Community development ‘yet-to-come’ during and post the COVID-19 pandemic: from Derrida to Zuboff

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Abstract The contours of this article, written as a dialogue between two authors, one in Australia (Westoby) and one in South Africa (Harris), outline a Derridean deconstruction of community development ‘yet-to-come’ during and post coronavirus disease 2019. Reflecting on our two countries’ experiences, drawing on theorists such as Zuboff (surveillance capitalism), Freire (critical literacy), Foucault (biopower), Escobar (pluriversality) and Berardi (semio-capitalism), we argue for transformational critical digital literacy work that enables greater community awareness of the consequences of digital lives and also transformative praxis.

Riffing off many experiences that readers will be familiar with (lock-down, social distancing, tracing apps, virtual meetings and so on), the dialogue also suggests a soulful community development yet-to-come, foregrounding embodied lives, slowness, place, relationality and connection.

Peter: Last year this journal published an online article ‘A community development yet-to-come’, which explored re-constructing community development praxis (Westoby, 2019—https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsz013) riffing off Jacques Derrida’s work. In that yet-to-come there was talk of how community development responds to climate change, inequalities, the rise of the neo-liberal university and so forth, but there was no mention of a pandemic. Yet, here ‘we’ are then in such a moment—a

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global pandemic, causing a global shock to health, economic, political and social systems—and this article considers how community development can respond.

The contours of our article, written as a dialogue between two authors, one in Australia (Westoby) and one in South Africa (Harris), outline a Derridean deconstruction drawing on several lines of enquiry. These include Zuboff’s analysis of surveillance capitalism (linking to Naomi Klein’s shock-doctrine); Freire’s notion of critical literacy through dialogue; Foucault’s notion of biopower; Escobar’s ideas of the pluriverse and Berardi’s on soul.

We write this article from a perspective generated by a dialogue between a community development practitioner/scholar/analyst and an activist archivist/scholar. Both of us come to this deconstructive task profoundly privileged—along every intersecting vector of privilege, including at this time maintaining paid jobs during the pandemic—and acknowledging the profound uncertainly of these times.

Our approach to deconstructing community development for one yet-to-come does not intend to make invisible the revival of ‘community as mutuality’ and expressions of neighbourly care during the pandemic. The pandemic has created opportunity as never before to explore community-online, and the role, practice and efficacy of virtual communities during a time of physical distancing—and we affirm these expressions of ‘community building’. Others have been examining what community-led development needs to bring to communities experiencing coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (for example, the movement for community-led development—https://mclld.org/share-innovations/). As such, from a Derridean perspective there are many examples of ‘community as hospitality’ while also recognizing the manifestations of community as ‘munitions’ (the muni within community) (O’Connor, 2010: 125)—as some people, groups and communities create barriers and borderlands to ‘keep people out’, a kind of ‘anticommunity’ formation of place and boundary.

What I bring to the dialogue with Verne, and to the deconstructive task more broadly, is a critical lens shaped by Derrida, Foucault, Freire, Zuboff, Escobar and Berardi. With it we look to offer a critical digital literacy framework for community development praxis, along with other insights.

Verne, as I come to the end of a page of introductory musings, setting up our dialogical provocation, I am interested in your reading of Zuboff’s Surveillance Capitalism, and how her work links to what is unfolding during this pandemic of COVID-19?

Verne: Thanks Peter. As always, in a few sentences you hold both a clutch of ideas and a bunch of tempting questions. But let me focus, initially, on Surveillance Capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). The book came out in 2019 and is monumental in many senses. Zuboff outlines what she regards as an
unprecedented development in capitalism, one involving the extraction of
the most intimate and private information about individuals (what she calls
‘behavioural surplus’, Zuboff, 2019: 194–200) and its sale to corporate and
other customers who use it to modify behaviours for both good and ill,
but mostly in order to make obscene amounts of money. She outlines in
great detail how the big tech companies, the juggernauts, sidestep rights
to privacy, data protection norms and restrictions on monopoly in order to
build behavioural surplus, largely without the knowledge or the consent
of the people from whom the surplus is extracted. And she demonstrates
how that surplus can be used—and has been used—to influence people’s
purchasing patterns, manipulate their preferences, persuade them to vote
in elections and referenda, and even determine the results of such critical
societal decision-making processes. Billions of people around the world are
hooked into systems which provide a service—from online purchasing to
email, from information searching to movie downloads—but for which they
pay a fearful price. Zuboff warns that this is just the beginning. She argues
that we are on the brink of a decisive move into what she calls ubiquitous
computing, in which extraction from individuals takes place even when they
are not online—they will be, and increasingly already are, being watched
and recorded by their cars, their refrigerators, their watches, their spectacles,
and so on. Humanity is relinquishing its right to sanctuary.

