Building a Feminist Commons in the Time of COVID-19

Miriam Ticktin

The global response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been structured around the idea that human connection and sociality are bad – they are dangerous. In theory, this is not entirely misguided. As we know, the virus does get transmitted through contact with or proximity to other living beings.

However, while human connection has been rendered suspicious in general, some forms of connection have been privileged and promoted over others. As we have seen in the US, togetherness in the form of the nuclear family and the nation have been favored and deemed “safe,” while immigrants, foreigners, people of Chinese origin, and many others have been implicitly or explicitly rendered “unsafe.”
These others are construed as invaders, and conflated with the virus. Immigration and Customs Enforcement is still deporting people – including those who are sick – without regard for them or the people into whose communities they are deported.

As feminists have long argued, neither the family nor the nation are safe spaces for women; but COVID-19 has shown this to be all-too-true for many others too. The nation is not a harmless or protected space for people in prisons, in nursing homes, in detention centers, in meat-packing plants, or in poorer communities where people do not have easy access to clean water and soap, where they have no ability to isolate or to get health care. In fact, a focus on the nation as a space of supposedly nonviolent connection and care has already killed thousands and thousands of people.

A focus on the nation as a space of supposedly nonviolent connection and care has already killed thousands and thousands of people.

While quarantine and social distancing make sense in situations determined by epidemiological measures, medical quarantine should not be confused with political quarantine; using the political category of the nation-state as the geographic space of quarantine has not resulted in better health for the majority of people worldwide.
The question then is not how to isolate ourselves – our vital connective tissue with one another and the planet has been revealed by COVID-19 in a whole new way — but which forms of connection to attend to and cultivate and which ones to be careful of or replace. This essay argues that, perhaps paradoxically, rather than isolating, to stay healthy, people are forging new egalitarian forms of connection.

In particular, I will argue that COVID-19 has enhanced experiments in what I will call a burgeoning feminist commons. These not only foreground new, horizontal forms of sociality but insist that these are the only way to survive. That is, they acknowledge our porousness, accepting that we must fight for the well-being of everyone if we are to be healthy ourselves.

The commons has come to mean many things (and is practiced by many different people, from Indigenous communities to ecologists to anarchists), but it is often referred to as a struggle against enclosures, against the privatization of spaces of freedom, against exclusion, and, perhaps most importantly, against private property. It can also mean the sharing of wealth and resources on the basis of collective decision-making; sometimes it is spoken of as grounded in social relations built on reciprocity, respect, mutuality, and responsibility (Hardt and Negri 2009; Dardot and Laval 2019; Federici 2019).

Feminist scholar-activists like Silvia Federici (2019) emphasize the feminist nature of the commons in terms of the communing of reproductive activities – meaning the day-to-day activities that are producing people’s lives. Examples include the collective kitchen, urban gardens, and squats. Perhaps most importantly, Federici states that the commons is not
just a site of reproduction and redistribution; it is also a site of struggle. It builds the grounds of resistance, refusing to separate the time of political organization from that of reproduction. But I suggest these are also feminist formations insofar as they are being created and harnessed by people on multiple, intersecting fronts to counter what bell hooks has called “heteronormative, imperialist, white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks 2004, 29). Ultimately, if expanded, a feminist commons could replace the exclusionary format of nation-states and borders with capacious structures and infrastructures of political care. Indeed, what I offer is as much of an amplification and a call for a feminist commons as a description of emerging formations. That is, feminist theorizing has always been about identifying the way the world is and simultaneously opening the way to new worlds – helping to bring them into being.

In what follows, I discuss three experiments in the seemingly contradictory practice of coming together in the time of COVID-19. Each form of connection takes place at a different scale: from the global to the local to the intimate, each with their own affective dimensions. And each does different work in relation to the commons: the first helps to form a common subject, the second furthers material redistribution, and the third reworks intimate relations. And while these are grounded in face-to-face connection, digital connection is essential for organizing in each case; they are all hybrid forms.

**Masked mobs**

As we now know, the measures taken to slow the spread of COVID-19 have revealed extreme inequality globally, both within and across nation-
states. For some communities, violence has substituted for care. In the US, Black neighborhoods were subject to the policing of social distancing measures far more than white neighborhoods and Black folks beaten viciously in the process (Rouhandeh 2020; Shaw 2020). In addition to being killed in larger numbers by the epidemic, Black and brown communities are still regularly targeted and killed by the police with impunity.

