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An Educator's Roundtable

The Afterlife of Energy Post-carbon and Feminist Post-work Politics

OPEN ACCESS

with Rania Ghosn, Alla Vronskaya, Ruo Jia, Ethel Baraona Pohl, Namita Vijay Dharia, Fallon Samuels Aidoo, Feminist Art and Architecture Collective (FAAC), Ilze Wolff

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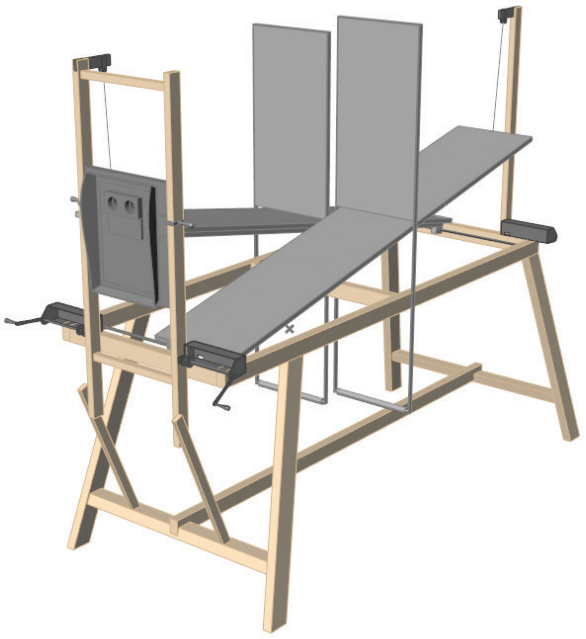
In the conclusion to her book *The Birth of Energy: Fossil Fuels, Thermodynamics, and the Politics of Work*, political scientist Cara Daggett considers "A Post-Work Energy Politics" in which she examines the historical coupling of energy and work—meaning human, waged work—in an invitation to disassociate their values and futures. The exponential power of fossil fuels animated the pipedream that powerful, inorganic slaves could substitute unfree human labor, ideas that have driven European imperialism. Fossil fuel systems did not lead, however, to a world beyond work. Rather, today's "patriarchal slave states" continue to manage the project of putting the world to work through the maximization of productivity, and the subordination of racialized, immigrant, and gendered bodies—who would work for lower, or for no, wages. "The project of work," Daggett argues, "is in tension with the project of life."[1] And the rise of "work–life balance" is a mere tactic of governance in which the enemy is fatigue, exhaustion, and burn-out. She suggests, in turn, an alliance between post-carbon and feminist post-work politics and asks: what might it mean for energy politics to refer to the politics of ensuring public vitality? In order to advance a feminist revaluation of work, Daggett draws on Kathi Weeks's *The Problem with Work* to outline a project that makes two utopian demands. One demand articulates a paradoxical relationship between the pragmatism of (present) demands and the speculative seeds of possibility; a second demand outlines a utopian form for such politics: partial, fragmented kin to the genre of the manifesto. Daggett concludes with an invitation that "a radical planet politics, if it seeks to contest ecomodernist claims, needs its own politics of pleasure."[2] In an echo to Daggett's invitation, the authors of this Educators' Roundtable were invited to contribute a short text that picks up on the possibilities of a post-carbon, post-work politics.

Figure: *Feminist Telephone*, Susanō Hideko Surface, 2024 for FAAC.



Pierluigi D'Acunto and Juan Jose Castellon Gonzalez, digital parametric model of Nikolay Ladovsky's space-meter, 2016. Image courtesy of Pierluigi D'Acunto and Juan Jose Castellon Gonzalez.

For the "Care-meter" to Remain Unnecessary
Alla Vronskaya

In 1927, Soviet architect and pedagogue Nikolay Ladovsky invented a machine that was to replace the traditional studio review system. Evaluating not the projects but the students' laboring bodies, his "space-meter" machine quantified architectural talent by identifying it with binocular vision and measuring its precision. While the space-meter was an attempt to create the ideal Fordist architectural laborer, the post-Fordist regime of exploitation can be represented through its own machine: let us call it "the affect-meter." It could be easy to design, for example, as an apparatus showing images (conventional attractors such as cats, babies, and food, mixed with photographs of architectural offices and Rhino models) and measuring bodily responses, like blood pressure and heart rate. If the space-meter exemplified the Fordist definition of talent as physiological and psychological fitness for a particular type of work, the affect-meter is an artistic intervention tasked with exposing the reliance of post-Fordist architecture on extracting emotional energy.

