



# *CARE* BEYOND *CRISES*

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# *KEY NOTES*

*on creative care practices beyond crises*

*Keynote*

***MOVING FROM  
CRITICAL TO  
CARING DESIGN  
PRACTICES IN AN  
INTERDEPENDENT  
WORLD***

*BY*

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**Abstract:**

*What can it mean to shift from a critical to a caring design practice? I raise this issue as urgent and significant within the interdependent planetary dynamics of climate breakdown, rapid species extinction and the vertiginous exacerbation of social inequalities spurred by the Covid-19 pandemic. To explore this question, I take my own participatory and research-led design practice as a reference point that helps me to reflect on how care can be central to design practices today.*

**Keywords:**

*Care, design, economies, commons, nested-I*

## INTRODUCTION

What can it mean to move from a critical to a caring design practice? I raise this issue as urgent and significant within the interdependent planetary dynamics of climate breakdown, rapid species extinction and the vertiginous exacerbation of social inequalities spurred by the Covid-19 pandemic. To explore this question, I take my own participatory and research-led design practice as a reference point that helps me to reflect on how care can be central to design practices today. ►

## *Keynote*

### ► SITUATING MYSELF

To begin this exploration, I will roughly situate myself and my practice so you as a reader can see more clearly where I speak from. This situating is also a way to support myself in sharpening my awareness of the personal circumstances and social privileges that co-shape my practice and approach to care. I am a 40-year-old white cisgender able-bodied woman with an Italian passport, but am part of a German-speaking minority within Italy. I am the mother of a healthy five-year-old child, I am in a long-term stable relationship and have pursued academic studies to the level of a PhD. I grew up with a single mother who ran a small but all-absorbing café in a rural skiing area of the Italian Alps. Because I lived in a ski resort, I was able to spend my winters on our local mountain and become very good at snowboarding. This skill set reached a point where, from the age of fourteen onwards, various sponsorships and my mother's confidence in my ability to self-organize would allow me to travel across mountainous areas of the Northern hemisphere on numerous adventures. Since childhood I have been a vocal and action-oriented environmentalist and feminist, even if back then I did not know that something like feminism existed.

### SITUATING MY DESIGN PRACTICE

I came to design at the age of 22, when I decided to use the money I had saved up through sports and working in my mother's business to go to university. The choice of design as a field of study had been rather random: when I needed to choose between biology and something more hands-on, my mother heard that our new local university was about to launch a BA in Design and pointed me to it. She said she always thought I would do something creative in life. Upon hearing this, I thought why not and gave it a try. This is how

I ended up studying design, with no real idea of what I was actually getting into. In fact, I very soon ended up feeling frustrated in relation to my environmentalist and feminist concerns. Luckily, in my study course I met Fabio Franz, who shared my concerns. This meant that suddenly, we both found a discursive space in which to elaborate our critique of the discipline we were trained in. Together we then met Kris Krois, who was a tutor for the course, and who helped us to understand that we could use our design skills not only to make or sell more stuff, but to sharpen, channel and communicate our critique of the world. In this process, during the last year of our BA in 2005-2006, Fabio and I started to work together under the collective name Brave New Alps. Working together made us both more courageous and resilient but also made us ask better questions about the world.

By the time we graduated with our BA, we were both quite good at what we could call a “critical design practice”. We were unhappy about social injustices and angry about environmental destruction and mobilized our newly acquired design skills to take things apart, to critique them. Already as students we knew that we did not want to put our skills at the service of the hegemonic economy, but had to ask what designers do when they don’t want to follow the call their profession has been shaped for? This question set us on a research and learning journey across Europe – completing an MA and PhD in the UK – and the Middle East – working with Decolonizing Architecture – to figure out what approach to design and to the world we wanted to make our own.<sup>1</sup> Within this journey, it soon became important to us to move beyond critical analysis and deconstruction, and to begin contributing to the multiplication of practices and worlds that are more just, livable and future-proof. To enable this intent, we began looking for inspiring theories and practices with which to engage in ►

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In large part this journey was also dependent on the funding we could get, as on our own we did not have the money to travel and study. So for anything we did, we always needed to look for funding, but also in part to adapt our journey to the kind of funding we could get. In the CV part of our website [www.brave-new-alps.com](http://www.brave-new-alps.com) you can read the details of who funded which part of our journey.