The global protests that erupted in the face of the murders and public lynchings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and so many more brought people together in new ways; they created connections on the basis of a very different form of care. As Deva Woodly (2020) has stated, the Movement for Black Lives is grounded on a politics of structural care, where care is about healing social ills through social action and where interdependence is recognized and claimed as a fundamental fact. This is part of a larger move by which antiracist activists and transnational feminists have been reclaiming the political power of care. For instance, according to Sara Ahmed (2017), who in turn draws on Audre Lorde (1988), for those who are marginalized, care is a form of political warfare: to engage in care is to uphold the right to survive. Similarly, Saidiya Hartmann (2016) argues that the forms of care produced through the violent structures of slavery and now active in racial capitalism are not reducible to either: they enable those who were never meant to survive to do just that. Indeed, abolitionism is a form of care.

Abolitionism is a form of care.
The murders compelled millions of people to take to the streets to fight anti-Black racism, inequality, and police violence, both because of and despite the pandemic; there have never been such huge, sustained global protests. Nay-sayers warned of a rise in COVID-19 from the protests, but that has now been proven untrue. In New York City, the protests enacted new forms of connection and structural care – community organizers and other volunteers were on the sidelines offering food, water, and masks at every march and gathering. For many, this was the first time being in public after months of confinement, so it was by necessity an experiment.

I want to suggest that there were two aspects of the protests that facilitated new ways of being together and new affective attachments. First, face-covering or mask-wearing creates a certain anonymity among people – it hides expressions and identities. Masks help to remove people from recognizable roles and communities and allow them to join together in unforeseen ways, sheltered from individualized
police surveillance. This was made clear by the masks worn by Anonymous during Occupy and other protests, even if donned for very different reasons.

Stated otherwise, wearing masks can serve as a form of political disguise that allows for new possibilities — they enable people to try on new ways of being, without being prejudged or categorized. They allow for a more generic subject to emerge, joined in political — not personal — relations. To be sure, there is an insidious racial politics to mask-wearing that risks further criminalizing and pathologizing Black folks and people of Asian origin in particular (Zine 2020). But in the context of mass protest, masks — even in their different colors and patterns — impose a form of anonymity that displaces assumed kinship or identities, and allows instead for more flexibility — a way of being prefigured by the idea of gender fluidity, where one’s identity is never fixed. Instead, they create room for respect, and shared anger. They remove a reliance on individual forms of sentimental affinity.

Second, as many theorists have pointed out (Solnit 2000; Ingold 2004; Butler 2011), walking together produces political possibilities: protest marches are an age-old strategy, but each one creates the possibility for a different collective subject to come into being. The movement of bodies, together, produces its own political force; to understand the political, we must take seriously its somatic dimensions (Hattam 2020; Youatt 2020). Indeed, the way people actually walk together is different in this COVID-19 time. In the protests I participated in, people marched close enough to stay in a group yet also tried to respect the six-foot rule. This looser, grid-like structure created the possibility of a new, semianonymous collective.
Indeed, we can think of the power of moving together to create new collective subjects by thinking about the word “mobility” and its etymology. In the seventeenth century, the word “mobility” was shortened to the word “mob.” A mob referred to the disorderly part of the common people; it meant a riotous assemblage, a crowd or gang. How might we theorize a new collective political subject in relation to a crowd, for instance? Crowd theory discusses whether individuals are more than the sum of their parts, if they are smarter or dumber than the individuals that compose them (Hayden forthcoming). One part of the definition of mob is its fickleness, its movement. Could this constant changeability actually be at the root of its political potential? If we think of the specificity of a masked mob, we might say it enables an even more flexible solidarity. In being medically cautious, it enables a form of political contagion.

If we think of the specificity of a masked mob, we might say it enables an even more flexible solidarity. In being medically cautious, it enables a form of political contagion.

I want to suggest that in the act of moving itself – in the walking, biking, and even running that protestors did and continue to do together, a collective subject has begun to form – the class-in-itself has become a class-for-itself. We could say that this collective –
made up of an enormous range of people, diverse in age, class, racial background, gender, and sexual orientation – is emerging as the subject of the commons (Robcis forthcoming), demanding equality and justice, starting with a global antiracism. People do not know each other, they are not bound by identity or any singular form of community: they come together by enacting courage, commitment, and equality in the face of ongoing police violence.

