

“Traditional heterosexual education teaches that the bits only go one way, and it does so in the form of a lecture. Well, that was my experience anyway. Maybe yours was different?”

- Jamie Heckert, *Fantasies of an anarchist sex educator*

FANTASIES OF AN ANARCHIST SEX EDUCATOR

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Fantasies of an anarchist sex educator

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Fantasies of an anarchist sex educator¹

Jamie Heckert

Why does one write, if not to put one's pieces together? From the moment we enter a school or church, education chops us into pieces: it teaches us to divorce soul from body and mind from heart. The fishermen of the Colombian coast must be learned doctors of ethics and morality, for they invented the word *sentipensante*, feeling-thinking, to define the language that speaks the truth.

—Eduardo Galeano, *The Book of Embraces*

'A spell', says anarchist, feminist and Witch, Starhawk, 'is a story we tell ourselves that shapes our emotional and psychic world' (Starhawk 2002: 155). She brings attention to the powerful spells cast by corporate media and other authorities in the wake of September 11: stories of fear, of security through control and of the inevitability (and righteousness) of war. Stories we may come to believe and to tell ourselves, perhaps in different forms. Stories that can be resisted. 'The counterspell', she says, 'is simple: tell a different story' (ibid.).

Writing this essay has been an exercise in putting my pieces together, in telling different stories. The casting of these counterspells has been anything but simple. One night, struggling with this process, I wrote in a bedside notebook, 'It is painful to write, to speak. Silence is familiar, if not comfortable. So, too, telling stories that act as cloaks, covering the vulnerability of honest naked flesh. Holding back the flow of words, emotions, life. Disconnecting.' Stories I find easy to tell are simple: they are the stories I learned to tell in order to survive. These stories, simple stories, aren't working for me any more. I crave deeper sustenance, something more than survival. 'The politics worth having, the relationships worth having, demand that we delve still deeper' (Rich 2001a: 39). This delving, argues Adrienne Rich, lies in honesty. And for her, truth is never simple:

There is no 'the truth', 'a truth' – truth is not one thing, or even a system. It is an increasing complexity. The pattern of carpet is a surface. When we looked closely, or when we became weavers, we learned of the tiny multiple threads unseen in the overall pattern, the knots on the underside of the carpet.

(Rich 2001a: 32)

If truth is never simple, neither is learning to weave. To look closely at the patterns of one's own life is to find ways to resist profound forms of psychic domination, to potentially find ways to weave counterspells. To share the stories one finds reading these patterns can be an act of solidarity. That is both my hope in sharing these stories and my experience hearing and reading the stories of others. The stories of people I interviewed for my PhD research (Heckert 2005), stories of violence and desire (e.g. Allison 1993; Dunbar-Ortiz 1998), stories of friends and strangers; these are the stories that help me to imagine my own life (Le Guin 2004a), to cast my own counterspells.

I can relate to the male Latin American poets that Adrienne Rich criticised for writing as if 'the enemy is always outside the self, the struggle somewhere else' (Rich 2001b: 28). It is a practice that no longer sustains me. Now, more than ever, I feel a great affinity with the wisdom born of feminist movement,² that there can be no clear-cut division between the personal and the political:

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Throughout my life somebody has always tried to set the boundaries of who and what I will be allowed to be ... What is common to these boundary lines is that their most destructive power lies in what I can be persuaded to do to myself – the walls of fear, shame, and guilt I can be encouraged to build in my own mind ... I am to hide myself, and hate myself, and never risk exposing what might be true about my life. I have learned through great sorrow that all systems of oppression feed on public silence and private terrorization ... For all of us, it is the public expression of desire that is embattled, any deviation from what we are supposed to want and be, how we are supposed to behave.

(Allison 1995: 117)

In writing the fantasies for this piece, I deepen my acknowledgement of the struggles within as well as those without. In sharing them, I end some of my silence.

Before beginning the sharing, I want to be clear in my agreement with the notion that there is 'no such thing as a true story' (Chödrön 2002: 17; see also, e.g., Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers 1997). (Or, in other words, rather than telling an absolute truth, 'story tells human truth' [Le Guin 2009: 119]). Others present at the events I describe might tell very different stories. I could tell different stories myself. These are the ones I choose to tell today, experiencing the dignity of speaking (only) for myself (Deleuze 1977; Tormey 2006).

I have fantasies of getting in trouble

I find myself waiting for it – the next insult, the next assault. My muscles tighten in preparation, as though I still lived in the house of my father and his drinking, as though I were still in school and a target for violence. I expect strangers, friends and lovers to realise what I imagined others knew – that I'm not good enough, that I'm not doing it right.

I remember walking home from school one day, I must have been ten, and finding a large, solid sheet of ice. I tried to carry it as a shield to protect myself; it was too heavy. Holding it, I could hardly move. I wonder, do my arms and shoulders ache because I'm holding it still?

Does my gut clench because it is still braced for a punch? Or is my belly irritable because I learned not to listen to it? What good were the signals from my body, my belly, my heart, that something wasn't right, when there was so little I could do? Better, it seemed, to ignore them, to fantasise of a better future, of other worlds. The present held little promise.

In the meantime, the tightening of muscles, the holding of breath, the freezing of myself continues, stemming the flow of emotion. Tears halt, fears burrow, fury abides. I focus, instead, on survival. Survival and escape.

The nightmares were intense when I decided to try to stay living in the UK with my new lover, thirteen years ago. I would wake us both up, terrified by visions of police chasing me through the streets. I was sure I wouldn't be allowed to stay. The authorities would know, somehow, that I was dangerous, queer, an anarchist.

I worried, too, when I started working for the council. I waited until I was 'legal', having received the first of many stamps in my passport granting me temporary 'leave to remain'. My new job was going into schools and talking with teenagers about sex. I could just imagine the tabloid headline – SEX CLASSROOM SCANDAL: QUEER FOREIGN ANARCHIST CORRUPTING OUR YOUTH.

Finishing my PhD on anarchism and sexuality, I did not believe I would get it. For so much of my life I've been in trouble for talking about sex, for questioning authority. How could I get rewarded for it now? Even as I prepared to graduate, I had visions of some university hierarch standing up, pointing at me and shouting, 'Anarchist, out!'

Writing this current chapter, I've been afraid, wondering, how will this get me in trouble?

These fantasies aren't surprising, really. I've been in trouble most of my life.

