Come Closer: Geographies of Care

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Come Closer: Geographies of Care

Anam Mehta

In partial fulfillment of a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Environmental Analysis, 2020-21 academic year, Pomona College, Claremont, California

Readers:
Professor Char Miller
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Epigraph

The ants are inside my laptop. They enter through the narrow moats under each key on the keyboard, through the vents and hollows. I see them walk out of the USB port or the mini HDMI port or the charging port or the SD card slot. I type, and I wonder if they’re startled or killed by the bottom of the keys quickening down. I wonder at their traversal of its inside terrain, how they brave the wind from the cooling fans, if their clawed, bristled feet are large or heavy enough to dent something important, nudge a joint loose or a wire aside, how it feels for them to touch charged metal, what they make of the green and gray and silver... Later, they lick each other because they lick for each other. They eat, then vomit into each other’s mouths. Their social stomachs chew outward, their digestion a precursor to togetherness — eating as a temporary clasp...

All that is involved in swallowing: a mouth shutting, and then more closings: chewing, spit doing its own chemical chewing, tongue and hard palate winching food back and down, esophagus clenching in a neat downwards elevator, towards more molecular destruction. To avoid all this, we split the axis: if the data juts, unruly, we flay its container into new regularity. A forceful rectangling. Splitting an axis is a bad solution to this problem, though, this problem of such largeness and smallness existing in the same world. The problem of largeness and smallness being measurable against each other. Because it conceals that distance: if it’s not all we can see, we don’t see it at all. We make only two options for ourselves. Inside and outside, the window declares rectangularly. Inside is my side. There is supposed to be cleanliness here because I made it, clear cut space for it. I see bodies of ants and we’ve made a graph. —from my brilliant friend Ahana Ganguly’s senior thesis *Ew!*.  

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In the garden, writes Jamaica Kincaid, we perform the act of possessing. To walk through and survey from above, to determine what plants are allowed to grow and what must be uprooted and discarded, to give water and nutrients to our favorites, and to say when exactly to rip up the soil anew are only possible in relationships of possession. Ownership of the ground and the worms and the vegetable kingdoms are all uncertain, questionable, and fleeting, but still—in the garden we act and can be seen as possessors of this rectangular space and all the living beings inside. But although we create relationships of possession, the garden also creates relations with us, becoming a space of care, comfort, and therapy. In the spring of 2020, my siblings and I decided to plant tomatoes in our garden: cherry, san marzano, and early girls. We got delicate little seedlings from the nursery and brought them inside to protect them from the last of the frosty days. When the ground warmed and the sun shone brighter in the early spring, we realized we had too many plants for our five square foot patch, so instead of the two foot spacing recommended on the guide, we planted where we could, working around the thick roots and stones just below the cold soil. After planting the living plants, we drove wooden sticks and small branches into the ground as neighbors for the plants to lean on. We watched and watered as they grew tall and leafy and developed flowers. Within the veneer of possession of the outside garden

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3 Ibid.
is a management of ourselves and our internal excesses of feeling through slow nurtured growth and ritual watering.

As time passed, other plants grew up around the tomatoes, the sticks fell over in storms, and the plants tangled with each other; but still they grew red, sweet fruits. Beautiful gifts. After the fruits ripened and became magically big and round and soft and heavy on the thin stem, there was a lapse in our possessive relationship. Within the transition of a plant I watered everyday to this bundle of fruits, an unknowingness opened, a point in which I suddenly didn’t understand this plant I had watched since it was a baby. I could act like the plant was mine and the garden was mine, but the tomatoes had their own gravity, a different set of relationships that did not center around me. Sure, I bought the plant and put it in the ground and watered it, but I did not make it grow tomatoes. Robin Wall Kimmerer says gifts exist in the realm of mystery. They do not have the same logic of commodification as grocery store tomatoes, but, like all gifts, create a set of ongoing relationships to the garden, soil, watering can, and even the sticks the plants lean on. “In a garden, food arises from partnership...But I can not create a tomato or embroider a trellis in beans than I can turn lead into gold. That is the plants’ responsibility and their gift: animating the inanimate. Now there is a gift.”

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5 Ibid.
As summer turned to fall, a few lonesome tomatoes still grew on slowly withering plants. Soft leaves of brown, red, yellow, and orange carpeted the ground that held the tomato plants and the weeds I refused to pull. The space was fuller than ever. Dead leaves, dying plants, thriving weeds, and my feet tangled up together as I walked through to water, careful not to step on any roots. When I was done and left the patch, I found hitchhiker seeds on my sleeves and pant legs. The little brown capsules with their tiny spikes and gnarly edges were uniquely suited to latch on to me, hopeful to reach new grounds of germination and life. The gifts of the garden came with these new responsibilities, to serve my role in the generations of life cycles of these plants as a carrier and traveler of seeds. The eyes I used to see the garden became unclouded from the possessive and began to see how the garden possesses me. Becoming useful to the garden by carrying seeds and caring for residents of the patch was part of this gifting process. By offering gifts, the garden pulled me into its messy rows and tangled roots as I became part of the workings of plants, happy to care for them even after the tomatoes dried up and the weeds found new grounds. For the illogics of the garden are not based on maximum output or market forces or yearly gains, but resources of soil, water, and sun intertwined with biology, feelings, and aesthetics, by our whims and the relationships that the patch of plants form with us.

And in this way, the garden and gifts exist outside of what Timothy Morton calls agrilogistics: the technical, planned approach to agriculture that drives global farming practices and promises to eliminate fear for survival—the machine of agriculture. Agrilogistics according to Morton began 12,500 years ago, when humans shifted from hunter-gatherer societies to agriculture. Immediately, in Mesopotamian granaries, the tastiest, easiest to harvest grains were selected for storage and to continue growing, pushing evolution to fit into agriculture. He says “Agrilogistics promises to eliminate fear, anxiety, and contradiction—social, physical, and ontological—by establishing thin rigid boundaries between human and nonhuman worlds.” This split, this agrilogistic fencing led to the development of private property, of possession, and the contemporary sense of self; because now humans could and needed to own the nonhuman to continue planning and expanding agriculture. Agrilogistics also led to the establishment of massive rigid social hierarchies like patriarchy, impoverishment, and produced the world of accelerated agriculture, industrialization, global capitalism, and anthropogenic climate change that we live in today.

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7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

An example of one kind of final form of agrilogistics lies one hundred miles west of our home garden in Albany, NY. The sprawling Green Empire Farm complex in Oneida, New York houses millions of strawberry, tomato, pepper, and cucumber plants in two shining 32-acre aquaponic greenhouses pictured above. It is the largest such facility on the continent. Under miles and miles of glass grow green leaves and red fruits, their days rigorously controlled by algorithms that regulate light, temperature, pH, humidity, fertilizer, water flow, and even when bees are released for pollination. Alongside the endless rows of greenery are parallel rows of wiring, lights, cameras, and sensors. As much as these greenhouses are places to grow plants, they are places to control and surveil through the digitization of plant health and constant optimization of the growth processes. In a job description for an IT help position at Green Empire, requirements include the supervision of computer systems that then subsequently supervise plants and maintain daily data communications. This kind of big data driven plant uploading and maintenance is part of a larger trend the industry hails as one of the vanguards of modern agricultural production called precision agriculture. Precision agriculture is the method of achieving optimal agricultural efficiency through measuring and adapting to variations by using digital technologies including GPS, big data, cloud computing, the Internet of Things, automation, sensors, and robotics. Green Empire, though, goes beyond what more traditional farms can do with precision agriculture. By nature of the greenhouse form, the ground and air itself become mappable and controllable at a scale that is not possible in an open field. Individual plants and even leaves can be isolated and tracked by the density of sensors and systems that the greenhouse allows. Agrilogistical space is at war with the accidental. Between thin, rigid glass boundaries that separate the human world from the nonhuman, the green empire stakes out a claim of control, a precise possession of the air, water, and data of the plants inside.

