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Samantha Montgomery

University of Minnesota Morris

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The Path to Eliminating Oppression:

Why Anarchist Thinkers and Intersectional Practitioners

Should Work Together

Samantha E. Montgomery

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Introduction

What drew me to this topic was constantly witnessing barriers of oppression to myself and everyone around me. The barriers I see are keeping women from making equal pay (Jones 2021), keeping suicide rates among transgender youth high (NewsRX LLC 2016), and keeping police officers from being charged in cases like Breonna Taylor’s. What pushed me to write this paper was a deep belief that humanity is constantly evolving to recognize and remove these barriers. I use the United States of America as a prime example of this as we have come from a long history of inflicting pain on marginalized groups. There is still much room for us to grow in terms of recognizing human rights, as seen above, but it’s important to also recognize how far we have come and why. I believe the progress we have made in removing oppression is rooted in empathy, and that if we are to eliminate these barriers - which show themselves both systemically and culturally - we will need to increase the ability to empathize with one another. Without it, we will not be able to build the compassion necessary to work together to eliminate all of the oppressions all of us face.

This paper emphasizes the definition of anarchism as the progression of society toward the removal of its hierarchical, oppressive structures that appear in either cultural or systemic ways. To anarchists, this means re-examining not just the state but also concepts of patriarchy, classism, sexuality, and so on. If we recognize the definition of anarchism as society dismantling oppressive structures, then taking any measurable steps toward this would mean being able to claim an anarchist identity. I single out the US for the mere fact that having lived only in this one country, I feel I cannot speak on the way oppressions impact society in other cultures. The empathy of anti-oppression is echoed in anarchism in two ways: empathy for one’s self and empathy for others. In order to work toward anarchism as a goal of the elimination of oppression, we must then focus on increasing empathy - particularly, empathy for others.

However, some people are more prone to empathetic thought. Those with a multi-marginalized identity are more likely to develop an empathetic approach to oppression due to the fact that they are experiencing oppression in multiple, interlocking ways. Those who are singularly- or non-marginalized
are not incapable of developing radical empathy for others, but they usually require a longer arc to get there. That the recognition, analysis, and naming of interlocking oppressions as “intersectionality” were all done by black women shows those with multi-marginalized identities are more likely to develop this empathetic approach to anti-oppressive thinking. Intersectionality can and needs to be applied as more than just theory to be effective, though. As seen in the history of women of color fighting for social justice, when applied as a practice, intersectionality can take measurable steps toward the actual elimination of oppression. Furthermore, if we were to apply intersectionality as a systemic practice, it could eliminate oppression to the degree that our society could achieve anarchism.

Taking into account that multi-marginalized people are more likely to develop empathetic thinking to anti-oppression, we should thus center these experienced individuals as autonomous leaders in creating public policy that is continuously updated to reflect more nuanced, empathetic thought. Any measurable implementation of policies by these individuals would be considered progression toward the elimination of oppression and likely leave the United States with tight-knit, yet loosely federated collectives that elect leaders based on their experience and who are rotated based upon the need for the topic at hand: Anarchism. Thus, this paper hopes to achieve a practical, approachable start to achieving that as a goal while mitigating the negative perceptions of anarchism that harm the potential effectiveness of the theory when it comes to eliminating oppression.

I start my paper by going into several various forms of oppression anarchists recognize. Going further, I explain the root that informs this anti-oppressive thinking: empathy - for one’s self, and for others. In the second section, I argue the people who are more likely to develop this empathetic approach to oppression are those who have a multi-marginalized identity. Thus, if we want to eliminate oppression, we must have multi-marginalized individuals as autonomous leaders creating and implementing public policies around anti-oppression. In the third section, I explain that intersectionality was named initially as a theory to recognize the ways oppressions can interlock, and go into the interviews I conducted. From these interviews, I came away with three ways empathy and intersectionality can be applied as a practice to eliminate oppression: analysis of marginalized perspectives in formal education, decentralization of
decision-making in hierarchical structures, and legal intervention to mitigate harmful fallout. Finally, I end my paper by arguing that if we were to implement these changes our society would fit the definition of anarchism as mentioned earlier, and give an account of what vision some anarchist thinkers had for the future.

For this paper, I conducted three interviews with multi-marginalized women of color who are leaders in the fight against oppression here in Denver, Colorado. These interviews were conducted via Zoom in April 2021.

