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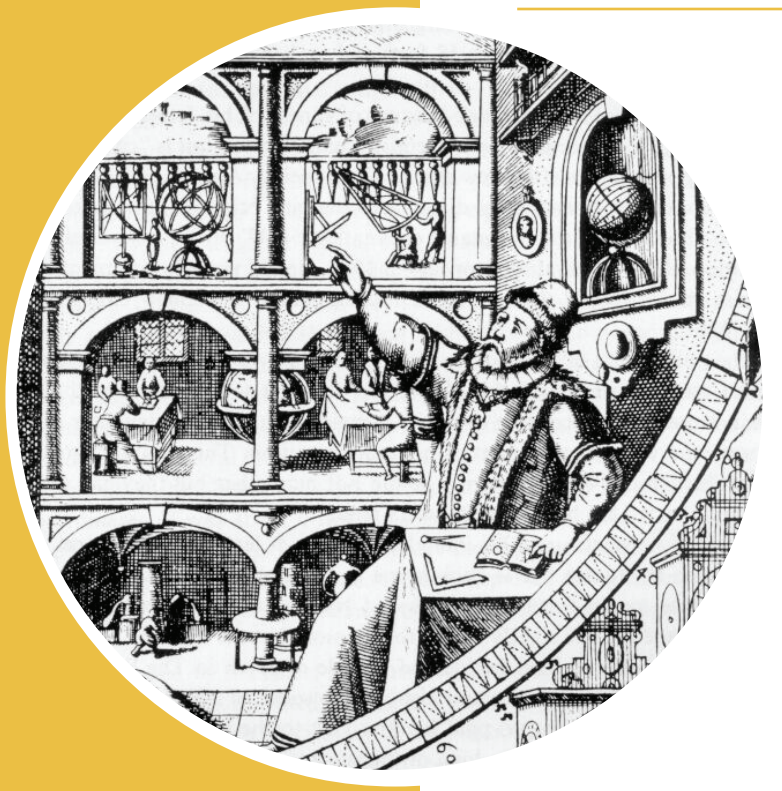

Critical Care

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InSchibboleth

CARING, MENDING, CLEANING:
IMAGINING MORE JUST COMMUNITIES OF CARE THROUGH THE DOMESTIC WORKERS COALITION AND KANTAMANTO MARKET

Abstract: Responsibilities for providing care are unevenly dispersed geographically, and often along racialized and gendered lines. Expanding market relations, associated with neoliberalism, facilitate globalization and create complex webs of care, while simultaneously embedding labor in a logic of disposability. Using examples of Seattle's Domestic Workers Coalition and Kantamanto in Accra, Ghana, one of the largest secondhand clothing markets in the world, we explore the ways that workers resist the devaluation and disposability that occur within their webs of care. This agency is highlighted when the bodies of literature around care ethics, communities of care and commoning are read as a framework for understanding these workers' current situations. We employ critical care ethics in response to counter the disposability and devaluing that have occurred under neoliberal capitalism. Communities of care highlight the role of relationality and worker activism in resisting the dispossession and devaluation that take place within their webs of care. Finally, incorporating commoning, a sustainability literature, we imagine communities of care which show that our interdependence and existence in networks of care are central to the human condition and pivotal to both survival and flourishing.

Keywords: critical care ethics, webs of care, USA, Ghana, devaluation.

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1. *Introduction*

Making care visible has been the cornerstone of much feminist theorizing for some time now, advocating for its significance and demonstrating the ways that care is fundamentally shaped by, and shapes power relations and a range of inequalities[1]. When the significance of care in our lives is taken

[1] See for example, E. N. Glenn, *Forced to Care: Coercion and Caregiving in America*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2010; and R.S. Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work*, II ed., Stanford (CA), Stanford University Press, 2015.

seriously, the interdependence and the power relations undergirding care arrangements become more apparent and thus less easily dismissed. Critical care ethics, in particular, point to the many ways we are enmeshed in networks of care that are deeply implicated in human and more-than-human existence[2].

In this article we take critical care ethics as our starting point to make visible the care involved in the work and activism of domestic workers in Seattle, USA and the caring practices that undergird the work of those managing fashion waste imported into Ghana. We embrace Doreen Massey's[3] notion of a 'global sense of place' involving a web (and politics) of connections that trace socio-spatial relations and multiple trajectories in and out of a particular place as «the mobile power-geometries of the relations of connection»[4]. In this way we aim to make more visible the practices and processes of care in these two different places.

In the first section of this paper, we review literature that considers some of the major themes in critical care ethics, especially thinking about them in the context of webs of care that point to ways that people and places are connected across the globe. We link that scholarship to the concept of communities of care. Then we bring these ideas to bear on two case studies based on our respective ongoing research projects, the activism of domestic workers to gain labor rights in Seattle and the caring labor associated with managing the Global North's fashion waste in Accra. Both these studies lay bare not only the webs of connection between the Global North and the Global South, but the interdependencies of these connections. We consider the role that communities of care play for both sets of workers to resist the devaluation and dispossession that they experience under neoliberal capitalism. In the final section we reflect on alternative socio-spatial possibilities for more just caring arrangements by linking communities of care to the concept of commoning. Using critical care ethics and the commons, we consider workers' resistance as a critique of neoliberal capitalism and suggest that this approach could produce more economically, socially and environmentally just futures for everyone within these webs of care.

[2] M.P. Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds*, Minneapolis (MN), University of Minnesota Press, 2017; J. C. Tronto, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice*, New York, New York University Press, 2013.