That’s a lot, I know. And I’ve just skimmed the surface of a multilayered
and richly textured work. But before I attempt to link it to COVID-19, I have
to say that Surveillance Capitalism needs to be read alongside work by others,
which is equally important at this moment. Work which, if anything, digs
even deeper than Zuboff. So, for instance, Jackie Wang’s 2018 book on what
she calls ‘carceral capitalism’. Wang unfolds how big data, logarithms and
related tools are used to incarcerate populations without the need for literal
prisons and other places of detention. Or Amy Webb’s 2019 work on artificial
intelligence (AI), in which she shows that ‘we are crossing a threshold into
a new reality in which AI is generating its own programs, creating its own
algorithms, and making choices without humans in the loop’ (Webb 2019:
125).

COVID-19 is providing humanity with an opportunity to reflect on where
it finds itself, what it wants and what it really needs. Sadly, scarily, at the
same time it creates almost the perfect platform for the archons of capitalism
and AI to expand their reach exponentially under the pretext of combating
catastrophe. So, as we rely on technology more heavily for connection, for
community, in a time of social distancing, unavoidably we unlock new layers
of behavioural surplus for the archons. As we advocate free or very cheap
access to online services for the world’s most vulnerable people, potentially
we are giving the archons new sources of surplus. And so on.
Peter: Verne, you have provided a glimpse into some of the key recent literature on surveillance capitalism. I would add that we are now seeing greater cooperation, or collusion between the mega-corporations that Zuboff and the other authors you mention analyse, and the state. So not only are there significantly more ‘data’ being harvested by corporations as people, during and post-social distancing/lockdowns, live more of their lives online, but there are data linked to health now being collected and stored by states, with citizens being quick to comply. For example, in Australia the government launched the coronavirus tracing app named COVIDSafe app on 26 April\(^1\). This was two weeks before the relevant legislation even went to parliament on 12 May\(^2\). One intriguing thing is that more than 6 million Australian citizens downloaded the app even before the legislation went to parliament. Without even understanding how it works, or it being subjected to technical tests (about claims of safety and security of data collection), or even review of the legislation prior to normal procedure. People, in the name of ‘safety’ and under pressure to ‘do the right thing by their fellow citizens’ (invoking ‘community’) and with a carrot offered (‘lockdown restrictions can be lifted quicker if people download the app’), citizens were quick to comply. Australia is obviously not alone in using this technology—in China and India downloading their app is mandatory; apparently one-third of Icelanders had downloaded their equivalent at the time of us writing, and so forth.

Intriguingly, for the Australian app, data are being stored by Amazon Web Services, the Seattle based mega-corporation that Zuboff writes about. Mapping this recent technological initiative simply grounds the terrain we are talking about.

In the period of lockdowns during this pandemic, and now subsequent forms of tracing and surveillance, we see a potent manifestation of what Foucault called biopolitics and biopower. As Rachel Adams (2017) outlines:

> In short, biopolitics can be understood as a political rationality which takes the administration of life and populations as its subject: ‘to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order’. Biopower thus names the way in which biopolitics is put to work in society, and involves what Foucault describes as ‘a very profound transformation of [the] mechanisms of power’ of the Western classic age. In *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault writes of ‘a power that exerts a positive influence on life, which endeavours

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1. [https://www.health.gov.au/resources/apps-and-tools/covidsafe-app.](https://www.health.gov.au/resources/apps-and-tools/covidsafe-app.)
2. [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_Legislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bId=r6556.](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_Legislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bId=r6556.)
to administer, optimize and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations\textsuperscript{3}.

The main point being that the state has not, in most countries, had to use force or repressive power. People subject themselves willingly to this biopower.

But, now the key point: in this willing subjection to biopower, are people aware of the interplay of this behavioural surplus you discuss above and actual surveillance power? This brings us to the idea of Freire and critical digital literacy, a key element of a community development yet-to-come.

I would suggest that ‘critical digital literacy’ can be understood as a form of pedagogy for making sense of and deconstructing the digital and material forces and power that shape our world. In engaging with the politics of digital governance alongside its use in everyday life, a critical digital literacy approach to community development links people’s lived experiences to the broader context of structural and social power in which they are situated. What do you think Verne?