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► a practical conversation. In what follows, I will introduce some of the theoretical coordinates that have become key for us so far, and will reflect on how they helped us to move Brave New Alps from a critical to a caring design practice.

### BEING CRITICAL VIA MATTERS OF CARE

We are very much inspired by the work of Spanish-British feminist philosopher Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, who in 2011 captured our attention by defining “matters of care” as something we cannot maintain our distance from.<sup>2</sup> When I care about something, I cannot just critically analyze it as it might be when I am concerned about something. When I care, I feel an urge to (inter)act and engage with the situation in order to actually contribute to transform it into something that is more desirable for everyone involved. Puig de la Bellacasa prompted us to focus very clearly on imagining how different our design practice would be if it generated care, while also reminding us that every situation requires specific modes of care. Caring design practices can never use a “cookie-cutter” approach, applying the same methods and ways of working no matter where and with whom.

Through a continued engagement with feminist philosophy around care, we also began to see that for the kind of worlds we want to create repetition is key: emerging practices and worlds need care and nurturing, so the hit-and-run approach we were introduced to in design schools was something we decided to leave behind us. In fact, we don’t think that as designers we have the capacity to (co-)create other worlds with just one project. Gestures, care and engagement need to be repeated over and over again. The realisation that longer time spans are required for the kind of change we

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María Puig de la Bellacasa, ‘Matters of Care in Technoscience: Assembling Neglected Things’, *Social Studies of Science* 41, no. 1 (2011): 85-106.



work for, pushed us to thoroughly consider where – geographically – we are most likely to be able to guarantee such long-term engagement despite precarious working conditions. Our logic and affect drew us to the mountain area we grew up in, because this is where we have our family ties, and where we suppose that, were we to need to move abroad for work, we would periodically come back and be able to tend to long-term processes of transformation. So from about 2012 onwards, we worked for several years towards settling in the valley we now live in. This valley has since become the space where we desire to situate our work and where we want to live, at least for the next 40 years (or rather, until we transition).

## CARING THROUGH COMMONS

In our attempt to give direction to the worlds we co-create with our work, we came across feminist and autonomist Marxist theorizations of the commons, which were incredibly inspiring to us.<sup>3</sup> Here commons, i.e. shared resources that are cared for by a collective of commoners through constant acts of commoning, are seen as a pre-condition for a good life for all, as they are based on care for people, care for nature and fair share, i.e. making sure that the surplus generated through the commons is shared fairly amongst people and earth-others. This approach stands in stark contrast to the logic that reigns within a capitalist economy, based on the exploitation of nature and people in order to generate profits for the very few. Design practices are often asked to act in more or less close alignment with the logic of capital, in support of generating profit for a small group of people and without regard for the well-being of other humans and earth-others. But as designers we can choose to shift our energies toward the commons – and in fact be inspired by permaculture design principles, which invite us to act in concert with principles of ecology, ►

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Massimo De Angelis, 'On the Commons: A Public Interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides', ed. An Architektur, E-Flux Journal June-August, no. 17 (6 May 2010): 1-17; Massimo De Angelis, *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capital* (London: Pluto Press, 2007); Silvia Federici, 'Feminism and the Politics of the Commons', 2011, <http://www.commoner.org.uk/?p=113>; Midnight Notes Collective and Friends, 'Promissory Notes: From Crisis to Commons', 2009, [www.midnightnotes.org/Promissory%20Notes.pdf](http://www.midnightnotes.org/Promissory%20Notes.pdf).

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► energy transformation and care for all the beings and processes that we are part of. Through our engagement with the commons, we have begun over time to perceive ourselves not so much as part of the design community but as part of a social movement that reclaims material justice from below by creating new kinds of material worlds.<sup>4</sup> This shift in perspective has been important to us in two ways: it removed the competition amongst ourselves, because within a social movement, every success story enables everyone involved.

