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## Processing this Pandemic

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# *PROCESSING THIS PANDEMIC*

Three reflexive essays on topics brought to light during  
COVID-19

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*Advised by Dr. Kate Darby | June 2020*

*CONTENTS*

WE ARE WORKING FOR WHAT EXACTLY? .....2  
LET’S STOP TALKING ABOUT OVERPOPULATION .....7  
I’M SCARED SHITLESS IN HERE .....13  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....19  
REFERENCES .....20

*I do not have the lived experience of a farmworker, undocumented worker, low-income person, incarcerated individual, or person of color. While I do discuss and highlight issues in these pieces that directly impact these groups, what I say is not coming from personal experience. The ideas I am bringing forward are those which I have studied and read, and have had countless conversations about with mentors, fellow organizers, and friends – all of this has shaped and formed the thoughts that I share here.*

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## ***WE ARE WORKING FOR WHAT EXACTLY?<sup>1</sup>***

Right now, I'm in what feels like an endless cycle of Zoom calls, neighborhood walks, and Netflix shows – the rest of the world feels like it's on pause. Yet somehow my last quarter of college is halfway over and I'm reminded that time has not actually slowed. I never thought that I would end my college experience with online classes, a virtual graduation ceremony, and at a time of record unemployment. Another change: my senior capstone project. I had finally decided on a project centered around community and food, where I planned on interviewing members of community groups who are using food as a tool to strengthen their communities, whose stories I would then share in a meaningful way. With coronavirus, everything had to shift, because those groups I was intending on interviewing were now in crisis mode, with priorities far greater than having a conversation with me. Eventually, that led me here, to writing three pieces on vastly different topics, connected by issues that feel particularly visible during this moment, though have been present long before now. This first piece has its roots in my original topic of community and food, expanded upon and adapted from something I wrote before this pandemic. To begin, I want to bring it back to right now, to this quiet world where so much feels like it's on hold. Those who are able are staying home as much as possible, making the outside world feel much quieter and still. Because amidst this outer stillness, there is more happening than ever. Life is just as busy if not busier for grocery store workers, farmworkers, health care employees, delivery workers, and so many other professions deemed as "essential." And even for those not so essential, there are still bills to pay and families to care for.

This is not a quiet break for everyone.

Even for those of us with a little more time on our hands, much of it is spent organizing within our communities, creating networks of support to meet the needs of community members. Neighbors are

<sup>1</sup> Title quoted from [Familias Unidas por la Justicia](#), an independent farm worker labor union in Washington State. This language comes from a recent Facebook post in which they describe how the labor of farmworkers has long been undervalued though always been essential, and how this continues during the current coronavirus pandemic. They continue to work, but they are also demanding more.

offering whatever they can, whether that be childcare, a ride to the store, a homemade face mask, meals, or even financial aid. It's encouraging to see, but it is also important to recognize that so many are relying on this community support to *meet their basic needs*. This is being done not to supplement or enhance what is being provided by our systems, but really in absence of them.

In this work, I want to highlight the role of food in developing these community systems of support. Food is being used (always, but right now especially), as a way to strengthen community and remain connected. We all require food to sustain us, and this shared need can be used to connect with one another and deepen relationships. Building and enhancing these connections is crucial in developing a strong community – because really, without relationships, what do we have? Food continually provides a basis for conversation and relationship-building. We see this through eating and sharing food together, where at its most basic level eating a meal in the same space initiates conversation and bonding, and sharing food offers a means of communicating affection and support, sometimes in a way that words cannot.<sup>2</sup> Food also impacts our own perceptions of identity and culture. Because what we choose to eat is largely a reflection of our own personal history, what we eat reveals a lot about who we are. Therefore, food is deeply personal. And as it plays such an integral part of our daily lives, its importance cannot be exaggerated.

Based on this, it's not difficult to understand why so many community projects are grounded in food. Providing and increasing the accessibility of nourishing food for your community is a way of taking care of one another, and presents a base to build upon. This is clear now especially. The term mutual aid is coming up again and again. These are the community responses we're seeing, where people join together to meet immediate needs arising from these sudden disasters, as well as needs emerging from the "ongoing disasters of the systems we live under." Neighborhoods and communities are self-organizing and doing what they can to support those who are most vulnerable. Of course, many of these efforts are not new, there are ongoing groups that have been doing this work long before the current crisis. Mutual aid is a non-western tradition; it is a practice that came before colonialism and capitalism. It is also one that communities of color have been practicing for a long time. While these efforts tend to be more visible after crises, it's important to note that mutual aid is intentionally a long-term commitment, and one that's purpose resides in allowing communities to succeed and flourish, rather than merely survive. Though these are not new efforts, what is happening now is certainly motivating more to get involved.

<sup>2</sup> Sharing food is also a powerful strategy used to unify and strengthen a community, one example being the [Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast for Children Program](#). This program was not only used to satisfy the practical need of hunger, but also to provoke a larger discussion around food access and poverty.