[3] D. Massey, *For Space,* London, Sage, 2005.

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 174.

2. *Critical Care Ethics and Communities of Care*

Critical care ethics challenge economized neoliberal notions of rationality, autonomy and individual self-sufficiency and instead focus on interdependence and connection as the basis of human interaction. The relational ontology of critical care ethics means that we all give and receive care at various points during our lifetimes. These interdependent relations of connections of people who need and give care are fundamental for enabling us to thrive and flourish. While initially focused on activities in the domestic sphere, the field of critical care ethics has been stretched to think more expansively about the broader dimensions and practices of care in public services, politics and the economy. Increasingly the case is being made for bringing care ethics into public debate to frame political issues[5] and analyzing care in terms of the transnational political economy of care[6].

Webs of care, which build on critical care ethics, recognize the «multilateral circulation of agencies of care », and trouble the idea of a symmetrical reciprocity of care[7]. Foregrounding a webs of care framework allows researchers to be attentive to the «thick mesh of relational obligation» that is associated with any care work, particularly work that spans large geographies and reproduces existing global inequalities[8]. In the case of Kantamanto, global chains of fashion waste from the Global North to the Global South creates «a hierarchy of power» in the fashion industry[9], which reproduces «colonial dependence among countries»[10]. In the case of domestic workers, the international transfer of caregiving from the Global South emerges from existing inequalities with Global North countries. However, these global relations of inequality will always be partially studied as long as global care chains are conceptualized as linear and largely unidirectional[11]. Therefore, we prefer to think of the 'relations of connection'[12] and the 'webs of

[5] See for example, Tronto, *Caring Democracy.*

[6] Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization*; M. Walton-Roberts, *Global Health Worker Migration: Problems and Solutions*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2023.

[7] Bellacasa, *Matters of Care,* p. 120.

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 20.

[9] E. Picarelli, *Crafting Utopias Through Fashion in Ghana and Senegal*, «Zone Moda Journal», XII (2022) 2, pp. 14-15.

[10] L.A. Manieson – T. Ferrero-Regis, *Castoff from the West, Pearls in Kantamanto? A Critique of the Secondhand Clothes Trade*, «Journal of Industrial Ecology», XXVII (2022) 3, p. 813.

[11] P. Nadasen, *Care: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Chicago (IL), Haymarket Books, 2023.

[12] Massey, *For Space.*

care'[13] that Global South workers are enmeshed within as they undertake caring labor for, and often in the Global North.

Critical care ethics allow researchers to focus on the multitude of processes, practices and experiences that make up the embodied experiences of Global South workers undertaking care labor. We choose this approach over global care chains literature, which prioritize the scale of the individual and the nation and over-represents issues such as the transfer of labor and resources from the Global South to the Global North[14]. Hochshild developed the term global care chains to describe «a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid and unpaid work of caring»[15]. Global care chains do capture some of the relations of connections between often spatially distant people across the globe. For example, women from the Global South move to the Global North to look after other (more affluent) people's children and elders and to bolster health care systems[16]. This exacerbates already existing geopolitical inequalities among nation-states and exaggerates gendered divisions of labor in locations in both the Global South and the Global North. While this global care chain approach has been fundamental to the study of international transfers of labor, we find that a webs of care approach overcomes some of the known limitations of care chain analysis.

Keeping webs of care central to our theorizing allows us to attend to the complex and multiple realities that make up the lives of both domestic workers in Seattle and market vendors in Kantamanto. Part of these complex relations are the ways in which the commodification of care is both gendered and racialized[17]. Given that capitalism requires relations of severe inequality[18], this unequal burden that caring labor places on women and workers of color can be directly understood within capitalist logics as a form of devaluation to

[13] Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*; Tronto, *Caring Democracy*.

[14] Nadasen, *Care*; M.T.N. Nguyen – R. Zavoretti – J. Tronto, *Beyond the Global Care Chain: Boundaries, Institutions and Ethics of Care,* «Ethics and Social Welfare», XI (2017) 3, pp. 199-212.

[15] A.R. Hochschild, *Global Care Chains and Emotional Surplus Value*, in W. Hutton – A. Giddens (a cura di) *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*, London (UK), Jonathan Cape, 2000, p. 131

[16] See for example, K. England, *Home, Domestic Work and the State: The Spatial Politics of Domestic Workers' Activism*, «Critical Social Policy», XXXVII (2017) 3, pp. 367-385; and Walton-Roberts, *Global Health Worker Migration.*

[17] C. Coe, *The Commodification of Social Reproduction: A View of Global Care Chains from a Migrant-sending Country*, «Geoforum», CXLI (2023), pp. 1-8; Glenn, *Forced to Care*; Nadasen, *Care*.

[18] J. Melamed, *Racial Capitalism*, «Critical Ethnic Studies», I (2015) 1, pp. 76-85.

ensure that labor remains cheap, and profit can be extracted from the commodification of care. As Melamed[19] argues «racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires», making race the largest axis along which capitalism will continue to seek to extract profit. Building on Achille Mbembe's[20] work, *Necropolitics*, Fernández[21] describes this as a process of «*racist wastification*» where racism becomes a means of producing wasted lives. In a critical care ethics framework power relations and inequality are centered, as is the recognition that responsibilities for providing care are unevenly dispersed geographically, often along these racialized and gendered lines[22]. Therefore, critical care ethics offer a useful analytic for studying the processes which perpetuate inequalities between the Global North and the Global South.