**Section 1: Anarchism as the Elimination of Oppression**

The elimination of oppression should be the goal of every society. How this is accomplished, is, of course, the million-dollar question. Let us agree that the complete elimination of oppression is likely impossible, yet as we have seen in the past with women’s suffrage, the formation of the 8-hour workday, and the abolition of slavery, we can work to stem the flow of oppression. This is then the goal: to take measurable steps progressing toward the elimination of oppression. Should the US begin to take those measurable steps, the resulting vision would fit well within the definition of anarchism, which is something that should be looked upon positively! There are several interpretations of anarchism, but I focus on anarcha-feminism for its recognition of how multiple levels of oppression exist and interact with one another. To the end that anarcha-feminism is part of a newer wave of anarchist thinking, I believe, grants me leave to use the broader term “anarchism” to encompass those tenets of anarcha-feminism (Fridley 1978, 20). Julia Tanenbaum from Black Rose Anarchist Federation/Federación Anarquista Rosa Negra (BRRN), a political organization focused on building “popular power”, explained anarcha-feminism in her article “To Destroy All Forms of Domination”, saying, “Many radical feminists shared anarchist goals such as ending domination, hierarchy, capitalism, gender roles, and interpersonal violence, and utilized and influenced the key anarchist organizational structure of the small leaderless affinity group. They grappled with the questions of how to balance autonomy and egalitarianism and create non-hierarchical organizations that also promoted personal growth and leadership” (2019).
However, Anarcha-feminism was further developed by “some feminists, usually after discovering anarchism through the writings of Emma Goldman” (Tanenbaum 2019). Emma Goldman and Lucy Parsons were two of the original anarcho-feminist thinkers, although oddly, neither were self-described feminists. Additionally, although the two women had very similar ideologies, there was one topic of oppression they differed on: race.

Parsons was self-described as having Mexican and Native American ethnicity and found footing with anarchism after entering into an interracial marriage with Albert Parsons in 1871 (Hunter 2018). Forced to flee Texas as a result of the reactions to the relationship, the Parsons settled in Chicago where they took part in the organizing of the Haymarket affair, a peaceful protest that dissolved into a riot after a deadly bombing. Her husband was accused and executed for the bombing in what was widely considered a frame-job, and afterward, Parsons remained as one of the loudest voices in favor of anarchism in the US at the time and a founder of anarcho-feminism. Her text, “The Principles of Anarchism”, provides a multi-marginalized perspective on anarchism as well as a feasible framework that helps make anarchism more approachable (Parsons 2017).

Goldman was born in today’s Lithuania and was of Jewish descent. She immigrated to the US in 1885 and worked in New York factories where she became friends with her socialist and anarchist coworkers (1911). Goldman was another main founder of anarcho-feminism. The Haymarket affair raised serious questions for her, and she began to write and speak extensively on the subject of anarchism. Her writings, such as Anarchism and Other Essays, are essential to understanding the oppressions anarchism wants to eliminate. Additionally, Goldman’s texts help understand the viewpoint of a singularly-marginalized person’s perspective on oppression, which I believe led to her lack of critique on racism as a structural oppression.

It wasn’t until the 1970s, however, that anarchism would gain traction again. Specifically, anarcho-feminism. Arlene Wilson wrote in “Who We Are: The Anarcho-Feminist Manifesto,” in 1971 that “the intelligence of womankind has at last been brought to bear on such oppressive male inventions as the church and the legal family; it must now be brought to re-evaluate the ultimate stronghold of male
domination, the State.” (Tanenbaum 2019) The oppressions these women saw were everywhere, and the women saw them mostly as a result of the inherently oppressive hierarchy of the state. Anarchism, no matter which branch, is always recognized as a refusal of the oppressive power and hierarchy of the state. The purpose of the state is, according to Goldman, only to “maintain or protect property and monopoly” (1911). The only way the state knows how to perform its purpose is through violence, which “all forms of government rest on.” Thus, Goldman claims “in every instance [the government’s] aim is the absolute subordination of the individual” (1911). This legalized force “invades the personal liberty of man” according to Parsons, as “from this exercise of force through governments flows nearly all the misery, poverty, crime, and confusion in society” (1903, 5). In essence, Parsons believed that the government created the very issues it was supposedly attempting to resolve. Because the inherent structure of the government focuses power at the top, there needs to be a complete restructure to prevent “such concentrated power” as it “can always be wielded in the interest of the few and at the expense of the many” (Parsons 2017, 3).

Of course, the state needs to protect its capital, which led both Goldman and Parsons to heavily criticize capitalism as their most prominent issue. Goldman felt capitalism’s main production was that of greed - it turned “the producer into a mere particle of a machine” and had people turning the products, and thus profits, of their labor over to CEOs who had produced nothing (1911). Parsons took a slightly more radical approach to capitalism. She did not advocate for raised wages but instead claimed “if you go on strike for a raise, they will simply raise the cost of living” as the state needs a wage imbalance to continue the constant subordination of its citizens (Parsons 1903, 11). If people are too busy working to be able to afford to live, they have no time to think about, critique, and fight against the oppressions they’re facing.

