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Dis-orientation, dis-epistemology and abolition

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Abstract

This paper is a brief reflection on Ami Harbin's work *Disorientation and Moral Life* and its relation to epistemology, especially in the context of abolition, and more specifically prison abolition and ways of not knowing I term dis-epistemology. It asks: How does being disoriented lead one to new knowledge or/and to being humbled (tenderized) about not knowing? How can not knowing aid in liberatory struggles, in alleviating oppression or even in being in community with like-minded people in an ethical manner?

Keywords: epistemology; activism; abolition

What is the relation between knowledge and orientation? How does being disoriented lead one to new knowledge or/and to being humbled (tenderized) about not knowing? How can not knowing aid in liberatory struggles, in alleviating oppression or even in being in community with like-minded people in an ethical manner? These are some of the questions that Ami Harbin's *Disorientation and Moral Life* brought up for me and which I explore below, using prison abolition as one brief example.

First, it is important to understand Harbin's specific definition of disorientation, as "temporarily extended, major life experiences that make it difficult for individuals to know how to go on" (2016, 2). In other words, it is about experiencing serious (prolonged and major) disruption to one's life so that one does not know what to do. The hope generated by Harbin's analysis, or my interpretation of it, is that these experiences of disorientation, although often unpleasant and jarring, can also be productive. In essence, these unpredictable experiences of not knowing how to go on have the capacity (not always realized and certainly not romanticized by Harbin) to teach us about how to live responsibly in changing circumstances. It is this connection between epistemology and disorientation (or knowing and not knowing how to go on) that offers a rich point of analysis, one

[1] This essay was part of a forum on Ami Harbin's *Disorientation and Moral Life*. I thank Alexis Shotwell and Ami Harbin for inviting me to take part in it.

which I believe can aid in conceptualizing activism in our current unpredictable and disorienting times.

Harbin's discussion of the connection between consciousness and action is especially illuminating for these purposes. In activist circles we often talk about the need to create awareness around specific injustices (for example, within the prison abolition arena to make people aware of the project of mass incarceration and its effects; or for those who know about mass incarceration, to understand the racist, gendered, racial capitalist, and ableist logics of incarceration and segregation, often discussed through the prism of the prison-industrial complex). But once people are aware of these injustices, once they know, what does this knowledge do?[2] In the examples that Harbin puts forward, especially for those "living against the grain" (116–117)—those who do not fit societal norms—"the generation of awareness does not override their deep uncertainty about how to go on" (89). This is because, perhaps contrary to popular opinion, awareness can go hand in hand with, and is not the opposite of, disorientation. Feminist consciousness-raising, being one of Harbin's examples, can also reorient and potentially lead to moral resolve, resulting in action (sometimes political action). But these instances of disorientation don't *necessarily* lead to political action, moral resolve, or action. As Harbin explains, gaining awareness (in feminist classrooms, understanding racism, etc.) is more likely to lead to ethical action, but it does not necessarily mean it will. Furthermore, even after people become aware, they may still be disoriented, not knowing how to go on.

The focus here, on those living against the grain or on individuals subjected to oppressive structures, seems apt. This is because such "affect aliens" (as Ahmed [2010] calls them/us) are more likely to experience a kind of double consciousness (discussed beautifully by Dorothy Smith [1987] as bifurcated consciousness). As Harbin and other feminist philosophers explain, those in positions of privilege don't just lack awareness about oppression but actually exhibit active denial of this oppression and its effects, a kind of refusal to know. I would push this analysis a bit further and suggest that some people—especially those in privileged positions—know and are aware of inequality but perceive inequity and oppression as just (e.g., poor people are needed as a category to maintain capitalism; people are in prison because they are perceived to be criminals or made bad decisions, but the system itself is just).