In the microcosm of the tiny Midwestern town of my childhood, I learned that difference was dangerous. Security, I was taught in so many lessons, comes from sameness. An atheist in a Christian town, I was the regular object of evangelical efforts. Why didn't I believe what they believed? When, as a teenager, I played fantasy role-playing games instead of baseball, I was warned of the dangers to my mental health as well as to my soul. When I continued to follow my own desires, rumours spread that I was a Satanist. Intertwined with this were others' anxieties about my gender/sexuality, expressed as something that was wrong with me. I was the one who was *different* (i.e. 'disgusting', 'perverted', 'gay') – an object of both fascination and contempt.

It wasn't just at school, in the so-called public sphere, that I was in trouble. My father abused alcohol when I was growing up. He was a respected member of the community, working in the local furniture store and serving on the city council. I remember once when I was young, watching him shaking hands and smiling with a customer in the store. I didn't understand how anyone could like him. Didn't they know what he was like? I don't know how I expected them to know. I just knew that I was often afraid of him. When he was angry, my mother, brother, sister and I were all potential targets. When he was angry, we were in trouble. When he was angry, it was one of us who was making trouble. He claimed the authority to define the laws, to make judgements and give out punishments. Sameness, in the forms of agreement and obedience, offered some security from his wrath. Our household was a microstate and for the most part I played my part in a vain attempt to evade my father's violence.

Here and in school, I was assessed – in trouble when found wanting, praised when successful/compliant according to the terms of those assessing. Marshall Rosenberg refers to this state that the cultures of my school and home encouraged as 'emotional slavery', in which 'we believe ourselves responsible for the feelings of others. We think we must constantly strive to keep everyone happy. If they don't appear happy, we feel responsible and compelled to do something about it' (Rosenberg 2003: 57).

How did I survive growing up in this patriarchal household, in a small conservative town? Fantasies. One time when my father sent me to fetch him yet another beer from the refrigerator, I shook it ever so slightly. Not enough that it would actually foam all over him when he opened it, but enough that I could imagine it. When it was my turn to set the table for dinner, I gave him the odd plate or piece of cutlery when I had the chance, so that, I fantasised, he would realise he was different and unwanted and would leave us to get on with our lives in peace. I knew that being different made you want to leave. I wanted to leave. I escaped into fantasy novels. My favourites were tales of young men who were different; escaping stigma, they became heroes who saved worlds (Eddings 1982; Feist 1982).

I remember sitting in the principal's office with him, Mr Robinson, and two boys who had bullied me in the playground. We were in elementary school, maybe eight or nine years old. I remember trying to make sense of it, to deal with the pain, through fantasy. I was like Luke Skywalker, you see, and they were like Darth Vader and the evil Emperor. It was a battle of good versus evil, and I, of course, was the good guy.

About twenty years later, I went to my ten-year high school class reunion. I was terrified and had hardly slept the night before. I wanted to meet the people who had become monsters in my head, to see them as real people. And so I met the man whom my very young self had labelled 'evil Emperor'. Even while I was viscerally remembering the feeling of his fist in my gut, I listened eagerly to his criticisms of politics and capitalism. He told me about his industrial workplace in the same small town that we had both grown up in, about how people were suffering. I asked him, 'Why do you think people put up with it?' He said simply, 'Because they are afraid.'

I had another strategy. I was 'smart' (in the terms of schools). While this still got me into trouble, both with my classmates for 'being a geek' and with those teachers whose claims to intellectual authority I challenged, it also 'earned' me some respect. I learned here that different was safer when it meant better. If I couldn't get security from sameness, I could get it from success.

openness. Others might be termed spiritual practices: connecting with the rest of earth through marking the turning of the year, through gardening and gathering wild foods, through taking in the beauty and power of the sea, the forest and the sky, connecting with my embodiment and my capacities for stillness and for motion through swimming, cycling, yoga and chi gung, connecting with my own feelings and desires and those of others through meditation and non-violent communication, accepting the inevitability of death so that I embrace life more fully and with greater appreciation (Batchelor 1998), connecting with other sources of wisdom through the reading of spiritual texts (e.g. Chödrön 2002; Lao Tzu 1997; Starhawk 2005), fantasy novels (e.g. Butler 1993, 2001; Marks 2002; Donaldson 1993; Starhawk 1993) and other stories that offer me different understandings of power and possibilities (Cohn 2007; Le Guin 2009).

I imagine a reader asking, is all of this care of the self meant to be a replacement for action?⁸ As a friend reminded me, 'There are women in California who do *nothing but* take care of themselves.' I want to both offer reassurance and to challenge the question. I'll challenge first: where does the emphasis on *action* or being *active* come from? My thoughts turn to a recent visit to the GUM (genito-urinary medicine) clinic for a check-up, where I was stunned by so much, including the consultant's use of the terms active and passive to describe anal sex between men. I said I preferred to use giving and receiving, thinking of those words as less inscribed with power. (She nodded, writing down the words she preferred.) However, they now remind me of a commonly cited passage from the Bible: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' (Acts 20: 35). This in turn, takes me back to anal sex and what Michael Warner calls 'bottom shame' and the shame-induced risk-taking for men whose 'masculinity is more closely identified with insertive than with receptive anal sex' (Warner 2000: 212). I recognise, for myself, how a prioritisation of *action*, being *active* or an *activist*, is intertwined with a comfort in *giving* rather than receiving, offering care to others more often than accepting care. Again, I am not alone in this (see, e.g., Anonymous 2000; Crisman 1991; Starr 2007). In emphasising practices of connection, and in starting with myself, I become more practised in the mutuality of mutual aid. In starting with myself, I reassure you (and me), that I do not end with myself. I cannot, for my self is relational (MacKenzie and Stoljar 2000): simultaneously social and ecological (e.g. Stevens 2009, 2010). Connection does not take me inside myself (i.e. navel gazing) or 'outside myself' (i.e. depression or disassociation); it allows the outside in and the inside out, blurring any supposed border. It's amoeba sex.

Being my own lover *is* action: a form of erotic direct action. In this way, I increase my susceptibility to pleasure, to connection with others; I want to experience the erotic potential of everyday life. Every day. I don't want to wait for 'after the revolution' to feel joy; indeed, perhaps there is no after. No afterlife, only life. And life, I know, is full of erotic potential. I have tasted it.