These issues of oppression permeated all aspects of life, including the family. Parsons said women were “regarded as a sort of necessary evil...a thing only fit to cater to [man’s] pleasures and his passions--this was woman’s lowly position” (Parsons 1905). Goldman was a staunch believer that marriage was the worst thing a woman could do to herself, as at the time, a woman signed away what little rights she had when marrying. She argued that prostitutes were better off as at least they could
choose whom to sleep with and when (Goldman 1911). Interestingly, as mentioned earlier, while both of these women were strong supporters of women’s rights, neither claimed the title of feminist. The reason they denied the title is due to semantics. Feminists of the time were advocating for women’s right to vote - Parsons and Goldman felt voting only further validated the power of the state, and thus, went against the utmost principle of anarchism (1903; 1911). This of course raises conversations about means and ends, but unfortunately, there is not room in this paper to discuss it.

As mentioned earlier, however, there was one area of oppression where Parsons and Goldman differed. Where Parsons felt that race was interlocked with oppression based on sex and class, Goldman was largely silent on race. Goldman recognized and wrote about the hypocrisies of the US professing freedom while brutalizing Black and Indigenous people of color, but failed to understand the systemic aspect of their oppression. Kathy Ferguson (2011) posits Goldman viewed race as a historical fact, instead of a social construct. Therefore, racism is “simply prejudice” to Goldman and not something that can be organized around and fought against. However Ferguson brings up the point that Goldman had several opportunities to learn from her peers, and even “recognized that the lack of knowledge across racial lines is the responsibility of the more powerful group, yet there is no evidence that she pursued that recognition outside prison walls” (Ferguson 2011, 131). The reason behind Goldman’s failure to pursue that recognition tracks with her views on women’s suffrage:

African American churches were one of the very few relatively safe havens for organizing these vulnerable communities; that black women and men needed the trappings of bourgeois, Christian respectability to protect themselves from the sexually predatory legacies of slavery; that African American workers often faced more bigotry from white unions than from white owners; that black activists hoped for a strong state to make and enforce laws against segregation and lynching. (Ferguson 2011, 133)

In essence, Goldman felt black men and women were participating in their oppression both systemically and culturally, and thus, she was uninterested in reaching out to them. But why is this the
case? How could Goldman, a radical in terms of free love and women’s rights, fail to recognize such an obviously systemic oppression such as racism? Because, despite arguments surrounding Jewish ethnicity and race, Goldman presented as white. Therefore, her ability to see oppression based on race was limited. This, in turn, impacted her logic and reasoning behind her anarchist beliefs. Looking at Goldman’s words in *Anarchism: And Other Essays* we see much is written about the concept of individualism. For example: “As to individualism, at no time in human history did it have less chance of expression, less opportunity to assert itself in a normal, healthy manner” (1911). Admittedly, Goldman also said, “It requires something more than personal experience to gain a philosophy or point of view from any specific event. It is the quality of our response to the event and our capacity to enter into the lives of others that help us to make their lives and experiences our own.” (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1981, 27). However, it is highly likely that Goldman would protect hate speech as a right given by the first amendment, rather than be empathetic to the harmful ways it contributes to oppression. She doesn’t ignore aspects of empathy, but her focus on why oppression is bad appears to often be rooted in how it personally affects her.

Thus, we have the two roots to anti-oppression as the inner recognition of one’s oppression and a desire for personal liberation, and the empathetic recognition of another’s oppression and solidarity with them in the face of it.

**Section 2: Multi-Marginalized Individuals as Empathetic Leaders**

The focus of fighting oppression must be on increasing the empathetic aspect of anti-oppressive thinking. Without empathy, those who are currently enjoying their privileges will have no reason to let go of them. To increase empathy, we need leaders who can write and implement policies to assist in that. I will say those belonging to multi-marginalized groups are, generally speaking, more likely to have the empathetic recognition of the barriers others face, which is why they need to be autonomous leaders in the fight against oppression. There are three reasons multi-marginalized people should be the individuals to lead this effort: 1) they are more adept at recognizing it, 2) they have been fighting this fight for a long time, and as mentioned, 3) they are more likely to develop empathy.
The first reason is that, as a general rule, multi-marginalized people are more capable of recognizing their different oppressions and how they interlock, sheerly out of the fact that they are experiencing this oppression. This is evidenced by the fact that black women were among the first, if not the first, to recognize how oppressions interlocked (Nash, 2011). Anna Julia Cooper wrote in 1892 that “The colored woman of today occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country….She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both” (2017, 76). Hettie V. Williams (2018) describes Ida B. Wells, a black female journalist in the late 19th century, as “living on the margins of American society” which “provided her with unique perspectives, opportunities for engagements, insights, and indignations about American society...that are profoundly and uniquely different from those of white males or females nor black males” (48). Mari J. Matsuda et al (1993) expand upon this concept by explaining this unique viewpoint that comes from the margins of society produces an understanding which can only be gained by actually living through instances of racism or other oppressions. In my interview with Regan Byrd, an anti-oppression consultant with dual degrees in public policy and sociology, Byrd confirmed this for me, saying, “By having an identity that is not recognized by society, you increase your skepticism to the way other identities are characterized by society and other, similar types of assertions.”