So what is the value of knowledge of oppression, of being aware or of disorientation more generally (since disorientations don't always lead to awareness or to political action)? Why am I suggesting, following Harbin, that disorientations

[2] Harkening back to Sedgwick's (2003) illustrious dilemma in her discussion of reparative reading

are useful to activism? The answer is that disorientation can be productive in creating not just specific new knowledge but a different *relationship with knowledge*, and with the inability to know 'how to go on.' This inability, this disorientation, this unfamiliarity, can be harnessed as a potential tool for liberation in the form of epistemic humility. The important intervention that Harbin's book makes is to establish the insightful connections between disorientation, ethics, and epistemology. Here Harbin differentiates between "aha" moments of reorientation gained by new knowledge or awareness (referred to as moments that "click") and moments that make us feel both more aware and less conclusive, which can lead to epistemic humility. In *The Epistemology of Resistance* (2013), José Medina suggests: "Having a humble and self-questioning attitude toward one's cognitive repertoire can lead to many epistemic achievements and advantages: qualifying one's beliefs and making finer-grained discriminations; identifying one's cognitive gaps and what it would take to fill them; being able to formulate questions and doubts for oneself and others; and so on" (43). In other words, connecting Medina's and Harbin's discussions together, epistemic humility is the process of knowing what you don't know and of maintaining humility about the knowledge you do have, especially in regards to others' experiences.

This sense of epistemic humility seems to me to be a crucial aspect of ethical political action. Disorientation that leads not only to reorientation but also to understanding what we *don't know* (especially about oppression) seems crucial to any coalition building and sustaining of social movements. Relatedly and perhaps more crucially, *not knowing how to go on* (Harbin's definition of disorientation) can be a powerful basis for ethical political action, contrary to common logic and common practice. Such disorientations can alter not only the content of our knowledge but the way we gain it and what we think knowledge is.

Here I would like to show how these insights might be relevant and useful in the context of carceral abolition. By carceral abolition I am referring to the myriad movements and frameworks that call for abolition of penal and carceral spaces and logics (Chapman, Carey, and Ben-Moshe 2014). The below examples refer mostly to perspectives emanating from activists in prison/penal abolition. Abolitionary (or "fugitive," in the words of Harney and Moten [2013]) knowledge originates from and takes into account those who are most affected by State violence and capture. And abolition, of course, emerged from the discourse of the abolition of slavery.

What I want to emphasize is that prison or carceral abolition is not only a political movement but also a specific epistemology that produces an ethical position, one which resonates with the kind of disorientating (or jarring) ways of knowing that require or lead to epistemic humility (not knowing what to do or how to go on). I suggest that abolition as a radical epistemology could be construed in two ways—as a counter epistemology, and as an epistemology that produces

specific *forms* (not just contents) of knowledge. In the first instance, one can view abolition as a specific epistemology, one that is counter hegemonic (see Gramsci 1992). It counters the hegemonic discourse about the need to segregate others in the name of punishment, treatment, or safety (of themselves or the people who might encounter them/us).

I propose that in its second sense, as an epistemology that produces specific forms of knowledge, abolition facilitates other ways of knowing. I call this dis-epistemology, by which I mean *letting go of attachment to certain ways of knowing*. Dis-epistemology denotes letting go of the idea that anyone can have a definitive pathway for knowing how to rid ourselves of carceral logics. It is this attachment to the idea of knowing and *needing to know* everything that is part of knowledge and affective economies that maintain carceral logics. Abolition is about letting go of attachments to forms of knowledge that rely on certainty (what are the definitive consequences of doing or not doing) and expertise (tell us what should be done) as well as specific demands for futurity (clairvoyance—what would happen), as I discuss more fully elsewhere.[3] According to Harbin's analysis, this "missing" knowledge of what to do, due to the jarring experience of disorientation, cannot be resolved by solely gaining new knowledge about the condition at hand; it also requires a moral positioning and epistemic humility.

Abolition efforts are often described as not being prescriptive and not offering specific solutions and therefore as being not useful. Abolitionists work on a case-by-case basis in their campaigns, research, and calls for action. They are often in a position of not knowing what to do (the knee-jerk reaction of "lock her up"' as a catchall solution for harm is critiqued heavily by abolitionists, as are 'one size fits all' answers to harm or healing). Some opponents (be they progressives who believe in reform or those wanting to maintain the status quo) posit this stance as, "If you can't offer a specific solution, then you are part of the problem." But I want to suggest, following Harbin, that this tenderizing effect and its resulting epistemic humility can actually be conceptualized as a strength of abolition. As Harbin discusses: "What gets tenderized by the particular disorientations discussed here are practices of easily embodying the habits and expectations individuals have learned, shared, and firmed up in the past. The language of changing habits and changing expectations helps us understand what is required to allow for these shifts—getting below the level of individuals' decisions, to the level of unlearning. When expectations are unsettled, individuals can come to embody social norms and practiced habits of interaction differently, in ways more responsive to the ways the