Notes

1. This essay is dedicated to my fellow workers on the sexual health team and to each of the young people I worked with over those years. This would not have been written without you. I also want to acknowledge conversations with Richard Cleminson, Liz McGregor, Rowan Cobelli, Liz Kingsnorth, Lisa Fannen, Cloudberry McLean, Sian Sullivan, Kristina Nell Weaver, Anthony McCann, Matt Wilson, Ben Franks, Lloyd Miller, Debbie Cowan, Simon Edney, Alex Jackson, Laurie Heckert, Jason Heckert, Helen Moore, Grant Denkinson, Elizabeth Barner, Jane Heckert, Larry Heckert, Rob Teixeira, Joan Robertson, Diggy Leitch, Michael Gallagher, Ben Tura, Jane Harris, Nicky MacDonald and, of course, Paul Stevens for helping make this essay possible.
2. Following bell hooks (2000), I refer to social movement, rather than maintaining that boundaries can be placed around identifiable 'social movements'.
3. This attitude, a response to fear, changed through a number of events, including organising with a fellow anarchist worker a meeting of tutors (called TAs in North America) to threaten a strike on marking in response to a wage cut for fellow tutors, as well as discovering that others were writing anarchist theory in universities.
4. My father has stopped drinking and retrained as a drug and alcohol counsellor, while Jensen suggests that his has in no way acknowledged the harm he has done.
5. They use the masculine 'guys' purposely here to indicate what I see as the gendered nature of heroics in this case.
6. Anarchist sex education could blur any distinction between prefigurative (Franks 2003; Gordon 2008) or consequentialist ethics (May 1994), which focus on practices that bring about a different (more anarchist) future and an immediatist one focused on experiencing the present differently (e.g. Bey 1991, 1994). Both can apply simultaneously, practising practices relevant to sexual health (again, broadly defined) without necessarily being 'sexual' themselves. Mindfulness, for example, changes one's experience of the present, allowing judgements, thoughts and feelings to be acknowledged and let go of, increasing a sense of connection with oneself. Being deeply present during sex, in my experience, is profoundly pleasurable as well as both self- and other-caring.
7. The pubococcygeus muscle, or PC muscle, links the coccyx (tailbone) with the pubic bone and functions as the floor of the pelvic cavity, supporting the pelvic organs. Kegel exercises, a method for learning to flex and strengthen this muscle, are used to prevent premature ejaculation in men, to improve urinary control and to ease childbirth.
8. I see care of the self as consistent with the central theme of connection, expressed in various ways, throughout anarchist and anarchic politics: as the 'groundless solidarity' and 'affinity of affinities' of anarchism (Day 2005), as the 'politica affectiva' of horizontalism (Sitri 2006) or the 'affective resistance' of autonomous feminism (Shukaitis, Chapter 3), as well as in the shared joys (Shepard 2009) and pains (Plaw 2005) of nurturing community.

During the Christmas/midwinter festive season of 1992, my best friend gave me a copy of Betty Dodson's *Sex for One: The Joy of Selfloving* – a crucial moment of solidarity in my teenage years! An inheritance from feminist consciousness-raising efforts in the US, this book not only affirmed my teenage sex life with myself (including all my fantasies), it encouraged me to be my own lover in every sense of the word.

How better to practise letting go of the State than with myself? How better to be more caring, less controlling, less controlled, than by being a lover to myself?

I want to be clear, here: I'm not suggesting we all just wank our way to revolution. Rather, I'm coming to realise, again and again, that for me to practise anarchy is to care for myself, to listen to myself, to offer compassion to myself. One way of interpreting this is that 'we' should take care of ourselves in order to be more *effective* anarchists: care as a means to an end. This works as far as it goes. I do have more energy to write, to organise events, to participate in meetings the more I take care of myself. This instrumental care seems to me to be less the care of a lover and more the care of a coach or drill sergeant, training myself for revolution with a regime of healthy diet, regular exercise and plenty of rest. The care I want for myself is a means without end, without goals.

Being in touch with myself, touching myself. Letting myself receive the touch, love and appreciation of others. Letting go of the ice shield, the State of disconnection. Being gentle with myself, listening to my body, I learn to feel the pain when my desires are unsatisfied, either in the present or as memories of the past that still come to life. Muscles soften, tears flow. I don't *have* to make it okay – that's what the State does (or tries to do) with its borders and its judgements and its policing (Scott 1998). That's what I do sometimes. That's how I learned to survive. Make it okay so he doesn't get angry. Make it okay so he doesn't hit me. Make it okay so I don't feel the pain. I do not want to smash the State, because I know that I am the State sometimes. It's how I survive. I want to let it go as I develop other ways of relating to myself and the world around me. I can't do that on my own. I need help.

Asking for help is one of the aspects of anarchy I find most difficult to practise. For mutual aid to be truly mutual is to acknowledge vulnerability. Dammit, that's just not how I was raised! And to ask, rather than demand, is to accept that the answer might be 'no'. Hearing and reading feminist criticisms of macho behaviour in anarchist spaces, I know I'm not the only one facing these challenges (e.g. Osterweil 2007; Sullivan 2005, 2007). Stephen Duncombe suggests that this fear of vulnerability haunts 'progressive' politics generally, and, more importantly, can be a source of inspiration:

If we are afraid to publicly recognise and politicise our own desires, how can we hope to speak to those of other people? But if we start to ask the questions of what our needs and desires are, and how a politics might meet them, we just might discover that, lo and behold, *our* needs are the same as *theirs*.

(Duncombe 2007: 84–5)

To make myself, as Foucault suggests, more susceptible to pleasure is, it seems to me, to accept my vulnerability, my ability to be wounded. Suddenly, the challenge of radical social transformation, of letting go of the State, sounds an awful lot like how folk might describe their fears of intimacy: they might get hurt. I might get hurt. Being a coach, drill sergeant, judge, policeman or other 'male in the head' (Holland *et al.* 1998), I push myself to ignore my desires, my needs, my pain. Being my own lover, I'm there to give myself compassion, to listen to myself.

Being my own lover is an ongoing journey, with no fixed answers or correct practices. Walking, I ask questions. In doing so, I look to philosophy less as an intellectualising anaesthetic, as I sometimes do, and more as an ethos or practice of living (May 2005; McWherter 2004), as both a love of knowledge *and* a knowledge of love (Irigaray 2004). As such, it becomes one of many practices of connection in which I am able to find strength in vulnerability, in flexibility, in

This became my key strategy for survival – fantasies of superiority. My 'differences' didn't make me lesser than others, they made me better. The reverse discourse of identity politics I have since rejected (Heckert 2004) was one I embraced in my youth. Homosexuality wasn't a perversion; it was radical, dangerous, *interesting*. My atheism didn't mean I was going to suffer in hell; it was a sign of my superior rationality and intellect – how I would have loved the arrogance of *The God Delusion* (Dawkins 2006). Being in trouble with my dad, well, that meant I wasn't anything like him (I wanted to believe). And being 'good' at school, that meant I could go to college and get out of that town. Then, I fantasised, I would be free.

