

NETWORKS OF CARE: DIGITALLY MEDIATED MUTUAL AID
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Throughout the first years of the Covid-19 pandemic, mutual aid, especially digitally mediated mutual aid, proliferated as communities responded to the challenges of the pandemic and its social, political and economic consequences. This thesis explores how social media platforms shaped the practice of mutual aid throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic in Toronto, and how those engaged in mutual aid navigated the challenges created by those platforms. The thesis combines a review of the online content of three digitally mediated mutual aid projects (the Facebook group CareMongering-TO, and the Instagram accounts OpenYrPurse and Climate Justice Toronto (CJTO)), with two interviews with account administrators. Drawing on both platform studies and feminist media studies, it argues that while social media enables new forms of care to emerge, it can also create profound challenges for people, particularly marginalized people, as they try to care for each other.

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In the spirit of the Haudenosaunee thanksgiving address, or Ohenten Kariwatekwén (the words that come before all else), I begin this thesis with gratitude and acknowledgements for all the beings who share this territory on the shores of Lake Ontario with me. I turn my attention and gratitude towards the animals, the plants, the rocks, the air and the waters. I give my gratitude for lake, and the rivers, both above and underground, that shape Toronto, Tkarón:to, the city where I live, that is also at the centre of this work. I'd also like to acknowledge the Indigenous peoples of this territory who have lived in and cared the lands and waters for millennia, and who continue to survive, thrive and fight for justice today. The most recent treaty holder, the Mississaugas of the Credit first nation, and the Wendat, Seneca, Petun and Neutral, as well as the peoples of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe confederacies who have long shared this territory through the dish with one spoon wampum covenant. As an uninvited guest on this territory, I am continuously working to live up to the lessons and principles this covenant teaches about our shared responsibility to each other, the land and the waters.

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is for you; I hope that it provides you with something, if only the affirmation that the work of continuing a long tradition of care and survival this digitally mediated world is both challenging and important.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Context

I'm writing this on a sunny day in February 2024. Sitting in my bedroom, which is also my office, where I've spent more hours since the spring of 2020 than I can bear to calculate. I work here, sleep here, self-isolate here, and hop on and off video calls for work, community organizing and therapy. I even eat here because since August of 2023 my roommate and I have chosen to mask in our shared kitchen space. While things in my life have changed since the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic in 2020 and the government of Ontario, where I live, asked people to refrain from leaving their homes for non-essential reasons, my life has resolutely not moved on from Covid-19. My continued concern about Covid-19 stands in contrast to the government and the world around me, where mandatory masking, isolation periods and free testing have all been reduced or abandoned over the course of the last two years. Gone are the days of "we're all in this together", gone are the public health measures and the rhetorical commitment to taking care of each other that pervaded 2020 and 2021. In place of this we are encouraged to make personal choices and take personal responsibility for the consequences. We are encouraged to ignore the continued circulation of the evolving novel coronavirus between our ever-vulnerable bodies, even though throughout the fall and winter wastewater data showed that Covid-19 levels were among the highest since the beginning of the pandemic (Bhargava, 2024). The impacts of Covid-19 on politics, economy and society continue to reverberate, however the lessons it brought about what a caring society might look like, seem

to have gone stubbornly unlearned by those with the power to implement them. In Ontario and across Canada, health care, long-term care, unemployment, and disability all remain underfunded, under-resourced and overwhelmed (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2023; DeClerq & O'Brien, 2023; Lau, 2023), while people are struggling to access and afford the essentials of life. The crises brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, and other global crises, continue, but the attention on care and collective responsibility has faded.