![Photo by Rasande Tyskar](https://search.creativecommons.org/photos/578dcc5b-d0cd-4843-b177-c85c2f427fe8)

**Friendly fridges**

COVID-19 has initiated a global recession. Many are living in situations of heightened precarity, and while in countries like Canada and Germany the government has stepped in to offer additional unemployment benefits, in the US, the 600 dollars per week that was given to those who were unemployed due to COVID was brought to a halt in July 2020 by the Republican Senate. In the face of an incompetent and largely absent state, mutual-aid groups were formed and activated almost immediately. In Brooklyn alone, there are now over fifty neighborhood groups. Some are more charity oriented, i.e., the more privileged providing food,
help, and services for the less privileged; some are more about horizontal networks of solidarity. Some preceded COVID-19 in terms of community involvement; some came into being with COVID-19.

Mutual aid has a long history: Peter Kropotkin – a Russian anarchist-socialist thinker – advanced the idea in response to Darwinian social scientists like Herbert Spencer, who held that competition was central to human society (Whitley 2020). Mutual aid is based on the idea of social solidarity and cooperation, and on building new social relationships grounded in collaboration, participation, and equality (Spade 2020). Insofar as it is about radical collective care and against forms of paternalism, it is also a feminist project. In fact, many Black feminists have claimed mutual aid as a key element of abolitionism.

Can mutual aid morph into a different kind of political project that challenges the very tenets of racial capitalism? I want to point to a seemingly humble experiment that is reworking material infrastructures to deepen connections between people – indeed, to create the material conditions of a commons. I am thinking of the project of free community or “friendly” fridges set up across all the boroughs of New York City. The first refrigerators were put in place in February 2020 by a group of anarchists working to combat hunger in underserved communities during the economic crisis and pandemic, but they actually far exceed that goal: they are resources that anyone can share in, anonymously, without having to give reasons or to show deservingness. They enact trust in people to take what they need and give back if or when they can. It is not about giving away “free food” but about
creating a new set of relations grounded in material equality, not in exploitation and extractivism (Colyar 2020; Rosa 2020).

There are no explicit agreements about who takes care of the fridges or why – there is no central leadership or ownership. A group of chefs were the founders of one of the fridges; food-justice activists take care of another (Colyar 2020). The food is mostly nutritional, to supplement areas that are often food deserts, and it is rescued from local restaurants, bakeries, grocery stores, food pantries and farms. The fridges rely on local bodegas, stores, or private homes for their power sources. To be clear, there are critiques of some fridges not being grounded enough in the communities they serve (Gomes 2020). But the community fridge near where I live is plugged into a café that had a sign stating “Welcome Refugees” on its door even before it first opened, demonstrating a spirit of the commons. It is regularly emptied and replenished. And just recently, a “free library” popped up beside it, where people share their books: take one, leave one.

These fridges can be thought of as a form of commons. To be sure, such “free” projects are not new: from the Black Panther Party’s survival programs, which included free breakfast, to Occupy encampments where resources were shared. There are many wonderful and creative feminist examples, such as the “Eating in Public” project by Gaye Chan and Nandita Sharma, which also includes free fridges and free stores, but as one part of a series of experiments in planting guerilla gardens, food trees, and holding “diggers dinners,” all inspired by the seventeenth-century English commoners: serfs who were pushed off communal land at the outset of the private-property revolution, who engaged in activist
planting to take back their commons and to eat. Chan and Sharma’s poetic experiments undermine the idea of greed as somehow more “natural” (Ganaden 2014).[1]

Friendly fridges exemplify the principle of refusing to separate political organizing from the time of reproduction. That is, care work and political organizing are integrated when the very process of getting food to survive also shifts the political landscape from a focus on profit to a focus on life. To me, this is the critical point — reproduction is also about nourishing the political imagination, it is about the production and reproduction of ourselves as a common subject. It is about the reconstitution of the social fabric as a means of survival.