Moreover, it helped us to become more aware of what specific as well as transverse skills we can mobilize within an ecology of transformation actors. It thus gave us a stronger sense of self-efficacy, i.e. of being able to shape the world around us and start creating the world we desire here and now, with what we have at hand. These won't be perfect worlds, but they become important points of reference in a web of actions and groups that reclaim material justice. In our local work, we currently act towards this end by co-creating a community academy at the local train station, which acts as a commons resource center.<sup>5</sup> We are part of a venture that makes fizzy drinks as tools for engagement through practice, with questions involving what kind of economy and agriculture we want to see.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, we are working on establishing an accessible forest kindergarten together with a forest school teacher, an activist farmer and six other families. On a trans-local level, we continue to be in conversation with fellow researchers and practitioners who are part of the Community Economies Research Network and the Commission International pour la Protection des Alpes. Here we reflect and act together on issues of scale – especially through an initiative called The Interdependence – and on issues that define where we can

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### **4**

Dimitris Papadopoulos, 'Generation M.: Matter, Makers, Microbiomes::Compost for Gaia', 2 October 2014, <http://eipcp.net/n/1392050604>; Dimitris Papadopoulos, 'Worlding Justice/ Commoning Matter', Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities 3 (2012), <http://arcade.stanford.edu/occasion/worlding-justicecommoning-matter>; Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004).

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### **5**

'La Foresta', accessed 23 February 2021, <https://laforesta.net/>.

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### **6**

Brave New Alps, 'Comunità Frizzante', 2019, [comunitafrizzante.it](http://comunitafrizzante.it).

act for change from a local to an international level. These are all spaces of commoning we contribute care to, in which we try to enact a different way of being in the world, while contributing with our design skills whenever they seem useful.

## CARING THROUGH DIVERSE SOLIDARY ECONOMIES

In our critique of the hegemonic economy and our growing desire to co-construct just ways of providing for humans' livelihoods, we were fortunate to come across the concept of diverse economies developed by US-Australian feminist economic geographer J.K. Gibson-Graham.<sup>7</sup> The diverse economies concept provides an empowering outline of what the economy is: it consists of everything we do to sustain our livelihoods – whether this involves the exchange of money or not. Gibson-Graham invites us to conceptualize the economy as an iceberg, of which the small tip alone consists of capitalist economic practices (such as salaried work, exchange in the capitalist market, capitalist finance), while the larger lower portion of the iceberg, which is submerged underwater, consists of the many things we do in life to sustain ourselves and others that are based on solidarity (for example, raising children, taking care of our gardens and environment, gifting, informal solidary lending, maintaining libraries).<sup>8</sup>

This iceberg approach to the economy makes me very hopeful for design(ers), as it clearly shows that we can interact not just above the water line in the conventional market, but that we can be part of the nurturing activities below the water line and contribute to constructing economies that have the well-being of people and earth-others at their core. We can contribute to creating the fabric of relations and infrastructures that allow us to live well, while defying ►

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J.K. Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron, and Stephen Healy, *Take Back the Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming Our Communities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); J.K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (as We Knew It)* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

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J.K. Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron, and Stephen Healy, *Take Back the Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming Our Communities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); J.K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (as We Knew It)* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

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► capitalist logic. We are no fans of the idea that designers who wish to be agents of transformation should engage mainly in conventional work, driven by the demands of the capitalist market, and then do some pro-bono work on the side. We can be – we need to be – more creative and risk-taking than that. There are many collective, inventive and perhaps still unconventional ways out there to sustain our livelihoods. There is much we can learn from workers, co-operators, anarchists and commoners, but first and foremost from people who for centuries have developed solidary and creative ways to resist the oppression and violence of capitalism and colonialism.<sup>9</sup>

For our own design practice, discovering the diverse solidary economy approach has led us to decide that our design practices should not be the one and only thing that sustains our livelihood. We have chosen to mobilize the multiple resources we are privileged to have access to, so that we can be more radical in our design decisions. First, this meant moving back to the geographical area where our families have lived for centuries to share resources with them. For example, while I was working on my PhD in the UK, Fabio and I both lived off my bursary so that Fabio could spend three years working with his father to convert the top floor of his mother's house into a flat we could live in rent-free, thus allowing us to reduce our monthly costs dramatically compared to our life in a city such as London.