But agrilogistics does not only refer to this kind of technology-forward, hyper-planned, sterile approach in the actual management of plants, but to all the other parts of the operation as well. Just as plant growth is controlled and algorithmic, the contracts, pricing, procurement, shipping, and food safety standards have to be managed and administered to fit within agrilogistical logic. The mapping of the greenhouse also applies to mapping of workers. Similar to modern warehouse labor, workers in the greenhouse are surveilled by the computer systems and sensors like the plants. Agriculture technology companies like Priva provide the tools for the greenhouses to track and automate employee movement and performance by integrating with smartphones or their own custom trackers. This system goes so far as to be able to trace each individual tomato to the worker who picked it. In the name of efficiency and cost cutting, this kind of automation in warehouse labor flattens people into numbers and has led to cruel labor practices in which workers who do not meet their

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productivity quotas can be terminated. Mastronardi Produce, who own and operate Green Empire Farms, even call their workers their “Flavor Army” in an invocation to the agrilogistic war for efficiency.

Mastronardi, an Ontario Canada based company, owns seven such greenhouse complexes in the US and others in Canada. Like many big agriculture companies, it works with contracting firms that supply labor to work greenhouses. These outside firms are responsible for hiring and housing workers so that Green Empire doesn’t have to deal with hiring laws or pay benefits directly to workers. In the quest for higher profits, this work is outsourced to contacting firms in the name of efficiency. This is a common practice that works to shift blame for worker complaints and labor standards to the contracting firm as the legal employers rather than the site where the workers are employed. When workers or advocates bring up abuse or poor conditions, the companies and worksites can claim ignorance and say that while the conditions are regrettable they cannot do anything about it because they are not the legal employers. Many of these workers are also labor migrants, and in the case of Green Empire Farm they hail primarily from Haiti, Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras, and so are only in Oneida because of their contracts. This practice keeps workers in modes of instability as poor wages, deportability, inability to communicate in English, racism, the firm’s control over both lodging and transportation, and shifting liability intersect to create the precarious conditions that temporary contract migrant workers face.

After March, 2020, these factors compounded and risks intensified due to the Covid-19 pandemic, with almost no support from the government. The large portion of undocumented farmworkers in New York State were excluded even from receiving the meager CARES Act stimulus checks or applying for unemployment. In early May, 171 of the 300 workers tested positive for Covid-19, the largest concentrated outbreak in Upstate NY at the time. MAC Contracting, the firm that hired the workers, put them up in motels around Oneida without proper permits and set up school buses for transportation from the greenhouses and back. The workers were made to sleep four to a room and social distancing guidelines and mask wearing on the company bus and in the greenhouses were not enforced. To this, Mastronardi and Green Empire said they could do nothing and were not to blame because they did not hire the workers and were not in charge of lodging.

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20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
prompted media coverage and special teams of contact tracers and testers to come into Oneida, some of the 11,400 permanent residents of the town (which is almost all white) tied the outbreak to the fact that the mostly Spanish and Creole speaking workers were from out of the country. In social media and phone calls, residents expressed anger at the workers, the virus compounding entrenched xenophobia. While all of the workers from the greenhouse recovered from the virus and are working even now in the greenhouse which never shut down, one of the motel staff also contracted the virus and passed away. Across the country in the California fields in the summer of 2020, where this kind of contracting and migrant labor is also common, the pandemic and worsening fire seasons collided as farmworkers picked fruits and vegetables while breathing smoke-filled air through masks in 110 degree weather as massive fires raged next door and the sky burned bright red. This is the cruel logic and dedication to agrilogistics that necessitates the precarious and dangerous conditions of existence over any form of existing.

Morton writes that humans are fascinated by maintaining agrilogistics at whatever the cost to us. This creates a loop which feeds agrilogistics for agrilogistics’s sake. We admire and aestheticize these massive, computer-controlled greenhouses for their utility and cleanliness, for how far they have run from the gifts of the garden. The utilitarianism and tech-driven construction and maintenance of the facility give the impression that this kind of farming is possible anywhere—in fact, the portability of this technology is one of the main reasons it is marketed as innovative and industry disruptive. As the CEO of Mastroni says: “Let’s get [away from] the weather controlling our destiny.” Yes, the technologies of greenhouse plant digitization and worker contracting are not specifically geographically based, but the very reason that the facility exists is because the county and state gave 15.3 million dollars to the company in tax breaks, grants, and tax credits. According to the meeting notes of the NYS Urban Development Corporation, without this public financial assistance, the project would not have moved forward. So, while the Green Empire greenhouses might not be land-based, their very existence is dependent on place and a system that works to maintain the acceleration of agrilogistics while offloading the real

28 Ibid.
costs to others. In this case the greenhouse workers and New York taxpayers. “Ethics of self-interest are a major feature of agrilogistics.”

But what does agrilogistics look like from the other side, from the nonhuman worlds that agrilogistics seeks to separate out and control? In the garden, this took the form of gifting, relation building, repossession, and seed carrying, but what about Green Empire? What relationship do those greenhouse plants have to agrilogistics? Of course, their existence is a product of agrilogistic systems and thinking, but these plants are also living beings with their own human and nonhuman relationships and interfaces. The reduction of lifeforms to human use value is incredibly arrogant and is the very mode of thinking that exploits the world and pours greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere at the expense of all life. Laying aside the default humanist lens, these plants do not just constitute a data-farm farm but are users of this complex computer system in their own right. Their behaviors and outputs use the sensors to translate their state to something legible by the computer, which then triggers the algorithm that circles back to the plants to adjust the light level or nutrient mix or pH of the water. All of this could happen without a human user or interface present at all. They don’t need us. These plants live deeply digital lives. They are connected to the same kind of cloud that I use to refresh Twitter or message a friend, but unlike what I can do on my phone, these plants possess their environments through technology in a wholly different way, their basic functions being uploaded and processed constantly. In comparison to this, my possession of the garden is ultimately a farce. I do not control the air or ground or pH of water or even the plants themselves, and I certainly cannot do so through computerized automated algorithms. So who then, if anyone, does possess the garden?

**Anthropocene and Crisis**

These relationships between human and plant, whether it be in the garden or greenhouse, are not unidirectional, and are further complicated by the environments that facilitate interactions. To isolate the tomatoes growing at Green Empire as simply commodities to be grown and sold simplifies and ignores the actual workings of the greenhouse and the impact on workers. As our landscapes become increasingly dominated by industrial forms, we have to reckon with how humans are impacting the livability of both our own human societies and the beings we share this world with. We have come a long way from the start of agrilogistics 12,500 years ago. Our world, dominated by a warming climate, biodiversity loss, and environmental catastrophe, is currently mired in the proposed geological epoch called the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene defines this era in which humans are the major force determining the continued livability of the earth. Since the year 2000, when Paul J. Crutzen, a Dutch atmospheric scientist, first used the term, the idea of the Anthropocene has expanded far past the disciplines of geology and environmental science to the arts, humanities, social sciences, and increasingly—in popular culture. While the proposed epoch is not yet formally approved in the geologic

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world, meaning it is not part of the official geologic time scale, the Anthropocene captures a sense of the scale that humans now work with.

Alongside the development of the Anthropocene as an epoch is the fixation on crisis narratives. Usually talk of the anthropocene or to the scale and time frame in which humans change the environment comes with a rhetoric of crisis and apocalypse. To have lived through 2020, is to be told that crisis is everywhere. The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) gives us only until 2030 to drastically change carbon emissions in order to avoid catastrophic global warming. The Amazon is on fire, Australia is on fire, California is on fire. The Arctic Circle hit 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit. We are in a mass, human caused, extinction. And I could go on. Then there has been the Covid-19 pandemic, which generated an unprecedented crisis: the climate is in crisis, housing is in crisis, healthcare is in crisis, democracy is in crisis and the world is doomed. There is a distinct sense that we are either barreling towards apocalypse or already engulfed in it. But what does this narrative of crisis do for us? The core of apocalyptic thinking is nihilism, an idea that the world is too ruined to continue. Crisis narratives and apocalyptic thinking offers an assurance of ending, a certainty that the end of human failing is the end of humans. But to fall into this narrative and this way of thinking is to write off the lives of beings who exist now and others to come because crisis imagines them as already gone. Crisis narratives offer us an easy escape from contemplating and noticing how life around us continues through catastrophe. I say this not because I believe that global environmental issues are unimportant, not least because those impacted first and most deeply are Indigenous peoples around the world, but to be able to look for a way forward in the midst of a warming world.

