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Letter to Julie

17 June 2020

Dear Julie,

I've taken up knitting after a long relapse. It is strangely calming to be carefully knotting a single woollen thread over and over again along a long line of 272 stitches. Every few lines I stop to appreciate the incremental growth happening in my lap as a patterned blanket slowly emerges. In this intense moment of pandemic, social isolation, economic collapse and ongoing ecological trauma it is a comfort to take up a practice that connects me to women over the ages who have knitted, woven and patched, making warm useable items that make an immediate contribution to surviving well.

This is a moment that has revealed so many threats to surviving well. They stand before and around me in their rude starkness. A zoonotic virus is the putative culprit, having jumped 'kingdoms' from animal to human, inadvertently hounded there by habitat destruction and industrial agriculture, catapulted into deadly actancy within human populations, aided by global interconnectedness. Economies have faltered as labour has withdrawn into lockdown. But polluted atmospheres have experienced a temporary reprieve, freed for a brief few months from the work of holding heavy molecules of carbon emissions in suspension. Stars have been introduced to a generation of urban children in global megalopolises. States have generously handed money to citizens thrown out of work. Truly the world has turned upside down. Well, that's not quite right—I am sure the wealthy and powerful have are still on top and government generosity has had some meanly bounded edges—but things are topsy turvy for sure and *everyone* is affected in some way.

Many of my favourite commentators immediately found a voice as COVID-19 spread. I became mute.

More than ever before over the last ten years since you died, it is now that I achingly wish you were here in this world with me. I long for our conversations, our exploratory discussions about how to think, how to respond, what to do in the midst of a world of suffering, how to kindle hope, what to foster, what not to foster and on and on. I could really do with your company right now. You always had some orthogonal thought. It would often provoke in me some creative response. Together we would goad each other to new apprehensions, testing old modes, laughing ourselves out of the tried and true pathways strewn with big names and male egos, venturing blithely into the woods with no known track to follow. As long as we were together, we were bold.

I need some of this boldness now. I know that J.K. Gibson-Graham has something to offer as people ponder the post-pandemic world. All this shaking up of lives and livelihoods; the

enactment of once impossible, now possible, policies; the mass expressions of communal appreciation; the cooperative race to find a virus—all this calls for a galvanizing response from our community economies collective project. And yet I falter. I listen, I feel ... and now I knit. Knitting provokes musing.

In the decade since you departed this firmament an amazing mesh of scholarship has formed around the thoughts we seeded. Our close family of students, and students of students comprising the Community Economies Collective (CEC) founded in the 1990s, has flourished. With financial support from your estate, the Collective has embedded our regular writing retreat ‘nunneries’ into its life. In the magical and reverent setting of the Convento Santa Maria del Giglio run by the non-profit organization Punti Di Vista at Bolsena, just north of Rome, ideas have been spawned, books started and completed, a Diverse Economies and Livable Worlds Book Series initiated and conviviality generated. For many of us, the view over the Convento’s garden and olive grove down to the majestic collapsed caldera of Lake Bolsena is now imprinted on our collective psyche. We have soaked up the graceful solidity and quiet coolness of metre thick walls enclosing bedroom cells and a cloistered courtyard. We have felt a part of a long unbroken thread of teaching and learning, ritual silence and singing, meditating and engaging, our footsteps blending with the footsteps of generations of past scholars, workers and carers. And our thoughts have been nourished and captured.

The reach of our work has extended far and wide and amazingly the CEC has been joined by an ever-growing international Community Economies Research Network (CERN). At last count the membership sat at 262, not that much short of the 272 stitches I cast on to start my knitted blanket. And this network is threading together strands of thinking and acting that extend and encompass. Most recently we published the Handbook of Diverse Economies an edited collection of 58 chapters written by 66 authors, all CERN members.

Yes, Julie, ‘diverse economies’ is now recognized as a ‘field of research’ that justifies a Handbook. I remember when we dreamed of writing a ‘minor classic’. And that with the publication of *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* in 1996 we felt that we could now die happy with our achievements. Well, there is much more to celebrate. At the same time—there is much more to expect of ourselves.