Verne: So, I’m hearing two questions in your reflection Peter. One has to do with awareness, the other with what you’re calling ‘critical digital literacy’. Yes, we need far more awareness of the kinds of surveillance we are routinely exposed to by our devices. If I remember correctly, the first time I really thought about this was during the student uprising on South Africa’s university campuses in the period 2015–2017.\textsuperscript{4} My organization was involved in mediation work, while friends of mine (some students, some faculty) found themselves caught up in what felt like a tidal wave. In the early stages, student leaders used WhatsApp and other tools very effectively to mobilize action and direct operations. But it was not long before university administrations and police intelligence units began using these same tools both for surveillance and for targeted disruption of student formations. This is when I started reading more and thinking more deeply about the price people pay for being plugged in digitally. Although, I have to say, I find deep inside myself a resistance to caring about surveillance. I mean caring for myself. This probably has something to do with long years of anti-apartheid work, during which one learned to assume that everything one was doing and saying was under scrutiny. In that space it is easy either to become paranoid—the one extreme—or to develop a ‘fuck them’ approach. It probably also has something to do with my unease around data protection and all the other layers of privacy our global elites afford themselves, when

\textsuperscript{3} https://criticallegalthinking.com/2017/05/10/michel-foucault-biopolitics-biopower/

\textsuperscript{4} The uprising occurred in two phases, popularly termed RhodesMustFall and FeesMustFall.
the great majority of human beings—living and working in crowded shared spaces—experience almost no privacy at all.

Another consequence of being plugged in digitally is complicity in a vast material network, which is all about extraction, consumption and disposal. The virtual, I think, seduces us into being blind to the extent to which it hinges on: mines extracting coltan and other substances required in the manufacture of hardware; factories producing devices; the labour of human beings sweating in those mines and factories in often inhumane conditions; cables cutting through landscapes and seabeds, disturbing ecosystems, sometimes terminally; huge landfills receiving the hardware waste spawned by ever-accelerating appetites for the new and the upgraded; and so on. Awareness of this complicity, it seems to me, is critical to the possibility of soulfulness in digital literacy. I’ll keep looping back to this possibility.

So, yes, awareness is vital. Although, as usual, I have far more questions than I do answers. As I develop knowledge about the kinds of surveillance and the modes of behavioural manipulation made possible by the systems and the devices I’m using, I do wonder how I can put that knowledge to work. How can I contribute to shifting things? Or has that struggle already been lost? Questions not unrelated to one I’ve been wrestling with through these COVID-19 months of virtual meetings, classes and workshops—how to nurture soul, even find it, in these relentlessly illuminated and windowed two-dimensional spaces? How to resist the gaze of Narcissus and forget the extent to which algorithms are crunching data on one’s facial expressions and every other minute detail available to the system’s sensors?

Well, I could go on. By the way, did you sign up to COVIDSafe?

Peter: Like the field of critical health literacy (Sykes, Wills & Popple, 2017) and critical thinking generally, a ‘critical digital literacy’ linked to normative community development work would assume ‘circles’ of people can come together to make sense of what’s unfolding—awareness as you say of what’s happening and our complicities—but also identify transformative possibilities through praxis. So I’d like to reframe your question: ‘How can I contribute to shifting things?’ to ‘How can we contribute to shifting things?’ The ‘we’ is crucial in a Freirean community development tradition. Your thinking and the likes of Zuboff provide crucial expertise such that dialogue, collective analysis and strategizing are well informed.

Tracing back to some of our key points, COVID-19 has accelerated a move into more digital lives. This leads to numerous key issues from a transformative perspective. Lines of inequality are amplified—the ‘haves and have-nots’ now linked to digital access. I’m reminded of the opening scene of the 2019 Academy Award winning movie Parasite, in which a poor Korean family living in squalor awake to find that the woman living in the flat above them has put a password on her Wi-Fi ensuring they cannot
access it anymore. This exclusion from the Wi-Fi triggers a trajectory of further impoverishment. For the privileged the pandemic has been a giant pause, a kind of resting moment for contemplation, more yoga, perhaps alcohol detox and goodness knows what else. For the poor it has been catastrophic—and we now talk of the hunger pandemic unfolding in your continent.

Along with inequalities, we see this flocking to an online world also has huge winners and losers economically. Think of corporations such as Amazon, Facebook, Google, Uber Eats, Zoom and others. Huge economic winners. In Australia the two huge food retail corporations have increased profits significantly. Many local businesses have collapsed or gone into what our government called hibernation. So, we see the globalization versus localization debates heightened.