I dreamed that life would be okay when I got out, as I counted down the days that summer after high school. If I just suffered through this, I'd be okay when I got to college. There, I wouldn't be so different. There, I could succeed. Success, I was taught, brought freedom.

I have fantasies of being an Anarchist Sex Educator

To make a trouble was, within the reigning discourse of my childhood, something that one should never do precisely because that would get one *in* trouble. The rebellion and its reprimand seemed to be caught up in the same terms, a phenomenon that gave rise to my first critical insight into the subtle ruse of power: The prevailing law threatened one with trouble, even put one in trouble, all to keep one out of trouble. Hence, I concluded that trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it.

(Butler 1990: vii)

Modern schools and universities push students in the habits of depersonalised learning, alienation from nature and sexuality, obedience to hierarchy, fear of authority, self-objectification, and chilling competitiveness.

(Evans 1978: 136)

I felt tremendous relief to arrive at Grinnell College. One of the wealthiest educational institutions in United States, due to its early investment in Intel, the college can easily afford the beneficence of scholarships for working-class kids who are 'good enough'. Accepted by this elite institution, I got to hold on to my fantasies of superiority and success. It was, at the same time, a place where I could let go of some of the silences I'd been carrying. I came out as gay (and how!), very quickly coming to think of myself as an activist. I loosened my hold on intelligence as rationality, dropping chemistry for women's studies and atheism for paganism. Success took on new forms.

'If you could be the best at anything, what would it be?' A group of us were sitting in the Stonewall Resource Centre at Grinnell asking each other questions. 'Activist,' I said. 'Ah, a revolutionary!' said Ali. I hadn't thought of it like that before. Yeah, maybe revolutionary. Troublemaker, definitely. It's who I've always been.

Four years before that, I sat on my best friend's bed agreeing that it would be cool to be sex researchers when we grew up. I never thought I really would.

Somehow, I became both: an anarchist sex researcher and educator.

Anarchism seemed so obviously *right* when I met my first anarchist; I was twenty years old at the time, studying 'abroad', in Stirling, Scotland. I was immediately hooked. (And not *just* on him.) It offered visions of other possibilities, a radical critique of the domination I (and so many others) had experienced; it fit with the feminist challenges to hierarchies of gender, class, 'race' and sexuality that I had been eagerly learning about in women's studies classrooms. I was in love.

Studying again in Scotland years later, this time in Edinburgh, I was surprised to find myself writing about anarchism and sexuality. I had thought of anarchism as something I did outside the university, something too dangerous to combine with my research on sexuality.² I tried to keep these fears at bay using a strategy I'd found helpful for many years: I tried to be *right*.

Like many people engaged in struggles for post-capitalist, post-state and post-patriarchal cultures, I was deeply moved and inspired reading Derrick Jensen's autobiographical book *A Language Older than Words* (Jensen 2000). I sobbed as I read his stories of familial violence and as I remembered my own. I came to identify with him and his argument. He evocatively links his experiences of domination with wider patterns: economic, political, ecological, sexual, racial and spiritual. His conclusion: civilisation depends on domination and must be stopped. I was drawn to his arguments in part because they seemed even *more radical* than my own position. I was seduced by this book and thrown into confusion. Maybe *he* was right.

Derrick Jensen wrote of his choice to end all communication with his father, which I respect at the same time as I chose otherwise.⁴ What concerns me more is that Jensen not only gives up on his father, he gives up on a large proportion of humanity. Quoting Viktor Frankl, a survivor of Auschwitz who said, 'There are only two human races – the race of the decent and the race of the indecent people', Jensen continues:

He is right of course. To restate this in terms of this book's exploration: there are those who listen and those who do not; those who value life and those who do not; and those who do not destroy and those who do. The indigenous author Jack Forbes describes those who would destroy as suffering from a literal illness, a virulent and contagious disease he calls *we'tiko*, or cannibal sickness, because those so afflicted consume the lives of others – human and nonhuman – for private purpose or profit, and do so with no giving back of their own lives. There are those who are well, and those who are sick. The distinction really is that stark.

(Jensen 2000: 198)

A line between healthy and sick is one I've been put on the wrong side of too many times to trust any attempt to draw one. However, any concern is quickly brushed aside as the reader is encouraged to identify with the well and the decent:

How can *those of us who are well* learn to respond effectively to those who are not? How can the decent respond to the indecent? If we fail to appreciate and answer this question, those who destroy will in the end cause the cessation of life on this planet, or at least as much of it as they can. The finitude of the planet guarantees that running away is no longer a sufficient response. Those who destroy must be stopped. The question: How?

(Jensen 2000: 198–9, emphasis added)

Being a hero, one of the good guys⁵, being *right*, is a common theme in activist literature like *A Language Older than Words* (see Goldberg 2005), in the survival strategies of 'adult children of alcoholics' (Crisman 1991), in academia and in my own history. While I distrust drawing these lines between the good guys and bad guys, the well and the ill, I still find myself doing it. These are the strategies I've used to survive: 'success' in institutionalised education, silences of emotions and desires that don't fit with being 'good', the sameness of being one of the (good) guys, who are at the same time 'weirdos and freaks' – the activists (Anonymous 2000: 166). While inverting conventional morality (i.e. bad is the new good) has been life saving for me at times, I worry now about its other effects. For one, it can inhibit transformations of consciousness or social relations (see, e.g., Brown 1995; S. Newman 2004). Also, identifying as an outsider has often been a great source of loneliness and isolation for me. Even in spaces with other 'outsiders', I can be afraid of losing my status as an insider among the outsiders; here, too, disciplinary labels abound: liberal, reformist, sell-out. In fear, I can silence myself.

all that such pain may long for – more than revenge – is the chance to be heard into a certain release, recognized into self-overcoming, incited into possibilities for triumphing over, and hence losing, itself. Our challenge, then, would be to configure a radically democratic political culture that can sustain such a project in its midst without being overtaken by it, a challenge that includes guarding against abetting the steady slide of political into therapeutic discourse, even as we acknowledge the elements of suffering and healing we might be negotiating.

