the wayward” by “press[ing] at the limits of the case file and the document,” reading the records of social workers, sociologists, prison officials, police, and urban reformers against their grain (Hartman 2019, xiv). Turning the language of incorrigibility and incarceration into “the refusal to be governed,” Hartman (2019, xv) both finds and makes “a dreambook for existing otherwise.”

Hartman’s close narration puts her own archival interventions and writerly voice into a posture of availability toward the expressed or imagined voices of the young women. She writes-up the young women into intimate conversations with each other, with their jailors, with the author, and with the readers. Hartman (2019, 4) reaches for her own vocabulary of middle-voiced verbs to portray “an urban commons where the poor assemble, improvise the forms of life, experiment with freedom, and refuse the menial existence scripted for them.” *Assembling, improvising, experimenting* and *refusing* cross the boundary between active and passive verbs – in Bennett’s terms, they “proceed from within an ongoing process” and they “mark the peculiar efficacy of complex, recursive processes…” (2020, 112). When these wayward women hover in their hallways, streets, and jail cells, they also hover in their assemblages. The “avid longing for a world not ruled by master, man or the police” is hosted in the hover-time, where the women can “attempt to elude capture by never settling” (Hartman 2019, 227). Police, courts, charities, and prisons require/impose transparency on their recruits, so “to claim the right to opacity” is a kind of resistance (Hartman 2019, 227). So was the “sonic upheaval” of the 1919 Bedford Hills prison riot, when the prisoners roared, sang, cried, “pounded the walls with their fists, finding a shared and steady rhythm that they hoped might topple the college, make the walls crumble…” (Hartman 2019, 279). *The New York Times* named it “an inferno set to jazz” (Hartman 2019, 284). The *and* between prison and freedom was their collective sonic insurrection.

Bennett suggests that we are all “middle-voiced partakers; more than either actors or recipients” (2020, 113-114). Hartman’s anarchistic young women were, in Bennett’s terms, “acting amidst” complex interactive zones of their kin networks, neighborhoods, clubs, and sites of incarceration; their agency was “distributed across a field” (Bennett 2020, 112, 113). When Goldman, Kropotkin, Mannin and others recognize the work of unsung anarchists, they are recognizing that everybody is a partaker with the rest. The movement is not individuals who then interact, but processes of relation among inorganic, organic and social partakers that shape who the group can become.

**Anarchist women’s assemblages – studying the missing middle**

The daily textual labor of the anarchist movement was done largely in the pages of many hundreds of journals written and published by small local groups all over the world. In her rich history of turn-of-the-20th-century radicalism, British feminist Sheila Rowbotham (2011, 13-14) comments that “journals acted like hives around which rebels and trouble-makers buzzed away with their dreams and schemes.” These journals often carried the words of women, were often edited, printed, distributed, and collected by women, were widely read and discussed by women. These tasks entailed their characteristic technologies: presses, paper, ink, and the technical/social apparatus of printing and communication, as well as bookshelves, file cabinets, the postal system, and the technical/social apparatus of collection and preservation.

At a few cents an issue, journals were more readily available than books. Journals were displayed in reading rooms, bars, and cafes; they were shared by subscribers around kitchen tables. Other characteristic sites of anarchy were radical schools, birth control clinics, independent communities, and labor unions. These in turn were often affiliated with journals: the *Modern School* magazine accompanied the anarchist schools; the *Birth Control Review* was linked to the anarchist clinics and the larger movement for legal contraception; *The Industrial Worker* and *Solidarity* were publications of the strongest anarchist union, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

Let’s start with one crucial, neglected figure: Agnes Inglis. She was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1872, and lived most of her life in Ann Arbor. Photographs show a slight, plain white woman with a calm demeanor and a pleasant smile. The youngest daughter of a middle class, Presbyterian family, she attended college for a time, worked at Hull House in Chicago and at other settlement houses, and learned about the hardships facing poor immigrant communities. She joined the Detroit IWW and organized union events, worked on behalf of Russian political prisoners threatened with deportation, and for several years set up lectures for Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman in the Detroit/Ann Arbor area.