I first imagined the affect-meter when co-teaching with Torsten Lange, an activist and scholar of gender and sexuality in architecture, in 2016, the year of #MeToo movement, which according to occupational psychologist Mary-Clare Race was a "real turning point" in corporate culture.[3] Since then, a new paradigm for thinking about architectural talent has gained a footing in education: talent is now recognized as care, the ability to repair and mend, rather than to assert one's own ego through spectacular form. Yet, the gap between these feminist ideals championed by progressive architecture schools and the reality of the market-driven world is growing fast, leaving students frustrated and insecure about their future under the economic crisis that follows the crisis of "resources." While this gap must certainly be closed, the parameters of this closure remain a subject for reflection.

Addressing the ambiguity of the term "sustainable development," which appeared during the early-1970s oil crisis and whose context economists could quickly shift towards a discussion of finding "renewable" substitutes for carbon energy instead of limiting consumption, Vandana Shiva remarked: "There is [...] another – and dangerous – meaning being given to sustainability. This meaning refers to sustaining not nature, but development itself."[4] Given that the roots of post-Fordism also go back to the 1970s, one wonders whether it mined affect as a "renewable resource" for economic growth. Following up on Shiva's observations from the predicament of today, we could also ask: How can one protect the principles of care and repair from being similarly hijacked by managers, economists, and politicians—in other words, how can we make sure that the "care-meter" remains unnecessary? How can we turn care for the planet into political action, while safeguarding it from becoming another instrument of sustaining the very failing systems that are killing the planet? And what should architectural education do to address this need and this danger?

of Some Dice, Some Litters, Tentatively
Ruo Jia

How to move beyond the current capitalist socio-ecological mechanism, and its reductive abstraction of life and vitality into hourly-pay and calculable filtered energy? The present system presents major epistemological flaws with the alienation of bodies and matters into numbers and process charts; with forms of patriarchal dictatorship, forceful nationalism, and centralized bureaucracy. So, how do we approach the task of worlding without idealizing and engineering another top-down system? We commence and recommence with things small, fragmented, limited, down-to-earth "vulnerable, on-the-ground works."[5] Some dice and some litters.

Production Is Not Just about Productivity
Much of the communist ethos of production is not about "choosing abundance at the expense of freedom,"[6] but rather, to contemplate that exposure to production can redeem subjecthood ontologically.[7] This intricate complex has been, for example, unpacked in Hannah Arendt's entanglement of labor, work, and action,

"Yeah, they were All Yellow: Asian Feminist Architectural Possibilities," pedagogical experiment with exhibition led by Ruo Jia, Harvard GSD Spring 2023. Photo credit, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, and Justin Knight, March 30, 2023.

in *The Human Condition* (1958). Much is at stake in activating and acting latent possibilities and bringing them to the reality for which they are anti-environments, through much radical affirmations.

Critical Messy Vitality

A distinction must be made between calculable energy and incalculable vitality—the former delineable to some extent, the latter less so. Energy is socio-eco infrastructure that mediates action and vitality into labor by counting hours, volumes, movement, all while shackling our becoming-with. Everything, however, is already interconnected in vitality. Chinese medicine, for example, has been read as relying on a worldview that holistically approaches bodies and environments, beyond the divisible, quantifiable parts. Such a worldview operates not as a totalizing mechanism, but by taking partiality as a given and intervening through points of intensities. This is exemplified by acupuncture and deep listening or knowing of matter in a multi-sensorial observation of bodies of vitalities.[8] However, much caution is entailed here, to overcome cultural essentialism and patriarchal dominance in knowing, of being beyond colonial containment.

Care as a Whole

The supremacy of quantifiable calculation and monetary exchange of life is not only impossible – think of all the eco-accounting of all non-human work for example – but will also further extend the mechanistic sanitary sterile relationship into further aspects of fertile vitalities, only breeding further alienation and objectification. How might we instead advocate for understanding and ethos of care as a whole, retuning energy into vitality? We need to promote forms of living that thread both "taking care of" and "taking care"[9]—the former connecting us to others, the latter connecting us to our own potentiality and positivity.