Singularly- or non-marginalized people, on the other hand, may have more difficulty, which even Goldman recognized, saying, “every effort for progress, for enlightenment, for science, for religious, political, and economic liberty, emanates from the minority, and not from the mass.” This is not to say it’s impossible for singularly or non-marginalized people to become empathetic thinkers - certainly not, otherwise, there would be no point to this paper. What I am arguing is that those who have not experienced a “major foundational oppression, such as race, gender, class, or sexuality” (e.g. white, heterosexual, middle-class males) will, as a general rule, have to go on a longer journey to understand and thus empathize with those experiencing oppression (Byrd 2021).

I can personally attest to this. My marginalizations include being a bisexual woman with a mental disorder who was raised by a single mother, while I hold the major foundational privilege of being white.
and cisgender. As a young adult, I held views that could be described as libertarian-to-liberal. I believed racism existed but failed to understand the systemic aspects of it. I believed the minimum wage needed to be increased but failed to understand how capitalism kept it low. I believed institutional education was the primary measure of intelligence. Now, as a (mostly) grown woman of 30 years old, I have come to rethink things. I see, now, the way we pledge our allegiance to the United States daily as a child as one of the many things that condition us as adults from analyzing the country in which we live and how it is contributing to oppression, despite the Human Rights Watch having said as recently as 2019 that “the United States continued to move backwards on rights”. I see this preventing us from analyzing ourselves and how we, personally, may be contributing to oppression. I feel I must reiterate that this should be evidence to the effect the acclaimed black feminist, bell hooks, raised, where “the issue is not that an organization on the left is all white, because theoretically, if white people are progressive….we could have a setting where everything’s run by white people, but the perspectives are not biased” (South End Press 1998, 51). This is important to achieve as we cannot have those who are the most vulnerable as our teachers forever - at some point down the road, once those who have major foundational privileges have learned how to take on a marginalized perspective, they will need to step up and do the work to eliminate the oppressions they are a part of.

Those who experience oppression on a single axis (e.g. white, heterosexual, middle-class women) are likely to start out recognizing oppression exists, but not the nuances of how systems keep it in place. Worse, they may find themselves placing their oppression at the top, creating a new hierarchy of “who has it worse” and how assistance should be applied. This is not the goal. Nor is the goal to blindly place multi-marginalized individuals at the top of a new hierarchy. Identities are not static within time, and what was once marginalized may not be so forever. It’s essential that whoever is being multi-marginalized at the current moment in time are the ones with autonomous power in eliminating the oppressions. Additionally, we must keep in mind while it is a general rule that multi-marginalized individuals are more likely to recognize oppression, that doesn’t mean that translates 100% to actively fighting oppression. “Minorities are chronically exposed to diverse forms of everyday racism (e.g., being followed while
shopping). In response, they may learn to ignore everyday racism because it occurs so frequently.”

(Airhihenbuwa and Ford 2010) Nadine Bridges, the Executive Director of One Colorado - an LGBTQ+ organization in Denver - mentioned another possible response in our interview: a person may instead attempt to force their identity to conform to what is ‘acceptable’ by society. However, the weight of that world cannot be burdened forever, and eventually, as a general rule, those experiencing this oppression turn to solutions.

Thus, the second reason multi-marginalized people should be acting autonomously in regards to oppression is that they have been fighting against oppression, most likely, their entire lives, and have gained valuable insight from that. There is no need to ‘reinvent the wheel’ when we can learn from those who have already done the work. Throughout history, multi-marginalized individuals, particularly women of color, have been pushing the boundaries of their barriers in every conceivable way. There is, as mentioned, the women’s movement first and foremost, which had radical thinkers regarding Parsons and anarcha-feminism as mentioned earlier. In addition, there is also Marsha P. Johnson within the gay and transgender movement (Park 2020); Dolores Huerta, within the labor rights and immigrant movement (Rosenbloom 2019); Winona LaDuke, within the environmental movement (South End Press 1998); Alice Wong within the disability movement (Wong 2021); and the three black women who founded the organization Black Lives Matter, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi (blacklivesmatter.com 2019). These individuals are at the highest risk, putting themselves in such a prominent position in their fight against oppression, yet we see them at the forefront of such social justice movements time and time again. This ability to act on fighting oppression requires compassion, which is derived from empathy.