One day in 1924 her friend, Detroit letterpress printer Jo Labadie, remarked that in 1911 he had donated his substantial collection of anarchist publications to the University of Michigan libraries at Ann Arbor. He asked Agnes to check on his donation to see what the University had done with the materials. Agnes found, to her chagrin, that the boxes were sitting unopened in a library locker. In a gesture that can only be described as an anarchist incursion, Agnes created what became known as the Labadie Collection of Radical Literature. She cribbed a desk from somewhere, a chair from somewhere else, some shelves, some files, and she set up shop in an out-of-the-way corner of the stacks. She was not a trained librarian, so she invented a unique cataloging system, which posed something of a puzzle to later librarians. She and Jo Labadie wrote to 400 other radicals, encouraging them to donate their personal libraries to the Labadie Collection. Agnes became known as a dependable repository for anarchists’ materials; because she had “street cred” as a radical, she was trusted by many who would otherwise have been unlikely to donate the documentation of their activism to a state institution.

For twenty-eight years, Agnes served as the curator of the Labadie Collection. For a few of those years, she was actually on the payroll; the other years of her self-created career as an archivist was unpaid and often literally under the radar of the institution itself. She was, in the literal sense of the term, an amateur, as described by literary scholar Carolyn Dinshaw: from the Latin, *amare*, meaning *to love*. Amateurs, Dinshaw explains, are “fans and lovers laboring in the off-hours,” coming to the material “from positions of affect and attachment” (2012, 5-6). Amateurism is not simply the absence of credentials: “It bears on their affections, their intimacy with their materials, their desires” (Dinshaw 2012, 29). Amateurs return, over and over, to their self-created work out of love and an enduring regard for the objects they collect. Amateurs find and treasure in one other “their desires to build another kind of world” (Dinshaw 2012, 6). By the time Agnes died in 1952, she had made significant progress in realizing that desire.

When anarchists died, chances are they left a collection of literature behind, and at some point the grieving relatives would write to Agnes; Agnes would get on a bus, go to their home, spend time in the attic or barn examining the contents of trunks and boxes; she would arrange for material to be shipped to Ann Arbor (with the University of Michigan paying the postage), get back on the bus, and return home. The manuscripts, correspondence, posters, handbills, etc. that she atssembled are actants in anarchist archives, poignant examples of Castell’s observation that assemblages can have inorganic as well as organic participants. Tracking down the relatives of John Francis Bray, a man who had been in the Chartist movement in England, Agnes exclaimed: “and I found a little old trunk of this man… And in that trunk were things! They made a story!”[[3]](#endnote-3) Over and over, year after year, she accumulated things that told anarchist stories. The current curator Julie Herrada (Herrada and Hyry 1999, 7) estimates that Agnes’ extensive labor increased the holdings of the collection twenty times over.

In the process, Agnes wrote an astonishing number of letters. She corresponded with the “stars” and the unknowns with equal enthusiasm: “I like to record people who did the work!”[[4]](#endnote-4) Agnes had the ability to conjure people into conversation by her mode of address. To take just one example: Agnes cultivated an intimate friendship with Pennsylvania anarchist Bertha Johnson. She characteristically begins her letters, “Dear Bertha, Let’s have a visit! Where shall we begin?”[[5]](#endnote-5) Her epistolary practice invokes Harman’s close narration by placing the correspondents in intimate relation so that their “vision, language, and rhythms” arrange their texts (Harman 2019, xiii) Bertha wrote to Agnes on March 16, 1933, explaining she inherited a library from a friend and offering to donate the materials to the Labadie when she is done with them.[[6]](#endnote-6) She and her husband Emery collected 1200 books. On their 260 acre dairy farm near Troy, Pennsylvania, inherited from Emery’s parents, they made a library in an old pantry, decorated with a steel engraving of Tom Paine. She added to the library with materials gathered from anarchist neighbors as well as clippings from publications to which she subscribed before the Depression pushed them into poverty. Eventually, despite hardscrabble measures such as taking in boarders, canning fruit to sell or exchange, and selling all the equipment and livestock, they had to sell their farm. Even then, Bertha found time to go over material that Agnes shared, write her thoughts, and come up with the few cents for postage to maintain their correspondence.