Following this experience, we decided that we would continue to live with one (more or less stable) income only, so that we might have significantly more time to contribute to the creation of commons and community economies that support us and others in breaking out of the tyranny of wage labour.<sup>10</sup> Currently, our livelihood is supported, for example, by a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship by the

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### **9**

Caroline Shenaz Hossein, *The Black Social Economy in the Americas Exploring Diverse Community-Based Markets, Perspectives from Social Economics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

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### **10**

Kathi Weeks, 'Life Within and Against Work: Affective Labor, Feminist Critique, and Post-Fordist Politics', *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization* 7, no. 1 (2007): 233–49.

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### **11**

Donna Jeanne Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

European Commission, rent-free living in Fabio's parents' family home, very occasional low-paid commissioned work (mainly for lectures and texts), project grants which provide a monetary income for the commoners we work with and which cover the material expenses of the commoning processes we are part of, plus our diverse economic activities such as growing much of our own food, cycling, repairing, recycling, backyard camping, sharing, and so on. Moreover, our decision to stay in one place – which we also perceive as a giant privilege – has allowed us to become part of a support network that helps us in many small and big ways to sustain our lives while mobilizing for change.

## CARING THROUGH AN EXPANDED WE AND NESTED-I

While trying to center care in our design practice – both in relation to humans and the environment – we entered into the realm of the environmental humanities, where prolific conversations are taking place around the decentering of the human (especially as it overlaps in the Western world with white male hetero cis able bodies) and the placing of humans amongst a multispecies assemblage. Engaging with the work of US-American feminist philosopher of science Donna Haraway,<sup>11</sup> Australian feminist philosopher Deborah Bird Rose,<sup>12</sup> Canadian feminist anthropologist Natasha Myers<sup>13</sup> and again with the work of Maria Puig de la Bellacasa<sup>14</sup> amongst others, helped us to understand community as never confined to humans alone, but always extended to earth-others as well. We are sharing and co-creating this world with plants, animals, fungi, bacteria and viruses. To be in this world means to be interdependent: we assume that such a figure as an independent individual does not exist. We are always interdependent with others, near and far, and it is this relatedness that makes us who we are. As Haraway puts it: “to be one, you must be many.”<sup>15</sup> This is ►

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### 12

Deborah Bird Rose, ‘Shimmer: When All You Love Is Being Trashed’ (Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet, Santa Cruz, USA, 2014), <https://vimeo.com/97758080>.

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### 13

Natasha Myers, ‘How to Grow Livable Worlds: Ten Not-so-Easy Steps’, in *The World to Come*, ed. Kerry Oliver Smith (Gainesville, Florida: Harn Museum of Art, 2018), 53–63.

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### 14

María Puig de la Bellacasa, ‘Ecological Thinking, Materialist Spirituality, and the Poetics of Infrastructure’, in *Boundary Objects and Beyond. Working with Susan Leigh Star*, ed. Geoffrey C. Bowker et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016).

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### 15

Donna Haraway, ‘Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene: Staying with the Trouble’ (Anthropocene: Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet, University of Santa Cruz, 9 May 2014), <https://vimeo.com/97663518>.

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► a powerful ontological framework, i.e. framing a theory of being, which we are working to activate in our everyday lives: what does it mean for us, in very practical terms, to live in this place and to care for and with all living beings that co-constitute it, through local or trans-local interdependence? In attempting to center this ‘expanded we’ in our lives and work, we also refer strongly to the concept of a ‘nested-I’ proposed by German and US-American commons theorists Silke Helfrich and David Bollier. The nested-I – which we refer to in its German version “Ich-in-Bezogenheit” (literally translating as I-in-relatedness) – helps us to approach our own needs and desires from a perspective of relatedness. For a caring design practice, such an understanding of being is pivotal, as here the I and the we only make sense in relation to one another.<sup>16</sup>