(Brown 1995: 74–5)

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Is it anarchism that is 'trapped between a tragic past and an impossible future' or is it me? I could hold on to my anger and pain at my father, at school bullies, at capitalism and Christianity and the State, furious that my needs were/are not met. I could keep trying to make it all right, to create a world where my needs are met (all the while doing so in the name of abstract values, on behalf of others). But I'm tired.

So tired that I find it increasingly difficult to be anti-State. Not that I am pro-State; I want to have more than two choices, to resist the George Bush logic of 'you're either with us or against us' (CNN 2001). I find that logic entirely too easy to turn against myself, to judge myself not good enough, not anarchist enough. Like Landauer or Deleuze and Guattari, I see the State less as an institution that can be smashed and more as a mode of behaviour, of relating. This understanding was accentuated after attending a course on non-violent communication where I learned to see all forms of behaviour as strategies for meeting needs (Rosenberg 2003). And if the State (like capitalism, patriarchy and white supremacy) is a strategy, it is one that I have used and continue to use. It is both a source of my oppression and a resource for my strategies of survival.

I experience meditation as a letting go of thoughts, of feelings, of judgements. I cannot hold on to the stillness; I cannot *make* it happen. All I can do is let go of whatever is not stillness. So, too, mindful sex, alone or with partner(s), is a letting go of all that is not the experiences of connecting with bodies and pleasures.

Perhaps anarchy is similar. I cannot make it happen (and not for lack of trying!). If the State cannot be smashed, maybe it can be let go of, with practice. Only as I taste other possibilities, experience them in the fullness of bodymind, do I learn to let go of the State. Slowly, gently, I am becoming-anarchist (Heckert 2010).

Being my own lover (not just a fantasy)

The artist does at [their] best what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to [themselves] and with that revelation to make freedom real.

(James Baldwin, quoted in Alexander 2005: 18)

i do it for the joy it brings
because i'm a joyful girl
because the world owes me nothing
and we owe each other the world

(Difranco 1996)

Repression takes a mammoth toll on our energy, and also on our sensitivity to the world around us. Repression is not a local anaesthetic. If we won't feel pain, we won't feel much else, either – both loves and losses are less intense, the sky less vivid, pleasure is muted. As a doctor working with Vietnam veterans observed, 'The minds pays for its deadening to the state of our world by giving up its capacity for joy and flexibility.'

(Macy and Brown 1998: 34)

I don't notice that the sky has gone dull (is it a gradual change?) until a profound experience brings me back into a fuller awareness of life. Have you ever experienced that? I've had it a few times, after great sex or with psilocybin, after massage, yoga or sauna, gardening or other connecting experiences. It's such a joy to remember the beauty of the world. How did I ever forget?

Fantasies.

The continual frustration of pleasure as anticipated rather than lived, of learning to find value only in utility (Winnubst 2006); the continual fear of never being 'good enough' (Crisman 1991; Wikipedia, 2008); the continual shame of embodiment in patriarchal cultures (Lisa 2008) and inequality in hierarchical 'democracies' – all mean its switching off is sometimes the best I can imagine doing. My survival strategy of success, an inheritance of 'phallicised whiteness' (Winnubst 2006: 10) and (domestic) violence, takes me 'outside myself' (lang 1992). Caught up in goals and judgements (Success? Failure?), I disconnect again and again from the experience of presence, from the sensations of being. 'The revolutionary is like the frustrated suitor whose single-minded focus remains on wedding and bedding his beloved, failing to take advantage of the pleasures of courting' (Simpson 2004: 20). Depressed and judgemental, from 'demanding the impossible' of myself, I adopt a stance of grumpywarriorcool (starr 2007), holding tightly to my ice shields sure that if I let my guard down others will judge me as harshly as I've come to judge myself. Better to play it cool. Depressed, grumpy anarchist, seeing nothing but domination, I become like Rilke's Panther:

His vision, from the constantly passing bars,
has grown so weary that it cannot hold
anything else. It seems to him there are
a thousand bars; and behind the bars, no world.

(Rilke 1989: 25)

My anarchist fantasies of the end of domination *keep* domination at the very centre of my vision. Central, yet abstracted because the pain is both ignored and held tightly, disconnecting me.

Doing so, I may be once again playing out on an individual level much larger cultural patterns. In an effort to understand why potentially radically liberating impulses transformed into a turning to the State for recognition and legislation (i.e. identity politics), Wendy Brown offers a feminist reading of Nietzsche's account of *ressentiment*, 'the moralising revenge of the powerless' (Brown 1995: 61). Resulting from the suffering of false promises of individual freedom and social equality made by liberal democracies, its effects include 'imaginary revenge' (Nietzsche 1969: 36) targeted toward a constructed enemy who is seen as responsible for the injury of inequality or a lack of freedom. Focusing on the moral outrage and the desire to return injury, the pain of the original injury is 'anaesthetised'. Shaking the beer can. Trying to bring down 'civilisation'. Demands for State protection. These efforts maintain a position of powerlessness, of permanently injured status, offering anaesthetic for the pain of wanting freedom, equality and connection. Whereas,

I can also silence others. Learning from a number of painful lessons where my desire to be right had led to a loss of connection with others, I decided not to take any sessions in schools during the final period of writing up my PhD thesis. I was terrified that it wouldn't be 'good enough' (what if I wasn't right?). I knew I could easily turn sessions into a defence of my argument, being more concerned with my own needs than those of the young people. They didn't need me trying to convince them of the importance of anarchism to the everyday politics/experience of sexuality. Becoming an Anarchist Sex Educator, as I sometimes do, I fall back on the strategy of pointing to everyday domination in the hope that if others see how bad things are, and how good they could be, it will encourage revolution. I'm not alone in finding comfort in this pattern:

[O]ften I intended my teachings to serve as a conduit to radicalization, which I now understand to mean a certain imprisonment that conflates the terms of domination with the essence of life. Similar to the ways in which domination always already confounds our sex with all of who we are, the focus on radicalization always turns our attention to domination.

(Alexander 2005: 8)

Like Jacqui Alexander, I'm concerned about the effects of continuous attention to domination rather than life itself. Is this a source of activist burnout? Of widespread and increasing depression globally? (Of my burnout, my depression?)

Letting go of fantasies of being an Anarchist Sex Educator, I'm faced with new questions. How can sex education *be anarchist*, rather than just a promotion of anarchism?

I have fantasies of anarchist sex education

If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.

(Lilla Watson)

The state is a relationship between human beings, a way by which people relate to one another; and one destroys it by entering into other relationships, by behaving differently to one another.