Kyle Whyte, in his paper “Against Crisis Epistemologies,” notes that crisis narratives are based on an urgency and unprecedentedness of this moment. Labelling a crisis as urgent provides justification for the suspension of morals, ethics, or considerations of justice in order to make fast decisions. It becomes ok for efforts to mitigate carbon emissions to desecrate Indigenous land and disregard Indigenous sovereignty or rights because crisis is imminent. Saying a crisis is unprecedented is to discount lessons learned from the past and run the risk of furthering colonial violences. As a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Whyte writes that the Indigenous peoples of North America have already gone through colonial apocalypse and are living in a post-apocalyptic world. To think climate change resettlement of Indigenous communities due to rising sea levels is a new phenomenon disregards both the violence of past forced resettlements and the important histories

40 Ibid.
41 Whyte, Kyle. "Against Crisis Epistemology.”
of Indigenous resistance, adaption, and problem-solving. Crisis narratives “escape specific culpability (for instance, in processes of settler colonialism, capitalism, or imperialism) and instead center a universal human frailty that ends with triumph, a clear moral, and a clean slate.”

Instead of settling with these obscuritory crisis narratives that have the potential to do real harm by doubling down on urgency and austerity, Whyte argues for the importance of building kinship relationships, which he defines as “moral bonds that are often expressed as mutual responsibilities.” Developing kin relationships is very different from the imminence of crisis, because kinships do not have set time frames or work in presentist modes. Rather, active kinship relationships are based on care, consent, and reciprocity, all of which take time to develop but are central to a world that has the capacity to respond to change. Two forms of urgency and unprecedentedness take shape in the Anthropocene. One is that of crisis, and the other is a narrative of endless accelerating growth and development. While these two may seem opposed to each other, they work in tandem. As the screw of modern progress turns forward, the threads of crisis turn right back. To develop and care for kinship relations through change, we must critically look at how crisis narratives are imposed through urgency, austerity, and unprecedentedly and come up with relationships that persist through and resist prescribed crisis.

For some people, Crutzen included, the lesson from the Anthropocene is that since humans are changing the climate and the world on a geologic scale, we should actively geoengineer a climate that we deem favorable or to try to reverse the effects of humans on the climate. Others believe that the human presence has only caused destruction to the world, and so, our role should be to remove humans as much as possible from the biosphere, to force things to be pristine. Both of these ideas envision solutions to the environmental destruction of the Anthropocene without an engagement in the complex and entangled relationships that we inhabit in this world. Caught up in crisis, these proposed solutions erase Indigeneity and work along the same agrilogistic violence that separates humans from the rest of the world. How can a “pristine” wilderness exist when people have been living on this land since time immemorial? The Anthropocene is not just the story of domination through some inherent power that exists only in humanity but has come about as the product of colonialist and capitalist extraction that stems from agrilogistics. Feminist science scholar Donna Haraway, who attempts to deal fully with these complexities in her book, Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene, proposes a different word to describe this epoch of environmental destruction: the Capitalocene.

Capitalocene, Chthulucene, and Covid-19

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43 Whyte, Kyle. “Against Crisis Epistemology.”
To Haraway, the Capitalocene is a term that captures the enormous and global environmental impacts of capitalism.\(^47\) (By contrast, she argues that “anthropocene” as a label implies that all humans are equally bound up in world-destroying relationships, when the truth is far more complex.) But to stop there and say capitalism is the root of all evils is also a simplification. The Capitalocene describes not only how capitalist economic systems since the European Industrial Revolution produced the carbon economy and extractivism, but it reaches farther and further back to “tell of the networks of sugar, precious metals, plantations, indigenous genocides, and slavery, with their labor innovations and relocations and recompositions of critters and things sweeping up both human and nonhuman workers of all kinds.”\(^48\) Yes, the lure of capitalist progress, modernization, individual accumulation, and industrialization deeply involves humans, but the story of Modern Man, armed with technologies of his own devising, as the sole agent of the Capitalocene ignores that this era was and is relationally made. The technology of the greenhouse only works if the plants grow ripe tomatoes, the bees decide to pollinate, the land can be commodified, the human labor is contracted across borders and exploited, and the taxpayers subsidize the whole thing. The carbon economy cannot exist without the ancient death of long-ago creatures.

As with the Anthropocene and agrilogistics, the Capitalocene is a Big term. It connects billions of earth’s inhabitants’ (including you and me) ongoing daily engagement with the system of capitalism with the cumulated effects of capitalist extraction and production on a global and geologic scale. As ideas, the Anthropocene and Capitalocene skirt the edges of our imaginations, resisting humanist logic and quantification in their huge fuzziness. They are weird, weirdly weird, according to Morton, in the way that the two levels that we think are distinct—the human and the geologic—are filled in with an uncanniness that comes from the actions of our everyday lives.\(^49\) To conceptualize the global scale in our minds is harder than we think. These terms are also made for the intellectual class and the academy, and not really at all meaningful outside of these spaces. As such, I don’t think either the Anthropocene or Capitalocene offer a way forward out of our destructive and disintegrating relationships they enshrine. Knowledge of the land and our grounded, personal relationships always seem more important, generative, and capable for that task. Even Timothy Morton, who comes from a distinct tradition of Western philosophy, argues for the importance of coexistence with land and place over abstracted words. Western philosophers, in a rather darkly ironic twist, have (according to Morton) come to an awareness of nonhuman agency and consciousness beyond the human that is not unlike Indigenous spiritualities and ways of knowing.\(^50\) Haraway also draws deeply from Indigenous thinkers in moving beyond the Capitalocene. Like Whyte, she argues for kin-making. “By kin,” she says in an interview, “I mean those who have an enduring mutual, obligatory, non-optional, you-can’t-just-cast-that-away-when-it-gets-inconvenient,
enduring relatedness that carries consequences.” To me, this kind of kinship is another Big term. Talking about the large kinships between collective humankind with the rest of the nonhuman world at scale is very hard to figure and quickly becomes abstract. But unlike the fuzziness of the Anthropocene or Capitalocene, kinship is personal and actionable. We can all see our kin relationships and how they are at play in our lives, but the connection between our actions and the Anthropocene is difficult to make even on an intellectual level, and almost impossible emotionally. There is a certain cynicism to terms like Anthropocene and Capitalocene that makes them easy prey for crisis narratives, but this cynicism melts away when thinking about kinship. Kinship engages us as fully. The kin relations of the garden provide fruit to survive another day, yes, but also gifts feelings of mutuality, relationships of care, and connection to land. In recognizing the centrality of cultivating kin relationships, Haraway offers yet another Big term (forgive me here)—the Chthulucene.

Unlike the stories of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene, the Chthulucene is made up of ongoing stories of multi-species tangles and kinships. The word comes from a compound of two Greek roots that define a spatio-temporality of staying through crisis. The roots invoke an ongoingness through responses to the damaged earth. The Chthulucene, because of its reliance on kin-making and emphasis on staying with the precarities and responsibilities of environmental destruction, resists crisis narratives. Haraway comes up with this word as a way to enshrine a vision of the world in which the orders of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene, with humans as the only important actors, is rethought to find how the biotic and abiotic processes of the earth put us all (human and nonhuman) at stake to each other. We must focus on what is still possible in precarious times—a garden in a pandemic. “The unfinished Chthulucene must collect up the trash of the Anthropocene, the exterminism of the Capitalocene, and chipping and shredding and layering like a mad gardener, make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures.”