In this context, it is important, and striking, to return to the modes of care that were so popular throughout 2020 and 2021. In response to the spread of Covid-19, and its impacts on people's job and housing security, many communities initiated mutual aid projects to ensure the survival of their most vulnerable members (Bender et al., 2021; Firth, 2020; Kusmer, 2020; Venn, 2020). These efforts took many forms, including forming neighbourhood pods (Davenport Mutual Aid, 2021; Parkdale People's Economy, 2020), running community Covid-19 testing sites (Project South & Hunger Coalition of Atlanta, n.d.), making and distributing PPE (Berkeley Mutual Aid Network, n.d.; Grabish, 2020), delivering food and care packages, constructing and stocking community fridges (Community Fridges TO, n.d.; Lofton et al., 2021; Travlou, 2020) maintaining networks of emotional and material solidarity between gig-workers (Qadri, 2021), organizing neighbours to assist and protect the growing numbers of unhoused people unwilling to live in unsafe congregate settings and hyper-surveilled pandemic hotels (Encampment Support Network, 2020; Lavoie, 2020) and countless other examples. Because of the importance of maintaining social distancing and because of the prevalence of digital media tools, many of these projects relied on digital and social media to facilitate connection and coordinate care. These efforts were often hybrid, but many also used social and digital media to build community and combat isolation while people were unable to gather in person (Bender et al., 2021; Chevée,

2021; Firth, 2020; Qadri, 2021). These included using Instagram to share requests for money sent via apps like Venmo, PayPal, Cash App and Interac e-transfer, and the creation of local Facebook groups dedicated to connecting community members and facilitating the exchange of resources, information and support (Kipp & Hawkins, 2022; Neuhaus, 2020; Seow et al., 2021; Venn, 2020). Groups and accounts like these were common throughout 2020 and 2021, with some continuing beyond that initial period and others giving rise to new initiatives and reminding many of the centrality, and complexity of care for social movements (Kipp & Hawkins, 2022; Michie, 2021). They represented a rise in the use of social media for this purpose, as well as a rise in the visibility of mutual aid and collective care.

Looking at three examples of digitally mediated mutual aid projects, this thesis explores the ways that social media infrastructures shaped digitally mediated mutual aid practices throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic in Toronto. In the face of deepening crises around the world from the pandemic to climate crisis to displacement and war, it is essential to understand how practices of care and survival like mutual aid must adapt to digital technology. Drawing from both platform studies and feminist media studies, I argue that understanding the relationship between social media and mutual aid requires looking both at the logics of social media, and at the systems of power that shape, exceed, and predate social media. Understanding how social media shapes mutual aid cannot be separated from understanding the ways that race, class, gender, and ability shape these technologies and our experiences of them. While social media enables new forms of care to emerge, it can also create profound challenges for people, particularly marginalized people, as they try to care for each other. Throughout this thesis I discuss just some of the practices that those engaging in mutual aid throughout the Covid-19 pandemic developed to navigate these challenges, and explore the potential that mutual aid might

hold for resisting or subverting the extractive logics of social media platforms and infrastructures.

I am not the first to observe that the pandemic revealed and deepened a “crisis of care” that care workers, scholars, and activists around the world have been warning about for decades (Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Duffy et al., 2023; The Care Collective, 2020; Wood & Skeggs, 2020). Some have even argued that during the pandemic, this crisis became a catastrophe (Duffy et al., 2023). The role of care and care work in society has been deeply undervalued because of the feminization, racialization and lack of disability justice lens of this labour (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Precarias a la Deriva, 2006; The Care Collective, 2020; *The Pirate Care Project*, 2019). In recent decades, neoliberal policy has chipped away funding for the public and state care infrastructure, promoted privatization and deregulation and undermined organized labour power, where it existed (Evans & Fanelli, 2018; The Care Collective, 2020; Wood & Skeggs, 2020). These efforts have pushed care work back into the private sphere of the home and created increasing hostile conditions for both caregivers and recipients, with highly gendered and racialized consequences (Cranford, 2023). These impacts are seen across the society in sectors like health and education, that are traditionally thought of as care sectors but also in other sectors from garbage collection to grocery stores that are increasingly understood through the lens of care (Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Duffy et al., 2023). The pandemic placed increased pressure on these already degraded and overwhelmed systems, leading to deadly consequences for both care workers and care recipients and revealing the cost of failing to value care. Costs that have been shouldered by the poor, the elderly and disabled, and by racialized communities, and racialized women.

