



Joyful Militancy: Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times

Carla Bergman , Nick Montgomery , Hari Alluri (Introduction)

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"Absolutely what we need in these days of spreading gloom." —John Holloway, author of *Crack Capitalism*

"A guide to a fulfilling militant life." —Michael Hardt, co-author of *Assembly*

"Rigid radicalism" is the congealed and debilitating practices that suck life and inspiration from the fight for a better world. *Joyful Militancy* investigates how fear, self-righteousness, and moralism infiltrate and take root within liberation movements, what to do about them, and ultimately how tenderness and vulnerability can thrive alongside fierce militant commitment.

Carla Bergman co-edited *Stay Solid: A Radical Handbook For Youth*.

Nick Montgomery is an organizer and writer currently at Queen's University.

Joyful Militancy: Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times Details

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Madeleine says

instructive and articulating a lot of what i've been thinking of lately w/r/t community and cooperative alternative spaces, the erotic as transcendent spiritual connectivity, and receptivity to surprise and ongoing capability for transformation... like good activist texts should do this text made me feel led, like an opening to a conversation, rather than answer, excited to read and talk and be changed by the movements and ppl around me

June Amelia Rose says

I wanted to like this book more than I did. An interesting study that led me to some new ideas (like "reading paranoid" - thankful to have encountered that) but i can't help but feel the book was bogged down with almost half of the content being criticisms of their own thesis, especially accounting for their privileges as white cis ppl. I understand the need to self-crit, to invite alternate ideas, alternate viewpoints especially in a book like this, but in doing so you haven't really persuaded me to take your thesis seriously, or won me over significantly. I would've appended all the interviews instead of just a few, as kind of alternate viewpoints, and streamlined the argument in the main part of the book. A decent read, but a bit unfocused.

C.E. G says

I had hoped there would be more examples of what this looks like on the ground, but this is a pretty theoretical book (and the middle felt a little too long). However I do really love their concept of "joy," and ended up copying down a bunch of quotes that resonated. Rather than equating joy with pleasure or happiness, the authors use Baruch Spinoza's definition of joy, meaning the ability to affect and be affected. I still feel uncomfortable with how some of these concepts are being used to push marginalized people into premature forgiveness/trust, but I think the authors of this book recognize that tension.

Toward the end I found myself thinking not so much of activist spaces, but of my worksite. We're so conditioned by our school system to be critical of new ideas rather than creative and curious, and it felt really validating to see it put into words.

"Everyone has glimmers, at least, of the ways that fierceness can be intertwined with kindness, and curiosity with transformation."

"Rebecca Solnit has taught us to see optimism and pessimism as two sides of the same coin: both try to remove uncertainty from the world... Optimism and pessimism can provide a sense of comfort at the expense of openness and the capacity to hang on to complexity. They can drain away our capacity to care, to try, and to fight for things to be otherwise."

Sarah Ahmed: "Promise of a seeking of happiness can cause us to ignore/turn away from the

suffering of others if it threatens happiness."

Joy as a "process of coming alive and coming apart. Whereas happiness is used as a numbing anesthetic that induces dependence, joy is the growth of people's capacity to do and feel new things, in ways that can break this dependence."

"We are interested in how the capacity for refusal and the willingness to fight can be enabling, relational, and open up potentials for the collective struggle and movement, in ways that are not necessarily associated with controls, duty or vanguardism."

"We want an expansive conception of militancy that affirms the potential of transformation at the expense of comfort, safety or predictability."

Emphasis on movements/community instead of actions.

Solnit in *A Paradise Built in Hell* - "In the wake of an earthquake, a bombing, or a major storm, most people are altruistic, urgently engaged in caring for themselves and those around them, strangers and neighbors as well as friends and loved ones. The image of the selfish, panicky, or regressive savage human has little truth to it."

"What happens when politics becomes something that a person *has*, rather than something people *do together*, as a shared practice?"

Margaret Killjoy: "For a bunch of anarchists, we're remarkably uncomfortable with new ideas... We've really honed our ability to critique things but not our ability to embrace things."

"Surprise and curiosity are often infantilized by Empire. They are treated as foolish or childish - lacking educated, rational, civilized, adult capacities of detached evaluation."