The Chthulucene is also an apt descriptor for 2020 and 2021, dominated by a global pandemic and large-scale spatial disruption. The Covid-19 pandemic remapped many of our daily movements and decisions, exposed systemic failures, and brought to the forefront the human species’ entanglements with the nonhuman world. In India, the government response to the pandemic caused the second largest mass migration (after Partition) in the history of the country as working class people in megacities lost their entire livelihoods in a matter of hours. Rightwing governments, from Brazil to the UK downplayed the virus’s effects, leading to overflows in hospitals. In the US, the country hit hardest by the virus in 2020, political leaders were slow to act and denied the pandemic’s realities. As of April 2021, the US alone has had more than 30 million confirmed cases of the virus, meaning nine in 100 people. New York City, the early center of the US outbreak, also

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became the pulpit for Governor Andrew Cuomo, who emerged as a global voice of calm and reason while having a history of systematically defunding the very health care facilities for which he quickly began to bang pots and pans.\textsuperscript{57} The shutdowns, stay at home orders, and safety measures taken by governments also work along existing power structures. Suddenly, millions of people in this country lost their jobs as the economy crashed, found themselves working from home, or in a situation of being forced to take on large risks in order to simply survive. Most of the jobs lost were low wage jobs. Black and Hispanic women bore the worst of the layoffs, and a year later are also the group who have recovered the least.\textsuperscript{58} The pandemic was clearly not the beginning of these problems in America but it exacerbated existing conditions of harsh inequality. In a country where most people do not have the emergency funds for even three months, working a job in which you are exposed to Covid-19 is often not a choice at all.\textsuperscript{59} “Essential workers”, a majority of whom are working class, became a label for people who provided goods and services for those working from home, allowing people whose jobs were transferable to digital space to offload risk onto others.\textsuperscript{60}

How do nonhumans fit into this spatial disruption? First, there is the entanglement of how the virus spilled over from an animal to a human. The rigid boundaries between human and animal that an grilogistics creates are not so real after all. Zoonotic viruses like Covid-19, are of course not new either: SARS, bird flu, MERS, Ebola, Zika, Lyme disease, Rabies, Nipah, and the Plague all started from animal-human entanglement.\textsuperscript{61} But as the human progress of the Anthropocene continues in the form of mass deforestation, mining, industrial agriculture, and endless urban sprawl, humans entangle with animals not as kin, but commodity, increasing the probability for cross-species infection.\textsuperscript{62} As Ferris Jabr writes in an essay published in the New York Times Magazine, “We are used to thinking of ourselves as the protagonists of every landscape, but from the perspective of infectious microbes, we...are the landscape. As we restructure Earth’s biosphere to suit our whims, we open hidden conduits between other animals’ microbiomes and our own. Once those channels are in place, pathogens can no more stop themselves from spilling into us than water can prevent itself from running downhill.”\textsuperscript{63} In the human response to the pandemic, we use animals for our own benefit. The rush for a vaccine conducts tests on mice, monkeys, hamsters, rats, ducks, pigs, chickens, cats, dogs, and ferrets because we have deemed their lives as lesser than or separate from ours.\textsuperscript{64} These test subjects will suffer during the experiment and be killed after. In November of 2020, Denmark ordered the killing of the 17 million minks in

\textsuperscript{63}Ibid.
mink farms in the country because Covid-19 is able to pass from humans to minks back to humans. Instead of understanding how humans and minks are in relation to each other, the government followed in the agrilogistic separation between us, making the decision based on crisis. Covid-19 lends itself to crisis-narratives very easily. Yes, there is real and uneven danger associated with the pandemic but making decisions like culling all minks solely based on crisis fails to slow down and consider what kinship might look like. Instead, it sets us up for future crises.

Evolutionary biologist Rob Wallace, author of *Big Farms Make Big Flu*, examines how commodification through global capitalism creates pandemics in the first place. He says that there are two main sources of pandemics: the plunder and exploitation of the forests and remote ecosystems and the monstrous livestock and poultry industry. The forests that live outside of agrilogistics are made up of webs of kinships that trap new pathogens through circles and layers of diversity. Complex forests keep pathogens within their host populations. As big agribusiness (the most explicit carriers of agrilogistics) cuts into the forest, the existing complex kinships become simplified in the delineation of rectangular, monocrop fields. This simplification provides superhighways for pathogens to jump through, increasing the potential for viruses to jump species and travel along commodity chains. The crisis deforestation creates for the typical pathogen host species does not kill or erase the creatures all at once. These relationships are not so easily disposed of. Often, displaced species shift into new relations with human systems that open more interfaces and paths for viruses to spread. Bats, when they are driven from the forest roost closer to denser human populations. Rather than optimizing and separating out what is commodity and human and what is not, driving agrilogistics deeper into forests for profit driven agriculture actually brings creatures of the forest relationally closer to human worlds and puts humans more at stake to the pathogens of other species. Enclosing animals as commodities at massive scale also produces ideal incubation chambers for pandemics. The poultry and livestock industry’s factory farms create populations of animals with as little genetic variation as possible, removing immunological barriers to rapid pathogen proliferation. Viruses regularly tear through homogenized livestock populations, and the animals that survive due to genetic resistance are not even allowed to breed with each other to spread immunity in the next generation. Instead, agribusiness uses vaccines and antibiotics, which feeds the pharmaceutical industry, but doesn’t often work to contain outbreaks and are more temporary and require constant consumption and upkeep. “Agribusiness ever turns us toward a techno-utopian future to keep us in a past bounded by capitalist relations. We are spun round and round the very commodity tracks selecting for new diseases in the first place.”

So how do we get off the rails that spin us in loops of progress and crisis?

**Care**

As humans continue in the screw of progress even through the pandemic, Whyte and Haraway emphasize kin-making as a way to resist crisis and stay with the possibilities of the Chthulucene. For this paper, I

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would like to focus on care, a fundamental aspect of a kinship. A feminist ethic of care begins from the centrality of care work and care relations in our lives and societies. We receive and give care throughout our lives, and it is central to our social relationships that matter. Care structures relationships in ways that enhance mutuality and well-being—understanding that we are all tangled up in a precarious world. But unlike the Big, academic terms like Anthropocene and Capitalocene, care is actionable and personal. We all know what care is because we all engage in care relationships. There is a certain kind of sincere emotionality, vulnerability, and irrationality that care relations foster. Instead of the rigid barriers of and pure logics of agrilogistic thinking, care is messy, entangled, and essential. To engage in care is to open oneself up past the nihilism and cynicism of crisis, to stay with each other through the mess. Replete with the imperfections and slowness of developing deep relationships, care persists to drive us together, to acknowledge and build our collectivity and capacity to respond to change.

As a political concept, care marks relations of power along gender, race, and class in the public and private sphere. It embodies issues of politics in its resistance to individualization, privatization, exploitation, and extraction. But care cannot be practiced or theorized in the abstract. It is place-based and contextual, and to look at care in a pandemic, we must deal with a geography of care over distance. In this paper I would like to explore responses of care to the Covid-19 pandemic and argue for the importance of developing multiscalar, more than human care-ships. I will turn to mutual aid, something that has become vital to addressing precarity in the pandemic. How is mutual aid organizing a structure of care? I will also examine digital care and connection online, asking how care functions in the digital space and how that space relates to land and the physical environment. Lastly, by drawing on an Indigenous conception of Land, I would like to argue that radical, participatory, and Indigenous urban planning practices can expand care relations in public spaces that includes and takes seriously the more than human world. The future doesn’t have to be defined by layers of crisis. By noticing and expanding the care interwoven in all relationships, we can grow care worlds for the future.

Care is a gift. To care for another being is to create relationships of ongoing. The reciprocity of care is a special bond, both outwardly practical in nature and immensely close to the heart. Care creates gardens everywhere, relationships of gift giving and reciprocity, of tenderness and entanglement, of expression and vulnerability, beautiful tomatoes to water and watch grow. As Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, “Something essential happens in a vegetable garden. It’s a place where if you can’t say ‘I love you’ out loud, you can say it in seeds. And the land will reciprocate, in beans.” To be abundant with the gift of care is to plant seeds in the garden, and a caring future is bounteous with beans.

Mutual Aid and Ants

Relationships of care are complex and clumsy. They are not clean or linear, but rather like roots pulled up from the ground, tangled and dirty and covered with earth. They are grounded connections, relaying life’s
needs, building response-abilities to change. To understand care as a type of relationship that can be formalized and organized around, I would like to turn to the mutual aid projects as essential caregiving responses to the disruptions of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Post March 2020, as large sections of the economy suddenly closed, employers announced massive layoffs and isolation rules set in, people all around the country started establishing networks to meet the immediate needs of those around them. By providing child, pet, and elderly care, dropping off groceries, sewing masks for others, assembling kits of essentials, raising funds, and simply helping those around them in any myriad of ways, these groups do mutual aid work. People, in the face of collapse, isolation, and intensified precarity, respond to need in their communities by sharing resources and supporting those most vulnerable.