Food Not Bombs is one such group, and one that has been around for nearly 40 years.<sup>3</sup> Described as an “anarchistic mutual aid group,” Food Not Bombs is known for providing free vegan food in public spaces. And as such, they are very intentional about their identity as a mutual aid, rather than charity, group. They are nonhierarchical, use consensus decision-making, and create no distinction between their organizers and those coming for a meal. Rather than simply giving out free food, chapters of Food Not Bombs invite those eating with them to contribute in some way. Serving food in public spaces allow the group to expose issues of poverty and inequality while living their values of direct democracy, solidarity, and mutual aid, working to challenge existing systems rather than reinforce them. In this way, food is used as a tool to build a strong movement and address critical issues. This not only demonstrates a powerful way that food can be used to bring people together, but also exposes some of the issues within charity that perpetuate existing systems rather than challenge them. Oftentimes charity organizations offer their services as gifts, as if food and housing is something to be given, rather than necessities for living. Charity is oftentimes money coming from the rich to “the right kind of poor people,” a kind of saviorism or top down model instead of one that builds power from below. And while many of these charity organizations often have the best of intentions, when they aren’t actively engaging with and listening to the communities they impact, the existing power dynamics and core issues remain. Instead of empowering members of their communities, they become reliant upon others for change. In contrast to charity, “mutual aid is part of a broader strategy to address the root causes of injustice by mobilizing people to dismantle structures of domination and build the world we want.”

While it’s exciting to see an increase in mutual aid efforts, which can and are often powerful and impact many, it’s also not always enough. Without deliberate planning and organization, volunteers often do not pace themselves and experience burn out quickly. Recently in New York, a mutual aid group has been working to collect and redistribute funds for coronavirus relief. While the group has raised over \$40,000 fairly quickly, the amount requested neared \$220,000. This shows the power in these efforts, but also some of their limitations. We are too often restricted by the systems we are working within. Needs can overpower the capacity for help. There are still people struggling to afford medical care and food for their families and communities; more can always be done. And not everyone holds the privilege of working from home, there are great racial inequities regarding this ability to social distance. It’s been found that only 16.2% of Hispanic or Latino workers and 19.7% of Black workers actually have the

<sup>3</sup> I wrote this section on Food Not Bombs pre-pandemic. I’ve since come across and learned about various mutual aid groups, many of which have developed in light of coronavirus. Food Not Bombs may not be the most relevant example for this moment, but their story does highlight many crucial pieces of mutual aid, and is a powerful model to look to.

option to work from home. This is one factor contributing to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on these communities. States that have released race-specific data on cases and deaths are reporting high numbers of Black deaths, even in areas where Black people make up a relatively small portion of the population. These inequities leave many workers with the terrible choice of either going to work and risking exposure or staying home and risking hunger. This comes not at the fault of these people individually, but at our systems that consolidate power and punish the poor.

We are also socialized in a way that puts responsibility on the individual for their own successes and failures. In this context, the “we” I am referring to are white people in the United States. There exist other cultures and groups that are not socialized in this way, and many are doing things differently. But in this society, we put the emphasis on our own individual successes, seeing one another as competitors rather than sources of support and reliance. adrienne maree brown uses the term anti-nurturing, illustrating how “we in a western/US context are socialized to work against respecting the emergent processes of the world and each other.” This acknowledges that the ways in which we perceive and think about the world and one another are *learned* behaviors, rather than inherent parts of being human.

And in this capitalist society, everything has been commodified, which has extended to food. This commodification of food has increased the amount we produce and created a market for it, giving most of the power in these systems to large corporations, inevitably leading to an unequal distribution. In this world our value comes from how much we produce, where we must *earn* basic necessities – including food. Even during our current crisis those in power are talking about bailing out some of the most wealthy and polluting industries (i.e. airline and cruise ship), while everyday workers may wait months for a single \$1,200 check. Acknowledging the problems we face, and that the institutions and systems at play are inseparable from these core issues is critical in working to change them. Capitalism is one such system that plays a large role. This system limits us to our roles as consumers, where we’re encouraged to change our consumption patterns and behaviors to solve the problems we face rather than imagining and working towards creating alternatives to the systems themselves.

The systemic and structural issues in our society are always present, and are only exacerbated by crisis. During crises it becomes obvious what isn’t working because the impacts are so widespread, we’re seeing this now. Unsafe and unjust conditions that have always been present are now hyper-visible due to the coronavirus crisis. Many workers who’ve been deemed as “essential” are continuing to work though also continuing to be underpaid and undervalued with limited protections, as their working conditions become suddenly more dangerous. This pandemic has made it clear that labor is what keeps our systems functioning, not high-paid CEOs, but everyday workers. And yet, while these workers continue to show

up and risk exposure to the virus keeping the rest of the world at home, many are still struggling to meet their basic needs. The example of undocumented workers is particularly ironic. Many undocumented workers have been given letters officially declaring their work as “essential,” though these same workers continue to be at risk of deportation. ICE raids are still being carried out. Most of these workers do not have health insurance or receive sick pay, not to mention that Congress’ coronavirus relief bill excludes aid for those who are undocumented. What are these workers working for exactly? To maintain the status quo? To remain in poverty? To become sick and left without healthcare? These questions, among others, have been raised by the farmworker union Familias Unidas por la Justicia, as they continue to work. It’s during a time like this where these ironies are visible to more of us: that we undervalue and give little respect to those very jobs that our society cannot function without. The good news is that many are seeing this and demanding more. Workers are striking, more mutual aid and community projects are emerging – there are so many of us organizing for a better future.