Their epistolary network expanded to include Bertha’s sister Pearl, her eccentric neighbor Belle Chaapel, the Rumanian anarchist printer Joseph Ishill, his partner the poet Rose Freeman Ishill, the British anarchist printer Thomas Keell, his partner the indefatigable organizer Lilian Wolfe, and many, many others. Through this network texts were loaned, visits arranged, messages exchanged, feelings explored, ideas examined, and introductions made to other anarchists. They wrote each other up. Many letters begin with “I am so glad to get your letters.” Bertha visited Ann Arbor in 1948 or 1949 and often concludes subsequent letters with fond memories of the visit.[[7]](#endnote-7) Bertha once quoted from this lyric for Agnes: “When I grow too old to dream, I’ll have you to remember. When I grow too old to dream your love will live in my heart.”[[8]](#endnote-8)They met face-to-face only once, but they were comrades and they loved one another.

Word spread widely regarding Agnes’s work. Anarchists and other radicals from all over the world wrote to her and visited the Collection. To a friend she wrote, “I may soar with my mind but I can’t hope to roam the earth. However, everyone comes my way!”[[9]](#endnote-9) She guided students, faculty and visiting researchers through the materials. She met younger generations of anarchists, people coming of age in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, when the older generation, Agnes’s own generation, was in decline. Like her friend Lilian Wolfe who worked with the Loudon journal *Freedom* for over half a century, Agnes served as a bridge between generations. Because she was surrounded by students, Agnes was aware that the movement did not die after the state’s assault on radicals during the post-World War I “Red Scare,” even though it felt like death to the older generation. In a 1943 letter to her friend (and Bertha’s sister) Pearl Johnson Tucker, who organized the private library of her partner Benjamin Tucker, editor of the Boston journal *Liberty*, Agnes wrote that anarchism and the IWW “folded up” after World War I but “neither are defunct.”[[10]](#endnote-10) Her work was a crucial anticipatory link to future anarchists in the 1960s and beyond.

Ironically, since anarchy is often taken to mean chaos and destruction, Agnes brought order to her world. She built an institution, as did Sophie Kropotkin with the Kropotkin museum in the newly-formed Soviet Union and Anna Adama Van Scheltema at the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam.[[11]](#endnote-11) The tradition of anarchist libraries is global, including collections in Argentina, Mexico, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and many other countries. Marianne Enckell (1999, 14) cleverly coins the term “anarchive” to talk about these typically self-financed collections that operate with voluntary labor: “There are perhaps more archivists at heart among the Anarchists than in the great institutions.” The anarchists knew the survival of their materials was precarious. German anarchist Rudolf Rocker’s library of 5,000 books was destroyed by the Nazis. Emma Goldman’s and her comrade Alexander Berkman’s collection of materials was confiscated and “lost” by the U.S. government when they were arrested in 1917 for violating the Espionage Act. Bertha wrote to Agnes of her concern:

“I hope…[the Collection] will never be hidden away or destroyed by censors or fascist dictators. … eventually they may fall into the hands of some indifferent person who will put them in the bonfire as worthless or ‘red.’ Is there any special person or department who will take real interest in your department after you are gone? I hope so, and that your interest will make their’s greater.”[[12]](#endnote-12)

Bertha got her wish.