Being Boring

Ethel Baraona Pohl, Chair of Architecture and Care, ETH Zürich

To provide care for caregivers and their families, many feminist and queer support structures have been recently created, including *Manzanas del Cuidado*[10] in Colombia, the Concilia program in Barcelona,[11] or the *Utopías de Iztapalapa*[12] in Mexico City. Across all such initiatives, time is the caregiver's most precious ask. More often than not, however, the assignment of monetary value to time risks inadvertently reproducing the figure of the proletarian housewife, reconceptualized as the subject of the (re) production of the workforce, as the Wages for Housework movement has argued.[13] In that context, it might come as

no surprise that the need of many women visiting these projects is to have time to do nothing, to sleep—or to get bored. However, they feel guilty to ask for it, because boredom is often understood as an extravagance, a privilege of the wealthy classes. But could boredom also be a subversion of the capitalist default of productivity?

Caring for the world implies a feminist approach to the politics of interdependence, as the Care Collective emphasizes,[14] understanding as feminist interdependencies those that not only happen between humans but with the rest of species that inhabit the planet. Rolling out a Green New Deal to decarbonize energy systems and invest in renewables on a transnational scale is one of their propositions in that direction. But they also add that to achieve those goals, changes in patterns of work are mandatory, as under the capitalist system it is not possible to have any kind of ecological care if time is always used to produce more goods in a relentless quest for growth, which has had such a damaging impact on the planet. This demand for changes to work patterns has been at the center of feminist struggles since the very beginning, with the demand for recognition of and payment for all reproductive work within and beyond the domestic sphere. Building upon the legacy of feminist writings from the late 1960s onwards, it can be interesting to go beyond changing the patterns and wages for domestic and reproductive labor, and instead to put time at the center of the political, economic, social, and environmental debate.

In that sense, it is pertinent to ask ourselves how much environmental damage we could avoid and how much energy we could save if we use time in different ways, aside from extractivist and capitalist ways of production. Understanding boredom as a form of resistance, the time to be bored, alone or collectively, can become a feminist tool to put care, love, and conviviality at the center; moments of boredom in which silence and emptiness can actually be quite potent in a world full of stimuli.

An Ecology of Naps
Namita Vijay Dharia

Childhood summers at my grandparents' home meant making space for midday naps. Every day, for an hour and a half, blinds were lowered and the desert cooler was put on full blast. My grandmother rested after a busy morning full of meals, laundry, grocery shopping, banking, and cleaning. The house fell silent as she napped and the afternoon unfolded in all its deliciousness. As the ground turned white hot outside, I lay on the cool floor and felt calmness, the pleasure of doing nothing surrounded by the gentle snores of sleeping grandparents.

"No napping," I announce as my students hit maximum drowsiness on a warm day in May. Bred in an educational climate that valorizes hyper-productivity, they are exhausted from many nights awake. I see a student's head dip and jerk awake. "Go wash your face," I say, as I betray my own ancestry and teach on.

Tricia Hersey, nap bishop and founder of the *Ministry of Naps*, reminds us that naps are about more than sleep. They represent freedom, liberation, healing, and unlearning.[15] Drawing from Black feminist activism, Hersey invites us to inhabit what Cara Daggett calls "alternative arrangements of energy and work."[16] Building on Hersey, I encourage architecture to embrace an ecology of naps.

For far too long, architecture has believed in constant work. Its disciplinary ethic is to generate value through the constant capturing and reworking of property. Architecture is a relentless tool of capitalism and the studio is its technocratic, disciplinary apparatus. Through its array of desks, rectangular boundaries, and open floor plans, the studio promotes surveillance and order and trains architecture's labor force.

Can we collectively dream new dreams for architecture? Can we saturate our pedagogy with rituals and spaces of pleasure and rest—spaces where alternate imaginaries of architecture can foster? I believe that pause and rest must become critical tools of not only self-practice but also design and architectural practice. Through this, we open the space for architecture and urban development to be still. Rest then becomes a personal and professional ethic. It scales from the personal to the planetary and transforms both body and ecology.

In their discussions of interspecies living, Zoe Todd describes oil spills as "the extracted, processed, heated, split and steamed progeny of the fossilized carbon beings buried deep within the earth of my [their] home province."[17] Oil has kin, they remind us. If oil is ancestry, energy, and ecology, our grandmothers too are ancestry, energy, and ecology. To recognize energy work in architectural education is to reanimate these ancestries and the many ecologies they could cultivate, it is to teach with new configurations of ancestry-energy-ecology. It is to dream new ways for us and our discipline to rejuvenate.