There are countless examples, big and small, of ongoing mutual aid, the bigger and more organized of which are mapped here for the US:

![Mutual aid map](https://www.mutualaidhub.org/)

Created by the Los Angeles grassroots organization Ground Game LA in March of 2020, each heart here represents a mutual aid group operating in their communities around the country. Interacting with the map brings up links to each individual mutual aid group (https://www.mutualaidhub.org/). As a tool to connect people looking to engage in mutual aid in their community, this map provides an easy way to find the existing mutual aid infrastructure. The website also provides resources for how to start a neighborhood mutual aid pod, mostly compiled informally on various Google Docs. Simply looking at this map, which includes 833 points which is not even a complete dataset, shows how widespread mutual aid efforts actually are. To see these efforts in conglomerate from above misses their grounded connections, differing scales, and messy realities. Some encompass a whole city, while some are just a few blocks big. They each have differing levels of organization and histories and timelines, but what joins them is that they all are projects of direct action to change the conditions with which we live; they are all worlding projects, trying to help others by seeing how we are not alone. What the

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map zooms out to show how, on the scale of the country, mutual aid groups themselves are not alone, but also connected to each other across space.

Relationships of ongoing, of sympoeisis or making-with, as Haraway puts it, make up the Chthulucene. She says. “Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing... earthlings are never alone. That is the radical implication of sympoeisis. Sympoeisis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company.” Haraway argues that sympoeisis is a way to understand the world through kinships and recursions, and that the relationships themselves are worth thinking through, because they form the fabric of building response-ability in our societies. This worlding-with, this idea of dynamic collectivity and thinking through relationships, is foundational to mutual aid. Petr Kropotkin, the Russian zoologist and geographer, recognized this in his 1902 book Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution. As a zoologist, he begins his argument (running counter to Darwin’s ideas of survival of the fittest) with an analysis of how animals constantly practice mutual aid, and the species that practice sociability and collectivity while resisting competition have more robust lives and greater guarantees of continued existence. We can look at ants in this way, of one of the most numerous creatures on this planet with a million billion lifeforms, as constantly entangled in sympoeotic relationships of mutual aid. Kropotkin talks about the collectivity of ants, writing, “If we take an ants’ nest, we not only see that every description of work-rearing of progeny, foraging, building, rearing of aphides, and so on—is performed according to the principles of voluntary mutual aid; we must also recognize, the obligation for every ant of sharing its food, already swallowed and partly digested, with every member of the community which may apply for it.” Ants are one place to see in clear and explicit form mutual aid through symphysis. No ant can live without a dynamic and responsive relationship to its fellow ants and the colony as a whole.

Kropotkin’s observation and analysis of ants focusses around food giving and receiving. The ants he studied have food sharing built into their society and anatomy. As ants busy themselves doing the endless tasks of managing and reproducing the colony, they bump into their kin and upon meeting other ants from the same nest, the ants regurgitate food, little drops of transparent liquid, in order to feed one if hungry. Their digestive tube is even in two different parts, the anterior segment for community use and the posterior for the individual. Here, the agrilogistic notion of thin, rigid borders between individuals and bodies are erased. What makes the ant’s anterior digestive tube not the community’s digestive system?

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73 Ibid.
Instead of keeping the extra nutrition that would help that individual survive longer, collective sharing by trophallaxis becomes a mechanism to make sure the colony as a whole lives on. This kind of mutual aid also ensures that segments of the population that aren’t as well-nourished because of the role they play in the colony, such as larvae workers or builders, are able to access food while continuing their work. What Kropotkin perceives in the ants is a recognition of how at stake each ant is to the whole collective. Ants have formalized that relationship not by acting as individuals or separating stomachs from each other or retreating from how they are connected, but rather by functioning through intimacy, collectivity, and care. We can see one full ant feeding a hungry ant as an act of care in its vulnerability, irrationality, and commitment to the relationship itself, because what is more caring than feeding others? If food suddenly becomes less abundant or harder to find for the ant colony, the ants have a built-in system of care to be able to get food to the hungriest and more vulnerable ants. The trophallaxis of individuals multiplied many times over is a systemization of care that, according to Kropotkin, becomes mutual aid. Here, care is both a daily occurrence of providing the most basic needs of the colony but is also an organized and structural tool that sustains the colony long term.

More than a hundred years after Kropotkin, myrmecologist Deborah Gordon writes about the collectivity of ants in *The Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, an anthology of stories about the ghostly and monstrous Anthropocene. In her essay, she notices the collective behavior of ants as unwilling to fit into the two traditional biological narratives of collective behavior: that each ant is an individual that algorithmically contributes to the whole or that the whole system acts as one superorganism. Her work focuses on looking at collective behavior as tangles of overlapping connections that are constantly being created and reproduced

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without a central locus of control—sympoetic relationships. To do this, she follows two types of ants in opposite climates. Harvester ant colonies (*Pogonomyrmex barbatus*) in southeast Arizona are founded by one queen who lives up to 30 years and produces the workers in the colony. These colonies, when fully mature, number 10,000 ants strong and build nests up to 6 feet high and 20 feet deep in the desert.\(^75\) To live in a colony in the desert, the ants manage lack of water very carefully. Gordon, to see how the ant’s algorithms or rules regulate their collective behavior, has been spending time with these kinds of colonies since 1985. In studying colonies over many ant lifetimes, she was surprised to find that colonies that foraged less produced more offspring colonies. As droughts became more severe over Gordon’s period of observation, conserving water became more important than actively seeking new food. The ants regulate foraging through the feedback cycle in networked interactions of outgoing and returning foragers. More ants returning quickly with food bump into other ants near the nest, increasing the foraging rate. This works so well because if there is food near the nest, more foragers will bump into each other and cause foraging to continue, while when food is far away, the foragers will have few interactions and slow the foraging rate. Being able to find food close to the nest makes sure less water gets wasted on long treks through the desert. The ants thrive in a changing world through their organized, collective interactions. They survive and reproduce because of their relationships to each other—the relation and interaction is what drives life to continue. Through their relationships and interactions, they build a kind of collective intelligence with the world. “This collective behavior evolves as a set of relations that links a colony with the rest of the world.” Kropotkin starts his book on mutual aid by noticing how collective behavior in ants and other animals is fundamental for their living. This same sort of collectivity is the basis of care in our human ecologies.

**Occupy Pomona**

To notice mutual aid collectives is to better understand both the entanglements of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene and provide an alternative mode of thinking and organizing that increases our capacity as earthlings to respond to change. Living on a human-damaged planet means we need to learn how to best live and die within the entanglements we have.\(^76\) What Kropotkin and Gordon see in ants is an acknowledgement and organizing of collective tangling, a sympoisis in which ecology is an important starting place for studying human entanglements with other humans, and an argument for the ability of mutual aid structures to support a future in which care for each other’s basic needs is foundational for a response to the kind of precarity and change that is here and that is to come.

As Dean Spade, activist and author of *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity in this Crisis (And the Next)* writes that there are three key elements in mutual aid. One being that mutual aid works to meet survival needs and create shared knowledge about why people do not have what they need. This dual purpose of mutual aid projects contends that we don’t have to have things one way or another—we can develop solidarity and work towards self-sufficiency while making demands on the state or other institutions to provide what is needed. Like

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\(^76\) Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt, ed. 2017. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
the harvester ants that build collective foraging intelligence and the ants that share food and digestive tubes, relationships that provide material support as well as knowledge create colonies that live on through environmental change. The second element is that mutual aid projects mobilize people, build solidarity, and build movements. And the third: mutual aid projects are participatory and solve problems through collective action without waiting for help from the state or outsiders. To further understand a grounded form of mutual aid and explore its connection to care, I would like to examine an example of how Pomona College and a group of its students responded to the onset of the Covid-19 Pandemic. By close reading Pomona College emails and Occupy Pomona’s public documents I would like to show how Occupy Pomona is an example of how mutual aid organizations function to resist imposed narratives of crisis while noticing and strengthening our entangled relationships and increasing our capacity to respond to change; in short how mutual aid is an act of care and vice versa.