(Landauer 2005 [1910]: 165)

If anarchism is about changing relationships throughout life, then sex education could be just as much a focus of anarchist practice as G8 summits, poverty or climate change (inasmuch as any of these are really separate). Anarchist ethics of prefiguration and mutual aid, of listening and appreciating difference, seem to me to speak clearly to the challenges of sex education (broadly defined). What effects do various forms of oppression have on our capacities for sexual pleasure, for self-care, for intimacy? More specifically, how do particular patterns of domination in particular times and places affect the capacities of the people involved? What practices shift patterns in consciousness and in relationships, undermining domination, nurturing connection, in particular locations?

Sometimes, filled with despair, I have fantasies that this is impossible in schools. I look at the architecture and see in the courtyards and metal bars the shapes of prisons (Foucault 1977). I hear teachers shouting and bells ringing, demanding order. Order – on whose terms? I wince to recall a guidance teacher who encouraged us to lock the door when in the room with young people to stop any unwanted intrusions, never mind how the young people might feel about this. I remember being furious in another school where young people were subjected to a military recruiter

immediately before our session. In classrooms, notices on ‘appropriate’ behaviour frequently equate respect with obedience. And when a young person asked me for permission to go to the toilet, I thought, ‘How can I support them to feel capable of making their own decisions when it comes to sex when such basic physical needs as eating, drinking, pissing and shitting are scheduled by external authority and exceptions require permission?’ One classroom sign went so far as to say, ‘Unless you have a medical condition, please do not ask permission to use the toilet as refusal may cause offence.’ How can I encourage listening and empathy in an institution where young people receive so little themselves? How can I nurture capacities for equality when it comes to sex when schools naturalise hierarchy? How does anyone expect institutionalised education, with its cultures of assessment, to result in people prepared to express their desires, listen to those of others and work out together, cooperatively, what to do (or not do)? What are the implications of bureaucracy for sexual health? Of spending so much time in human constructed environments? Of boredom?

I’ve heard horror stories of school sex education lessons. The most sickening was when young men told me they had been shown a graphic video of the surgical removal of a cancerous testicle. The use of fear seems to be a common tactic in sex education.

‘Are you saying our school nurse is a terrorist?’

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The experiences in the classroom I remember with the most joy are the ones where we had a connection that touched me. I was not giving it to them, giving them what I knew was good for them, giving them what I decided they needed. I was listening. I was responsive.

Touching. Listening. Responsive. Is this education, or is it sex?

‘Can sex education be practical?’ asked John Wilson (2003) in a controversial article. I say it always already is. My question instead: what is practised?⁶

Or, rather, how might sex education be a practice that changes the present and opens different possibilities for the future?

I have fantasies of erotic education – of learning spaces that let go of judgement, of assessment (how good are you at sex? Are you doing it right? How ‘smart’ are you? Are you man enough, woman enough, straight enough, gay enough? Are you thin enough? Muscular enough? Beautiful enough?); that awaken the senses; that nurture a capacity for joy in living and learning; that nurture an ever-expanding awareness of one’s own embodiment—feelings—thoughts. To profoundly experience both pleasure and pain in all their complexities and flavours, to neither hold too tightly nor be held for long by either, to listen to the needs and desires of other beings as well as to one’s own, to resist the will to dominate or to be dominated, to find the will to connect: these are practices for sex, for life itself.

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Listening could be the place to start. Ursula Le Guin (2004b) contrasts two models of communication. The first is information transfer – from A to B or B to A – which reminds me of the policy speak of ‘delivering a sex education programme’. Like it was a pizza. It’s what Paulo Freire (2000) calls the banking model of education: knowledge is an object, a commodity to be transferred. The second model has more erotic potential: ‘intersubjectivity’, she says, ‘is mutual. It is a *continuous interchange* between two consciousnesses. Instead of an alternation of roles between box A and box B, between active subject and passive object, it is a *continuous intersubjectivity that goes both ways all the time*’ (Le Guin 2004b: 188). Her model for this: amoeba sex. Two bodies linking, opening to each other, giving and receiving of each other (literally, for they are sharing genetic material). Listening and telling. Telling, she reminds us, *is* listening:

The arrogant rationalism, the atheist supremacy, of my youth could not protect me from the dominant Christian values of my cultures. The day a Jehovah’s Witness leaflet came through my door, I saw, to my horror, that *their* vision of heaven was remarkably like *my* ideas of an anarchist future.

Both visions might be seen as utopian projections, imagining a future that contains what the present lacks (Bloch 1986). For Bloch, utopia can act as a method of inspiring social transformation and recognising desires that are not being met. For Hakim Bey, by way of contrast, such visions may be a distraction from enacting those desires. ‘Between tragic Past & impossible Future, anarchism seems to lack a Present – as if afraid to ask itself, here & now, WHAT ARE MY TRUE DESIRES? – & what can I DO before it’s *too late*?’ (Bey 1991: 61). While I have a deep sense of appreciation for Bloch, Bey’s concern speaks strongly to the shock I felt that day. Tracing this thread of anarcho-mysticism to Rilke’s biting critique of the Church helps me understand my fantasies of life after the revolution, of heaven:

The idea that we are sinful and need to be redeemed as a prerequisite for God is more and more repugnant to a heart that has comprehended the earth. Sinning is the most wonderfully roundabout path to God – but why should *they* go wandering who have never left him? The strong, inwardly quivering bridge of the Mediator has meaning only where the abyss between God and us is admitted; but this very abyss is full of the darkness of God; and where someone experiences it, let him [sic] climb down and howl away inside it (that is more necessary than crossing it). Not until we can make even the abyss our dwelling-place will the paradise that we have sent on ahead of us turn around and will everything deeply and fervently of the here-and-now, which the Church embezzled for the Beyond, come back to us.

(Rilke 1989: 332–3)

In my efforts to deny pain, I diminish my capacity to experience pleasure.

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One spring when I was in college, I was cycling through campus when suddenly my front wheel turned sideways and I flew over the handlebar. I picked up my bike, locked it to a signpost on the roadside and went into the nearest building – computing services. I didn’t feel any pain. In the men’s room, I looked in the mirror and was startled by the amount of blood. I tried to clean it up with tissues. Realising it was too much for me to handle, I went to reception and said to the woman working there, who I knew, ‘I think I need to go to the hospital or see a doctor or something, but I’m not sure. I’m kinda confused right now.’ I remember clearly that as soon as she told me, ‘Oda’s coming to take you to the hospital,’ my awareness switched off. Somebody else was taking care of things. I’d broken off my two front teeth and needed my forehead stitched back together again.