The probability of developing this empathy increases when experiencing multiple marginalizations, and is thus the third and most important reason why we should be centering these individuals as autonomous leaders in the fight against oppression. In my interviews with the women in Denver, I asked: Is anti-oppression inherently empathetic? All three felt empathy was, in some way, the root of anti-oppression. Dr. Lisa Calderón, the Chief of Staff for Councilwoman CdeBaca, said in our interview she thought the experience of oppression created more instances to develop that empathy for
others, but that the ability to practice it was sometimes hindered by a powerless feeling for those experiencing oppression, causing the occasional “punch sideways” at similarly oppressed people. Having an identity that is not generally accepted by society – or even illegal, such as homosexuality not so long ago - presents a person with an internal struggle: to be true to their identity, or to conform (Bridges 2021). This struggle helps translate to empathy for others and what they may be experiencing. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga especially illuminate this point in a widely referenced text. *This Bridge Called My Back*, which provides multiple perspectives from women of color on the meaning of their identities and the way they use solidarity as a means to fight against oppression. These women are considered radical left thinkers, which demonstrates my argument that multi-marginalized individuals are more likely to generally have anti-oppressive viewpoints. Moraga wrote “It is this experience that moves light-skinned or ‘passable’ Third World women to put ourselves on the line for our darker sisters. We are all family. From those families, we were on the one hand encouraged to leave, to climb up white. And with the other hand, the reins were held tight on us, our parents understanding the danger that bordered our homes. We learned to live with these contradictions. This is the root of our radicalism” (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1981, 5). Moraga went on to add, “We attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience: We are the colored in a white feminist movement. We are the feminists among the people of our culture. We are often the lesbians among the straight” (1981, 23)

Empathy was also heavily evidenced with bell hooks: “I came to theory because I was hurting...desperate, wanting to comprehend--to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away.” (Williams 2018, ) As Calderón pointed out, the more oppression or struggle one experiences, the more instances one has to potentially develop that empathy. Empathy requires, according to Bridges, “understanding all of the components that make up and result in the human experience,” which can derive from the internal analysis of one’s own oppression. In essence, I believe that by looking within and saying “no, I don’t deserve this,” it grants one the skepticism mentioned in Byrd’s interview earlier to look around at others and the assumptions society makes about what they deserve. Moraga went on to say, “What drew me to politics was my love of women, the agony I
felt in observing the straight-jackets of poverty and repression I saw people in my own family in…. [This book] is about… not settling for less than freedom even in the most private aspects of our lives. A total vision. For the women in this book, I will lay my body down for that vision.” (1981, 233). However, the ability to say “I will not settle” comes from a place of “radical self-love”, Byrd says, which isn’t taught in our society. This translates to “empathy for oneself” and cements the idea that increasing empathy as a whole is essential to the elimination of oppression. Empathy for one’s self is the first step for non-marginalized individuals to take to be able to have empathy for others and let go of their privileges so that multi-marginalized individuals may have an autonomous space to be leaders.

That multi-marginalized individuals are more likely to develop empathy due to them experiencing oppression is crucial to the recognition of, and thus the capability of fighting against oppression, especially the ways in which they interlock. It is this ability to spot how oppressive systems interact with one another to create new and unique barriers that gives them the experience to write and implement tangible methods to eliminate oppression.

**Section 3: Intersectionality as Praxis**

Understanding how oppressions interlock is crucial to the fight, and black women’s role has been understated in how essential they are and have been in this aspect. As mentioned earlier, Cooper was the first to write about the concept of interlocking oppressions back in the late 19th century: “…I see two dingy little rooms with, ‘FOR LADIES’ swinging over one and ‘FOR COLORED PEOPLE’ over the other; while wondering under which head I come…” (2017, 58). This is the core of intersectionality as a concept - that an individual can hold multiple sets of identities within themselves at once, and that these identities interact with one another to create an identity not previously recognized by society. The failure to recognize these identities leads to their oppression, and, just as the identities interact with each other, so do the oppressions interlock with one another to create entirely new, and unrecognized, forms of oppression. All of these oppressions are ones mentioned by anarchist thinkers: race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, age, etc. The Combahee River Collective, a black feminist group in the mid to late
1970s, was the first to use the term “interlocking oppressions” to explain there was no hierarchy of oppression, nor was there a hierarchy of ending oppression - they must all be fought simultaneously (1977). The statement they issued is another piece that shows a strong overlap between the refutation of oppressive hierarchies, which is anarchism, and the recognition of interlocking oppressions, which is intersectionality. But it wasn’t until 1989 that Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw named this concept of interlocking oppressions as “intersectionality” (140). It is this long history of black feminist organizations committing to the study of “manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face” that “made black feminists ‘the first activists in the United States to theorize and act upon the intersections of race, gender, and class’” (Nash 2011, 452). This further emphasizes my point that multi-marginalized people are more adept at recognizing oppression.