Focusing on power relations and inequality exposes the similarities in the logic that undergirds both domestic workers migrating to undertake the Global North's care work, and the disposal of the Global North's textile waste in the Global South. In both instances, neoliberalism and globalization produce complex webs of care. Yet even in constrained circumstances workers exercise agency. Within critical care ethics a complimentary theory, communities of care, has arisen. Francisco-Menchavez[23] uses 'communities of care' to talk about the ways in which migrant workers organize care horizontally between members of the Filipino migrant labor communities working in New York City. This might be about managing family arrangements, locally and transnationally, but it can also be about sharing employment and housing opportunities. Importantly, Francisco-Menchavez makes clear that these multidirectional networks of care are suffused with the agency and decision-making of the migrants. Moreover, communities of care describe the ways in which workers collectively manage their own caring or social reproduction needs in community with their coworkers. Through the transnationalization of care, there are heightened links between people, institutions and places across state borders[24], which also provide opportunities for workers from the Global South to build their own communities where they care for each other in

[19] *Ibidem*, p. 77.

[20] A. Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, Durham (NC), Duke University Press, 2019.

[21] M.F. Fernández, *A Necropolitical Approach to Waste Theory*, «Revista Carnaria de Estudios Ingleses», LXXXVI (2023), p. 151.

[22] Nadasen, *Care*; P. Raghuram, *Race and Feminist Care Ethics: Intersectionality as Method,* «Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography», XXVI (2019) 5, pp. 613-637.

[23] V. Francisco-Menchavez, *The Labor of Care: Filipina Migrants and Transnational Families in the Digital Age*, Champaign (IL), University of Illinois Press, 2018.

[24] Walton-Roberts, *Global Health Worker Migration*; N. Yeates, *Going Global: The Transnationalization of Care*, «Development and Change», XLII (2011) 4, pp. 1109-1130.

response to the devaluation and disposability that accompanies undertaking care labor. Far from the hierarchical power structures that undergird transnational flows of care labor, these horizontal flows of care build upon, among other shared experiences, the precarity of their shared working conditions[25].

Always relational[26] critical care ethics allow researchers to explore the relations of connection and webs of care that are created as care labor becomes a commodity on a global scale. These relations are between people. But following work by Bellacasa[27], we argue that care ethics also allow people to rethink both their relationality to others *and* their environment. Tronto and Fisher's seminal definition of care is «everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web»[28]. Therefore, it is a plausible intervention to bring together sustainability and care literatures to think through possibilities for economically, socially and environmentally just relations of care. Bellacasa goes so far as to argue that the interdependency between humans and more-than-humans is a condition of life, therefore care is «concomitant to the continuation of life»[29]. The attention to systems-thinking in sustainability literature makes it well-placed to respond to the lived reality of social, economic and environmental inequality that is (re)produced within the complex global care relations that we detail in this article. Specifically, critical care ethics and notions of sustainability can be linked through 'commoning', which in turn parallels some of the principles associated with communities of care. Commoning refers to ongoing practices and set of relations that govern the commons, or collectively held spaces and resources[30]. This is like the horizontal relationships that are forged within communities of care as workers attempt to share the burden of meeting each other's socio-emotional and material needs. In both forms of theorizing, there is at-

[25] Francisco-Menchavez, *The Labor of Care.*

[26] J. C. Tronto, *Who Cares? How to Reshape a Democratic Politics*, Ithaca (NY), Cornell University Press, 2015.

[27] Bellacasa, *Matters of Care.*

[28] J. C. Tronto – B. Fisher, *Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring*, in *Circles of Care*, ed. by E. Abel – M. Nelson, Albany (NY), SUNY Press, 1990, p. 40.

[29] Bellacasa, *Matters of Care,* p. 70.

[30] S. Federici, *Introduction*, in *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, Oakland (CA), PM Press, 2019, pp. 1-10; G. A Garcia-Lopez – U. Lang – N. Singh, *Commons, Commoning and Co-Becoming: Nurturing Life-in-Common and Post-Capitalist Futures (An Introduction to the Theme Issue)*, «EPE: Nature and Space», 4 (2021) 4, pp. 1199-1216..

tention to how a group manages a shared pool of resources to better support the community. As the focus of critical care ethics expands beyond domestic work, we argue that considering the more-than-human relationality in webs of care is increasingly necessary. We explore these ideas in our example of textile waste, and how both the waste, and the labor associated with taking care of that waste, are exported to the Global South.

3. *Caring, Mending, Cleaning: Domestic Workers and Market Vendors*

The themes and dilemmas raised by the bodies of literature around critical care ethics and communities of care provide a framework for us to understand domestic workers' and market vendors' current situation. Notably these concepts prioritize the workers' agency in resisting the dispossession and devaluation that accompanies their labor. Focusing on workers' agency offers a road map for imagining different futures than the continued global inequality that is characteristic of neoliberal capitalism. We put these ideas to work in the context of our respective research with domestic workers in Seattle and market vendors in Kantamanto. Initially it might seem these two groups of workers have little in common, but both are embedded in discourses of disposability and devaluation under neoliberal capitalism. Critical care ethics offer a means of countering this disposability and devaluing and but also point to a practice whereby both sets of workers operate collectively to resist the unequal, hierarchical distribution of power that facilitates these transnational webs of care. In the next two subsections we offer an overview of the contexts in which the domestic workers and market vendors operate, but informed by care ethics, stress the ways that both groups resist the invisibilization of their work, and create communities of care that not only enable the survival of their current situation but point to potentially more just and flourishing future[31].