Anarchives partake of networks of participants, contributors, and supporters: the web around each surviving library thickens over time and overlaps with the others. Anna Scheltema in Amsterdam and Agnes in Ann Arbor exchanged warm letters concerning their collections and their mutual contacts in the anarchist movement, especially with the historian Max Nettlau, and Scheltema visited the Labadie Collection in November, 1950.[[13]](#endnote-13) Agnes exchanged materials with English organizer Lilian Wolfe who helped keep up the Freedom Press Library along with the well-known British anarchist Colin Ward.[[14]](#endnote-14) When Agnes found herself with duplicate copies of precious materials, she found other homes for them within her network of collectors. Most anarchist journals exchanged complimentary copies among themselves, so that their editorial offices morphed into sites of collection. The movement’s cafes and pubs also served as reading rooms and small lending libraries; journals often carried appeals for donations by groups starting their own collections.

Anarchist groups served as hubs for networks reaching into one other and looping back to the Labadie Collection. For example, Agnes was a member of the League for Mutual Aid, established in 1920 in New York City to provide loans and services to unemployed or blacklisted workers, especially the IWW.[[15]](#endnote-15) The executive secretary of the League, Adalaide Schulkind, sent League publications to the Labadie; through the League, Agnes had further links to birth control activist Marie Equi in Oregon, anarchist teachers Ellen Kennan and Jo Ann Wheeler, ILGWU activist Rose Pesota, young Washington D.C. activist Lillian Kisliuk, and many others. Agnes corresponded with teachers at the Modern Schools, including Anna Schwartz at the anarchist community Stelton in New Jersey, who in turn rounded up materials for the Labadie Collection from the Stelton families.[[16]](#endnote-16)

The traits Castells attributes to assemblages overflow the pages of Agnes’s collections and correspondence. Decades of exchanges of letters and publications exhibit the density, frequency, quality and reciprocity that characterize a thick assemblage. They put on display Agnes’ sly sense of humor, even temper, and abiding love for her material. The time between letters can be seen as a kind of hover-time, in which the recipient reads and perhaps re-reads the missive and composes a reply, often reciprocating with a donation or an introduction to yet another collector. The correspondents write each other up, that is, they nurture the mutual influence that enables them to partake in the movement they document and treasure.

**Conclusion**

When anarchism is brought into feminist histories, the legacy of Seneca Falls (1848) and the hard-fought success of the 19th amendment (1920) need to make room for the legacy of the Paris Commune (1871), the Spanish Revolution (1936-39), and the dogged persistence of the anti-fascist resistance (1920s-40s). Expansion of the electoral roles, while still significant, is recalibrated when put alongside brutal state repression of dissent. Excavation of the “missing middle” enhances feminist histories by recovering not just heroic individuals, or impressive ideas, but a serviceable movement that we can use today. In a 1935 letter to Agnes, Bertha wrote about their movement’s ”filaments”: “And the endless chain of fellowship is a source of satisfaction to me. You and Alice [Furst] and the dear Ishills [Joseph and Rose] and the filament reaching out to your friends and my friends.”[[17]](#endnote-17) Filament, fittingly, can be an organic thread connecting plant or animal tissues, or a conducting wire for carrying electric current in a machine. The people, the beliefs and values, the materials collected, the technologies that made the materials, the institutions that enabled their exchange, are all filaments weaving their threads around one another.

Agnes was aware that her own participation in anarchist assemblages expanded as she explored the material in the Collection. She wrote to Joseph Ishill:

In such work as I do, where your education comes with the work, new interests keep arising. I never, in the first place, took notice of the printing. The subject, the author was all. Then I found that the publisher was interesting. Then it dawned upon me that the donor was as interesting a personality as the writer! The one who thought so much of something that he or she put it in a trunk and keep [sic] it for years and years! And then I began to see such name as Percy Ballou’s and to notice the ‘embellishments’ the small ones. And not only the cartoons that make a big show. And all this I card-catalogue and make data of – for the scholar that will be coming…[[18]](#endnote-18)

With each additional angle on her material, Inglis reported, “The Collection seems to become more and more alive.”[[19]](#endnote-19) With each filament we can reconstruct today, each thread that blooms or fades, our radical history becomes more and more alive. Because assemblages are open-ended, new linkages are always possible. Assemblages reach to the future.