Crenshaw examined the District Court case, DeGraffenreid v. General Motors Assembly Div., (1976), to develop her thoughts on intersectionality and describe how black women were being particularly discriminated against. DeGraffenreid was of the position that she was being discriminated against because she was a black woman. GM argued that this was impossible as they hired black men and white women, and therefore, the court decided black women had no unique position to be discriminated against as since GM was hiring women, there was no discrimination on that axis, nor was there if GM was hiring black men. But according to Crenshaw “because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (1989, 140) This means that an intersectional approach is required to be able to encompass all branches of oppression, and, furthermore, an intersectional approach would allow those who are experiencing multiple oppressions to create a type of umbrella of representation of identity for those who are singularly- or non-marginalized (Crenshaw 1989). For example, by encompassing the perspective of someone who is marginalized by class and gender and sexuality, we can ensure the perspective of someone who is marginalized by class or gender or sexuality is still covered. This is another reason multi-marginalized individuals should be leading the creation of policy to fight oppression.
According to Anzaldúa and Moraga, the real “danger lies in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical base” (1981, 29). One resulting consequence of doing this is accidentally equating intersectionality with black women due to the societal focus on the interlocking oppressions of race and gender, specifically (Nash 2011). That black women founded and named the concept of intersectionality gives evidence to the idea that multi-marginalized people as a whole are more likely to recognize how oppressions affect others. Yet, having intersectionality synonymous with black feminism limits the possible insights other marginalized people may contribute, as well as placing an identity on black women that is static. This identity may place them at the top or bottom of a hierarchy, but it doesn’t allow for the recognition that black women have other axes that create a variety of perspectives, which is essential to establishing who has the necessary experience to deal with a variety of oppressions. Intersectionality was thus named initially as a theory, however, in this paper, I am focusing on the importance of it being applied specifically as a practice.

According to Nash, intersectionality is “a practice that black feminists had been engaged in for decades” (2011). When it is applied as a practice, we have seen intersectionality can take measurable steps toward the actual elimination of oppression through the actions of women of color in various social justice movements. But how can this be done systematically? How is intersectionality applied as a practice? I ask this question not to highlight any flaws in the theory of intersectionality, but to emphasize the ways the theory can be made tangible in the lives it analyzes. Others define the practice of intersectionality as “encompassing a wide range of phenomena, [including] legal and policy advocacy that seeks to remedy gender and racial discrimination...intersectionality is put into practice in human rights law, in antidiscrimination policy, and in social movements and advocacy organizations” (Sumi, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). Patricia Collins (2015) widens this a bit in her definition saying, “practitioners who would be drawn to intersectionality as critical praxis seek knowledge projects that take a stand; such projects would critique social injustices that characterize complex social inequalities, imagine alternatives, and/or propose viable action strategies for change.” To simplify, intersectionality represents a set of engagements “consisting of political interventions employing an intersectional lens” (Sumi,
Crenshaw, and McCall 2013, 785). This means intersectionality can be practiced in weighty and incredibly varied ways that experiment with the structure of current hierarchies both systemic and cultural.

My interviews with the leaders of anti-oppression here in Denver explored ways in which anti-oppressive policies could be implemented. Keeping in mind their answers in Section 2 regarding empathy as the root of anti-oppression, I asked all three women, “What does empathy look like as public policy?” In essence, I wanted to know: because multi-marginalized people are more empathetic and that empathy often translates into anti-oppression, how can we systematically create empathic thought in those that would normally require a longer arc? Their answers left me with three aspects to expand upon that well reflected the above quote from Matsuda et al (1993): alternative perspectives need to be addressed as a part of formal education, statutes need to be written for the formation of unoppressive hierarchies, and legal interventions need to be in place to mitigate harmful fallout. I examine each of these aspects in turn.

First, in my interviews, both Byrd and Bridges brought up the topic of education as a way to increase empathy, and thus eliminate oppression. Byrd brings up teaching empathy as “there’s you and there’s others, and...you should care about them in the same way you care about yourself.” The way I believe this can be done via education is the teaching of perspective with “intentional curriculum design, engagement, asking people open-ended questions...” and using “metrics and measurables” to evaluate the progress. Bridges adds that this education has to start “with pre-k or before that.” I am not a sociologist, but perhaps through the re-enactment of age-appropriate situations, children could learn to put themselves in another's shoes. Bridges teaches a class on disrupting privilege, which she likens somewhat to the five stages of grief for her students; there’s denial, anger, bargaining, depression, before finally, acceptance that they can be oppressors themselves. This mention of anger is seen by another teacher, Mitsuye Yamada, who, when explaining the racism Asian-Americans face, had a student exclaim: “It made me angry. Their anger made me angry, because I didn't even know the Asian Americans felt oppressed. I didn't expect their anger” (1981, 35).
Bridges reaches her students at a point in their lives when they’re willing to examine the system and reveals to them how they are also oppressors within it. We need to systematically create more of these opportunities for students to make that realization. To Bridges, “The practice of intersectionality is creating opportunities for people to educate themselves.” One of the ways I believe we can do that is through the teaching of Byrd’s radical self-love, which helps develop empathy for oneself. This could potentially be achieved by helping people who do not experience major foundational oppressions understand how they are being oppressed in minor foundational ways (e.g. beauty) As LaDuke put it, “....Indian people know they are oppressed but don’t feel powerless. White people don’t feel oppressed, but feel powerless” (South End Press Collective, 77) In other words, people who do not experience a major foundational oppression like class or sexuality may struggle to recognize oppression to the degree they don’t even recognize it when it is happening to themselves on a more minor scale. Recognizing how one’s self is being oppressed will help lead to the examination of oppressions and having empathy for others. Additionally, education of perspectives will help those who are non-marginalized learn the necessary empathy to let go of their privilege.