We’re in the midst of a global pandemic, and though we’re hurting, there is still hope. It’s during moments like this when “the previously unthinkable suddenly becomes reality.” This crisis is pushing those who’ve never organized before to get involved. We’re seeing more and more turning to their communities for support over the state. We’re seeing how food is being used as a catalyst for connection and support. Many of us are finally seeing the inequities present in our society as they intensify, and are using this moment to reflect on what we view as normal. As we remain inside and think longingly of interacting with others, we also must not forget what we know to be true right now. Because “nothing could be worse than a return to normality.” It’s when food producers share knowledge and resources rather than compete for profits, when we put the needs of our communities over the needs of corporations, and when good, nourishing food is available to everyone – we will finally be prioritizing one another and our communities over the systems that tell us to do just the opposite. Unlearning what we’ve been socialized to think and behave and instead putting our efforts towards building strong relationships and caring for one another is powerful.

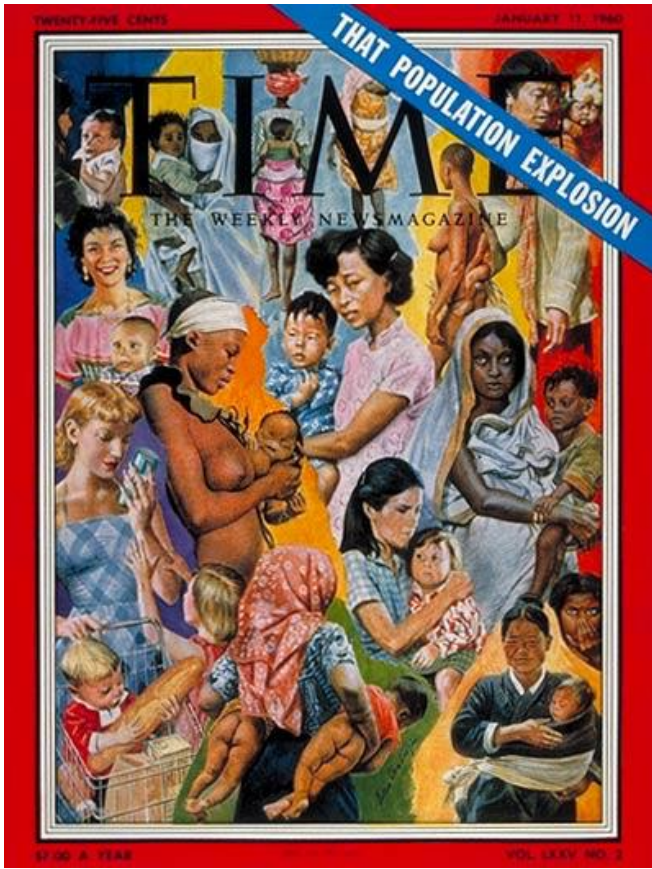
Let’s use this moment to help us get there.



# *LET'S STOP TALKING ABOUT OVERPOPULATION*

I'm a Business & Sustainability student, and sometimes, what I learn in my environmental classes are contradictory to what I'm being taught in my business ones. Usually, there is at least a shared understanding that things need to change and that climate change is serious, but the underlying beliefs and thoughts around *why* and *what* need to change vary significantly. I've been taught to look to Amazon as a successful company, and that technology and market forces are our best defenses against climate change, but I've also been taught that capitalism is the monster driving our problems, that economic efficiency is flawed, and that resilience is key. These contrasting views have given me a kind of window into how we're teaching these subjects, and to be honest, the lack of direction there is in a solution. However, there is one topic that somehow permeates through most disciplines (in my experience), one that feels like an undisputed truth in many business classes, while is more of a question mark in the environmental ones: the problem of overpopulation. It's common to think and be taught that population growth is what is driving climate change and environmental destruction; it's something many are exposed to long before college. We're also seeing an increase in these narratives right now, during this global pandemic. Claims that humans are the *real* virus, and that mother nature is finally being given the chance to recover can oftentimes be traced back to the overpopulation myth. On the surface it makes sense, that our ever-growing population is increasing human demands on our planet. The problem is that overpopulation is not the driver of climate change, and these narratives often bring with them dark implications.