As such there are many dualities at work which we are yet to make sense of. Some globalized supply chains have collapsed, which might lead to a focus on nationalized or localized production and supply lines. But it’s not just economic issues. As you’ve explained, surveillance capitalism isn’t just harvesting data for consumption. It’s also about politics, shifting the whole norms and assumptions of democratic institutions. Cambridge Analytica\(^5\) etc. Brexit, Trump, Morrison in Australia—all indications that normal ‘polling’ can’t predict. Invisible forces at work. As more people move online this harvesting of data for political purposes will surely become even more potent.

Maybe the panopticon is all encompassing—we have lost the fight already as you suggest. Yet Freire’s work offers not only awareness but the invitation to expanding imaginations—what he called imaginative literacy, before acting. There are alternatives.

My final thoughts here related to Freire’s idea of expanding imaginations. A key previous contributor to this journal (Esteva 2014, 2015a, b) is the Mexican post-development thinker/activist, Gustavo Esteva, linked to the Universidad de la Tierra (University of the Earth), supporting the Zapatista struggle in southern Mexico. As a post-development thinker, much of Esteva’s work has been an inquiry into ‘what comes after failed development?’ And I think one of our threads here is that forty years of hyper-capitalist neoliberal policy making, following 200 years of industrial capitalism, has failed us all profoundly, particularly the poor and the non-human world. As such, reaching then beyond the either/or prospect of hyper-capitalist

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5 Cambridge Analytica was the company behind use of new data sources that profoundly influenced the Brexit vote. Morrison refers to Scott Morrison, the Prime Minister of Australia, unexpectedly elected in a May 2019 election for the Liberal-National Party (the equivalent of the Tory’s in the UK and Republican’s in the USA).
market-led development versus state-led capitalism or socialism is ‘the commons’, which represents the ‘cell of a new society’ (Esteva, 2015b: 744). This is an example of the possibility of re-imagining—this ‘beyond’ the either/or options of state or market, and instead, a mutuality tradition of cooperation and commoning.

I wonder if the panopticon gives rise to what a transformative critical digital literacy could lead to. A new dreaming of mechanisms such as platform cooperatives: e.g. local people using digital platforms to cooperate and create local businesses in ways that delink from the global corporations such as Uber Eats, Uber and Amazon.

In saying this, I also acknowledge that Esteva’s approach to ‘the commons’ is quite necessarily different to many. Recognizing the enclosure of the commons as a historical process (are not digital worlds now being enclosed?), and acknowledging the movements that are reclaiming or regenerating the commons (for example commonly managed land, Wikipedia, open-access software, cooperatives, and so forth), he advocates for people to see what’s already happening. His suggestion is that there is a new post-capitalist world emerging among the commons. But, importantly, it is not one form. So, he is adamantly against the idea of ‘the commons’ as a universal category, but is instead for a ‘family of words that includes different traditions’ of commoning (Esteva, 2015b: 744).

Oh, and to answer your last question, no, I didn’t download the COVID-Safe.

**Verne:** Glad to hear it. Tell me, was there only an ‘I’ involved in that decision, or was there also a ‘we’ at play, a circle of friends and colleagues, a community?

Your point on community is taken, in principle, but I wanted to make a point about how important it is for each one of us to take personal responsibility for how and when we plug in. The tech titans routinely confront us with reams of small print—we need to read it. Sometimes we might have to turn down an app because of its onerous Ts&Cs. Say no to the cookie permissions and other requests which dangle on the screen invitingly. Decline a new fridge because it will be recording my habits and related behaviours. Or just walk away from a particular digital space altogether—I took one look at Facebook when it first exploded onto the scene and ran. I don’t want to sound virtuous here—this is more a reminder to myself than a description of a practice. Truth is COVID-19 has made it more difficult than ever to take responsible decisions about plugging in. For, as you point out, the move into digital terrain has accelerated, bringing with it those frequent and unsought requirements to download software or to upgrade it in order to participate optimally in virtual processes. Often I’ve felt that I don’t have a choice.
This accelerated move does bring benefits, for sure, but overwhelmingly for society’s elites. And, as you point out, the social divides have been profoundly deepened. Here in South Africa we have seen the great majority of people left behind in every way. Take schooling for example. For more than two months now the great majority of learners have sat at home through the COVID-19 lockdown without access to the devices (and the air time and the data and the connectivity) they need in order to participate in online learning. While private school learners have moved almost seamlessly into what feels like a new era. Naomi Klein has exposed how in the USA the tech giants are talking to states about using COVID-19 to leapfrog education into a ‘utopian’ future of remote learning, in which the mass of people will be left behind irrevocably (Klein 2020). What Klein and others (Harari 2015, for example) are warning of—when what is happening in education is replicated in health services, public transport and every other arena of service delivery—is a human revolution on the scale of the industrial and agricultural revolutions.