"There can be a sense of satisfaction in being the one who anticipates or exposes inadequacy. There can be safety and comfort in a paranoid stance, because it helps ensure that we already know what to do in new encounters. Incessantly exposing flaws can be pleasurable and can even become a source of belonging."

"The stance of detached judgment means remaining at a distance from what is taking place. In contrast, experimentation requires openness and vulnerability, including the risk of being caught off guard or hurt. From a paranoid perspective, things like gratitude, celebration, curiosity and openness are naive at best and potentially dangerous."

Walidah Imarisha: "In a society that fits everything into a dichotomy, you win or you lose. There is no space for a win that's attached to a loss."

Sylvia Federici: "One thing I've learned is to become more humble and hold my judgment of people until I know them beyond what I can make out from what they say, realizing people often say foolish things that they do not really believe or have not seriously thought about. It also comes from recognizing we can change, which means that we should stress our potential rather than our limits."

Hannah says

this was basically not at all what i expected - heavily philosophy-based and that just isn't my jam, though it did make me reexamine how i define joy. hoping to find a more accessible book that deals with burnout and finding your place.

Virginiawiles says

Crucial Reading

A book to be read, and then re-read, in conversation with others, stirring questions, grief, joy, insistent desire in oneself, in community, in friendship. Dive deep here.

Charlie Kruse says

A really really important book for our times. Looking at activism through the lens of Spinoza, Bergman and Montgomery look at how our relations with each other are the ways out of Empire's traumatic and destructive methods of exploiting each other. Some of its' most prescient chapters are about the trauma we can inflict on each other, all as resisters of Empire, and also of solutions to that and ways of behaving that increase our capacity to feel, to connect, to strengthen each other.

This also isn't a guidebook. As much as this book has lessons to teach, it's much more about getting people within communities to begin and enhance conversations on how we better organize together, on how we better communicate together and on how we better live together. Full of quotes and interviews from other interviews across multiple disciplines like indigenous resistance groups, childrens' rights groups and feminist groups, there is much more of a focus on a collective approach to each issue, and how to make the collective stronger together. Beautiful and thoughtful words for a world that needs it.

Scott Neigh says

I didn't like this one nearly as much as I wanted to. The problem it addresses is real, urgent, and not discussed nearly as much as it needs to be. In fact, many of the ways it describes "rigid radicalism" felt painfully familiar. The anti-authoritarian sensibility underlying the work resonated with me. And scattered throughout are individual insights about the ways that our groups do, don't, and could work and specific ideas about the world that sparked quite useful reflection in me, and that I'm sure would do the same in many other people. But the book worked considerably less well for me at the level of weaving those insights and ideas together, and as a whole piece of work. Some of that might be connected with the fact that the form of it is more akin to a scholarly book than I was initially expecting. Not that I have anything against scholarly books, and I'll often stand up for even quite obscure ones having something useful in them for movements. But form and underlying presumptions about how knowledge should be produced still matter and I think a deliberate step away from academic ways of dealing with ideas would've strengthened this book. Related to that, I think it would be a more useful tool if it focused less on situating itself in this or that intellectual

lineage and more on exploring actual experiments and conversations within movements around these issues. Even saying that feels tremendously unfair, because *some* aspects of it are grounded very firmly in movement realities – as I said, its characterization of its core problem hit home, and you could tell that plenty of its observations were hard-won through difficult personal experience. As well, at multiple points through the text it explicitly emphasizes the importance of the situated and the concrete, and of respecting complexity. But that fell away all too often. Different movements would be cited to show this or that, but often in ways that felt fairly superficial. Despite its injunctions against doing so, sometimes it felt like specific experiences were being generalized in unhelpful ways, without due attention to how it all could work quite differently for other people situated in other ways. It would have been strengthened, I think, by doing more to engage with knowledge produced by and emerging from movements *on their own terms*, including far more engagement with instances where that would not sit easily with the book's own analysis. And I know it's a hard thing to do, but it would also have been strengthened by doing more to not just refer to but to describe in sensuous, concrete, material detail specific examples, ideally lots of them, of how the phenomena discussed in the book have played out in different contexts. So I think there are insights and ideas in this book that are generative and that I hope spark further discussion of what is a very important issue, but it also illustrates the need for ongoing work – and here I'm talking about work that falls on all of us who take movement-generated knowledge seriously – to figure out how to draw out and talk about the kinds of deeply situationally embedded and complex experiences of everyday life, including everyday life in movement contexts, that form the core of this book's concerns.