In very basic (yet, still species-focused) ways, developing a caring design practice within an ontology of an extended we, for us has meant that we are very much interested in doing things together with others: supporting the transformational ideas of others but also taking care of each others’ livelihoods and well-being. So, whenever we can, we activate our skills, resources, energy and time to support the diverse economies that sustain the commoners we act in concert with. Currently, this takes the form of acting in four main ways: supporting people in getting access to projects and training funds to sustain their work, mentoring and coaching, sharing our material resources, and conceptual, affective and administrative support for the implementation of commoning initiatives. These actions help to relieve us from the very individualized and individualizing burden of needing to make ends meet, and from the feeling of isolation and exhaustion we all can feel when working for what is yet to be. It is about opening this discussion on care up to others, and working hard to reinforce one another and to

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### 16

Silke Helfrich and David Bollier, *Frei, Fair Und Lebendig: Die Macht Der Commons* (transcript Verlag, 2019), 44–47.

make change happen together – something that has become all the more urgent with the Covid-19 pandemic, as so many people around us have lost their sources of income and are looking for new ways to make ends meet.

In terms of a multispecies – which for us is practically a far more challenging realm – we decided to begin to grapple with it by caring for multispecies relations where we are: having taken a course in permaculture, we have put ourselves in touch with our garden and are now caring for the multispecies garden-assemblage in symbiosis with ourselves (growing, watering, mulching, composting, creating humanure); through our web of friendships with agro-ecologists, witches, activist farmers and “fermentationists”, we continue to learn about care in agriculture, woodland management and food production in collaboration with microbes and many more creatures. Most recently, we embarked on a journey to learn about forest pedagogy, because despite the fact that we grew up and now live in the second largest biodiversity reservoir in Europe, the modes of living that reign here are mostly estranged from the forests that surround and sustain us. In terms of multispecies relations, we are very curious as to where our journey will take us. It feels like we are slowly beginning to grasp what exciting and radical changes it can bring.

## CLOSING

When our journey towards a caring design practice began, Fabio and I felt rather alone, yet over time we banded together with allies – within but especially outside the field of design. Experience after experience, new and transformational points of orientation and supportive others have been placed on our conceptual and affective map. The journey is not over, even if we have decided that we want to stick to the same geographical area over a long period of time. ►

## *Keynote*

► We are curious to see where the world and our allies will lead us next, while actively working on our ability to sustain our livelihoods in ever more commons-based (infra)structures.

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# ***WORK SHOPS***

*virtual workshops for hands-on practices*

*Workshop*

***DESIGNING WITH  
CARE IN AN  
INTERDEPENDENT  
WORLD:  
COMMUNITY  
ECONOMIES AND  
SITUATEDNESS.***

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**Abstract:**

*How to create an economy that cares?  
Where is your community of care?  
What happens when we move en masse from  
a critical to a caring design practice?  
To explore these questions, the workshop aims to take  
our own design practices as a starting point and to reflect together  
on how they have been transformed through  
the ongoing attempt  
to make care a central point of reference.*



**Keywords:**

*#caring design #community economies #diverse economies*

► **TAKING CARE OF AND IN PROJECTS**

The main goal of this 90-minute workshop was to explore how planning and working practices can be changed to take into account personal and existential needs, interweaving and configuring them with a situated and continuous approach to care, i.e. an approach that starts from one's own daily experience and develops over a medium to long period of time. We started by analysing our current situations and tried to understand how caring can offer a way of re-imagining our relationships with others. ►

## *Workshop*

► To do this, the workshop focused on creating a space for care and reflection, where this moment was proposed not as a form of content production but of mutual support in the spirit of the economies of care. It was an attempt to consider how to bring caring economies into the networks of people, groups and institutions we are part of. To help us, we read some of the quotes in this text as a point of inspiration for the conversation:

**If we work, where we work,  
with whom we work, what we do  
at work, and how long we work  
are social arrangements and hence  
properly political decisions,  
how might more of this territory  
be reclaimed as viable terrains of  
debate and struggle?**

(Kathi Weeks, 2011)

How can the actors of transformation act in solidarity and support each other? There are many practices and forms of cooperation and collaboration within the worlds of design. Many are aimed at production and only a few at re-production. Caring makes us vulnerable but at the same time strong too. It helps us to consider other perspectives and enable other practices. This pandemic brought us forcefully back to the cooperative

forms of practices that are not only productive but linked to people and to their domestic context, thus giving visibility to the work of re-production.