3.1. *Domestic Workers in Seattle: Invisible No More?*

In 2018, Seattle became the first city in the US to have a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights (the Domestic Workers Ordinance). A coalition of various community groups worked collectively to bring this piece of legislation to

[31] Our research strategies are informed by critical care ethics. Thus, we are mindful of our own more powerful positions in these global webs of care, and specifically what that means regarding our accountability to, and solidarity with the domestic workers and market vendors who make our research possible.

fruition. The Coalition is, as Bellacasa would have it «a living web of care (maintained) by a collective disseminating force (…) distributed across a multiplicity of agencies and materials and supports our worlds as a thick mesh of relational obligation»[32]. As of late 2024, twelve U.S. states, two cities (Seattle and Philadelphia), and the District of Columbia have passed Domestic Workers Bills of Rights, and other jurisdictions have added other labor protections for domestic workers. Seattle's landmark passage of the Domestic Workers Ordinance and supplemental ordinances provide basic labor protections for domestic workers who work in Seattle, allowing domestic workers to gain important legal rights. These are significant gains for an occupation with a history of being devalued and ignored because it happens behind the doors of private homes[33].

In its current formation the Seattle Domestic Workers Coalition[34] includes the core organizations of Casa Latina, Fair Work Center/Working Washington, and ALA Garífuna representing domestic workers, especially Latinx, Black and immigrant workers. Employers are represented by Hand In Hand: The Domestic Employers Network and Kim brings an academic and critical policy analysis to the mix. We also receive support from the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) and the Office of Labor Standards at the City of Seattle, who oversee the Domestic Workers Ordinance (DWO). This coalition of organizations working toward domestic worker protections is also an example of a socio-emotional commons with «social resources held in common (…) (in) a group of people whose actions express a principle of 'generalized reciprocity'»[35]. The theme of linking communities of care to socio-emotional commons is taken up again in the discussion section.

Contemporary domestic work lies at the historical intersection of representations, practices and processes of care work, the home, and the state. This is a set of dynamics that can render invisible both domestic work and even the workers themselves. Indeed, domestic workers are frequently represented as disposable, especially if they are (im)migrants; and as 'unskilled'

[32] Bellacasa, *Matters of Care,* p. 20.

[33] England, Home, *Domestic Work and the State*

[34] An earlier iteration, the Seattle Domestic Workers Alliance, was a worker-centered project involving Working Washington, Casa Latina, SEIU 775, and the National Domestic Workers Alliance. Our goal was ensuring that all domestic workers working in Seattle are covered by existing basic workers' rights laws. Once the Domestic Workers Ordinance was achieved, several of the same organizations and supporters subsequently came together to continue the work regarding domestic workers' labor rights.

[35] L.W. Isaksen – S.U. Devi – A.R. Hochschild, *Global Care Crisis: A Problem of Capital, Care Chain, or Commons?* «American Behavioral Scientist», LII (2008) 3, p. 408.

workers who can be imported and treated as interchangeable, expendable and deportable[36]. Seemingly invisible and even disposable, domestic workers are also too easily forgotten by legislators and others besides. Historically the state has been reluctant to regulate the working conditions of domestic workers in homes. A reluctance that is undergirded by a deep resistance to recognizing that domestic workers are 'real' workers and to intervening into the inner workings of the 'private' homes where they are employed. For example, the goal of the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act was to promote basic standards of living and labor protections for American workers, including minimum wage and overtime protection coverage. However, domestic workers (and farm workers) were left out, denying them access to these basic labor protections[37].

Hidden away, working in individual homes, with no central place to meet against a common employer, means that domestic workers have been too easily dismissed as 'unorganizable'[38]. Yet over the last 20 years or so, domestic workers have created a social movement, one that builds on their networks and draws on a repertoire of political resources and practices with the aim of re-valuing care work and care workers[39]. Domestic workers themselves are building coalitions and alliances, often including employers, to press for legal and legislative changes regarding their working conditions. These efforts are examples of collectively mobilizing critical care ethics against the devaluing of their work.

Often the starting point of many of these re-valuing efforts is in neighborhood associations or worker centers, where domestic workers come together in a shared space and organize independently of their employers. One example is New York City's Domestic Workers United which was founded in 2000 and was at the center of the push for the 2003 municipal legislation in New York City protecting domestic workers rights. They then moved on to successfully push for what would become the first state-level Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in 2010. In Seattle, Casa Latina began in 1994 and was pivotal

[36] G. Chang, *Disposable Domestics: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy*, II ed., Chicago (IL), Haymarket Books, 2016.

[37] K. England – C. Alcorn, *Growing Care Gaps, Shrinking State? Home Care Workers and the Fair Labor Standards Act,* «Cambridge Journal of Regions Economy and Society», XI (2018) 3, pp. 443-457; Nadasen, *Care*. The FLSA has been amended since to cover most domestic workers, but there remain some limitations, notably for some aspects of home care work.

[38] E. Boris – J. Klein, *Caring for America: Home Health Workers in the Shadow of the Welfare State,* New York, Oxford University Press, 2012.

[39] This wave of activism is the latest in a lengthy history of domestic worker organizing in the US (see for example, NDWA A History of Domestic Work and Worker Organizing).

in the passing of Seattle's 2018 Domestic Workers Ordinance and continues to play a central role in the push for improving the working conditions of domestic workers in the region.