There is often implied racism, xenophobia, misogyny, or even eugenics underlying the message of population growth; it is rarely solely about the need for fewer human demands on the planet. When we focus on the need to decrease human numbers, there is usually some kind of assumption and assertion as to *which* populations are the ones that ought to be reduced. It's certainly not those in the so-called "developed" countries, it's those in the global south, with higher birth rates and less political power. Classifying population growth as a global problem has allowed numerous international organizations to use this issue to justify the management of many in these countries, particularly women. One way this is shown is through images and photos that have come to represent this "population problem." Crowded images of Black and Brown people, and of poor, large families have become a way of representing this issue, while leaving out the context of poverty, gender inequality, and power. Instead, this puts the burden



and pressure directly on those in these photos, usually Black women, ignoring the conditions underlying these circumstances. The image included here is a Times magazine cover published in 1960, focused on “that population explosion.” This cover is filled with mothers and their babies as a way to represent overpopulation. Just by glancing at the image and its title, women and children (primarily non-white), are associated with our growing population. Though this image does hint at wealth disparities, by only including mothers and children, the role of business and organizations such as the World Bank in creating and building the poverty and wealth disparities that exist today are ignored. Instead, hints of these inequalities are attributed to a “population explosion,” where mothers are the focus. Today, organizations are more careful about the images and language they use, as the topic of population has become more controversial. Though these crowded images are consistently associated with population and poverty, today they are less explicitly linked.

These narratives promote the work of many NGOs, who often use this to justify their intervention in foreign countries, all under the pretext of “helping.” In reality, many of these NGOs are more accountable to their funders than to the communities they are working within. This complicated role can be shown by looking at foreign NGOs in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. After the disaster, NGOs were everywhere, leading to Haiti having more NGOs per capita than any other country. In a striking example, the American Red Cross, who raised half a billion dollars for Haiti after the earthquake with promises to build and provide thousands of homes, produced only six. One of their main issues: employing very few Haitians and relying too heavily on foreign staff. Even with such high unemployment rates present in Haiti, few NGOs make job creation a priority. This is all based on and feeds into the western narrative that countries in the global south lack the ability to better their lives themselves and that they require support from wealthier nations. This also brings along assumptions that this bettering of their lives looks

similar to a western life, in many ways discounting other cultures and ways of living.<sup>4</sup> This is revealed when organizations send inexperienced volunteers to these vulnerable areas, driving this saviorism mentality, and oftentimes doing more harm than good.

Debates and discussions around overpopulation and the harmful rhetoric that tends to follow has been part of the mainstream environmental movement since the 1960s. The publication of *The Population Bomb* in 1968 is when this really gained momentum, contributing to a surge in concern and controversy over population growth.<sup>5</sup> As these conversations gained traction, discussions around immigration policy were also present, with the two relating in various ways. Historically, anti-immigration policies have also had close links with the environmental movement. For instance, the Sierra Club was overwhelmed with *immigration controversy* during the 1990's, with people both in and outside of the organization pressuring the adoption of a strong anti-immigrant stance. These pressures came out of *overpopulation concerns*, citing increased pressure on transportation, education, and housing infrastructure, then leading to increased environmental degradation, with higher immigration levels being named its primary cause. In 1996 after significant public controversy, the Sierra Club officially declared a *neutral stance* on immigration, though still cited overpopulation as an area of concern.<sup>6</sup>

Discussions around overpopulation are still used today to legitimize racist anti-immigration objectives. This is fairly obvious when looking at groups like the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), which notably, members of the Sierra Club helped to *establish*. FAIR argues that immigration is pushing the limits of our country's transportation infrastructure, increasing housing and rent prices, and harming life in rural areas. Here, immigrants are categorized as *greedy*, leaving their countries to steal the resources of wealthier ones. An *article* on FAIR's website describes the environmental impact of immigration, citing the high per capita consumption in the US, where more immigration allows more people access to these consumption levels. They argue here that immigration is the problem, ignoring an alternative interpretation, that what needs to change is US consumption levels rather than immigration. This implies that those of us in the United States *deserve* to consume as much as

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say all NGOs cause harm, many are run intentionally and provide significant aid, but it can be valuable to remain wary.

<sup>5</sup> In *The Population Bomb*, Paul Ehrlich argues mass starvation is inevitable as we reach the capacity of our planet. Notably, Ehrlich advocates for population control measures to be directed at middle- and upper-class families in the US, which he uses to prove his lack of racial bias. However, many of the policies he pushes for do have racial and class *implications*, with other narratives throughout his book doing the same.

<sup>6</sup> Today, the *Sierra Club* no longer supports the overpopulation myth, recognizing its own complicated history with the narrative and addressing its racist roots.

we do, and that those arriving from elsewhere do not. The environmental impacts of a growing population are used to justify these harmful views.

Yes, consumption levels are a problem and contribute to environmental degradation – but it is not a growing population that is driving this, it is a culture of consumption, systems that prioritize profits over human lives, and an unequal distribution of wealth at the core of these problems. We are seeing that “global neoliberal capitalism continues to emphasize population reduction of the poor in developing countries while increasing production-consumption in richer developed countries.” The richest 10% of our population is responsible for almost half of carbon dioxide emissions. Shifting this wealth and reducing (or eliminating!) the number of extremely wealthy people in existence will do far more to combat climate change than focusing on an increasing population. Discussions around overpopulation allow many of us to ignore these deeper causes and continue living as we have been, allowing those with the most power to hold onto it.