**The pods we choose**

My final example of an emergent feminist commons during COVID-19 are the intimate formations that some have called “pods,” others “bubbles.” People are forging intimate connections with others who are not part of their immediate or nuclear families and yet with whom they may not have any previous or deep emotional ties. But in quarantine times, these can function as life-or-death commitments. Not dissimilar to the history of the “families we choose,” (Weston 1997) and the ways queer folks have created forms of kinship based on affinity or need, not on blood or biology, COVID has generated the need for new relationships with friends, comrades, neighbors, coparents, lovers and ex-lovers — relationships that require deeper trust and sharing in new, respectful ways that limit exposure to risk, while still enabling sociality (Chang 2020; Kohn 2020).
To be sure, pods are not inherently progressive formations; they respond to the retreat of the state – and to the loss of the publics that feed institutions such as public schools – and sometimes, they respond by further privatizing resources, rather than rendering them part of a commons. The “parents pods” forming among the wealthy to school their kids are a case in point (Moyer 2020). Similarly, enforced forms of togetherness during COVID-19 have resulted in increased rates of domestic violence (Taub 2020). These are the counterpart to the commons-pods. Here, I focus on the potential of pods to undermine—rather than further deepen—inequality.

Choosing quarantine pod-mates can be determined by proximity and location, shared need or circumstance (i.e., kids playing together, shared outdoor space, shared rent), or political or other forms of queer or extended kinship. Pods enable and require different affective structures. Whether or not pod-mates love or even like each other, they must agree to live by consensus: is a certain action okay with everyone in the pod? All of this must be constantly discussed, debated, revealed, agreed upon – conflict is always on the horizon. Such practices of intimate sociality based on shared risk require different ways of inhabiting and sharing space and resources.

Living in communal arrangements is in itself not new: there are communes, ecovillages and cohousing arrangements. But quarantine pods may not actually live together; they are formed to share a different type of vulnerability, namely, exposure to one another in times of sickness. They are grounded on a different sense of risk and trust: if one is not open, honest and respectful, one could be putting one’s pod
at risk of sickness, long-term disability, or death. Sharing and living with the risk of contagious illness is also not new – queer communities pioneered various models during the first outbreaks of HIV/AIDS in the 1970s and 80s. To be sure, there are differences: while HIV is less contagious, it is lethal when untreated; COVID-19 is more contagious, but much less lethal. This broadens the circle of concern enormously, even as it dampens the stakes, making pods a commoning practice that has the potential to become very widespread.

**Beyond liberal sentiments**

What can we say about connection during the time of COVID-19? I have suggested that these new practices are helping to forge what I think of as a feminist commons, grounded on structural forms of care, struggle, and political imagination. These connections do not rely on sentiments such as compassion, sympathy or pity, or the more moralized judgements, such as deserving or undeserving. These latter are liberal sentiments, which work to connect the autonomous individuals of liberal politics. But the affective ties cultivated by these forms of connection are less about individuality than the collective, more about equality than hierarchy. The masked mobs, friendly fridges, and pods magnify a certain generic set of relationships. They do not rely on whether one likes each other or not; people may not want any sentimental affiliation at all. Rather, they are grounded on a basic respect and reciprocity, or what Jodi Dean (2019) calls “comradeship” – this is a political relation, not a personal one, and one that we can learn to practice with even the most disagreeable of characters.
'Care' in these times looks like respect for everyone’s fear, anxiety, anger, and frustration. It looks like humility in the face of the unknown and uncontrollable, and openness to new imaginative possibilities.

These forms of togetherness are about coexisting in ways that ensure everyone’s survival. As such, they abandon any hope of purity – they are saturated in ambiguity and uncertainty. “Care” in these times looks like respect for everyone’s fear, anxiety, anger, and frustration. It looks like humility in the face of the unknown and uncontrollable, and openness to new imaginative possibilities. It also looks like a demand for collective responsibility, and what the Movement for Black Lives among others have prefigured as an “irresistible impulse to justice” (McLeod 2019, 267).

Read the other symposium essays (http://signsjournal.org/covid/)

Acknowledgments:
My deep thanks to Sofya Aptekar, Victoria Hattam, Amy Hsin, Lochlann Jain, Anne McNevin, Lisa Sun-Hee Park, and Rafi Youatt for their invaluable comments.
References


those-community-fridges-wont-solve-hunger/.


**Note**