In March of 2020, when the Covid crisis thinking first spiked, universities and colleges in the US made decisions based on the idea of the urgency and unprecedentedness of the perceived crisis. On March 7th the University of Washington became the first major university to close, announcing that all classes would be canceled and resumed online. A few days later on March 10th, Harvard University announced to their undergraduate students that the school would also close and that students living in dorms would have five days to evacuate to somewhere else. As of March 26th, 1,102 colleges and universities in the US closed due to Covid, impacting over 14 million students in the US. All of a sudden, semesters collapsed, in-person classes ended, and the basics of college life melted away as these institutions of higher education rapidly withdrew their safety nets in the face of crisis. The façade of equality between students living on the same campus disappeared, and institutional priorities of reducing liability, endowment growth, and budget optimization became clear. As students of Pomona college, we received the email on March 11th at 12:26 PM announcing the ending of in-person classes and the closure of dormitories. Students had a week to prepare to leave their lives on campus by March 18th at 5 PM. Students without the option to leave campus on such short notice were provided a form to fill out within a day.

“Amid the global coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, we all must take urgent measures...This public health necessity means we cannot carry forward the semester in our standard manner,” wrote the senior administrators of the college, “...The approach of spring break added urgency to our decision process.” Notice here how the email cites this idea of urgency and a global outbreak as justification of their decision. By labelling the crisis as urgent, as argued by Kyle Whyte in “Against Crisis Epistemologies”, the college becomes able to upend students’ lives with little consideration of morals, ethics, or justice to achieve the end goal of not being liable for a campus outbreak. The other facet of crisis thinking according to Whyte is a rhetoric of unprecedentedness, which shows up in this email as well: “For over 133 years, the Pomona College community has faced times of challenge ranging from the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918 to World War II to the political and

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79 Ibid.
social turmoil of the 1960s. We are confident Sagehens will work together to reduce risk and protect one another and the wider community during this unusual time.” Interestingly, instead of labeling this as an unprecedented crisis, the college actually provides specific precedents of prior upheavals. However, 100 years ago during the Spanish Flu epidemic, which the college repeatedly mentioned in subsequent emails, Pomona College kept students on campus and provided resources to keep them safe. According to a November 1918 newsletter, the college moved classes and events outside, “on lawns, under the trees, on the steps – anywhere to be out in the air and sunshine,” and chose not to send students home with the understanding that that would put them and their families more at risk. Below is a picture of a march of students on Armistice Day in masks in front of Carnegie Library from the Pomona College archive and timeline.

Providing a narrative of the college having gone through crises and emerged victorious centers a story of universal human frailty that resolves in universal triumph and a clean slate for the school. By doing so the college wiggles out of specific culpability and responsibility in this moment. This narrative sets past crises within specific time frames and presumes that the college’s decisions were and are morally correct then and now. It also lays the groundwork for a politics of austerity by pushing responsibilities on to the students to reduce risk. By mentioning previous crises without a real reckoning with the outcomes of the past crises or the college’s previous responses, this email functions very much as a form of crisis narrative to justify decisions based on presupposed

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80 Ibid.
austerity by drawing thin, rigid boundaries between the college as an institution and the students that make up the body of the school. With this boundary in place, the college then is able to ignore the ways that students and the institution are at stake to one another through crisis. I am not arguing that the college’s Spanish Flu response was better than their Covid-19 response or that the college today should have made the same decision, because the two situations are under very different contexts (Los Angeles County now has 17 times more people than in 1918).\textsuperscript{84} I am however aiming to notice the separation the college creates with unilateral, top-down decisions in moments of crisis and present an alternative logic in the form of mutual aid and care.

In the days after March 11th, life on campus was surreal. There were loud moments of people trying to fit the remainder of the semester into the hours with their friends, and groups of students aimlessly wandering around, unsure what to do with the loss of classes and daily rhythms of school. There were also quiet moments of grief for the sudden loss of a way of life, the fast and slow packing of things, and an emptying out of campus. All around the question was said and not said: what now? While many students were able to leave campus to go home or other places with only a few days notice, many did not have the resources or ability to do so. According to a student conducted survey, 375 students submitted the online form provided in the college’s email petitioning to stay on campus for the remainder of the semester. The vast majority of these students were students of color, first generation college students, and/or international students. The day after the form was due, March 13th near midnight, the college sent out decisions on whether they would let students who petitioned to stay, rejecting a majority (~70%) of the requests for housing.\textsuperscript{85}

This comes at a time in which Pomona broadly touts diversity and equity as one of its core values, while refusing the basic needs requests of students without means to safely move on such short notice in the early days of the pandemic.\textsuperscript{86} In response to this decision, a group of students began to organize as a collective to share information and resources, calling themselves Occupy Pomona. This organization did not spring from nowhere as a fully formed entity, but drew upon formations and histories of a long and sustained effort by low income students to advocate for resources and support from the college. The longstanding argument is that Pomona College prides and markets itself as a diverse institution, and in recent years has admitted first generation college students as about 20% of the whole class, but after students are admitted they are not given adequate resources to thrive in the broadly white and upper income space of the college.\textsuperscript{87} As much as being on campus and living in similar spaces seeks to convince us that we as students have the same resources, preparation, and ability to assimilate into a college that mainly reproduces a certain professional-managerial class, this is simply not true, as laid bare in who is most affected when the college makes decisions of abandonment based on crisis.

By rejecting student petitions to stay, often without explanation, the college creates a forceful rectangling of who is inside and who is outside. Like Ahana says in her thesis, when we make only two options

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
we seek to create cleanliness where none exists. This is the fundamental structure of agrilogistics: it clear-cuts rectangles of cleanliness in order to see living bodies as a graph.

By organizing through the existing relationships between students who repeatedly must advocate for better treatment from the school, students had a basis for which to be able to communicate quickly and effectively in the hours and days after Pomona’s decision to reject most requests for housing. Occupy Pomona quickly became one of the largest organized student efforts I have seen in my years at Pomona. As a mutual aid group, they were able to raise a total of about $170,000 over three months to distribute to students in need.**88** In the days immediately following the college’s March 13th rejection of housing petitions, students built a robust, thoughtful, and effective decentralized organization to respond collectively to the college. On March 14th, Occupy Pomona released an open letter to the administration of the college entitled “On the Interests of College Students Regarding Pomona College’s Response to Covid-19”.

This document articulates the demands of the students who were being displaced as well as defines Occupy Pomona collective values and their direct and immediate steps to meet the needs of students.**89** Here, Occupy provides a basis for their mutual aid efforts and states how they as a collective seek to resist and mitigate the harm that came from the college’s crisis decision. In line with Dean Spade’s tenets of Mutual Aid, Occupy Pomona took on the dual responsibilities of mutual aid: that to provide for material community needs and make demands on the school at the same time. On the cover page of Occupy Pomona’s document (created on Google Docs), this dual purpose is immediately discernible, with the link to Occupy’s demands to the college and the link to their GoFundMe for direct support right next to each other. Right below these links is also a call for solidarity building with other groups and students, another part of Dean Spade’s definition of mutual aid. In the letter, Occupy Pomona presents itself as a collective of students and allies who are being evicted from their on-campus housing without a consistent or centralized decision making process of who would be allowed to stay or not. The letter cites international students who face visa restrictions and closed borders, first-generation low-income students without the financial stability needed for food and housing, homeless students without a permanent home to return to, students who face domestic violence/abuse at their family homes, students with immunocompromised family members or are themselves at higher risk for severe Covid-19, and students at risk of dropping out of the semester without the ability to study from homes that are not conducive to college learning. Instead of dividing these different forms of precarity into individual issues, the members of Occupy Pomona understand how organizing collectively across differences can lift up and provide for all students. An international student who cannot return to their home country because of travel restrictions and a student from the Inland Empire who wouldn’t be able to adequately participate in zoom classes because of a lack of internet or individual quiet space face problems that are geographically and spatially very different but still find solidarity in each other’s struggles through the collective.


The letter then goes on to articulate how students at Pomona in this situation are in relation to a broader coalition of supporters, “We have the support of alumni and fellow students who are leaving the campuses in their various privileges or are unable to be away from families at this time. We also recognize that this struggle for students to be housed is a national effort. We stand in solidarity with students at Harvard University, Amherst College and Duke University who are organizing to be housed, along with other demands for food, etc.” By standing in solidarity with students around the country, Occupy Pomona links their struggle with a broader struggle across geography. By acknowledging a shared struggle, mutual aid student groups shared information, resources, and support for each other, evidenced by how Occupy Pomona was able to model this open letter on one from organizers at Harvard.