These arguments and discussions surrounding population, while always present, are especially evident during times of crisis. Right now, while much of the world is staying home, a narrative is emerging that Mother Nature has finally been given the chance to breathe and recover. So many stories are circulating, describing small environmental victories in the face of this crisis. Images of wildlife roaming empty streets, improved water quality of the canals in Venice, decreases in China’s pollution levels – these, and more, are providing a silver lining in this crisis for many. Unfortunately, many of these stories have been proven false, or unrelated to this virus. Though not all have been. Around the world we are seeing a significant decrease in long flights, unnecessary drives, and other activities that are contributing significantly to pollution levels. Yet we are also seeing that China has lowered their pollution standards in light of this crisis. Here in the US, the EPA has lessened the enforcement of environmental regulations, to help polluting industries deal with this pandemic. Additional countries are discussing relaxing environmental regulations to jumpstart their economies. It’s definitely a mixed bag, and interesting to notice how small environmental improvements may be used to justify an increase in pollution later on.

While it does make sense to want to share and read these positive stories – after all, we want to feel like we’re going through what we’re going through for a reason – celebrating these environmental victories tends to ignore who is actually bearing the costs of this crisis. We already know that the hazards of this virus are racialized, with Black, Brown, and Indigenous people experiencing a disproportionate level of these risks. There’s been a recent increase in hate crimes toward Asian-Americans. In New Mexico, Native Americans represent over half of coronavirus cases, yet make up just over 10% of the

state's population. Navajo Nation is not only a food desert, but just over 30% of the nation lacks access to clean running water, and Indian Health Service is underfunded. These factors, among others, have contributed to the spread and severity of coronavirus in these areas. If a state, Navajo Nation would have recently surpassed New York for the highest rate of per capita coronavirus cases. These disproportionate impacts are widespread.

Celebrating signs of environmental progress without acknowledging these harms have been called out by some as eco-fascist: another concept with a history in the environmental movement. Eco-fascism puts the “good of the planet” above all else, which tends to insinuate, if not directly call for, human sacrifice. There have already been hundreds of thousands of deaths due to coronavirus. Any amount of environmental improvement cannot be worth these deaths; this is hardly a moment to celebrate. When these declining pollution levels and other signs of environmental progress are celebrated, they represent “indirect endorsements of mass suffering for people who are already most vulnerable – and incidentally, those who contribute least to climate change.” It's hard to know where to draw this line. When is it okay to appreciate signs of environmental recovery, and when should we push against this to acknowledge just how much human harm is occurring? I've come to see it as important to acknowledge it all. Instead of celebrating, why don't we instead *recognize* both the improvements that have occurred as well as the harm that has come with it? How might we see these same outcomes under equitable and just circumstances? Because it is possible, and claiming that humans are the virus disregards this potential, and is an eco-fascist narrative. Repeating this not only reinforces the overpopulation idea, but also ignores that humans are a part of nature, and that it is possible to live and exist without its destruction. This is visible in many Indigenous communities that have lived for centuries without causing the kind of harm present today. Notably, 80% of Earth's biodiversity hotspots are located on Indigenous lands. This is not because this land is inherently more diverse or productive, but because the land is cared for and respected in ways that capitalism discourages.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Indigenous farmers are producing up to 70% of the world's food. So many claim that we require industrialized agriculture to feed our growing population, and that pesticides and GMOs are the only way for us to survive. When it comes to overpopulation, I've found this to be one of the most common concerns brought up – that we need to lower population growth

<sup>7</sup>The environmental movement has often used the Native American as a symbol of the “ideal” relationship between humans and nature, creating a divide between many mainstream environmentalists and Indigenous communities. Many Native American communities have allowed parts of their land to be developed to achieve economic independence, which many in the environmental movement have critiqued. This is not a narrative I want to replicate, but rather bring to light and acknowledge that there are thousands of Indigenous groups all over the world, who are too often generalized.

to reduce the impacts of our destructive food system. Once again, this doesn't get at the roots of these problems.

The problems in our food system are not driven by more mouths to feed. We lack incentives for farmers to invest in their land for the long term, instead higher production levels and cheaper products are rewarded. In reality, "we produce one and a half times more than enough food for everyone on the planet," people are going hungry because this food is inaccessible, not because there isn't enough. Our food system does not prioritize feeding everyone and does not adapt to changes or crisis well. Recently, dairy farmers have been dumping thousands of gallons of milk as demand has dropped dramatically with the closures of primary buyers such as schools and restaurants. And it's not just milk. Chicken processors have started breaking eggs, farmers have plowed under many crops rather than harvest them. So much perishable food has become waste, and during a time where many are struggling to afford any. The United States produces more food than any other country, yet even before this crisis one in seven people were food insecure. No matter how much food we produce, there will always be some going hungry if we do not address issues of concentrated power.