The practices of the Seattle Domestic Workers Coalition can also be viewed as an example of Francisco-Menchavez's[40] concept of 'communities of care' that describes how collective and horizontal care networks arise among migrants around extended family, 'fictive kin' arrangements and shared meanings of their experiences. In the US domestic workers are coming together to make their experiences known and voices heard in direct actions, rallies and protests occupying public space, making themselves visible and audible. But they have also engaged in other practices of activism that makes their work visible in their bid to gain traction in the fight to gain decent working conditions and legal rights. One strategy is to 'count' domestic workers. Reliable statistics on the numbers of domestic workers are elusive; so, to press political claims in the absence of official statistics, domestic workers produce their own. Domestic worker organizations in the US have conducted their own surveys to capture statistical profiles of the living and working conditions of domestic workers, especially those who are immigrants[41]. This enables them to show with hard numbers that domestic work continues to reproduce historical racialized and gendered patterns. The Seattle Domestic Workers Coalition has also conducted surveys of workers. One in 2017 was part of the campaign that led to the Domestic Workers Ordinance passing in 2018, and a more recent survey in 2021 addressed the benefits (particularly paid sick leave and other types of time off) that domestic workers receive as part of our campaign for portable benefits. Other research includes gathering life stories of individual workers and focus groups with workers. Through this work, domestic workers are also building the webs of care that are central to their organizing. The Coalition's work is guided by a commitment to promoting respect and dignity to domestic workers, to make their work visible, to elevate the voices of domestic workers and to improve their working conditions.

When the COVID pandemic emerged, domestic workers began losing their jobs, and home care workers, for example, had especially high rates of exposure and relatively higher death rates. Rosinska and Pellerito remark that the pandemic saw domestic workers go from disposable to «expendable

[40] Francisco-Menchavez, *The Labor of Care.*

[41] See for example, S. Waheed *et al.*, *Profile of Domestic Workers in California*, Los Angeles (CA), UCLA Labor Center, 2020.

essential workers»[42]. Cleaning houses and caring for children and elders is, of course, not work that can be done remotely. Death rates among BIPOC workers were higher than among white workers (especially as the latter were more likely to be able to work from home). For Rosinska and Pellerito this made the «achievements of domestic workers acting through their collective organizations even more crucial»[43].

The pandemic has not only been a health crisis for domestic workers, but, unsurprisingly, a financial one too. Washington state went into a 'Stay Home, Stay Safe' order in March 2020, and jobs for domestic workers all but disappeared. In Seattle, Casa Latina created a day laborer and household worker relief fund (via GoFundMe) in early spring 2020 and raised $22,000 which went entirely to their worker members. Working Washington, another organization that is part of the Coalition, worked alongside over 400 other organizations from across the state to press for a direct relief fund for the state's undocumented workers. The resultant Washington COVID-19 Immigrant Relief Fund, introduced in late summer 2020, had a $40 million budget that accepted applications for a one-time direct payment of $1,000, an effort intended to introduce some small degree of economic security. Domestic and immigrant worker organizations stepped up to assemble and share resources and options for low-income workers (such as eligibility for sick leave and access to unemployment assistance) and to help workers apply for the relief funds that were available. Casa Latina offered free vaccination clinics and held webinars on how to protect your health at work. These sorts of actions, based in care ethics as well as activism, also work to deepen communities of care. In a(nother) moment of crisis, domestic workers engaged in critical care ethics as practice and politics, steeped in an understanding of the responsibilities of the collective as well as the individual.

3.2. *Building Communities of Care in Kantamanto*

While discarding clothing is largely seen as an act of charity in the Global North, places in the Global South, such as Accra, Ghana, have become a dumping ground for what often becomes textile waste[44]. Kantamanto is

[42] A. Rosinska – E. Pellerito, *Advocating for Survival: Domestic Workers in the Necropolitical Regime of the Pandemic*, «Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society» XXX (2023) 4, p. 1064.

[43] *Ibidem*, p. 1070.

[44] B. Skinner, *Fashioning Waste: Considering the Global and Local Impacts of the Secondhand Clothing Trade in Accra, Ghana and Charting an Inclusive Path Forward* [Dissertation],

the largest secondhand clothing market in West Africa and imports around fifteen million secondhand clothes each week[45]. Due to the prevalence of 'cheap labor' in Kantamanto, it has become a site where clothing waste from the Global North is absorbed, despite garnering little economic benefit for Ghana and significantly contributing to environmental issues[46]. Skinner presents the secondhand clothing market as a convenient outlet which facilitates further consumption of new clothing in the Global North[47]. Unlike chains of care where workers are made invisible as they migrate to support the care needs of the Global North, within this web of care clothing waste is shipped to countries such as Ghana, becoming invisible to those in the Global North. Both of these invisibilizing acts permit a cognitive dissonance for those in the Global North about who is undertaking their caring labor, and the lives that those performing the caring labor are forced to live. Thinking with Liboiron[48], we view the export of waste to the Global South as a form of colonialism. Indeed, in this instance, to fully understand the relationality between those in the Global North and Global South, means the environment, or at least land, must be considered. Workers in Kantamanto are not only left to care for the world's textile waste, but their communities of care are also operating within the environmental pollution that accompanies the importation of so much discarded clothing. Their work and life take place in one of the most polluted environments in the world, further exacerbating the inequalities within this specific web of care.