Passing on Passivity
Fallon Samuels Aidoo

Advocates for climate adaptation through historic preservation insist reusing "older, smaller buildings" is a better climate action plan.[18] Research and reporting to support this thesis remain limited, since energy audits of existing structures are laborious and costly. However, accessible data and architectural documentation can be found in student theses on shotgun houses—one of the oldest, smallest, and simplest structures a part of America's built environment. These shed-like structures can be found in very different climactic regions and historical periods serving diverse occupants and purposes--notably to temporarily shelter colonialists, missionaries, and troops, and to permanently house enslaved, emancipated, and indigenous people.

Plaques of the African American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard mark the former site of shotgun "gingerbread" houses, moved to equally swampy land across the street in some cases (as shown) or dryer highlands up the road. Native and African American owners of the houses subsequently expanded these houses and adapted them to their new locations, distinguishing them from their similar structures recognized as a National Historic Landmark. Photograph by Fallon Samuels Aidoo.

Student interest can propel faculty inquiry. Such was the case in 2022 when I joined architecture, historic preservation, and sustainable real estate development students in learning about the sustainability of shotgun architecture in a National Historic Landmark on the Massachusetts island of Martha's Vineyard. Three publications shed some light. A book by architectural historian Ellen Weiss examines the mutability of "gingerbread" houses built between 1860 and 1900 with clapboard walls, shingle roofs, and ecclesiastical ornamentation within a mile of the island's shoreline.[19] An Oak Bluffs Historical Society survey of Vineyard Highlands notes that many of the original 100+ shotgun houses were moved to high ground.[20] Martha's Vineyard Camp Meeting Association (MVCMA)—which owned and leased the land beneath campground houses—authorized these adaptations and relocations, we hypothesized. But, we wondered, for how long and why?

MVCMA is known on-island as conservative. It authorized indoor plumbing and electricity only after it became standard in island subdivisions and it permitted no central air conditioning system installations until the 1990s. Delaying winterization of summer cottages suggests not only resistance to real estate development trends, but a commitment to energy consumption and preservation innovation. MVCMA's own records, which I examined in summer 2022, indicate islanders who occupied campground houses year-round informed their environmental consciousness and leadership. Students rightfully asked, who would make campground houses permanent residences, and why?

Between 1890 and 1920, MVCMA joined urban development companies and authorities across the US in the removal of racial minorities and their housing under the guise of "slum clearance."[21] A plaque of the African American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard marks where cottagers of color once lived—a swampy section of the campgrounds now paved with gravel. Sarah Wentworth, one of 30 names listed on the plaque, lived there with her 3 sons before their forced migration to forested highlands and lakefront wetlands. Living in a relocated seasonal gingerbread house for a half-century, Sarah and her adult sons performed the housework necessary to turn their family home into passive houses and the grounds work needed to protect their households from storm surges and groundswells. The Wentworth family left behind ways of knowing their livability amidst environmental injustice and adaptability to climate variability. Sarah deeded her property to the town's Conservation Commission in her will, which her sons executed in 2009 as estate trustees.[22]

Probate records are invaluable yet underutilized resources in research of climate futures and pasts. Many others besides the Wentworths have utilized these legal instruments to shift the labor, capital, and time that climate adaptation and hazard mitigation requires to resourced heirs, stewards, and authorities. Rather than identify and propagate Wentworth's adaptive practices, Oak Bluffs Conservation Commission and the Martha's Vineyard Commission consented to demolition of the Wentworth house and others like it without historical or forensic documentation.[23] The Wentworths passed down an object lesson: a pedagogical property for learning how to work with heat loss/gain as well as water intrusion and absorption. Passing on this proposition, the town and county have shown others working tirelessly to model just and sustainable worldmaking that the island's conservation authorities see their built environments as expendable, not explanatory.

Feminist Telephone: A Labor-Saving Device
Feminist Art and Architecture Collective (FAAC)

This text resulted from an experimental game of feminist "telephone," used as a labor- and energy-saving device. Confronting the difficulty of getting multiple professional minds and bodies together across time zones (from West Coast USA to the UK) and space, we held one initial video meeting to discuss the prompt. We then relayed a text, one to the next - copy-paste, then edit, pass it on, copy-paste, edit, repeat. As in any game of telephone, the "message" gets garbled and transformed. At the end, four members of the collective met online. Together, that group worked to interpret the message - from ourselves, through ourselves, to ourselves - into a publishable and "deliverable" text that could be further interpreted by readers. To (try and) make sense. Together.