So back to now. Surely there is something to say.

As I reflect on the amazingly generative landscape of community economies scholarship I see some threads of connection that might be worth tugging. The three strongest are those that were first woven together in *A Postcapitalist Politics* in 2006. In this book we presented a view of politics that broke with the revolutionary vision of transformation that we had wholeheartedly embraced as we became schooled in Marxian political economy. Out of this rupture we worked to weave together a different politics of language, of the subject and of collective action.

First to the language thread

Remember, Julie, how the masculinist metaphors of economy we had (enjoyably) ridiculed in *The End of Capitalism* were well and truly behind us and we embarked on the political

intervention of building the vision of a ‘diverse economy’. The economic language we proposed was something to practice speaking so that we could be equipped to counter capitalocentrism. The deconstructive impulse motivating the language of a diverse economy led us to resist the ‘ism’ of capitalism. This language directed attention away from capitalonormative ‘systems’ to ‘capitalist practices’ and enabled more fine-grained identification of what was capitalist and what not—thus allowing us to speak of diverse forms of paid and unpaid labour, of surplus generating enterprise, of arms-length ‘market’ exchange, of legitimate and resilient forms of non-capitalist economic practice.

With this landscape of diversity now in full view, we sought to imagine and enact ‘community economies’. Embracing the power of performativity, we used deconstruction to clear the way for economies of ethical interdependence. If the economy could be seen as an open space of negotiation then we could foreground practices that contributed to surviving well, to equitably distributing surplus, to encountering others via exchange with respect and responsibility, to commoning what is needed to survive well and to ensuring investment in livable futures.

Much of our research was focused on documenting already existing forms of these ethical economic practices, or instigating them through action research, and countering their discursive obliteration in mainstream economics and public policy. What this pandemic has done is something that years of alternative economy activism has been aiming for. It has lifted the veil on community economy practices showing how prevalent, how easy, how sustaining and how joyous they can be. There has been curious amazement expressed by commentators more used to reporting on cut throat individualism, at the scale and scope of bottom up self-organized actions to support the survival needs of others. From the volunteer Russian Union of Doctors who have put their lives on the line to source personal protective equipment for their colleagues labouring in state hospitals with inadequate protection, to the young women who have organized Shopping Angels in Australia that offers free no-contact grocery delivery services to those affected by COVID-19 there has been an efflorescence of people to people organizing, building connections aimed at supporting life.

For those in the majority world and its diaspora this kind of economic interaction is nothing new—it is what sustains life, despite what the World Bank or other development agencies say. As Caroline Shenaz Hossein points out, mutual assistance and sharing of finances and resources without resort to formal economic institutions is a key part of meeting needs for black communities in the west and in African homelands (see <https://www.caroline-shenaz-hossein.com/caroline-shenaz-hossein>). Likewise, in large parts of Asia the everydayness of specific forms of reciprocity, sharing and distributing is registered in a rich vernacular vocabulary that operates under the radar of policy makers and outside the dismal embrace of established economic discourse (see <https://communityeconomiesasia.wordpress.com/>).

Can we look at this new thread of practices (re)emerging in the minority so-called ‘developed’ world and propose that they be woven together in situ into a more viable economic fabric? And not only that, but blended in with the community economy practices that have remained strong, but under-appreciated, in the majority world? Is this a next step for a post-development economics?

At the same time some governments have taken unfamiliar steps towards supporting lives directly. In Australia, the national government over night doubled the unemployment 'Job Seeker' payment to accommodate all those newly out of work because of the lockdown. This, after years of resisting calls for an increase in the unemployment benefit to a decent, liveable level. The temporary nature of this increase is under discussion, as is the insidious valuing of the COVID-19 related, 'no fault of their own' unemployed, versus the already unemployed, as though one group deserves a liveable income and the other doesn't. What is interesting is how swift and unquestioned this welfare-oriented decision was made, introduced as it was into policy by a conservative government normally in thrall to neoliberalism.