Education is not enough, however. Bridges added that secondly, “you still need to implement policies and laws to create effective change.” These policies would be necessary in structuring organizations, companies, and government in order to decentralize decision-making and make the hierarchy unoppressive. This decentralization is changing how decisions are made in a way so that the person who has the most experience with the issue and potential solutions is collectively chosen by the team. The elected leader makes a majority of the decisions regarding the issue while maintaining transparency and fluid transfers of information. This is thus a hierarchy of knowledge and experience, rather than identity, according to Byrd. Instead of choosing who we most want to have a beer with to make decisions, or putting the person with the highest formal education at the top, policies need to be in place for groups to select whom they think understands the issue at hand the best. To take Bridges’ and Byrd’s ideas further, it would then be essential to rotate these leaders based on the specific topic being discussed to prevent a concentration of power. Multi-marginalized people, as explained earlier, have the
most experience in recognizing and fighting against oppression - thus, they should be the leaders in the ways oppression pervades all aspects of life.

Unfortunately, the road to oppression is paved with good intentions, and no matter for all the education and policies in place, there will be unintended consequences resulting in harmful fallout. To pretend as though oppression could ever be 100% eliminated is not only naive but dangerously lends itself to allowing new, different oppressions to arise without recognizing them for what they are. Thus, the third aspect of empathy to be implemented is a legal avenue of intervention to mitigate that fallout when other policies and education may fail. Calderón mentioned in her interview “intervention as a means of alleviating suffering for those who are struggling” meaning “more than just a list of phone numbers to call.” She talked about those who are struggling having a legal team to help back them in the pursuit of their rights. This could resemble a specific organization dedicated to the discovery, contact, and legal assistance of individuals experiencing oppression. The point is there being tangible aid to those in need, and in a way that sets a precedent that will settle future fights and potentially lead to the change in policies necessary to accurately reflect the systemic oppression many people face. I believe that it’s time for our country to begin the process of experimenting with radical ideas that will have measurable results in order to fight against this, and it must be multi-marginalized people directing the fight.

**Section 4: Anarchism as the End Result**

But what of the end results of this? What would a complete restructuring of our entire society look like? As Byrd said during our interview, once we have removed our oppressions, our society would resemble “what one might call a hierarchy, but it’s more collective and democratized decision-making as opposed to top-down decision-making and it’s not even necessarily representational because people are expected to be filtering information and decision-making up and down that entire fluid structure.” Byrd’s description of how a society that has come close to removing all oppression stirs clear echoes of anarchism. The structure described above will have space where multi-marginalized individuals are the autonomous leaders in creating the educational plans, unoppressive hierarchical policies, and formation of
protective legal teams. These decision-makers interchange leadership positions based on what is needed at the time, while keeping in mind that experience is the best teacher. This may seem antithetical to anarchism, especially aspects that include legal intervention, but implementing these anti-oppressive practices is, in fact, the closest to the definition of anarchism.

In section 1 I spoke about the philosophies of anarchism, but anarchism is about more than just dismantling oppressive systems. It’s also about rebirth and rebuilding. Education was mentioned as a way to increase empathy, which, as we’ve seen, is the root of anti-oppression. Goldman, Parsons, and the Black Rose/Rosa Negra anarchist organization (BNNR) mention education as a prominent component of how to change the status quo to achieve anarchism (1911). Both Parsons and Goldman, after some thought, came to rest on the idea that, in essence, “a long period of education must precede any great fundamental change in society.” (Parsons 2017, 5), while the BNNR explains, “anarchist revolution, both historically and in the present, requires preparation through education” (Tanenbaum 2019). The BNNR goes further to explain how oppressions “require not just adjustments within the established hierarchies, but a challenge to hierarchy itself.” This is anarchism - not necessarily the absence of hierarchy, but a challenge to the established hierarchy. A challenge to the established hierarchy would be the necessary decentralization of decision-making as mentioned above.

“The creation of alternative non-hierarchical structures”, is possible in anarchism because, according to Parsons, the nature of humankind is not “nasty, brutish, and short” as envisioned by Thomas Hobbes, but rather, humans instinctively work together and have “the involuntary aspiration...to ‘make the world better for having lived in it’” (Parsons 2017, 8). This is the primary component of mutual aid according to Goldman, which is “the spirit of solidarity [resulting] in the perfection of social harmony -- Anarchism” (1911). The language of solidarity and this mutual aid is seen throughout texts on intersectionality, including texts by hooks (1984). She said, “solidarity is not the same as support. To experience solidarity, we must have a community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite, to build Sisterhood….Solidarity requires sustained, ongoing commitment.” BNNR reflects this in anarchist thinking when Tanenbaum mentions the “commitment to equality and friendship...fostered
egalitarianism and respect, and reinforced mutual knowledge and trust” (2019). This sounds an awful lot like Calderón’s description of how her team works to prevent an oppressive hierarchy from forming, while still keeping “a driver”: by forming them around long-standing friendships that are highly communicative, respectful in that communication, and are built on a smaller scale. Bridges compounded this by adding that hierarchies can be prevented from becoming oppressive by forming “respectful, tight-knit groups that communicate well with transparent decision-making” toward the goal of “recognizing needs.” It’s essential to realize that these decisions are made collectively. While “it’s correct to say people who are marginalized along multiple identities should be seen as folks with expertise and leadership in how to dismantle oppressive systems,” without “co-governance”, the oppressions will simply reform in new ways (Byrd 2021). In anarcha-feminism, this is already seen: “This anarcha-feminist vision, almost similar to the cell-like structure of earlier insurrectionary anarchist groups, emphasized valuing individual contributions in small groups instead of building the large, often authoritarian, and impersonal “revolutionary armies” that many New Leftists and socialist feminists envisioned. To achieve this, anarcha-feminists would build their movement through small affinity groups.” (Tanenbaum 2019).