Kantamanto is filled with an estimated 30,000 vendors selling items imported from countries such as the UK, the US, Canada and China. Kayayei (head carriers), on behalf of the vendors, transport these bales on their heads from the importer to the stall. From here, vendors will sort their bale of clothing, checking for wear and tear on an item, to determine if it can be resold quickly, if it needs to go to one of the tailors also operating within the market, or if it needs to go to landfill. The tailors in Kantamanto charge around 1 cedi per item repaired (~$0.07 at the time of writing). Repairs might involve cropping jeans into shorts and re-hemming the garment, fixing elastic waistbands, or patching holes. Most tailors also make items to sell themselves,

Cincinnati (OH), University of Cincinnati, Design, Architecture, Art and Planning: Community Planning, 2019.

[45] Picarelli, *Crafting Utopias Through Fashion in Ghana and Senegal*; Manieson – Ferrero-Regis, *Castoff from the West, pearls in Kantamanto?*.

[46] Picarelli, *Crafting Utopias Through Fashion in Ghana and Senegal.*

[47] Skinner, *Fashioning Waste.*

[48] M. Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism*, Durham (NC), Duke University Press, 2021.

buying select (often landfill bound) items from other vendors to create other items that are more likely to fetch a profit. The wide variety of skilled craftspeople in Kantamanto means that more than half of the clothing that arrives has a prolonged lifespan.

Manieson and Ferrero-Regis explain that in «global geographies of fashion, not only environmental but also work-related liabilities are shifted to low-income countries»[49]. The secondhand clothing trade in Kantamanto has led to the overburdening of Accra's landfill, the pollution of the ocean with fashion waste 'tentacles,' and an increase in air pollution from burning (plastic-based) clothing. The accumulation of clothing waste also creates breeding grounds for the mosquitoes, increasing the risk for the local population of contracting malaria[50]. These geographies of fashion waste create unequal global webs of care, where those in the Kantamanto ecosystem must care for items imported from the Global North, in order to keep up with the sheer amount of clothing arriving. Unlike in care chains, the material waste, rather than workers, crosses borders. It is more desirable to move the waste, rather than laborers, so that those in the Global North do not suffer the negative environmental consequences from their clothing waste. Therefore, it is important to incorporate the environment into the broad relationalities that are bound up in textile waste's web of care. Once again, it becomes obvious to link critical care ethics and sustainability to attend to these relationalities.

In Ghana, the secondhand clothing trade only operates at a subsistence level for many. As part of a largely informal economy, secondhand clothing vendors are, on their own, expected to deal with the turbulence in the secondhand clothing trade. Despite the importance of informality to Ghana's larger economy, the Ghanaian government is far more concerned with regulating the duty (or import taxes) on the clothing bales, rather than protecting the workers. Even collecting taxes from those in the informal economy can cost as much as the value of taxes to be collected[51]. The workers in Kantamanto are embedded in a logic of disposability[52]. As workers who may have volatile access to wage labor on any given day, workers in Kantamanto risk becoming part of surplus populations who are unable to consistently meet their

[49] Manieson – Ferrero-Regis, *Castoff from the West, pearls in Kantamanto?*, p. 815.

[50] L. Ricketts – B. Skinner, *Stop Waste Colonialism! Leveraging Extended Producer Responsibility to Catalyze a Justice-led Circular Textiles Economy*, Accra, Ghana, *The OR Foundation*, available online: https://stopwastecolonialism.org/stopwastecolonialism.pdf.

[51] Skinner, *Fashioning Waste.*

[52] M. Yates, *The Human-As-Waste, the Labor Theory of Value and Disposability in Contemporary Capitalism*, «Antipode», XLIII (2011) 5, pp. 1679-1695.

subsistence needs through their labor. Even the workers who do meet their subsistence needs through their work within the market are embedded in a logic of disposability because their work forces them to place their physical health at risk to be able to secure the most profit[53]. While this analysis applies to all workers in Kantamanto, the Kayayei in particular exemplify the ways in which capital disposes of workers by using them until their bodies can no longer physically withstand the work that they are expected to undertake. The large reserve of poor workers who continually migrate to Accra allow this unsustainable business model to function under neoliberalism.

Locally there are acts of resistance against this logic of disposability. Workers in the market build strong community networks that allow them to support each other both socially and economically. These are like the communities of care that Francisco-Menchavez[54] describes migrant workers building in New York, to allow the workers to support each other, based on shared identities. However, in Kantamanto, these relationships are forged out of the sheer amount of time that workers spend in the market and their shared vulnerability as informal workers trapped in inconsistent subsistence labor, rather than a shared identity as mothers and undocumented migrants. For example, one vendor's stall on a Wednesday morning as she opens a bale is busy. Two women sit with her, picking through the items from the bale to decide which they will take to their own stall elsewhere to sell for an up-charge. The exchange takes hours due to the flurry of chatter, shared meals and regular trail of people coming to greet her. She quickly sells at least half of each of the bales she opened this morning within the day, largely to these other vendors. Each transaction is built on familiarity, she already knows what her customers are looking for, so the time they spend sorting through the bale together becomes a shared social interaction as much as a business exchange.

The Revival, a Ghanaian non-profit, has been a key part of building and empowering a community of care within Kantamanto market. As Yayra Agbofah, the founder and creative director of *The Revival*, gives me a tour of Kantamanto, lots of people stop to greet him and then chatter in Twi. He later explains that they all like to tell him their problems. We stopped to talk to one of the tailors in the market. Once again, the greetings and social chatter take precedence. The market is where the workers live swaths of their social lives and conduct their business. Yayra buys eggs from a

[53] *Ibidem*.
[54] Francisco-Menchavez, *The Labor of Care.*

passing vendor, allowing the group to share food together. Much like in Francisco-Menchavez's[55] description of communities of care, problems are shared alongside joy or general socializing in Kantamanto, making the community here distinctly different from just work colleagues.