[3] In my forthcoming book, *Politics of (En)Closure: Deinstitutionalization, Prison Abolition and Disability* (University of Minnesota Press), I develop this idea more fully.

fragility, relationality, and nonideal realities of the world affect lives" (120). These tenderizing effects of unlearning are a part of, and not counter to, abolition as a dis-epistemology.

For example, recall recent critiques of the Black Lives Matter movement(s). One prevailing strand can be found in a recent (Wasow 2016) online op-ed titled "How to Go From #BlackLivesMatter to #BlackPolicyMatters." The subheading reads, "Instead of demanding a series of changes, we should focus on one achievable reform that could significantly reduce police violence and lead the way for other policy changes." I am offering this op-ed as an example of misrecognizing the value of insurgent decentralized activism and the kind of ethical stance it promotes based on dis-epistemology (disorientation and epistemic humility). Under the framework espoused by such critics, 'reform,' 'achievable,' 'reduction,' and 'policy' are the (only) desired goals and are viewed as the (only) means of making 'real' social change (as the subheading of the article suggests). But abolition is not about prescriptive solutions, as decisions in one case will not work in another, which is challenging for doing activist work, especially on a mass scale. As a (dis)epistemology and an ethical stance, abolition politics invites us to abandon our attachment to definitive types of knowing and especially to knowing all(s).

In his groundbreaking work, Thomas Mathiesen conceptualizes abolition as an alternative in the making: "The alternative lies in the unfinished, in the sketch, in what is not yet fully existing" (Mathiesen 1974, 1). Abolition takes place when one breaks with the established order and simultaneously breaks new ground. Abolition therefore, by definition, cannot wait for a future constellation when appropriate alternatives are already in place. This is inherently impossible, as Mathiesen suggests, because alternatives cannot come from living in the existing order, but from a process of change that will come as a result of a transition from it. According to Mathiesen, abolition is triggered by making people aware of the necessary dilemma they are faced with—continuing with the existing order with some changes (i.e., reform) or transitioning to something unknown. This is tied in with the connection Harbin makes between ethical positioning, moral resolve, and the tenderizing effects of disorientation, especially epistemic humility. As Harbin puts it: "One way in which awareness of contingent oppressive norms and political complexity can be morally or politically productive even without generating moral resolve is by allowing individuals to relate differently to others and themselves as knowers" (91).

The goal of carceral abolition, as I alluded to earlier, is to rid ourselves of carceral locales, which will require resolute action and moral resolve, the pushing and the steps needed to shutter carceral enclosures (such as specific campaigns in the spirit of 'no new jails' or prison building moratoria, as well as steps towards decriminalization of a host of currently punishable deeds). But carceral abolition is

also (and some abolitionists might say more importantly) about ridding ourselves of carceral logics. It's about building a society in which caging and segregating people for wrongdoings would be nonsensical. Abolition necessitates creating different ways of understanding and responding to harm, and therefore requires epistemic humility of the kind Harbin discusses.

The question becomes not "what is the best alternative" in its final formulation, but how this new order shall begin from the old. In this sense a question that emerges from the "unfinished" as alternative, is how to maintain it as such, a sketch, not a final result but a process (Mathiesen 1974). It is precisely for this reason that Mathiesen's work has often been criticized for lacking any concrete suggestions for penology or even activism, and therefore perceived as abstract and detached from specific activist and policy stances. But reclaiming abolition as dis-epistemology, with its lack of certainty, would solidify abolition as fashioning new ways of envisioning the world and opening up opportunities that are not closed off by readymade prescriptions.

This notion of nonabsolute solutions to social injustice comes from an understanding of the open approach needed to oppose such large and changing terrain. If the issue itself is multifaceted, the solution to it can't be one-dimensional, and the tools to counter it are also varied. In abolition this is exhibited in the tension between reformist approaches (improving education and health care for those incarcerated, for example) and abolitionary approaches. Harbin discusses this tension as one example of encountering injustice in ways that require "both/and" actions. For those living against the grain, those marginalized in current systems of power, these are survival techniques coming out of the kind of bifurcated consciousness discussed earlier.