Some anarchists dislike describing what practical applications of the theory look like, feeling that it will put limitations on what can be possible, yet we have some ideas from Goldman and Parsons. Goldman’s version of anarchism paints a picture of anarchism as a form of a state of nature. It is not inherently anti-structural, but rather, views “organization as the result of natural blending of common interests, brought about through voluntary adhesion” which is only possible “in a society based on voluntary cooperation of productive groups, communities and societies loosely federated together, eventually developing into a free communism, actuated by a solidarity of interests” (Goldman 1911). While I will not argue all the critiques made of anarchism, the practicality is one I must defend. Goldman claims “Anarchism is indeed practical. More than any other idea...it is building and sustaining new life.” This means that any measurable means of replacing oppressive structures with ones that build and sustain unoppressive hierarchical structures can fit within the definition of anarchism. Parsons gives us a more
definite vision of how anarchism can operate, possibly because she is more familiar with intersectional practices as a multi-marginalized person. “Each branch of industry will no doubt have its own organization, regulations, leaders, etc.” but not permanent delegates as they would “establish a power that is certain soon or later to be abused” (Parsons 2017, 3). This is a resounding echo of Byrd’s description of what our society would look like with oppressions removed. This overlap between anarchist thinkers and how those with multi-marginalized identities fight oppression is the main reason the two groups should be working together.

Admittedly, laws and regulations are antithetical to anarchism, especially when taking into consideration Goldman’s words that “statutory regulations, legislative enactments, constitutional provisions, [were] invasive. They never yet induced man to do anything he could and would not do by virtue of his intellect or temperament, nor prevented anything that man was impelled to do by the same dictates” (1911). However, I believe Goldman’s point here is exactly why we need anti-oppressive education systematically implemented at the present moment - to induce people to be empathetic if we can’t prevent them from being impelled to be mean. Does this make anarchism impractical or paradoxical? Not in the least, so long as the agreement of having multi-marginalized individuals as autonomous leaders in policy writing is one that is mutually made.

We could try and have advocacy organizations attempting to implement social education on behalf of who they represent instead, but Strolovitch explains how both member and nonmember organizations often fail to properly advocate for multi-marginalized individuals as it is assumed either another organization will ‘handle things’, or, the issues these multi-marginalized groups face will be resolved by fixing ‘broader’ issues that are seen as more central to the cause. These ‘broad’ issues typically do not actually mean issues that affect the most disadvantaged individuals, and, the action taken is usually less than substantial (2007). This is why education on different perspectives and policy implementation must be done systematically and with multi-marginalized individuals at the forefront. If we were to do this, Bridges says, “we would start considering things around capitalism, environment, social capital, around human condition...”
Anarchism has many branches, but because the main tenet is about the removal of oppressive hierarchies, it is not a stretch to see how by applying intersectionality as a practice, we could achieve anarchism as a societal identity in the US.

**Conclusion**

Anarchism and intersectionality intertwine like two vines growing from the same branch to reach toward ending oppression. As Bridges put it in our interview, “intersectionality and anti-oppression are the one and the same for me.” If we take anarchism to be the progression toward the elimination of oppression, practicing intersectionality is how we get there. The anarchist believes in removing the systems of oppression such as capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy through the practices of intersectionality: education, solidarity, and grassroots organizing. The multi-marginalized practice intersectionality in removing systems of oppression using the philosophies of anarchism: education, mutual aid, and collective decision-making.

While anarchy doesn’t necessarily preclude structure in terms of creating a hierarchy in which people can voluntarily participate, it doesn’t permit a government, which, in our current era of widespread and deadly oppression, may be necessary to educate singularly- and non-marginalized individuals on how they may be participating in oppressing others. Individuals who experience these interlocking oppressions are more likely to develop empathetic educational policies that would lead to the creation of non-oppressive hierarchies, and in effect, the ‘practical example’ of anarchism that the theory has been missing for so long. What this example will look like, I cannot say for sure, but I can say that if they work together, the anarchist thinker and the intersectional practitioner can achieve their common goal of ending oppression.
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