This renewed interest in a generalized, if not universal, basic income payment as a way of ensuring the dignity and survivability of citizens (recognizing all the exclusions that this designation embodies) is an opening. I think that we have an opportunity here to reframe such payments as an investment *into* community economies. With a 'liveable income guarantee' (a more politically palatable name for a basic income payment) people are able to continue to contribute to the kind of practices of care and survival maintenance for others that we have seen flourish during the pandemic. This payment needs to be reframed not as income support handouts that end up in the consumption of basic necessities, but as an investment that frees up time/labour and allows more value to flow into building community economies. The return on this investment could be measured in meals made and delivered to others, care for neighbours, mental health maintained, skills obtained and so on (see <http://communityeconomies.org/publications/articles/calculating-value-commons-generating-resilient-urban-futures>). The language of community economies is a crucial tool in helping to imagine how value can be sucked out of the current system and channelled into post-capitalist worlds built from the ruins of what we have at hand.

Second to the subject thread

Dear Julie, in *A Postcapitalist Politics* we linked language to subjectivity and argued that a different economic language could liberate different subjects of the economy. Yes, this was a human-centric formulation, something that we soon started to rethink. But subjectivity change has remained a key interest of ours and I would have enjoyed sharing with you all the zany glimmers of subjectivity change that have been sighted as the pandemic has unfolded.

For many in the minority world, life has suddenly slowed down and a resulting change in affect has been registered. Across households there are complex differences according to whether work has continued or ceased, whether there is a work-at-home option or not, whether or not there are children needing schooling online, numbers accommodated in the household and so on. Amidst this complexity many people have remarked on the pleasures of a different temporality to life, of making and growing food at home, of doing with less, of connecting more with family and friends to check in by phone or internet, of exercising more in their local area, of seeing neighbours out on the street at a distance, of feeling part of something. The creativity of the cooped-up has been a revelation—from ordinary people who dress up to take the garbage bins out or sing online in huge choirs, to out-of-work actors reading stories for kids or devising self-filmed rom-coms, we have been entertained

by unknown mates. So can this creativity and connectedness be harnessed to inform new kinds of economic subjectivity?

As we encountered in our community-based action research projects, in order to be maintained, the shift from an individualistic, needs focussed subject position to one that leans towards interconnectedness and collective asset building, must be supported by wider assemblages of power and materiality. Local government, physical infrastructures, communications networks, community attitudes, are just some of the complex components that need to come together to allow for new subjectivities to flourish. In the current context community economy scholars who ponder subjectivity and politics have developed a few different ways forward. One, is to rethink what collective action is, and who/what constitutes the collective—more on this below. The other is to refocus attention onto the more than human world—extending the notion of human subjectivity to allow for multi-species being, extending the notion of human agency to include the actancy of the non-human, or to put it another way, the affordances of those webs of materiality which provoke action. The entanglements signalled by the term ‘more than human’ further open up the terrain of politics, allowing for even more entry points into processes of transformation.

Third to the collective action thread

Remember Julie, how wary we became of traditionally organized working class politics that appeared to put ‘getting a piece of the capitalist pie’ ahead of ‘getting out of this capitalist place’? It was our concerns about the tame long-term goals of much economic activism that led us to reframe the economic imaginary. In a diverse economy, we argued, there were non-capitalist economic practices to strengthen or to initiate, starting right now. There was no need to wait for the revolution, we could begin right away, building ethical economies based on cooperativism, reciprocity, equitable redistribution, environmental responsibility.

Our action research was initially place-based, enrolling people in dialogue, in inventorying diverse economies, in imagining and enacting directly beneficial forms of social enterprise, exchange, commoned property and work-life arrangements. In some cases, these interventions provoked the formation of new local assemblages of people, products, species, environments, infrastructures, policies and governance. In other projects researchers followed these assemblages up and out, tracing how they extended into spheres of national and global governance. Collective action could now be conceptualized as happening within more than human assemblages, where the collective is the set of interdependencies that are mobilized to shift towards new states of being.

Julie, over just the last six months there have been three major provocations that have interpellated me, here in Australia, and people all over the world, into more than human assemblages that are drastically destabilized ways of being, of surviving, of caring and of futuring.