This is a revolution we don’t want. Social justice activists in South Africa are beginning to mobilize around the challenge. Small victories have been won in relation to the inordinate costs of data. More and more now (in the midst of COVID-19) the call is for universal free access to the internet, linked to demands for a universal basic income grant, ownership of property (the vast majority of South Africans, whether they live on communally owned land in deep rural areas or in urban township and informal settlement sprawls, don’t have title deeds), access to social capital networks, and the online provision of information in a form which is accessible and usable to those using cheap handheld devices. All of this is achievable. All of it is designed to ensure that the great mass of people is not left behind, once and for all.

So, Peter, we enable people to be plugged in. But what does community development look like in this space? You started talking about platform cooperatives and community use of ‘the commons’. Tell me more. Talk to me about how we nurture soul in this space.

Peter: Along with your very sharp analysis, you ask two good questions and offer a provocation. First my answer to your opening question: did I choose to not download COVIDSafe App alone—or ‘was there a ‘we’ involved’? In a sense there’s always the ‘I’—taking full responsibility for my decision. Yet, most certainly a ‘we’—there was intensive online debate among people I was connected to via social media (your non-beloved Facebook) generally, and among those in the community development fraternity particularly. Intensive debate and fierce disagreement are not always pleasant. I had a clear public line—that I would not download it due to all the reasons we have outlined above. Some community development
colleagues, and even students I have taught, were angry with me, arguing that downloading the app was a key indicator of being ‘for community’, not the individual. They suggested that as a public figure I should be taking the lead in advocating ‘for community’. But, in fact, the stronger public line I took was to advocate for dialogue and agonistic dialogue no matter what positions and action people adopted. Recognizing that people were sitting in very different spaces on this, the key for me became preferably dialogue, and if not possible, at least respectful difference (Mouffe’s (1993) ‘agonistic conflict’, which she contrasts with antagonistic conflict whereby disagreement is conflated with demonizing of the enemy).

Now, regarding your question and provocation: ‘But what does community development look like in this space? And: ‘Talk to me about how we nurture soul in this space’.

Hard to answer. I will in some ways sidestep the question, perhaps a ‘soulful community development yet-to-come’, as Derrida would have framed it (see Westoby, 2019). But I will probe the question signposting what I mean by soul, and then suggesting a way forward with three lines of thought.

You ask of soul. In previous writings (Westoby, 2016), I discuss soul from two key traditions—of depth psychology on one hand (aka James Hillman, Thomas Moore, Mary Watkins and Carl Jung) and on the other hand critical theory (aka ‘Bifo’ Berardi, particularly his book on Colonising the Soul, 2009). Avoiding definition, but drawing on the first tradition, soul is an emissary of depth, connection, slowness, embodied living. Metaphorically and mythologically, soul leans ‘downwards’ (hence depths) in contrast to ego and spirit that leans upwards (skyscrapers, endless flying, ambition). As I write those words, I am struck by how the Icarus-like nature of hyper-modernity, with a love of flying all over the world, has been more or less grounded during COVID-19. And many people’s ambitions have been thwarted.

Drawing on the second critical theory tradition of ‘Bifo’, we home in on understanding contemporary capitalism and its particular restructuring of the workplace. Within this analytical lineage, he argues that since the 1970s, at least within advanced capitalist economies, work has been transformed for many as a place of cognitive labour, as people use their minds at work more than their bodies. It is within this space of cognitive labour that desire, creativity and imagination are most manifest. It is where most people love to be, in contrast to the time prior to the 1970s, when most people wanted to work less, as work was mainly mechanical labour. In a sense, then, people are now at their most creative, intelligent selves at work, and therefore they want to spend more time there.
As a result, people’s identities and energies are constructed less from community, or the social fabric of society, than from the ‘social factory’ where they are employed. For many, work becomes their community. However, from a critical perspective this creative and imaginative work is contextualized by a competitive neoliberal capitalist economic system, which creates failure (after all it is impossible for everyone to win in a competitive work space), stress (people become tired of creating, of constantly making themselves, of competing), ultimately manifest in anxiety, panic and depression. Bifo argues that the soul has been colonized (Berardi, 2009: 14) by this kind of modern cognitive labour in the social factory, and that furthermore, ‘something in the collective soul has seized up’. (ibid: 10). For Bifo, soul, as gravity of the body, takes people into these seized, panicked, depressed places as a gift, inviting reconsideration of how they might want to live and work.