In the midst of this global pandemic, it makes sense to share and cling to the positive and hopeful stories seen circulating online. Many of us are feeling hopeless, scared, and angry, and want to blame something. Somehow, that something has become us. It's already ingrained in us that our ever-growing population is causing mass environmental destruction, reinforced over and over again in the mass amounts of media consumed while isolated at home. And yet, humans are not the virus we've been confronted with. If our population was significantly smaller, would our problems really be fixed? The answer has to be no, because the underlying causes that have gotten us to where we are will not have changed. We may need fewer human demands on the planet, but this can be addressed without reducing our population dramatically. It will, however, require addressing issues of wealth distribution and inequality, or in other words, issues of capitalism. Discussions around overpopulation allow us to continue living as we always have, while those in power to continue to hold it. These narratives are harmful, particularly at a time such as this. We want to criticize and blame something, but rather than put this on people, why don't we put this on the systems that have created this mess? This moment is a powerful time to make these realizations and understand how we've gotten here. Because when this moment has passed, when we're able to move freely without worrying about the distance between us and the nearest person, will our lives be better? Hopefully, the answer will be yes, not because of the smaller population that has resulted from this virus, but because we have realized how ineffective and unjust our systems are, and we are working to build new ones.

## *I'M SCARED SHITLESS IN HERE*<sup>8</sup>

By now, it should be clear that COVID-19 is not the “great equalizer” that some have asserted it as. While its impacts are widespread, they are certainly not equal. In my previous two pieces I have discussed various groups that are especially impacted by and made vulnerable to this virus, under broader themes and contexts such as community, overpopulation, and eco-fascism. In this piece, I focus more narrowly on a specific group that is incredibly vulnerable right now and often overlooked: those who are incarcerated. Each day more stories emerge on the increasing numbers of coronavirus cases in prisons, the lack of cleaning and sanitary supplies inside, and how unsafe this population is as social distancing has become impossible. And yet, rarely are we encouraged to think critically about the conditions inside, conditions that are always dangerous. While criminal justice reform has become a popular topic, the narrative still exists that those incarcerated deserve what they are experiencing, and that their safety comes second to ours.

The necessity of prisons and jails is rarely questioned, instead accepted as natural and permanent parts of society. As Angela Davis says, “the prison is present in our lives and, at the same time, it is absent from our lives.” It is something we can always count on to be there, yet also something we rarely are forced to see the realities of, or look at critically. In many ways prisons have become this thing that allow those of us not incarcerated to feel more safe and secure, where we lock away large portions of our population in the name of public safety. Though we may *feel* safer, are we really? The perception that everyone in prison is dangerous and violent is false. In reality, poor people of color are “targeted by racist policing” and usually are “put in desperate situations where they engage in criminalized behavior to get by.” We criminalize poverty, and in doing so disproportionately criminalize and incarcerate Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities. Essentially, “we criminalize people after we deprive them of the ability to take care of themselves.” There is also significant anti-Blackness connected to incarceration. Studies have shown that “white people have strong unconscious associations between Blackness and criminality,” with these implicit biases having impacts throughout the criminal legal system. In state prisons, Black people are incarcerated over 5 times the rate of white people, and it’s not because they are committing more crimes. For instance, rates of drug use among Black and white people are relatively

<sup>8</sup> Title quoted from a piece written by Felix Sitthivong, who is currently incarcerated at Monroe Correctional Complex in Monroe, WA. Here, Sitthivong expresses his fear and anxiety regarding being incarcerated during this crisis. Since he wrote this, prisoners in Monroe have rioted due to inadequate protections against COVID-19, as there have been outbreaks within the facility.

similar, yet Black people are arrested at significantly higher rates. We also see that for the same crimes, Black men have 5-10% longer prison sentences than white men. There is overwhelming evidence that Black people are unfairly targeted by our criminal system.

In this moment, injustices within the criminal legal system have become especially visible. Many of the guidelines and practices that we've been instructed to follow to prevent the spread of this virus are often inaccessible to those incarcerated, or against the rules. In many prisons, something as simple as handwashing is difficult to achieve as many lack hot water, or even a working sink. Felix Sitthivong, who is currently incarcerated at Monroe Corrections Center, says that while he and others inside have been told to wash their hands frequently, basic hygiene products are not provided freely, and remain overpriced. Sitthivong also describes what social distancing looks like for him:

“An individual like myself can line up for chow with 50 other prisoners at a time standing two feet apart but not be allowed to sit at the table with anybody else because they're only allowing one person per table, then have to come straight to my 6×10 cell and practice social distancing with my celly that I couldn't sit at a dinner with yet share a cell with. Makes perfect sense right?”

These words were written towards the end of March, yet were just published May 18<sup>th</sup>, revealing not only the lack of social distancing present, but also a clear disconnect between those incarcerated and those outside, including their families.