Sometimes, switching off is all you can do. It’s a way of adapting, of surviving. In the short term, it can save your life. If it goes on, it can be hard to remember the point of living. While I’ve never been suicidal, I have struggled with bouts of depression. I’ve not always known how to feel the pain inside. From my own memories of domestic (and other) violence to the daily struggles I see around me to the global politics of war and climate change, I feel great pain (Sullivan 2004). To cope, I regularly anaesthetise myself in various ways (moralising, intellectualising or distracting myself, with porn or political theory, television or net surfing, with ideas of ‘success’). And when I do, I end up feeling worse. Numb.

more generally: I find that the more I care for myself, the more I am able to care for others. What other practices might help (young) people (including 'sex educators') cast off the immobilising effects of fear (Lappé and Perkins 2005) and shame (Scheff 1990), to deepen bodily awareness and connection with emotions?

The nomadic creativity of social movements and grassroots cultures offers continuous sources of inspiration for anarchist sex education. What would happen if (young) people were taught queer histories of HIV/AIDS response?

Gay people invented safe sex. We knew that alternatives – monogamy and abstinence – were *unsafe*, unsafe in the latter case because people do not abstain from sex, and if you only tell them just say no, they will have unsafe sex. We were able to invent safe sex because we have always known that sex is not, in an epidemic or not, limited to penetrative sex. Our promiscuity taught us many things, not only about the pleasures of sex, but about the great multiplicity of those pleasures. It is that psychic preparation, that experimentation, that conscious work on our own sexualities that has allowed many of us to change our sexual behaviours ... very quickly and very dramatically.

(Crimp 1987: 252–3)

In what spaces might we speak of queer erotic communities (e.g. Hutchins 2007) as well as the nonsexual practices of connection among LGBTQ folk (Sawicki 2004)?

Of course, anarchist sex education is alive and well within autonomous feminist health groups and networks (see, e.g., Anonymous 2003; Gordon and Griffiths 2007; Griffiths and Gordon 2007), including self-help groups (e.g. Shodini Collective 1997), caressing workshops (Anonymous, 2007), resources for autonomy in pregnancy and childbirth (Fannen 2001), discussions of the politics of menstruation (Lisa 2008), DIY contraception and termination, herbal gynaecology (Nelson 1976), feminist histories of reproductive autonomy (e.g. Federici 2004) and more. Another potential source of inspiration coming out of struggles for social transformation and self-care is SOMA, an anarchist group therapy combining elements of radical psychology, anarchism and capoeira angola developed by Roberto Freire in Brazil to undermine the effects of dictatorship on individuals (see Goia 2008).

Fragments of an anarchist sex education might also be found within more mainstream settings. What elements of mutual aid, of listening, of imagination are already present in popular culture (Duncombe 2007), in health promotion practices (e.g. Nutland *et al.* 2003), in schools, universities and youth clubs? Can they be observed, with these observations offered back as gifts (Graeber 2004)? How can they be nurtured, diverting energy from patterns of domination into patterns of connection and care?

I have fantasies of erotic anarchy

What we must work on, it seems to me, is not so much to liberate our desires but to make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasure.

(Foucault 1989: 310)

Eroticism is exciting, life would be a drab routine without at least that spark. That's the point. Why has all the joy and excitement been concentrated, driven into that one narrow, difficult-to-find alley of human experience, and all the rest laid to waste? There's plenty to go around within the spectrum of our lives.

(Firestone 1979: 147)

This is very similar to how people unite themselves and give each other parts of themselves – inner parts, mental not bodily parts – when they talk and listen. (You can see why I use amoeba sex not human sex as my analogy: in human hetero sex, the bits only go one way. Human hetero sex is more like a lecture than a conversation. Amoeba sex is truly mutual because amoebas have no gender and no hierarchy. I have no opinion on whether amoeba sex or human sex is more fun. We might have the edge, because we have nerve endings, but who knows?)

(Le Guin 2004b: 189)

Traditional heterosex education teaches that the bits only go one way, and it does so in the form of a lecture. Well, that was my experience anyway. Maybe yours was different?

Anarchic sex education might invite the possibility that human sex could be more like amoeba sex – with (many) genders *and* with nerve endings! Anarchic sex education might be like amoeba sex, an amoeba orgy in the classroom (or in a social centre or gathering, in the pub or around the kitchen table). Not a worker delivering a pizza: a group of people making a pizza together, or even a group planning to make a pizza, while open to the possibility that it may turn into something else entirely.

But, you might say, a classroom is not like a social centre. It is a space in a hierarchical institution, a place of discipline and punishment. Maybe you remember some of the pain you experienced in school. You're right, anyway. A classroom is different. Usually.

The architecture doesn't demand authoritarian education. Institutions don't force obedience; they can't. Resistance is constrained through cajoling and rewards or threat of trouble, but it never disappears. 'Where there is power, there is resistance' (Foucault 1990: 95; see also Scott 1990). With the help of an anarchic facilitator and the willingness of a group of young people (ideally a self-selected affinity group with an ethic of free association – everyone *wants* to be there, with each other), a classroom can become a temporary autonomous zone (Bey 1991), a space for an erotic amoeba orgy when before and after it may host (more or less) orderly rows of 'students', with a 'teacher' giving it to them.

I remember clearly a moment in a school last year. It was early in a session when the group I was working with went silent. 'This isn't what you expected, is it?' I said to them. One young man looked at me and said, 'In a way, it's what we wanted. I thought we wouldn't be allowed to laugh.' 'That would suck,' I responded without thinking. 'Yeah,' he said, looking a little stunned, 'that would suck.'

What if it had been okay for him to cry, too?

let tears come
so we can really
laugh together
carve out spaces
to dream of things better she said
than this she said

(claque 2002)

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Teenagers are always in trouble. In another school session several years ago, a discussion with a group of young men on the topic of homosexuality helped me understand this. They said that they didn't want to act homophobic, but if they didn't, then they would get called gay themselves. We talked about how those things weren't separate, that by continuing to police themselves and each other they were participating in the creation of a policed environment. They were trapped in a cycle and struggled to imagine doing things differently. I asked, 'Can you talk about it?' One replied, 'No, we can't.'