Bean says

I read this with a book group, and was so compelled by carla and Nick's framework for nurturing leftist organizing cultures. It's no secret that "rigid radicalism" is an energetically-crushing facet of our movement psyches, and that this mindset has emerged based on completely valid realities of trauma, betrayal, exploitation, and harm (within and without our organizing circles). "Joyful militancy" is a way through -- not a prescriptive how-to, but an experimental, open-ended conversation that invites curiosity and generative shifts toward visionary presence, openness, and connection. In fact, "joyful" in this case does not refer to "happiness" (see the authors' critique of capitalist positivity), but actually to "the capacity to affect and be affected".

Getting into these ideas with others is helpful with Joyful Militancy, precisely because of the authors' insistence on holding their concepts "gently" (so as not to fall into dogmatism). In each chapter, carla and Nick offer thoughtful arguments for how we might re-center our movement communities... and in each chapter, they describe the ways in which the "common notions" they lift up might not get us what we want politically, if we don't complicate our understanding of how they operate. Initially, this was a point of frustration for me as a reader; I wanted the text to offer something more "concrete", and for the authors to make a more prescriptive case for how their theory could be built, held, and navigated inside of politically/emotionally fraught conditions. But this hesitance to set up joyful militancy inside a hardline set of ideological principles is actual the central beauty of this book:

"Joyful militancy is not a way of dividing the world into 'positive' and 'negative' ways of being or asking that we all get along or be happy together. Freedom always needs to retain the potential of refusal, negation, and resistance. To turn friendship into a solution or a goal is to erase the form of freedom we are getting at, which is the freedom to work at relationships - to participate more actively in the shaping of our worlds."

So, cue the book group or reading buddy: since we can't really create "shared thinking-feeling-doings" (like

trust and responsibility) when they're compulsory or prescribed, what does it take to put the ideas in this book into action? Pouring over these ideas with others can help sort out the particularities of how joyful militancy can be practiced, attempted, and processed inside of our specific contexts.

This book resonated with me as a lover of adrienne marie brown's Emergent Strategy (no wonder; quotes from the author's interview with amb are featured throughout the book), Ursula Le Guin (specifically, in the sociopolitical dynamics that emerged for the anarchist society on Anarres in *The Dispossessed*), and the politicized healing modality practiced at the core of generative somatics. It's a response to "call-out culture" that doesn't categorically condemn our need to reject (in the authors' philosophy, all of our connections and interactions can and do have "sharp edges"), nor does it minimize the people most impacted by the things we feel compelled to name as problematic (inside our own communities, and in the larger societies we live in). I especially appreciated the perspectives of First Nations organizers like Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Glen Coulthard that are lifted up prominently in this text. Joyful militancy is so exciting because of the lineages it's rooted in, and the relationships that made its writing possible. I love that the way forward in this context is not in cultivating our most rigid adherence to a pure system of thought, but through nurturing the "cracks" in Empire that are evidence of our capacity for aliveness & desire that exist outside of subjection.

Edie Maas says

It's extraordinary how much I needed the ideas in this book to be stated to me clearly and in some sense systematically. It's the act of having the thing you're seeing, named. It's more than validating. It reverberates through other spheres of my life, too. Like a bingo number, you know. You have to go back and stamp it on all your cards. It changes all of them. I found these ideas relevant to completely non-activist parts of my life (but I guess resistance to Empire is common to all parts of my life, so it's maybe not so surprising).

Still, I found the book to drag. I was bored through parts of it, impatient to get to the next bit, I get it, we don't need to flush this idea out so, very, much... There were paragraphs you just sort of sat politely through and tried to look interested, peppered with, and surrounded by, really impactful observations. I'm very glad I read it... I just wish it had been slightly shorter.