As prisons and jails have suspended in-person visitations during this crisis, alternative forms of communication are difficult to access. Three prisons in California have cut off phone and email communications for those inside, leaving letter writing as the only alternative.<sup>9</sup> The families of many in these facilities are understandably worried. Many haven't received letters and think it's because their family members inside are unable to afford stamps at the commissary. One woman, who has been writing back and forth with her incarcerated husband, says that she hasn't heard from him since he last wrote that he was getting tested for COVID-19; she's anxiously waiting for a response. Todd Sloan's mother found out that he had tested positive on the news. Sloan, one of the first to get coronavirus at Monroe Correctional Complex, was immediately isolated and denied cleaning supplies, his medications, and personal things.

As Sitthivong's firsthand description of social distancing within a prison shows, the prison is a place where you aren't able to control where you go or who you interact with, making social distancing impossible and conditions dangerous. “Incarceration is itself a category of vulnerability.” The virus is

<sup>9</sup> The virus can spread through multiple people touching keyboards and handsets, which is what these prisons have used to justify these actions.



likely to spread quickly in these areas because of “close quarters, unsanitary conditions, a population that is more vulnerable to COVID-19, and the large number of people that cycle through the criminal justice system.” This is already happening, and only getting worse. In Texas, 70% of prisoners tested have coronavirus. Across the US, the infection rate is about 2½ times higher in prisons and jails than with the general public. Prisons also tend to hold an older population and approximately 40% of those inside have chronic health conditions – both factors that increase this groups vulnerability. Already, the health and medical care in prisons is inadequate. In most states, those incarcerated must pay medical co-pays for health services. While these co-pays range from \$2-5, for people who typically make between 14 and 63 cents an hour, this price is equivalent to “charging a free-world worker \$200 or \$500 for a medical visit.” In addition, those inside are often denied treatment, especially for mental health concerns which impact over half of the prison and jail populations in the US. Prison officials often turn to physical force and solitary confinement over providing adequate medical care. This moment is straining these already insufficient resources, leaving many to die from sheer medical neglect. Being in a prison where COVID-19 is present or near is life threatening. These deaths are preventable.

There are stories circulating right now bringing to light these cruel conditions. We’ve seen New York governor Cuomo announce the 100,000 gallons of hand sanitizer he’s providing to citizens weekly for free. He has, of course, only briefly mentioned how the sanitizer is being produced – by the labor of prisoners. Ironically, those incarcerated are not allowed to use hand sanitizer due to its high alcohol content. Requiring people to produce something that they don’t have access to themselves, while being paid close to nothing, is incredibly dehumanizing. This is also entirely legal. And yet prison labor is used to produce so much more than hand sanitizer and has been for quite some time.

Prisons are a considerable source of profit for many corporations. Calls to reduce prison populations and decarcerate threaten this income. This has escalated to a point where today, many companies rely on prisons to function and depend on this constant supply of people to produce. Times that have seen the biggest booms in prison construction are notably times where crime rates have actually fallen. More prisons have been built not with public safety in mind, but with profit in mind. And so, many of today’s corporations are “directly involved in the punishment business.” This includes many phone companies. Michelle Tran, whose husband is incarcerated, spends \$100-150 each month on phone calls, and knows some who pay double that. And yet, as these are often the only ways of communicating with loved ones inside, families continue to pay, and phone companies capitalize off of this. This is also present with food. In many cases, the same dining provider provides both food from the cafeteria and what can be bought from the commissary. Some big food providers have been accused of intentionally

providing low quality options in the general dining hall as a way to motivate prisoners to buy additional food, and increase their sales from the commissary. Incarcerated individuals have virtually no choices and companies know this, using it to boost profits.

So, what do we do now? Correctional facilities are responding with lockdowns, solitary confinement, and visitation restrictions. Some have proposed building new prisons to further space out these populations. Others are calling for a mass release. A lot of opposition to mass release usually comes in the form of concerns over public safety, implying that saving the lives of those incarcerated is not worth this risk. And yet, throughout history large-scale releases have been relatively common, and haven't resulted in increased threats. For instance, in Illinois around 1980 a program was instituted awarding many prisoners early releases, impacting over 21,000 people. Finland used to have one of the highest incarceration rates in Europe, and since 1976 has been decreasing these numbers through policy changes, leaving them today with one of the lowest rates of incarceration in the world. More recently, we can look to Iran who released over 85,000 prisoners due to coronavirus. With these large-scale releases, increased crime rates have not been found.

For those of us who have been talking and thinking about prison abolition prior to this pandemic, calls to free them all feel important and expected, with critiques and concerns feeling familiar. *What about those who are dangerous? What about the rapists and murderers?* Yes, these concerns make sense and are important, and I will repeat here a response I've heard when I've asked this same question – what is happening to these people now? Less than half of crimes are reported to the police, with the numbers regarding sexual assault being closer to 25%. Many are choosing nothing over the system we have, so why are we holding onto it so tightly? In some ways this goes back to the money coming out of prisons, but it also goes back to that idea that prisons are natural, and that we cannot imagine a world without them. And yet, many of our ancestors were unable to imagine life without slavery or segregation, these institutions were once seen to be fundamental pieces of society. Prisons, jails, and detention centers function in the same way. Alternatives do exist, and though it may require immense restructuring and change, they are what we need.