With such an analysis in mind, a soul perspective on community development work also considers, in dialogue with the likes of Bifo, how to recreate autonomous and strategic sites of work, action and community that offer an alternative to the current structure of neoliberal capitalist enterprise. Soul signifies an aesthetic response to orthodox notions of contemporary work, and a call to reorient sensuality and vitality away from the social factory of work and towards re-weaving the social fabric of community—a new ‘ecology of late capitalism’ and radical reform.

In the light of this emissary of soul (understood through both the traditions of depth psychology and critical theory), indicators of a soulful community development yet-to-come would be embodied life, slowness, careful noticing as opposed to rapid action, less flight and more connectivity to locality/fleshy bodies, a re-orienting towards the social and community fabric of life (not work). I would suggest our idea of a transformative critical literacy would be complemented by circles of people reflecting on place, the body, slowness, place, work and connection.

In suggesting this, I am aware that a duality is set at play. An inevitable one, articulated by Arturo Escobar in his ground-breaking book Designs for The Pluriverse (2018). In that book he suggests humans live at a crossroads: on the one hand cyborg, ever-plugged in digitally; yet on the other hand a real need to return to an embodied, relationally oriented life that is more rooted in community, place and sustainable bioregions. First Nations people provide much wisdom for the latter path. At the same time, he recognizes that ultimately it will not be either/or.

So, I am suggesting that this community development yet-to-come will embrace a transformative critical digital literacy as a popular education strategy of enabling citizens to make sense of the cultural-social-economic and political forces shaping our lives. I would add that this digital
literacy would also need to probe into the impacts of this hyper-connected world on our bodies, our nervous systems, our mental health (and ‘Bifo’ Berardi provides many insights into this). At the same time a soulful community development yet-to-come insists on a return to the body, relationality, locality, slowness. Both/and.

Verne, I’d like to make a final comment, for as we engage in our dialogue, I am also participating in a three-month online global dialogue hosted by The Proteus Initiative. Our dialogue is focused on what we call ‘Delicate Activism in a Time of COVID-19’. In many ways delicate activism aligns with a ‘soul’ approach in that the key to this work is sharpening our observational capabilities (Kaplan and Davidoff, 2014). The backdrop to this need for sharpening is that much social practice is a constant movement between the polarity of observation and intervention. We observe, observe, dialogue, ‘make sense of’, and then with a hopefully accurate analysis, take action (intervention). Yet, western ways of being in the world lean way too heavily towards quick intervention. A delicate activism suggests we refrain for much longer than our habitual impulse from intervention, or non-reflexive action, and instead spend a lot more time observing what is unfolding (not solitary observation, but as rigorous practice of using senses, analysis and in dialogue with others). I would suggest that as the world experiences the profound disruption of COVID-19, community practitioners need to be attending to rigorous observation. And the irony of this is that observation is an intervention. To observe is to witness, to become intimate with what’s unfolding (perhaps our own families again, or localities during lockdowns?), to even fall-in-love with life again, one not dominated by what Berardi calls hyper-capitalism (Berardi, 2009). A community development yet-to-come informed by soul and a delicate activism demands slowness my friend. And I say this with a full awareness of the privileged position of being able to even imagine slowness as an imperative. After all, with the hunger pandemic already ravaging many parts of the world, the hungry cannot choose slowness.

**Verne:** Slowness. Indeed. Slow enough to be fully present. Slow enough to connect, to see the chimera that is every either/or and to begin apprehending the both/and which is always already at play. This, for me, is the thread which weaves together deconstruction, intersectionality and archetypal psychology, and draws them into realms of soul. Derrida, Escobar, bell hooks and James Hillman as soulmates.6

In *Pluriverse*, Escobar delineates another important dimension of resisting binary opposition. It’s a passage in which he’s exploring worldviews—or epistemes or ‘worldings’—other than ‘patriarchal capitalist modernity’.