I remember one of my undergraduate psychology lecturers saying that homophobia was a pathology; it's not *us* who are sick, it's *them*. I cheered with others, at the time. After years of working with young men, I see homophobia, the fear of homosexuality, as something to be listened to. It's okay to be afraid. It's okay to be angry. It's okay to *feel* anything. The question for me is, how can each of us learn to take responsibility for our own feelings, to let go of a sense of responsibility for the feelings of others (Rosenberg 2003)?

My fantasy of the school as prison, as a space antithetical to sexual health, comes in part from the pain and anger I feel remembering particular experiences I've had in schools and my great love of autonomy and equality. I also experience profound empathy for the anger I've heard from young people when they talk about their schooling. It's not the only story I could tell. I've also been inspired by the care I've seen teachers express for young people. I remember in particular how appreciative and supportive teachers in one of the Catholic schools were, aware of the challenges of our negotiating entry to the school (not always successfully). They knew how popular we were with the students and I had the impression that they genuinely cared for young people and hoped that they might experience sexual well-being and caring relationships. I am both moved by their care and pained by the patterns of control they seem to uphold in the school.

Teachers, too, are afraid of getting into trouble. After a conference talk advocating anarchism as a source of inspiration for sex education, one schoolteacher said she would love to do this, but how? Parents would be upset.

Maybe parents and teachers need to be listened to, too. Could this be one aspect of anarchist community organising?

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Sessions I did in schools always included space for the young people to sit in small groups and to write questions they may have had about sex, sexuality and/or relationships. I was frequently amazed and inspired by the depth and variety of questions asked. Looking over eight years worth of collected questions, I see some interesting patterns. Young men, for example, frequently wrote questions like 'How many positions are there?' and 'What's the best position?' Safe questions in a disciplinary culture: quantify, evaluate. Questions that mimic, too, the language of men's lifestyle magazines, with their emphasis on (sexual) performance and managerialism (Tyler 2004).

At the same time, I hear something else in these questions – a desire to develop erotic imaginations.

Here, counterspells may be cast. When the telling of different stories is a listening, responsive to the needs of others as well as honestly recognising one's own needs, it is a powerful act of solidarity. (If not, it may be an imposition, a violation.) I sometimes told the story about the young men who didn't want to be homophobic to men in other schools. A deeply attentive silence was a common response.

I smile, remembering a session in a Catholic school where a young woman exclaimed, 'Oh!' when I hoped for an opening of imaginations, inviting a breakdown of heteronormative divisions between 'foreplay' and 'real sex' by discussing sex between women and the possibilities of pleasure without penetration (see, e.g., Albury 2002; Chalker 2000; Dodson 1987; F. Newman 2004).

Similarly, young men often loved stories focusing on techniques for pleasure, offering alternatives to the medicalised and reproduction-oriented narratives of most sex education. In response to their questions, we discussed techniques for slowing ejaculation and prolonging pleasure (i.e. slower breathing, condom use, squeezing the base of the cock, gently tugging the balls back down and changing activities). Learning Kegel exercises for their PC muscles was also pretty popular ('for next time you're bored in Maths class'). More fraught with young men were explorations of the notion that penetrative pleasures may not only be a one-way street, even in heterosexual relationships (Morin 1998). (Even when discussions were emotionally challenging, as they often were, young men wrote appreciatively of sessions on evaluation forms.)

When young people repeated stories of the evolutionary imperatives of heterosexuality and monogamy, stories I told of the sexual habits and radically egalitarian social organisation of bonobos, of the MMF (male-male-female) triad of swans I saw on a Channel 4 documentary, or of

the vast diversity of what we might call sexuality in human cultures around the world and throughout history often excited discussion. Many of the young people also appreciated opening up discussions about the relationship between health and hierarchy (see, e.g., Marmot 2004; Wilkinson 2001), particularly when these were grounded in the concrete experiences of their education and current or future employment.

One could also tell stories of erotic connections between people that were not necessarily genitally focused, opening imaginations to other possibilities in a hypersexual culture (see, e.g., Alexander, Chapter 2). I could tell, for example, the story a friend my age told me of remembering the joy of kissing for hours when he was a teenager. Rather than advocating an authoritarian, not to mention unrealistic, notion of celibacy, such stories might help young people imagine (and practice!) negotiating their own ideas of what constitutes sex, including slow sex (Honoré 2005), no sex (e.g. Packer 2002) and/or safer sex. 'Erika', one of the women I interviewed for my PhD research, described how learning to say no to sex was a crucial part of her healing after childhood sexual abuse (see also Haines 1999):

My first really sexual experience was to decide not to have sex. To just say 'no' to sex and it came out of fear and out of confusion and out of all sorts of shit but actually it was really affirming and sexual and made me feel really sexy because I realised that I couldn't really say 'yes' to sex without knowing what it was like to say 'no.' I'm quite choosy about sex now. I very rarely enter into sex unless I've got a clear inkling that its going to be good because I'm not interested in any sex that's any less than like really, really good. I don't want boring sex anymore. I don't want any of that, or guilt sex or kind of street cred sex or ... I don't want any of that. I'm not interested. I think that's one of things that I can't change, is that ... that was the beginning of my sex life. I can't do anything about that and what I can do is just make sure that its really good now, which I do.

(Erika, in Heckert 2005: 145)

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Anarchist sex education might also involve sharing skills of deconstructing stories as an act of solidarity. Bronwyn Davies described how she did this with children in a primary school:

[C]hildren can be introduced to the possibility, not of learning the culture, or new aspects of it, as passive recipients, but as producers of culture, as writers and readers who make themselves and are made within the discourses available to them. It allows them to see the intersection between themselves as fictions (albeit intensely experienced fictions) and the fictions of their culture – which are constantly being (re)spoken, (re)written and (re)lived

(Davies 1993: 2)

Imagine teenagers, and older adults, learning to deconstruct the dominant sexual stories of their cultures! What shifts might occur in the classed, racialised and gendered power relationships of teenage sexuality, where young men engage critically with pornography and young women take apart the messages in lifestyle magazines (and vice versa!)? What could happen if more people questioned the disciplinary nature of state-sponsored sexual health materials? Could this be another route to becoming 'protagonists', as people in the popular movements of Argentina refer to themselves (Sitrin 2006; see also Johnstone 2010)?

Finally, imagination comes from a flexibility and openness not only of the mind, but also of the heart, of the body, as they are inseparable. Learning (and practising!) non-violent communication (NVC) improved my ability to connect emotionally with the young people I was working with, helping me let go of the security I find in intellectualisation. This applies to taking care of myself