Adopting an idea of (re)productive economy, we organized the meeting based on practice and focused on individual connections, combining the search for shared solutions based on common resources with meaningful activities and caring relationships. In the search for a better framework within which to act and work, based on feminist critiques, we focused on the needs and the resources that are in the re-production spectrum and could be brought into play. As pointed out at the beginning, the workshop deliberately did not want any structure or guidelines to frame the discussion and exchange between the participants. It was a space for re-production and mutual attention. We have tried to adopt an approach to care that does not come in the form of assistance, but as a strength that can make our actions reproductive and regenerative. As we read in Mia Mingus:

**We must not only fight against  
the world we currently have,  
but also be working to create the kind  
of world that is inspired by our  
deepest desires for ourselves,  
our families (whomever they may be,**

**including chosen family) and our communities. And it is from this place, where I would like us to always start. From the world we want, the world we collectively desire. I always think it is important to say that I'm here today as a queer, disabled, Korean woman, transracial/transnational adoptee, raised in a US territory in the Caribbean. None of which are more or less important. For me, these are not just descriptive terms; they are political identities, based out of my own and other people's lived experiences, and I understand them—all of them—to be powerful ways of moving through and understanding the world...**

(Mia Mingus, 2011)

In our reflections we agreed that we are looking for alternative and different forms of economies. We consider them to be crucial, both to support us in imagining new possibilities and to put into practice supportive and enabling relationships to make care a central point of reference, from different points of view.

### **Conclusions**

The workshop ended with an invitation to care, as each participant was asked to define a key message or motto; this is the sum of the principles that were shared and the ways in which they have chosen to dare:

– dare to cultivate spaces of care beyond your kin

- dare to defend your boundaries and invite others to take on care as well
- dare to focus on building relationships rather than focusing on productivity
- dare to take time for self-care
- dare to take on activities of care even if your social privilege allows you to not care
- dare to mobilise your privilege to create caring situations for others
- dare to take an intersectional perspective on care in your projects ■

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### **Recommended readings:**

Brown, Adrienne Maree. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. Chico: AK Press, 2017.

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Haraway, Donna. *Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin*. *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 6, 2015.

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Weeks, Kathi. *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Duke University Press, 2011.

Mingus, Mia. *Femmes Of Color Symposium in Oakland, California*, 2011.

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***THANK  
YOU!***

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# CARE BEYOND CRISES



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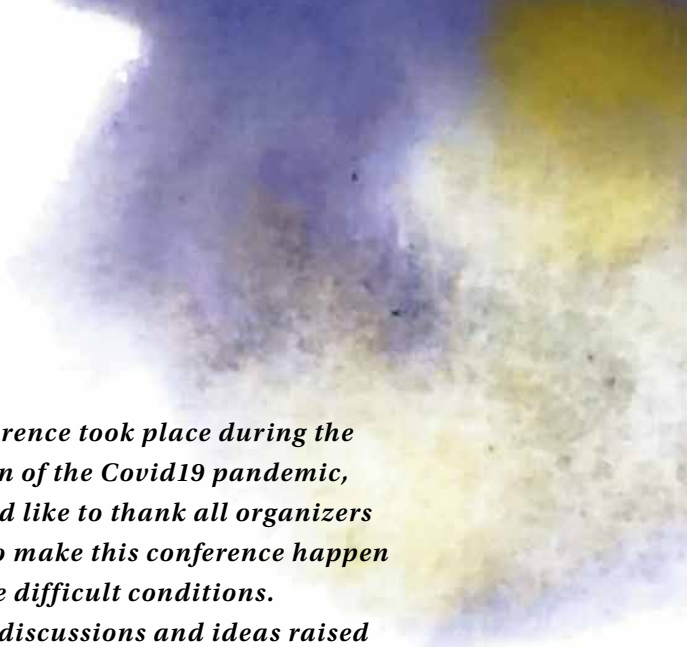


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*Nevertheless, the discussions and ideas raised in the conference became a way out to imagine alternative presents and futures within the multiple crises through focusing on care.*



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