

# Create Community

Be present

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2023

a review of

*On Community: Field Notes #8* by Casey Plett. Biblioasis, 2023

Casey Plett's new book, *On Community*, weaves a nexus of themes and concepts, including compassion, needs, the pleasure of sharing coffee, the mutual support queers and transsexuals provide, the power of the group, and an ongoing space of encounter.

While Plett has been involved with activist communities, in this book she also locates herself as a cultural organizer. This distinction between cultural organizer versus activist is useful. Even if activists and community organizers share similar politics, activism in community often looks different than cultural organizing work. Within *On Community*, Plett views her life experiences that cannot be characterized as activism through a cultural organizing lens.

She draws such lessons from both mistakes and successes of earlier community experiences that have shaped her: Mennonite heritage and upbringing, trans literary circles, trans lady picnics, friends hanging out at Tim Horton's, the publishing industry, her collective house, online forums, social media networks, and the home neighborhood bar down the street.

While this is not explicitly an anarchist or anti-authoritarian text, Plett consistently critiques how violent hierarchism can sneak into allegedly liberatory communities. Through dry irony, she uses the theme of freedom to contextualize how the 2022 Freedom Convoy—a far right coalition of anti-vaccine-mandate activists, QAnon, Christian nationalists, Islamophobes, Nazis, and Confederate sympathizers—terrorized Canadian cities. Up to a thousand vehicles and 18,000 Freedom Convoy demonstrators a day targeted downtown Ottawa. Despite their vile-ness and hatred expressed, Plett witnessed some eerie similarities between them and what her friends festively like to do in the streets, including rowdy street parties and giving out food.

Some claim that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused horseshoeing, where the extreme left and right ideas come to resemble each other. But Plett does not believe in horseshoe theory. On the surface, there was similarity between the alt-right adopting liberal, pro-choice chants like "My Body, My Choice," as an anti-vaxxing slogan and some leftists and anarchists opposing mandatory vaccinations and mask wearing as extending government totalitarianism. But the two approaches were not really close to each other. The alt-right emphasized individual separateness, while those who were against mandatory regulations worried about state interference with community cooperation.

While suffering is enmeshed in both the far-right disregard for social solidarity and leftist dependence on state-oriented positions, anarchists and anti-authoritarians focus on concern for others and oneself as crucial to social life. We should reject the horseshoe theory's claim that the two approaches are close to each other.

Such a belief would mean that a white supremacist citywide shutdown deployed by the Convoyers is the same urban obstruction as a Black and Brown uprising over police brutality and structural racism. Freedom is central here. What the Convoyers considered freedom and the lack of freedom they imposed on the residents of Ottawa is telling. Uprisings coming from within cities and among those oppressed and marginalized, lead to more freedom.

Plett points out that accountability processes she experienced during her involvement in an array of non-religious communities closely mirrored the culture of Mennonite churches.

Plett recounts a Mennonite community dynamic, how when a church member has legal issues and was under carceral scrutiny, police let them be when church elders said the phrase, “We’ll handle it in the church.” When accountability processes occur using restorative justice outside of carceral systems (and Plett is not pro-cop), she similarly hears in her mind, “We’ll handle it in the church.”

How many times have anarchist and non-authoritarian communities reproduced this churchlike inwards-looking mentality, that accountability occurs exclusively within one common community as opposed to among overlapping communities?

This expansive perspective as a cultural organizer makes *On Community* a helpful read for anarchists pointedly enmeshed in what can become a demand for correct ideology, action, and behavior.

The power of the group always has inherent hierarchism and power differentials, whether it is a small trans literary press or an affinity group organizing against the Freedom Convoy. Internalized ways of thinking based in community pressure are no different. As we integrate collectivist approaches and shared ideologies to better care for one another, we must look for the ways we reproduce hierarchy unconsciously.

Plett’s theoretical offering within *On Community* is an approach she calls “unbifurcation.” Instead of creating poles about communities as morally good and bad, unbifurcation helps one name how a community as a group, culture, or circle is both real and imagined, intangible and specific, limiting and freeing, liberating and hierarchical, comforting and disruptive—none of these qualities can be disentangled.

The alienation of people from each other caused by capitalism, societal stratification, and their vacuousness are integral to the imagined nation that creates state cohesion. Whether that is alienation on anonymous street corners or alienation in neighborhoods where people have no connection, this vacuous feeling cannot be separated from why people become nationalistic or oppose nationalism.

Resisting vacuousness is not just radical; it is also at the heart of nationalism like that of the Freedom Convoy. When we unbifurcate vacuousness, we can see how the same feeling is motivating radicals to resist the capitalist emptiness of North America just as nationalists feel vacuousness and cling to hurtful ideologies and practices under freedom’s guise to fill lives with meaning.

Shared intangible feelings of emptiness produce drastically different concrete realities of radical mutual support versus alt-right militant individualism. Unbifurcation is a piercing yet stabilizing way of thinking for anarchists and anti-authoritarians to implement in our communities, to name our apparent community realities alongside harder-to-name aspects undergirding group cohesion.

With earthy and accessible language, Plett avoids abstraction for the sake of exploring what is tangible in her life. Concluding with a list of truths, she outlines how communities need 1) to embrace the private and the public, 2) to honor serendipity and labor, 3) to explicitly define their capacities and limits, 4) to examine the uncomfortable, 5) to strive for openness, and 6) to resist the presentism (the idea that a current, static moment is the predetermined outcome of history).

This is a handy guideline for anarchists struggling with issues regarding community, an approach that encourages us to reflect on our behavior. When stuck in community conflict or growing pains, turning to a distinct approach created outside of one’s community can provide fresh perspective.

A theme Plett explores consistently but does not name within her nexus of community is memory. She gestures to such with her concluding critique of presentism. She explores her memory to derive these community truths, how a lived experience in one moment was not truer than her memory about what that community moment over time eventually meant. “Don’t give up on it. Don’t give up on this stuff,” Casey Plett says at the end of *On Community*.

Community conflict or burnout may feel all-consuming, but that is not the only reality happening in a moment. There is more to that stultifying feeling than how one feels trapped in a present moment. Time and memory can alter that felt community experience. They may even rip away the cloak of presentism to reveal a different inter-connective flow.

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