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6 See, for instance, *Hooks and Hillman 2016*. 
What he demonstrates is a decolonial politics in which subaltern worlds deliberately disengage from dominant ones and connect with them only very intentionally and strategically (Escobar 2018: 217). As living ghosts, they haunt power both by withdrawing from space—by declining particular roles, by letting silence speak for them—and by entering space when least expected. So, in relation to the digital it’s not only about being plugged in or not; it’s about plugging in and plugging out on terms not determined by dominant worlds; on terms that are, at the very least, negotiated. Both/and. This reminds me of an online archival project undertaken some years ago by the Archival Platform, driven by my friend and colleague Mbongiseni Buthelezi—Ancestral Stories.7 It’s rationale was a profession and a field of enquiry in South Africa—genealogy—dominated by whiteness and inhospitable to indigenous ways of knowing and doing. The project not only troubled a dominant discourse; it also revealed the extent to which younger generations of black South Africans are using social media and other digital platforms to engage with and share ancient knowledges.

As you know my friend, it took me many years to discover the possibilities of soul connection in the digital realm. As a writer I clung to my fountain pen and my beautiful handcrafted notebooks, the computer merely a technical device for transcribing and transporting texts. But now I’ve learned the delights of creating and crafting text on screen. I’ve befriended devices and started to find the soul in their designs, their sounds and their surfaces. I’ve learned whole new subtleties of touch, my fingers capable of an unimagined lovemaking with hardware. The fountain pen and notebooks are still beloved, but no longer in monogamy. And, of course, I’ve learned how soulmates can nurture their connection digitally. You and I communicate every day though we live in different continents—arguably, fundamental qualities of our relationship (and a plethora of connective nuances) have been opened, if not created, by technology.

The big learning for me in recent months—and it’s very specifically a COVID-19 lockdown learning—is the extent to which deeper collective processes and encounters can be held virtually. I guess along the lines of what is emerging for you in the delicate activism dialogue. I’ve seen my organization using curated WhatsApp binges to enable colleagues to stay in touch, and have frequently been surprised by the levels of sharing taking place. Over several weeks I’ve participated in a panel interviewing applicants in the USA and South Africa for the Atlantic Fellows for Racial Equity, with both the bonds developed within the panel and the intimacy of the engagements completely unexpected. And I’ve facilitated

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7 http://www.apc.uct.ac.za/apc/projects/ancestral-stories.
workshops, which have subverted my scepticism fundamentally. Virtual break-out groups can work, electronic flipcharts offer dimensions beyond the reach of paper and koki pens, ‘reading a room’ on a screen is possible (in fact, it invites a pluriversal reading of multiple rooms), sometimes people look in mirrors more readily when they’re in the ‘safety’ of their bedrooms, and so on. I’ve been surprised.

But not seduced. The digital is both liberating and limiting. Knowing the limits is critical, as is retaining capacity to say ‘no’, and being able to avoid addiction. One’s got to be able to switch off long enough to enjoy retreats into wilderness and other forms of unpluggedness. On one’s own or with people who can offer real, material, more or less sweaty, hugs. (After seventy days of lockdown now, my body craves hugs, handshakes, an arm around my shoulders.) One’s got to be able to switch off long enough to engage in the dimensions of community which the digital does not reach.

Peter: Verne, I loved your contemplative musings on the possibilities, the surprises, and yes that warning to not be seduced.

As we come to an end of our dialogue, your stories remind me of a small journey with a few people during this lockdown. Classic community development you might say. Here’s the story: ‘I’ had an idea. I’d been inspired reading Jenny Odell’s *How to do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (2019), yet sensed it would be good to read with others, and living in a new bioregion, wanted to connect with new people even in a digital way. Hence, I discussed the idea of a ‘critical reading group’, which is essentially Freire’s ‘circle work’ with Odell’s book as the ‘code’ to trigger dialogue. No one ‘teaching’, just a dialogue. I reached out to two others, not saying, ‘I’d like to start a reading group’, but, ‘I have an idea to read with others, what do you think? How about ‘we’ start a reading group’. A subtly different question, but important from a community development perspective. This group became a project of a ‘we’, not an ‘I’, and as the other two said ‘Yes, let us do this’ (the ‘us’ is important) and reached out to others, we became a circle of eight. It’s illustrative of our community development method: ‘I’ to ‘We’ and it has been a rich journey so far. The content of the book also echoes much of what you have just shared, asking ‘what is it to resist the attention economy?’—not delink from it (for that would be to retreat from politics)—but bring a new intentionality, to avoid being sucked into the cacophony of noise, news and necessity. This resistance, Escobar’s ‘disengagement’, is crucial. This community development yet-to-come is honing its analysis of those possibilities of digital community, of transformative digital literacy, and yet supporting a praxis of people in resistance, in turning off, delinking.