Reflecting on her lifetime of political struggle, civil rights activist Ella Baker said, “Somebody always carries on” (Cantarow 1980, 93). Agnes had a similar conviction that future scholars would be coming. Someone will carry on. This was not blind faith on these women’s part, but rather a reflection of their experiences within radical assemblages, where relationships are open-ended processes that invite new elements in. When civil rights leader Roger Baldwin visited the Collection, Agnes recalled his transformation when reading a letter from Voltairine de Cleyre: “And you forgot the world while reading it,” she reminded him. “You got the spirit of the Labadie Collection by that.”[[20]](#endnote-20) She characterized the Labadie Collection as a place not just holding books, but housing “vital, living people because of the material being of the nature it is.”[[21]](#endnote-21) The Labadie Collection invited its visitors as well as its creators into another world.

Renewing our knowledge of and respect for past anarchist feminist assemblages could not come at a better time. Present radicalisms look different when they have an affirmative history of their own. Scholarship looks different when it turns toward the practices needed for “opening up rather than closing down versions of history … [and thus] reorienting our focus on to the significant political battles of the present”(Hemmings 2007, 72). Indigenous struggles for land and dignity, civil rights actions defending the value of black and brown people’s lives, anti-capitalist occupations on behalf of the 99%, community responses to global pandemic based on mutual aid: these are all forms of contemporary political action that call on and amplify anarchist feminist worlds.

1. I am using “First Wave” to denote the period from the mid-to-late 19th century to the early-to-mid 20th century, with no implication about progress or decline from one era to another. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Emma Goldman to Stella Ballantine, April 3, 1919, in *The Emma Goldman Papers: A Microfilm Edition.* Eds. Candace Falk with Ronald Zboray, et al., reel 11. Alexandria, VA: Chadwick-Healey, Inc. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Agnes Inglis to Fred Beal, August 26, 1938, Box 2, University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Library). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Agnes Inglis to Frank Worden, July 20, 1942, Box 20, University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Library). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Agnes Inglis to Bertha Johnson, January 18, 1946, Box 11, University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Library). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Bertha Johnson to Agnes Inglis, March 16, 1933, Box 11, University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Library). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Bertha Johnson to Agnes Inglis, February 27, 1949, Box 11, University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Library). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Bertha Johnson to Agnes Inglis, February 28, 1950, Box 11, University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Library). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Agnes Inglis to John Beffel, April 1, 1943, Box 12, University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Library). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Agnes Inglis to Pearl Johnson, p. 2, March 7, 1943, Box 19, University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Library). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The Bolsheviks destroyed the Kropotkin Museum soon after Kropotkin’s death. The International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam still thrives. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Bertha Johnson to Agnes Inglis, November 8, 1933, p. 3, Box 11, University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Library). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Anna Scheltema to Agnes Inglis, November 18, 1950, Box 16, University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Library). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Lilian Wolfe to Agnes Inglis, August 22, 1946, Box 20, University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Library). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. “The League for Mutual Aid” Collection, Papers 1920-1972, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University <https://reuther.wayne.edu/files/LR000455.pdf>). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Anna Schwartz to Agnes Inglis, August 24, 1951, Box 16, University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Library). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Bertha Johnson to Agnes Inglis, July 5, 1935, p 3, Box 11, University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Library). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Agnes Inglis to Joseph Ishill, June 3, 1934, Box 4, p. 3, Ishill Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Percy Ballou was an anarchist printer. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Agnes Inglis to Joseph Ishill, June 3, 1934, p. 4, Box 4, Ishill Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Agnes Inglis to Roger Baldwin, October 3, 1934, Box 1, University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Library). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Agnes Inglis to Max Metzkow, November 10, 1930, Box 14, University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Library).

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