First, there were landscape scale, out of control bushfires that engulfed the whole of eastern Australia’s forests and sent suffocating smoke clouds into urban areas and around the world to New Zealand and South America lasting weeks. Second, there was and still is, the global COVID-19 pandemic that has spread to all human populations, bringing death to

many and severe curtailments on mobility and social interaction to all. Third, there has been an eruption of global anger about the latest killings of black people in the USA and in Australia by entitled police, ignited by the videoed suffocation of George Floyd by a white policeman's knee.

There are many ways of connecting these three provocations—but the one that most stands out is the combined threat to breath. “I can't breathe” implored George Floyd, as did Aboriginal man David Dungay Jr before his death in Sydney's Long Bay Prison in 2015. “I can't breathe” cry the victims of COVID-19—a virus that attacks the respiratory system in as yet unknown ways. “I can't breathe” is what so many residents living on Australia's eastern coast miles from the bushfires entreated. Oxygen deprivation has become a shared condition—momentary and life-extinguishing for George Floyd, prolonged and life-extinguishing for those most affected by COVID-19, and extended and disabling (though how ultimately life-extinguishing we have yet to track) for those in the way of the firestorms and their maelstroms of smoke.

Racialized colonization/capitalism, habitat loss/industrial agriculture/urbanization, climate change and generations of not ‘caring for country’ lie behind these three related acts of suffocation. Can collective action be mobilized to address these threats to our planetary future? Today is a time of incredible globality—our interdependencies have never been so evident and stark. Might these viral, racial, country assemblages that have hailed us offer openings for an invigorated and inventive politics of transformation?

I am hopeful. The knitting is growing. A single woollen thread has been provoked to grow into a warm blanket to keep my knees warm. The three threads of language, subjectivity and collective action have been provoked by events, by desires and by concerns to grow through our work in the Community Economies Collective and Research Network. I will let you know what happens in my next letter,

Love
Kath

Postscript written 6 months later

22 December 2020

Just to update, Julie. The knitting continued: the first blanket was finished, then a second started and finished, followed by a sweater for my daughter and I'm now onto one for myself, though going is getting slower as summer temperatures soar (already reaching 41 degrees—‘unprecedented’ for November). I may no longer need to keep warm, but I do still enjoy the activity of producing something tangible as I participate in countless Zoom meetings.

But I won't badmouth Zoom get-togethers, as the most wonderful thing happened in November before the temperatures sky-rocketed. The CERN conducted Liviana, its first International On-line Conference (<https://sites.google.com/view/liviana2020cern/home>).

This occurred over 2 weeks and included 22 sessions held at different times so that groups of CERN members could meet from all regions of world. Probably about 100 people participated. The discussions ranged from indigenous led economic co-design, to art practices to take back the economy, to cooperativism in the black social economy, to birthing work, to the water commons, to CE research directions and teaching experiences and much more. The feeling of all the sessions I tapped into was wonderfully supportive, and intellectually and politically stimulating. You would have loved it, Julie.

I know we always were suspicious of the grand old men of the left proclaiming, in light of some global or local event, that finally, this was the moment, the revolution was about to begin (remember Ernest Mandel at the Rethinking Marxism conference in 1992?). While undeniably hopeful (and who were we to put a damper on hopefulness?), it also seemed sadly self-justifying, as if they could not bear the thought that they were not in the thick of making history. But ... reluctant as I am to talk about mobilizing moments when it comes to collective action, I can't help observe that the volume of interest in community economies thinking and practice has rapidly expanded recently. It is so gratifying to see it being picked up and used in different contexts, and you would love to meet the wonderful people who are doing this.

Our work is not making headlines, that's for sure, and I doubt it ever will—the message is too complex and contextual to fit the one liner tweet or simple point of a newspaper article. But it does seem to be infiltrating and spreading, emerging in various forms, sometimes acknowledged, often times not. I'm still thinking about how to write about this somewhat unseen form of 'impact'. Again—so wishing you were here to see it and help me out.

Kxx