And what is the alternative to a prison? The key idea here is that there is no one alternative. A good place to start though, is by asking why. Why has this harm occurred? What were the conditions that led to this point? There is a tendency to vilify those who cause harm, while holding up survivors as innocent bystanders. Let's instead look to those who cause harm as genuine human beings capable of change. Let's look at someone taking accountability for the harm that they've caused as an opportunity for growth rather than an excuse for punishment. Many are afraid of taking accountability because they've

seen what happens to those who do. Using models of restorative and transformative justice are important in building a world beyond prisons.<sup>10</sup>

One powerful example of transformative justice involves Malcolm London and Kyra.<sup>11</sup> Both participated in a transformative justice process that took place three years after Malcolm sexually assaulted Kyra, initiated after Kyra posted about her experience publicly. Kyra's goals were the center of this process, as everyone involved worked hard to prepare for an in-person circle, which she had identified as one of her main goals. The project was lengthy and intensive, involving over a year of "trust-building measures, political education, and intense conversations" in preparation for the circle. Both Kyra and Malcolm had their own support teams who they met with weekly and were in constant communication with. Malcolm's team worked to provide a space where he was able to question and process what caused him to do harm, and learn tools to prevent it from happening again. It was certainly a difficult process, yet one that both parties *chose* to participate in. When it came time for the in-person circle 15 months later, Kyra was given the chance to address Malcolm, and he was given the chance to listen and apologize. Kyra describes the circle as an important part of her healing process, where she may not have forgiven Malcolm, but was able to see him take accountability for his harm, be honest, and see the impact this process has had on him. This circle marked the formal end of the transformative justice process, though each party left with future goals to work towards. This was hard work. Countless hours were put in, by not only Malcolm and Kyra, but by their friends, their support teams, and everyone else involved. Transformative justice intentionally emphasizes healing and accountability over punishment; prisons and jails do not provide this kind of opportunity.

When thinking about these alternatives, it's important to be conscious of how we're viewing and thinking about harm and violence. The dichotomy between innocent and guilty people that we often turn to, really does not exist. It's a part of being human to cause harm, and we all do it. It's just that only certain types of harm are criminalized and from only certain kinds of people. It is simply inaccurate to define someone by their worst act, and when we assume the value and morality of someone by the crime they've been convicted of, a lot is ignored. Looking again at calls for mass release, many are limiting this ask to only those convicted of nonviolent offenses, or those classified as "low risk." While on the surface this may make sense, it also overlooks a lot. Naming a crime and using that to justify why someone is

<sup>10</sup> If you're interested in learning more about what these alternatives might look like, I highly recommend looking through the website [transformharm.org](https://transformharm.org).

<sup>11</sup> This story and process has been shared online, with the consent of all parties. Typically, these processes are private, and details are not shared publicly. I am sharing this example with the intentions of aiding others to better understand what this process *could* be. Each process is different and varies considerably, and is not for everyone.

“too dangerous” to be released leaves out so much. This ignores not only the context surrounding the crime itself, but also who that person was, what they’ve done since, and most importantly, who they are today. Risk and violence are not inherent traits or pieces of anybody, and asking for releases along these lines also ignores how much risk and violence occurs outside of prisons. Our society outside is not perfect; harm and violence continue to occur. It’s our “existing conditions [that] produce risk, and create the potential for harm.” If instead of attempting to estimate the risk of each person, we looked at meeting their needs and taking steps to reduce the likelihood that they will cause more harm, we might be headed towards somewhere better. Instead the prison “replicates drivers of violence,” where abuse within prisons has become an expectation, not an anomaly. Every individual incarcerated is a victim of violence, because the prison system itself is a violent system. It’s becoming clear that “the only way to stay safe in prison is to leave.” The US government is not going to release everyone incarcerated, but this shouldn’t stop us from asking and advocating for freedom and opportunity for as many as possible. Too often, “if we ask for a mile, we’re lucky if we get an inch.” It’s not effective to overemphasize how realistic (or not) these demands are. Instead, why don’t we imagine what a world might look like that truly is just and equitable, and share these ideas. Imagining a world beyond prisons, one where everyone has housing, food, and healthcare, is a powerful act on its own.

Many hear of these injustices and see them as signs to reform the system. Yet the idea of reform ignores that the system was designed to work in this way, that it was never designed for justice. What we have is not protecting us or making us safer, and it is not preventing crime. Prisons are always a public health crisis, but right now, this is especially true and dangerous. We tend to discount the experiences of those incarcerated and see their perspectives and lives as secondary. This ignores that people incarcerated are people, equally deserving of protection and safety. They are also members of our community, who deserve respect and empathy. I end here with words put together directly by those incarcerated and their families:

“When you discuss who is most vulnerable and susceptible to the public health and economic implications of COVID-19, remember us...Use your platforms to elevate our voices and help us show that we are more than the worst thing that’s ever happened to us or the worst thing we’ve ever done. Show the world what it looks like to treat everyone with human dignity.”

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