Yayra has also been working with tailors and vendors in Kantamanto to divert denim that would otherwise end up in Accra's landfill[56]. One of their projects is a collaboration with the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, where they sell patchwork denim tote bags made from this denim waste[57]. Through this project, *The Revival* demonstrates how, through a circular economy approach, different webs of care could be foregrounded. These alternative relationalities have the potential to produce fairer wages for laborers in Kantamanto, and to reduce the amount of fashion waste that accumulates in Ghana, often producing negative environmental impacts. By building a community of care within the market, Yayra has been able to pay workers higher wages, offer them additional work, and create a social network of workers who look out for each other. This work is the beginning of commoning, the ongoing work and set of relations that must be sustained to collectively govern spaces and manage shared resources[58]. The communities of care that are sustained in Kantamanto, both by *The Revival* and the workers themselves, are the network of relations necessary for commoning work. However, right now, more organizing is needed for all the vendors to understand the scope of economic, social and environmental issues at stake, and to give them collective and democratic control over their common resources. These resources include the secondhand clothing, themselves, their labor and creativity and the physical space of the market.

4. *Imagining More Just Communities of Care*

We have taken up themes from critical care ethics to discuss the work of the Seattle Domestic Workers Coalition as an example of a community of care and to show the similarities to the care networks forming in Kantaman-

[55] *Ibidem*.

[56] The Revival, *About*, «therevival.org», 2024, available online: https://www.therevival.earth [accessed 1/22/24].

[57] Victoria and Albert Museum, *Recycled denim tote bag by The Revival*, «*vam.ac.uk*», available online https://www.vam.ac.uk/shop/fashion/bags-totes/recycled-denim-tote-bag-by-the-revival-164641.html [accessed 1/22/24].

[58] Garcia-Lopez – Lang – Singh, *Commons, Commoning and Co-Becoming.*

to market. We see both cases as acts of resisting the devaluation of care labor and the logic of disposability in which these workers are embedded. These communities of care have formed in response to the transnational webs of care within which they operate, to allow workers to help each other in difficult times, and to regularly share social time and moments of joy.

As we imagine what more just futures within these webs of care might look like, we turn to commoning to help us articulate our thinking. Elinor Ostrom's seminal work on understanding the commons as a complex site of resource management can be expanded by consciously coupling each resource to the web of caring relations in which it is embedded[59]. In linking common resources to the webs of care which govern these shared resources, we argue that this can begin to uncover some of the complexity that Dolšak and Olstrom note as a challenge of resources embedded in complex systems. As we have already demonstrated, the care labor undertaken by those in the Global South to the direct benefit of the Global North is embedded within particularly complex systems, with stakeholders at many scales from local to global[60].

By arguing that care shapes what people pay attention to, how to understand responsibility, what is considered important and how to respond to the world around us, Tronto posits that all these characteristics are needed to be a fully functioning member of a democracy[61]. Garcia-Lopez *et al.*[62] show that the potential for the commons, and acts of commoning, to (re)produce new subjectivities and relationalities, is pluriversal, that is a world where many worlds (or worldviews) fit[63]. Federici uses the language and politics of the commons as an «expression of this alternative world»[64]. Commoning is positioned as the antithesis of, or at least an alternative to neoliberal capitalism and is therefore considered a tool for finding creative solutions to many widely acknowledged problems[65]. Critical care ethics and sustainability can be similarly evoked. As Tronto reminds us, if care ethics were to overtake other orientations, such as the individualism which is inherent in neoliber-

[59] E. Ostrom, *Reformulating the Commons*, «Swiss Political Science Review», VI (2000) 1, pp. 29-52.

[60] N. Dolšak – E. Ostrom, *The Challenges of the Commons* in *The Commons in the New Millennium: Challenges and Adaptation*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 2003, pp. 3-34.

[61] Tronto, *Who Cares?*.

[62] Garcia-Lopez – Lang – Singh, *Commons, Commoning and Co-Becoming*, p. 1200.

[63] A. Escobar, *Sustainability: Design for the Pluriverse*, «Development», LIV (2011) 2, p. 139.

[64] Federici, *Introduction,* p. 1.

[65] S. Leitheiser *et al.*, *Toward the Commoning of Governance*, «EPC: Politics and Space», 0 (2021) 0, p. 15.

alism, then we might be able to live in a world made up of different sorts of socio-spatial processes[66]. Both critical care ethics and commoning can be evoked to imagine alternative webs of care.

Commoning is an ongoing practice and set of relations (both human and more-than-human relationships) that must be maintained in order to sustain collectively governed spaces which manage shared resources – or the commons[67]. The commons can refer to any physical or social resources which are held in common, including socio-emotional commons associated with the global care crisis[68]. Compared to other sustainability-based theories, commoning recognizably draws on care ethics, because it is concerned with relationalities between community members and their environment. As Leitheiser *et al.* argue, commoning is an «ongoing process of designing institutions to serve the common good», where the community has «the right to define the common good»[69]. Therefore, practices of commoning look different depending on local contexts, desires and interests. Critical care ethics have similarly prioritized the importance of democracy in producing more just and care-filled futures. The resistance from both domestic workers in Seattle and market workers in Kantamanto, represent forms of commoning where workers collectively sustain and manage their resources (or the commons). Here the workers – their labor, skills, time – and the spaces of resistance themselves act as the common pool of resources to collectively manage.