Bookish says

2018 has been a thrilling and exhausting year to be alive. Joyful Militancy has been helping me make sense of it. Montgomery and bergman describe trends and practices all over the world where people are coming together with a shared devotion to being more actively engaged in the world and with one another. These people are not motivated by rigid and abstract political ideology, but by joy. For the authors, joy isn't the same as happiness; joy describes the capacity for people to change, grow, and feel new things. It's the capacity to build strong and supportive relationships in one's community and across difference. From these joyful relationships, deep changes can occur in the fabric of everyday life. This little book is a real balm for the vortex of political bros yelling at each other about Karl Marx and the never-ending Twitter fights about who has the hottest and most perfect take on that day's political crisis. It is a reminder that in order to build a better world, we need to truly support our communities and to let ourselves be supported by them. —Nina (excerpted from Bookish's Staff Reads)

Jacob Wren says

Some passages from Joyful Militancy:

There is something that circulates in many radical movements and spaces, draining away their transformative potential. Anyone who has frequented these spaces has felt it. Many (including us) have actively participated in it, spread it, and been hurt by it. It nurtures rigidity, mistrust, and anxiety precisely where we are supposed to feel most alive. It compels us to search ourselves and others ruthlessly for flaws and inconsistencies. It crushes experimentation and curiosity. It is hostile to difference, complexity, and nuance. Or it is the most complex, the most nuanced, and everyone else is simplistic and stupid. Radicalism becomes an ideal, and everyone becomes deficient in comparison.

The anxious posturing, the vigilant search for mistakes and limitations, the hostility that crushes a hesitant new idea, the way that critique becomes a reflex, the sense that things are urgent yet pointless, the circulation of the latest article tearing apart bad habits and behaviors, the way shaming others becomes comfortable, the ceaseless generation of necessities and duties, the sense of feeling guilty about one's own fear and loneliness, the clash of political views that requires a winner and a loser, the performance of anti-oppressive language, the way that some stare at the floor or look at the door. We know these tendencies intimately. We have seen them circulating and felt them pass through us.

*

Maintaining transformative relationships is not easy in a world full of violence, in which Empire continually induces us (especially white, cis-male settlers) to construct flimsy relationships based in leisure and to abandon them if they are no longer pleasurable.

*

Most of what is called privilege has nothing to do with thriving or joy; this is why privileged white men are some of the most emotionally stunted, closed-off people alive today.

Broadsnark says

Anyone who has ever been involved in any kind of activism/organizing/leftist group can attest to the fact that those spaces can sometimes be incredibly rigid, unwelcoming, paranoid, and just depressing. This book is an attempt to ask why those spaces become that way and if there are better ways of organizing, better ways of trying to make the world better. I very much agree with the problems that they point out and the central ideas - That relationships are more important than ideology. That the everyday is crucial. That we need joy in what we are doing or we will fail. That we need to leave room for personal and collective transformation and not expect everyone to be exactly in the right place (as though we know what that is). If I were another type of person, I would probably give it another star. But I am at a place where I really want everything to be as plainly and succinctly stated as possible. I think it is my old age setting in. And I found myself skimming a lot of the repetitive and/or overly philosophical parts. (There was a lot of Spinoza.) Still, this is an important conversation to be having and worth a read.

Redpoet says

Sort of feel like I can't really write anything here without possibility violating the spirit of the book...lol

Let me simply say, some parts of it were so very good (in my opinion) and some parts were mundane (in my opinion) and some parts, I could have done without.

In the end, I would recommend it to a whole lot of people (especially those with experience on the left). I guarantee you will see things discussed that you have thought about.

Brian says

Another excellent contribution from the Institute for Anarchist Studies/AK Press. An interesting blend of academic research/sourcing and contemporary interviews, *Joyful Militancy* reminds us of the dangers of "rigid radicalism" and offers ideas and examples for bringing joy into our political work. "Joy is never a duty and never something imposed on other people... We are trying to affirm that joyful transformation is already happening, as an emergent power that undoes moralism and opens up new potentials, sometimes even beautifully. Joy subsists through common notions, which need to be held and tended in order to remain alive."

Celia says

This book puts to paper and crystallizes so many thoughts/feelings I've had, and didn't know how to communicate. I love that it is offered as a starting point of sorts- there is a list of other resources in the back that I'm adding to my to-read list!