Knowledge sharing is an important facet of mutual aid since mutual aid organizations work best when operating locally and so must share with other groups in other localities to copy and adapt best practices, methods, and tactics. “Locally operated mutual aid works better for meeting people’s needs in all kinds of situations, including disasters, because our needs are best met by those with the most local knowledge, and when we are the ones making the decisions affecting us.”90 Locality and geography is vital to thinking about mutual aid work because it engages that idea that all aspects of life, where people live and study, how we eat, and transport ourselves are sites of injustice and potential resistance.91 So, scaling up mutual aid doesn’t mean more centralization or making groups bigger to encompass larger regions, but rather more groups and more robust knowledge sharing between those groups. As a school situated right next to four other liberal arts colleges and two graduate schools, Occupy Pomona found allies in the neighboring schools that together form the Claremont Consortium. Many in the larger consortium community supported and donated to the Occupy’s mutual aid efforts, and students from the other liberal arts colleges shared knowledge of how to organize funds and make demands. The mutual aid group at Scripps College (one of the consortium schools) called Nobody Fails at Scripps directly cites Occupy Pomona as an inspiration and mentor group.92 Nobody Fails at Scripps then went on to share that knowledge with the Claremont Student Workers Alliance to help them fundraise for staff who had been laid off. Mutual aid begets mutual aid.

Occupy Pomona would not have been able to make the same kind of specific demands on the school or build the same level of knowledge of how to navigate the administrative bureaucracy if the mutual aid group encompassed multiple colleges across localities. Local knowledge was so important to Occupy Pomona in knowing what allies could be found among professors and which administrators would be open to dialogue and would get things done. Even with neighboring consortium schools, making demands of the consortium as a whole would have run into many more layers of bureaucracy even more isolated from the student experience as well as the larger interschool politics and top down debates over funding. After the introduction of the letter, Occupy Pomona lists their beliefs, commitments, and demands. By practicing mutual aid in a specific and defined locality, Occupy Pomona was able to make more specific and effective demands and commitments in response to the rules and existing relationships within the college. They were able to name dorms that would be

91 Ibid.
more accessible for students with disabilities (Sontag and Dialynis), put pressure on certain administrators through existing relationships, and build a working knowledge of the decision-making process specific to Pomona.93 The beliefs listed in the letter also articulate the importance of spatial locality while advocating for the basic life needs that mutual aid work revolves around.

Excerpt from “On the Interests of College Students Regarding Pomona College’s Response to COVID-19” published March 14, 2021:

“BELIEFS”

1. It is in the best interests of students to be housed. Housing will ensure students’ safety, whether due to possible houselessness, vulnerability to contracting the virus at airports, inability to have the resources to access the internet for school, and/or difficulty renewing their visa to return to the States.

2. We disagree that there is ever grounds to reject a student’s plea to remain in place after personally deliberating the risks of doing so, and evicting them—effectively forcing students into houselessness, lack of food access, and harmful, abusive conditions.

3. It is in the best interests of the larger public to house/feed students in the local area. If students are sent to their respective homes, they will have to cross airports and countries while possibly carrying COVID-19 and further spreading the virus nationally and internationally.

4. We students believe our health and well-being is linked to the health of Pomona college staff. We are willing to discuss with staff & administration to see what limiting interactions with staff can look like.

5. Dialogue between Pomona College administration and students regarding a response to COVID-19 will produce the best way to contain the coronavirus.

Moled after Amherst Students Letter to President”

These beliefs also are ones of care, seeking to enhance mutuality and well-being. There is a sincere emotionality, vulnerability, and transparency in holding the very simple belief that students should be housed. These beliefs show that despite of the urgency that the college invoked through short deadlines and a rhetoric of crisis, Occupy Pomona students slowed down to notice how forcing students out of stable housing is unsustainable, harmful, and something that can and should be resisted. Belief three also recognizes the importance of how locally housing people provides better access to communal resources and can continue through a physical relationship to campus. The belief also directly addresses the rigid boundaries that the college is trying to create between students, the institution, and the general public by noticing how Covid-19 spreads through the contact with people that comes with travel. To the college, there would be a difference in responsibilities between a student contracting the virus in a socially distanced dorm or even while living in Claremont generally and the same student contracting the virus at the airport or at home. However, to students

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1gCUihlAeKg8VEpFq1QvVgCJBNIbHYILLiuiEwGQ2aY/edit?fbclid=IwAR0rO0w6jOPAzZFBAKRiX4cLy4AF_bbhB4NDXQsYOpwxQn3WipfEdnZTO7c.
without the ability to isolate at home or even have somewhere to go, there is a big difference in access to resources and support. There is also a large difference in potential community spread. Many students forced to go home from campus would have been going to working class households in which working in-person, essential jobs with a high risk of infection and potential for exponential spread is not an option. By working for the best interests of the larger public, belief three bridges the boundary between college, student, and general population with a care for others that is not apparent in the college’s rationale. Similarly, belief four seeks to erase lines between the staff and students at the college. Here is a commitment to interdependency that mutual aid groups exemplify. Even though Occupy Pomona was a student movement, staff well-being was an important factor in collective decisions as well, an acknowledgement of collectivity that goes beyond the presumed bounds of the group. Lastly, belief five, and really the very nature of the group is based on a commitment to stay with each other through moments of change. It does not give up on the oftentimes combative relationship between the administration and student who organize but rather seeks to deepen and hold on to a relationship because of how students and the college are entangled together. This staying with is exactly what Haraway talks about with the Cthulucene. Occupy Pomona was made up of relationships of ongoing, of making and worlding with, sustained by an anti-agrilogistic care that seeks to bring us all (student, staff, administration, and public) together to organize and recognize our kinships to others.

Materially, while Occupy Pomona was not able to reverse the college’s denial of all the petitions to stay on campus, they were able to organize funding for the immediate needs of students being displaced. The housing, food, and transportation the group was able to provide for each other created new geographies of movement and distance from the centralized point of Pomona College. As students had to move and funds became available, organizing also had to shift. The importance of locality and a physical relationship to campus adapted to fit the new needs of students to find places to live away from Claremont. This shift is apparent in how Occupy Pomona opened up funds and grants to the entire student body regardless of location. The organization raised in total ~$170,000 through four venmo accounts and a gofundme page. On the gofundme, Occupy detailed how funds would be allocated through a transparent, collective, non-hierarchical process. “Decision-making power about our fund is shared as much as possible. Impacted students are in the best position to evaluate their needs...the volunteer team is not concerns with maintaining the longevity of the fund; it is the responsibility of the community to consider our long-term well being when requesting funds...We refuse to adhere to the mechanisms of control that operate through surveillance and penalty, and instead rely on mutual trust, accountability, and collective care so that our funds can reach those with the highest levels of need.”

Occupy Pomona as a bottom-up collective of impacted students facing different kinds of precarity is the opposite of the kind of top-down organization that makes harmful decisions based on presumed crisis like the administration of Pomona College. Here, like in ant colonies, the relationships are worth paying attention to. Relationships that form mutual aid are relationships of care, which is to say they are relationships of staying with each other through prescribed crisis. Looking back, it is easy to fall into simple narratives of how Pomona College made decisions, and how Occupy Pomona rose in response to perfectly provide for students, but the act

of staying with each other through dramatic change is a messy act. Mutual aid is a messy act. It is like caring for a
garden in a hurricane, the wind whips leaves around, but the grounded connections of roots stays strong,
ensuring we live on. Mutual aid refuses forced rectangularity and agrilogistics. It is messy on purpose because its
purpose is to continue life through crisis together. Dean Spade writes that mutual aid at its best should enliven
us, and life comes with interdependence and sympoeisis—earthlings are never alone. Kropotkin puts it best in
his empathic appeal: “Don’t compete!—competition is always injurious to the species, and you have plenty of
resources to avoid it! That is the tendency of nature, not always realized in full, but always present. That is the
watchword which comes to us from the bush, the forest, the river, the ocean. Therefore combine — practice
mutual aid! That is the surest means for giving to each and to all the greatest safety, the best guarantee of
existence and progress, bodily, intellectual, and moral.”