The tension between reform and abolition is a key characteristic of the penal/prison abolitionist stance, and there is no agreement as to how to resolve it. The movement is diverse and ranges from calls for focusing on the present circumstances of prisoners and advocating for gradual decarceration (as described by the attrition model by Knopp et al. 1976), to those who contend that any type of reform would lead to the growth of the prison-industrial complex and should be avoided by activists (see Davis 2011; Knopp et al. 1976; Mathiesen 1974). But pragmatism and a vision for the future of a non-carceral society are not necessarily binary opposites, especially through the duality of the both/and approach that Harbin suggests.

Harbin also draws on the work of Leanne Simpson, who discuses indigenous resurgence as connecting with generations of ancestral indigenous communities, and therefore as not a linear movement toward a specific goal. Because colonialism is still at play and is in flux—and I agree here with scholar/activists who reject notions of Indian removal and genocide as being in past tense but instead see it as a

structure and not an event (see Wolfe 2006 and Kauanui 2016)—creating strong indigenous communities and fighting against colonialism is therefore a constant process and requires constant redevelopment of ways to both resist and build. A precolonial world cannot be achieved since the damage has already taken place. However, even the goal of decolonization (by being in or supporting indigenous communities reclaiming land, resources, knowledge, and ways of being) is a tenuous future-oriented vision, more than it is a goal per se. In other words, the world we struggle to decolonize is already tainted by colonialism, and therefore this struggle necessitates constant questioning and shifting strategies and frameworks in unpredictable ways, a process Harbin discusses as "doubling back."

This sense of urgency enables abolitionism, as utopian epistemology, to become a model for political activity in the here and now, with an idea of the future. This is the concept of becoming, instead of being, or of potentiality, as opposed to possibility. For Agamben (1999), potentiality differs from possibility, which is something that might happen in the future; while potentiality represents the immanent, that which is present but not fully manifested yet. Abolitionists strive towards a non-carceral society in the here and now (where systems of incarceration and its logics are still present) but with glimpses towards such a world, for example, within the Platform for Black Lives with its push for reparations, with approaches to mental healing that go beyond state interventions, and within successful campaigns to stop any and all new jails (whether they are gender-responsive, green, mental health focused, or not).

Translating the usefulness of disorientation to the level of activism will necessitate building new relationships and ways of reacting and connecting to each other, often without having a clear or existing model as to how to do so. It might therefore enable a sense of humility and acceptance of this fact of not knowing and not having a clear blueprint for change. Even if one had a specific solution to a social problem, Harbin reminds us, following longtime activist Grace Lee Boggs, it might not work in a different locale or context.[4] This may lead to further disorientation, but again, this sense of not knowing how to go on can actually be beneficial as it leads to epistemic humility and further experimentation in the here and now in order to reach a different then and there (borrowing from the late queer studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz 2009).

[4] As was the case in Detroit, where Grace Lee and Jimmy Boggs were major engines for change for many decades. Harbin, as a current Detroit resident herself, is obviously inspired by and continues in their tradition. For more on their incredible work, see http://boggscenter.org/.

My argument here is not to suggest that there is no possible answer to the question of what to do and how to go on in the context of mass incarceration or carceral logics more broadly. Quite the opposite, I want to suggest that there are perhaps infinite answers to this question, but they are made invisible in our current paradigms (of justice or rehabilitation, for example). Like Scott Kurashige suggests, following and taking the lead from James and Grace Lee Boggs, "We must move toward the future lacking a clear-cut blueprint of what is to be done" (quoted in Harbin 125). I would amend this powerful refrain to exclude the word 'must,' as I think the kind of vision offered by the Boggses is by definition nonprescriptive (no absolute suggestion is given). The Boggses do not tell us what we must do, which makes the need for "carrying with us a shared sense of the awareness, values, methods, and relationship necessary to navigate these uncharted waters" (125), as Kurashige further suggests, even more essential. This is the hopeful potential of analyzing and cultivating the power of disorientation, if we heed Harbin's illuminating analysis.

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