Returning to Odell—herself quoting Berardi—s/he suggests that the new regime that we need to make real sense of
is not founded on the repression of dissent: nor does it rest on the enforce-
ment of silence. On the contrary, it relies on the proliferation of chatter,
the irrelevance of opinion and discourse, and on making thought, dissent,
and critique banal and ridiculous . . . . Instances of censorship are rather
marginal when compared to what is essentially an immense informational
overload and an actual siege of attention . . . . (Odell, 2019: 18).

Biopower (our consent), literacy (awareness) and a new praxis: stepping out
of this overload, this siege, yet with intention stepping into digital platforms
that enable new connections, new analyses and creative praxis (local, as per
my book reading group; global as in the Proteus Initiative and your work
between the USA and RSA). The importance of the COVID-19 pandemic
as enabling slowness and observation that will possibly enable people
collectively to see the fissures, the small cracks in the edifice of globalizing
industrial surveillance capitalism and intervene with ‘right action’. And
maybe here it’s worth clarifying—this slowness we are imagining is not
so much about some bourgeois version of rest and relaxing—albeit I have
always chosen to imagine the afternoon siesta as the most perfect act of
resistance against hyper-productive capitalist demands. No, this slowness
enables a more rigorous careful process of observation (analysis) which
leads to more potent intervention (action).

Verne: The challenge for most people is to find that slowness in the midst
of a clutter of activity, to be slow while acting with speed. We’re talking about
a slowness, then, which is not necessarily literal.

As to whether COVID-19 and its aftermath will lead to the kind of
potent action—as in transformational and sustainable—which is required,
that remains to be seen. Could this moment unfold as but another in a series
which in the recent past have triggered a tsunami of activity but failed to
secure structural change? This moment reminds me of others—in 2003 I was
in Toronto marching against the invasion of Iraq, a participant in just one
of thousands of mass protests around the world; in 2008 there were many
protests in South Africa as there were elsewhere responding to the Wall
Street-induced global economic implosion; I passed through New York in
2011 just as the Occupy Wall Street movement emerged; and last year one of
my projects was in Stockholm to interview Greta Thunberg during a Fridays
for Future strike action. It has been clear for a long time now that what
bell hooks calls imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is not
sustainable (Hooks 2013: 177). And it is obvious that COVID-19 creates yet
another opportunity for swift and deliberate dismantling of the intersecting
apparatuses of oppressive power. But I suspect that we are still a long way
short of a breakthrough. It’s feeling like just another tsunami.
Peter Westoby: Associate Professor of Community Development and Social Science, Queensland University of Technology, Australia; Visiting Professor, Centre for Development Support University of the Free State, South Africa.

I was introduced at a keynote of the 2018 International Association of Community Development as a community development scholar, activist and analyst. I kind of liked the ring of it; almost poetic. Yet, more accurately, from the age of twenty years I’ve been on a journey of community development practice, deeply shaped by a grass-roots tradition, Freirean in nature, and place-based. That evolved over many years, particularly as I worked in South Africa, Uganda, the Philippines, Nepal, PNG and Vanuatu. Then at the age of 40 I found myself a late-comer wading into the academy, and perhaps by chance took up a position as community development scholar just as Anthony Kelly retired from forty years of teaching/practice service at The University of Queensland (where community development has been taught for over forty years, a rich tradition). Since then, I’ve loved the journey of a more intentional dance that links theory and practice together—the rigour of the academy intersecting with the responsivity of daily community development practice. I’ve been a writer or co-writer/editor of fourteen books and over fifty professional journal articles on community development, and love that there is an emerging global ‘community of scholarship’ growing around the world.

Verne Harris: Head, Leadership and Knowledge Development, Nelson Mandela Foundation; Adjunct Professor, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa.

My first experiences of community-based work were in anti-apartheid structures during the 1980s and early 1990s. Most of my career has been about connecting reckoning with pasts to the making of liberatory futures. I served in government throughout Nelson Mandela’s presidency, including a spell with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I was Mandela’s personal archivist from 2004 until his death in 2013 and have spent the best part of two decades at the Nelson Mandela Foundation trying to build a dialogical memory for justice praxis. Along the way I have read deeply in deconstruction and intersectionality, authored or co-authored six books (including two novels), edited a few more, and travelled to many countries in search of communities, which have found ways to heal and to dream and to nurture inter-generational learning. Crossing paths with Peter twenty-four years ago was to enliven my soul journey profoundly.

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