The Digital World

As students from Occupy Pomona left campus and the student body dispersed all over the world,
mutual aid efforts went completely digital. Those relationships for which a shared place and locality was so
important had to be translated across time zones and landscapes. So many mutual aid efforts through the
pandemic rely on digital infrastructure to make connections and communicate. Relationships that once
sustained themselves through touch, presence, nearness, and a shared place within human scales of perception
not only squeeze to fit into the wires, chips, and screens of our computers and phones but also blow up to
encompass a global network of tubes. Using our computers and phones everyday for almost every task, we see
that the internet connects us across places but don’t know how exactly it happens. The internet is floating in the
air or in the cloud or in space satellites. We rarely think of the physicality and literal grounded connections of the
internet or who owns those connections. Rather than satellites, physical, privately-owned fiber-optic cables
transmit 99% of all data.95 As Sparky Abraham writes in an essay entitled “A Series of Tubes: Reclaiming the
Physical Internet”, existing on the internet is to send and receive information that has to have some kind of
physical form, whether that be as a flow of electrons, an electromagnetic wave, or a series of flashes from lasers.
And all of these physical forms need a physical medium which takes up space and land. The internet lives in
signals being transported through thin glass or metal tubes in the ground, on the ground, or above the ground.
The ground and the glass and the metal and the signals are the internet.96

To be on Zoom with my grandparents in India while sitting in New York means that my computer is
translating my face to numbers, then sending waves to the router, which converts those waves to patterns of
electrons to move from the router to the utility pole on the street, which moves along the cables there to a local
switching center housing servers and routers, and then to a major regional switching center in New York City
and then to a switching center where Zoom houses servers, and then Zoom sends my face through yet more

switching centers and eventually to an undersea cable (part of the global network of 750,000 miles of hairsbreadth glass tubes) which makes its landing on the coast near Mumbai, and then to some switching centers in the city and finally into their apartment building and up the walls to their router to be converted back into waves and beamed to their computer.\textsuperscript{97} 98

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Map of Undersea Cable Networks created by Ben Pollock\textsuperscript{99}}
\end{figure}

This is to say that using the internet is a much more grounded experience than we imagine it to be. We are like ants crawling around in a computer, constantly touching charged metal. When the pandemic began, and our lives increasingly became uploaded to the online environment, we sat more in our digital relationships. This doesn’t mean that we are further separated from our environments or places or the land we live on, or that the internet abstracts us from the material world, but that our lives in the Chthulucene are further tangled up (quite

literally with glass fibers) with undersea environments, the places that house servers, and the multiscalar materialities and global economic chains that make our digital lives possible. In April of 2021, a research report by the University of Toronto’s Citizen Lab report on Zoom confidentiality found that Zoom generates some encryption keys from its servers in China, theoretically making them susceptible to decryption by the Chinese government. ¹⁰⁰ Zoom, signalling to the larger geopolitical context and mainstream political views on China and security, promptly added a feature to let users choose which data centers their calls could be routed through, with China and Hong Kong off as the default as shown below in my Zoom account. ¹⁰¹ The physical internet interacts with our digital lives and vice versa, with the land that the internet is part of as the medium for these relationships.

The relationship between the land upon which the physical internet sits is complicated. That land, that ground enables our digital world, but the digital world is also at risk to climate change precisely because of those grounded connections. In the next 13 years, an estimated 4,067 miles of fiber optic cable will be newly under water and a further 1,101 nodes (data centers or other internet facilities) will be surrounded by water. ¹⁰² At the same time, our digital lives are increasingly facilitating environmental destruction in their own right. The emissions from the internet are constantly growing. Bitcoin mining alone sucks more energy than most countries, more than the Philippines and slightly less than the whole of the Netherlands. ¹⁰³ Far beyond


emissions, the physical internet is built upon the exploitation of rare earth metals and the labor required to mine them. Vijay Prashad writes about how transnational firms that seek to exploit Indigenous lands in Bolivia for the mining of lithium, which is used in batteries in everything from computers and phones to electric cars and servers, played an indirect role in the 2019 coup of Bolivian President Evo Morales, who wanted to nationalize the industry. After Morales cut off lithium mining contracts, mining companies drew the government of Bolivia into several protracted legal battles, forcing costly settlements on the Bolivian side. The internet, according to David Harvey and Robert Hassan, is a spatial fix, or a new landscape to place over-accumulated capital and to seek new spaces of accumulation. Outwardly, this translates to rare earth metal mining, the exploitation of Indigenous lands, and increases in energy use. Inwardly, the use of the internet to accumulate capital commodifies pre-existing parts of society and life that were sheltered from the market. During the pandemic, this internal tentacles of accumulation were able to reach farther than before as more people were forced to bring digital waged work into the private sphere of the home. For people lucky enough to still have a job and be able to work from home, work became more entangled with spaces of living, commodifying the very personal space of the home and putting a price on things like going to the bathroom in your own home.

This invasion of accumulation follows very much in an agrilogic way of thinking in which everyday living and basic needs must be optimized, financialized, and rectangulized. Another example of digital agrilogistics is in the boom of food delivery apps like DoorDash, Postmates, Uber Eats, Instacart, and Grubhub. People working from home created huge demand for food delivery through apps, and newly unemployed people turned to work in the gig economy; Uber alone added 36,000 couriers in New York from March to November 2020. Domino’s Pizza has for years now been known as a tech company that sells not just pizza but the experience of buying pizza. These apps promise ultimate convenience, centralization, efficiency, and no-contact for the consumers but exploit gig workers who are not even afforded employee status and cut into restaurant revenue. Agrilogistic separation has come to the point where you can press a few buttons on a computer to send signals on underground glass tubes and a hot meal will appear on your doorstep in minutes. This whole process seeks to invisibilize the connections we have to the physical internet and the person who delivered the order, let alone the people who made the food, the delivery truck driver who transported the ingredients, the farm workers who tended and picked and packaged the ingredients, and so on. Our digital worlds are as agrilogistic as Green Empire Farms, with those rows of tomatoes, with even our basic needs of life constantly surveilled and optimized.

Spending more time online, and especially on Zoom or similar platforms, we find ourselves in deeper relationships with the objects we use to access digital environments. In the absence of in-person human

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interaction, non-human relationships become more salient. On Zoom, I am not only staring at people’s faces, but also my MacBook. I know my computer and phone more intimately than almost any object. Our computers have a physical architecture to them that facilitates how we interact with others and ourselves. One example is Zoom fatigue, but being on Zoom for long amounts of time also often is a mechanism for sustained self-surveillance. Our relationship to our physical devices is cyborgian in that our digital selves change our relationship with our faces and bodies. To be constantly visible to yourself through the video camera is to read a translated, flattened, lagging, mirrored, and scaled-down self-image. The Zoom box is good at delineating what is inside and outside, what is visible or not, what is existent and nonexistent to others—all it does is create agrilogistic rectangularity. But to remember the grounded, physical connections that Zoom actually creates, we can attend and bring care to how our relationships extend through the networks of digital space to develop mutual aid projects that address precarity in environments changing across space. Instead of separating out and invisibilizing the relationships through which we tend to life’s needs, the internet can also be a space of closeness, vulnerability, and care.

Conclusion

The internet creates spaces of dynamic, responsive, situated, Sympoetic relationships that engages all of us Earthlings in the Chthulucene to build Mutual Aid projects that resist prescribed Crises of Agrilogistics that dominate the Capitalocene. To put it a better way, the internet is a good place to organize care with each other in order to live. What I have said in this paper is nothing particularly new or out of the realm of our everyday, simple, personal relationships. The personal is the political. Care, to me, is essential to life on this planet. It is at once incredibly huge in how it keeps all of life going, but also can be found in the small, daily relationships we have with beings all around us. We struggle as individuals under structural crises of housing, health, climate, food, etc. and so we must join mutual aid projects that care for each other. We live our lives online, so we must build digital care networks that include the physical aspects of the digital world.

Agrilogistic borders, boundaries, and rectangles big and small desperately need to be rethought. Care gives us the tools to do so. Instead of separating ourselves from our environments or the land or each other or any other living thing, we should come closer, to care for each other together. Creating care-ships acknowledges the truth of how deeply we are connected in this changing world. On this messy and human-damaged planet, care offers an emphatic plea to not give up, to stick with our relationships through crisis because they will not leave us so easily. Now, nearly a year after first planting the garden at home, Spring has come again, and even after a Winter of freezing temperatures and snowstorms, plants in the garden have started growing again, continuing and continuing our relationship.


https://lensa.com/help-desk-specialist-jobs/oneida/jd/eb0291d36247a7ad1df66a4f09e80fd0.