Federici understands the commons as a challenge to the hegemony of capital because the commons are an affirmation of human interdependence and capacity for cooperation[70]. However, she notes that in some instances the commons may be co-opted by capitalism and become a means of accommodating the status quo[71]. Therefore, highlighting practices of commoning within communities of care is an opportunity to critique the role of neoliberal capitalism in producing the inequality between the Global North and South. Moreover, in the sustainability literature, Moore[72] makes a similar argument, labeling the current epoch the 'capitalocene', to highlight that it is

[66] Tronto, *Who Cares?*.

[67] Federici, *Introduction*; Garcia-Lopez – Lang – Singh, *Commons, Commoning and Co-Becoming*.

[68] Isaksen – Devi – Hochschild, *Global Care Crisis.*

[69] Leitheiser *et al.*, *Toward the Commoning of Governance*, p. 6.

[70] Federici, *Introduction.*

[71] *Ibidem*, p. 7.

[72] J.W. Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, California, Kairos, 2016.

the exploitative practices of neoliberal capitalism and the logic of mass consumption which have caused the biggest environmental destruction. In this branch of sustainability literature, sustainable thinking offers another mode of critiquing capitalism and its role in creating and sustaining economic, social and environmental inequality. However, much like Federici's assessment of commoning, sustainability has also been critiqued for becoming a neoliberalized discourse and set of practices[73]. Nevertheless, while both critical care ethics and sustainability can be co-opted by capitalism, we argue that bringing together these theories do present opportunities to imagine more just futures within which care work could take place.

Domestic workers and market vendors become embedded within specific webs of care where they have to manage their own collective resources for survival. The communities of care that each group have built become important sites for understanding how these workers have resisted their own devaluation and dispossession within unequal webs of care. We also look to these communities of care, which in both instances organize better working conditions for groups of workers, to inform our responsibilities to the care workers upon whom many within the Global North depend. In this article, we have shown the similarities between the work that communities of care and commoning do for exploited workers. We use both concepts to recognize the actual changes they are making to their working conditions by their social activism within communities of care, as well as the range of possible alternatives to exploitative labor practices which are uncovered when the implications of commoning are considered. Indeed, these communities of care act as commons, which point to alternative possible futures.

Both domestic workers and market vendors in Kantamanto undertake disproportionate amounts of caring labor within the global political economy. Domestic workers migrating from the Global South to take on caring and cleaning labor in the Global North are hidden in homes, making the exploitative labor practices largely invisible. Following a similar 'out of sight, out of mind' logic, textile waste is shipped from the Global North to Ghana for workers there to engage in the caring labor required to keep as much clothing out of landfill as possible, and to forge a living wage out of this waste. Removing the waste from the Global North renders invisible all the work that goes into managing textile waste. Keeping their labor invisible makes it easier for both sets of workers to be disposable within a global capitalist system.

[73] L. Tulloch – D. Neilson, *The Neoliberalisation of Sustainability*, «Citizenship, Social and Economics Education», XIII (2014) 1, pp. 26-38.

Largely due to processes of racial capitalism[74] and 'racist wastification'[75], labor is embedded in a logic of disposability, where workers' bodies are «used up or wasted at accelerated rates in order to secure the most profit»[76]. Due to the social and economic inequality between the Global North and Global South, there is no shortage of laborers in the Global South to take on this caring labor once current workers are «used up»[77]. For instance, Parreñas'[78] writes of migrant domestic workers receiving few legal rights and having at best, 'partial citizenship' given the limited integration of migrants in receiving countries and how the process provides a source of low-wage labor for the Global North. Similarly, low waged workers in Accra's secondhand markets report having no other employment options, and migrants from northern Ghana or surrounding countries constantly replenish the labor force. Imagining how to solve this problem at the global scale, as a complete web of care, seems complex. Yet the communities of care that have been sustained by domestic workers and market vendors in Seattle and Accra respectively, demonstrate that there is an obvious path to more economically, socially and environmentally just futures. We imagine communities of care which show that our interdependence and existence in webs of care are central to the human condition and pivotal to both survival and flourishing.

5. *Conclusion*

Our aim in this article has been to make the labor of domestic workers in the U.S. and vendors in Ghana visible. The scholarship of Bellacasa[79], Massey[80] and Tronto[81] suggests that the webs of care connecting different places can forge a sense of responsibility and care for distant places. These connections between people at local, national, and international levels show that people and places across the globe are linked to each other. We began from the position that the webs of care in which we are all enmeshed are broad, spanning global territories and crossing national boundaries. While the com-

[74] Melamed, *Racial Capitalism.*
[75] Fernández, *A Necropolitical Approach to Waste Theory.*
[76] Yates, *The Human-As-Waste*, p. 1680.
[77] *Ibidem*.
[78] Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization.*
[79] Bellacasa, *Matters of Care.*
[80] Massey, *For Space.*
[81] Tronto, *Who Cares?*.

munities of care of domestic workers in Seattle and market vendors in Kantamanto are locally forged and sustained, critical care ethics remind us that globally so many more of us are implicated in the webs of care connecting us with those who undertake the bulk of the world's caring labor. While those of us from the Global North may never play a large part in the actual local communities of care, especially in the case of Kantamanto where these communities are operating geographically far from the Global North, we can recognize our relationality to the webs of care and commit to improve the economic, social and environmental conditions under which the communities of care operate.

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