Crisscrossing my thoughts with those who inspire and interrupt me.[BROSSARD 1982] I try replicating the process—the energy in the firing of synapses—of a single person (an "I") trying to hold it together, to hold worlds together and words, amidst competing expectations and pressures.

I stop. Breathe. Shut my eyes. From the hubbub of contradictions, competing uses, and productions, nodes of collective energy, emerges an I. The atoms and molecules in me: I am matter neither created nor destroyed. Am I? Are we? I shapeshift. How?

They measure the carbon within me as a calorific value. The heat produced. The energy content. They argue the earth is made of carbon, burned and used, and let loose after millions of dormant years underground. But why is carbon the only point of reference? No, I am not only made of carbon, I need to be reminded.

My body is a second body.[HILDYARD 2017] These measurements are my body, integrated into our body. We are waves, bodies of water, aqueous beings, entangled. We need to remember.[EVARISTO 2019] We need to remember. "'I', lighthouse waiting for storms."[ADNAN 2012] To feel the world.[CHAUDHARY 2024]

The energy of carbon-based lifeforms is relentlessly extracted from bodies—human, animal, vegetable.[YUSOFF 2018] I am assemblages.[TSING 2015] Racial capitalist autophagy persists[ROBINSON 1983] as I set the auto A/C on recirc. and try to ramp my body into ketosis.

I am depleted by capitalism, the machine that exhausts.[RABINBACH 1990] The exhaustion can be imperceptible, molecular.[IRIGARAY 1999] Growth for the few on the back of exploitation and depletion for the many depletes. Is the energy of women "renewable" when there is no plan to renew it? [GARBES 2022, BURKEMAN 2021]

Exhaust: from the mid-sixteenth-century Latin, to 'draw off or out.'

To be productive = to produce profit.

Profit = growth.

Growth for whom? And is growth always good?

"There is such a thing as enough." [MEADOWS 1972]

Where am I to find the energy? A rigid space.

To not fit—to not have energy, to be finite, *finito*—is a form of resistance. That, too, takes energy, creativity.[PIEPZNA-SAMARASINHA 2022] I have no energy—I must sleep. I can't sleep.

I stop. Breathe. Shut my eyes.

I am fatigued, but dig deeper, hoping to draw out more—a seam of untapped resources, a pocket of possibility, a tiny crumb in that pocket, a morsel. A calorie. I expend extra energy searching.

I am also the exhaust, the source of pollution. I try not to be. We share a fragile reality of climate crisis and biodiversity loss, unevenly distributed. The mobile I : auto-mobile, car, bus, airplane, my iPhone, engine fumes, smokestacks, to tailpipes. I am factory waste clouding air and waters, my children's disposable diapers choke up landfills. I am not only the solid, visible, stable, I am also the energy contained.

Against an economy of urgency, I slow down.[HERSEY 2023, MAY 2020, BERG AND SEEBER, 2017] I think I will rest here a bit, on you. I will carry a bit of you, onward.[KALMAN 2022] We draw together. So that we can draw together.

Letter to Tom
Ilze Wolff

The film and pamphlet, Summer Flowers by Wolff Architects looks at the life of South African writer, activist, and gardener Bessie Head (1937–1986). In 1969, in Botswana, Bessie Head built her house, Rainclouds, with the proceeds from her first novel When Rainclouds Gather. During the day she worked with other volunteers as part of a communal gardening project. The gardening project would later become a central part of her novel. It was also at this time that South Africa, her country of origin, was undergoing the most extreme and violent destructions of historic black neighborhoods under the racist Group Areas Act. It is in this house that she later, mostly in the evenings, wrote her landmark novel, A Question of Power. Today the house is a Botswana national heritage site.

Ilze Wolff, *Pumflet*, Summer Flowers (inside cover), 2019.

Here is a link to the film and the full description of the project: https://www.wolffarchitects.co.za/projects/all/summer-flowers/

Subject: Re: Bessie Head House
From: Ilze Wolff <ilze@wolffarchitects.co.za>
Date: Fri, 24 May 2019 16:30:04 +0200
To: Tom Holzinger <tom_holzinger@yahoo.com>

Dear Tom

I am so glad to receive all this information, thank you. It took me some time to process this and I am feeling ready to respond. Today is James Matthew's 90th birthday and I will see him tomorrow at a special party that his family has arranged for him at the Artscape Theatre. I will go with Gladys Thomas as my partner, significant, because the two of them co-authored the first book of poetry that was banned by SA apartheid government in 1972, called Cry Rage. I don't think Gladys and Bessie ever met or corresponded but their work is so aligned.

If there is an opportunity to speak to James about Bessie again tomorrow, I will ask him the questions that you have in mind. On the other hand, my research into the work of Bessie Head has developed on a unique and exciting path. I have managed to inspire a few others to look with me and together, as part of reading her work as text, we are also reading her work has a garden. There are many, many references to plant life, both productive and decorative that we have been collecting as we read her writings, as we look at the book covers and the photographs of her and her life as portrayed in her biography. She wore floral printed clothing in most of the pictures and this was observed and documented in a poem by Katherine Gallagher called "Meeting Bessie Head in Adelaide, March 1984" where she writes:

> *"Cautiously, she gazed at us*
> *through luminous dark eyes-scrutiny of a writer*
> *The sky was pure cobalt—an African sky, she laughed,*
> *standing in bright florals"*

Most importantly, though, the idea of a garden and working with soil and plant life is a political act. This is of course, highly significant if we were to think of a design of reinstating a garden for the Bessie Head House. The aesthetic, conceptual and formal qualities of this garden have already been done in the form of the texts that she left behind. In her meditations and correspondence with Robert Sobukwe for instance, it is clear that it is through gardening and vegetables that she reconnected with him via Miss Phala, Sobukwe's neighbour in Kimberley, who also happened to have bought vegetables

from Bessie's garden. "I am not a commercial gardener," she insists in a letter to him in 1972, enclosed with her then completed novel *A Question of Power*. About cultivation, Bessie quotes a statement by Sobukwe in the moving portrait of him in "The Coming of the Christ-Child":

> "I've just been reading a book on some of the land struggles in China after the revolution," he'd say. "It was difficult for Mao Tse Tung to get people to cultivate land because ancestor worship was practiced there. I've seen people do the same thing in the Transkei where I am from. There was hardly any land left to cultivate, but people would rather die of starvation than plough on the land where their ancestors were buried."

A garden, then, as observed by Bessie, has the power to generate a claim to land, although, that claim should be historicized and negotiated with those who have come before. This claim, in other words, is simultaneously urgent, yet problematic. Sobukwe's statement also talks about the more serious consequences of dispossession and the implications on people's spiritual lives.

Incidentally, campaign posters for the EFF used the slogan "Son of the Soil" together with a portrait of its leader, Julius Malema. When I first saw it, it struck me not only because of the clarity of the graphic design but mostly because of the use of this slogan, which is the name of the short story Bessie Head wrote as a meditation on the work of Sol Plaatje. But I wondered about using this slogan as party politicking and electioneering, something Bessie wrote quite adamantly against. There are connections between land, ancestors, flowers, politics and desire that I am learning from and through this particular reading of the work of Bessie Head, through Robert Sobukwe and also, through Sol Plaatje. I think there are lessons for how to make a garden, how to make a space where it is possible to both claim land yet be conscious of historical events or burial practices of the past. It is possible to "not starve" and cultivate a different claim to land and this is what I am busy trying to figure out now.

Finally, I am in the process of organizing a trip to visit Sobukwe and Plaatje's houses in Kimberley and then also would like to visit the Bessie Head House and the Khama Museum. I would love to meet you and talk more. My dates are not confirmed but it would be around mid-July.

How does that sound?

Kind regards,
Ilze Wolff

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Notes

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4 Vandana Shiva, "Resources," The Development Dictionary [1996], ed. by Wolfgang Sachs (London: Zed Books, 2019), 228-242. Pp. 230, 240.
5 Donna Haraway. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 1-25, 7.
6 Dagget.
7 E.g. Karl Marx, *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy*, vol.I, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 183-4.
8 Shigehisa Kuriyama. *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine* (New York: Zone Books, 1999) could be a good starting point of reference and research.
9 Martin Heidegger, "The Being of Dasein as Care," "Confirmation of the Existential Interpretation of Dasein as Care," *Being and Time* (1953), trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York, 2010), 184-193.
10 Manzanas del Cuidado (Apples of Care) are infrastructures of care network to support caregivers and their families, https://manzanasdelcuidado.gov.co/
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15 Tricia Hersey, Rest is Resistance.
16 Cara New Daggett, *The Birth of Energy*, 205.
17 Zoe Todd, "Fish, Kin and Hope," 98.
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