This crisis of care can be seen in Ontario where the systems that were supposed to care for people during the pandemic cracked under the pressure. The public health care system was unprepared for this type of public health crisis and failed to protect healthcare workers many of whom quit as a result of poor pay, bad working conditions, and inadequate access to PPE (Brophy et al., 2021). Long-term care, which is made up of a patchwork of private, public, and non-profit facilities, was perhaps the worst hit. Reports on the situation in Ontario long-term care homes show a system that was not only unprepared to protect both workers and patients from a pandemic but that lacked staff, oversight, and regulation creating the conditions for neglect and abuse (Marrocco et al., 2021). This cost was born most heavily by older people and by disabled people who find themselves in long term care facilities, often because there are few supports available for living in community (Stevens, 2016). As Cynthia J. Cranford writes in a chapter on home care in Ontario, the terrible conditions in long-term care meant that more people were seeking home care, however, here too policy makers provided little in the way of funding and support. Migrant women caregivers who make up a lot of the home care labour force therefore felt these impacts most deeply (Cranford, 2023). Similarly, the welfare and unemployment system had barely any options for the 3.4 million people who lost their jobs (Clarke & Fields, 2022). While the Canadian government granted a \$2000 benefit in 2020 to all people who had lost their job due to the pandemic (Zimonjic, 2020), this did not prevent a massive EI backlog (Roman, 2020). EI processing delays continue to mean that people who have lost their jobs wait months to receive any income (Lau, 2023). For those unable to work for an extended period of time, welfare and disability benefits in Ontario are inadequate both in their ability to address the needs of recipients and in the number of people deemed eligible and the number of people who require this kind of assistance continues to grow (DeClerq & O'Brien, 2023; Dubinski, 2024;

Smith-Carrier et al., 2020). Overall, the lack of protection and the failure to meet the needs of the people created a huge gap, especially for those who were already marginalized before the pandemic. Given these state failures, it is no wonder so many turned to community care and mutual aid to meet their needs and those of their families and communities.

The summer of 2020 and the pandemic also underscored that care is often entangled with questions of power, violence, autonomy, racialization, and surveillance. Throughout the summer of 2020, uprisings across the US and around the world in the wake of the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor emphasized the prevalence of state violence against Black people. In Toronto, people joined these uprisings to protest the deaths of Regis Korchinski-Paquet and D'Andre Campbell, both were killed after police were called to assist them in distress (F. Nasser, 2020; S. Nasser, 2020). The sense of solidarity created by the pandemic and community efforts to care for each other both on and offline converged with calls to defund and abolish the police and prisons and put more resources into community solutions that address the root causes of violence. Calls for mutual aid mixed with calls for redistribution and reparations for Black and Indigenous people. The slogan "We keep each other safe" easily linked the efforts to care for each other in response to government neglect with the increasingly widespread understanding that cops do not bring "public safety". Conversations about state violence inspired deeper conversations about the ways that many supposedly caring services and infrastructures, including social work, hospitals, schools and child welfare agencies, enforce systemic anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism (Maynard, 2017). These systems, while providing necessary care also frequently replicate punitive and carceral logics (Spade, 2020). As disability scholars, and Black, Indigenous and racialized feminists have shown, care is not a simple or universal idea, but is instead relational, embodied and bound up with power (Murphy, 2015; Raghuram, 2016)

(Murphy, 2015; Raghuram, 2016). Care comes with costs to autonomy, and with power imbalances (and intimacy) inherent to depending on another person for survival (Kittay, 2011; Lai, 2020; Mingus, 2017). In other words, the pandemic and racial justice uprisings of 2020 not only highlighted the way that care has been devalued, but also made clear that care as both practice and ethic has political implications.

Theoretical background

Throughout this research, I use the word mutual aid both because this is the terminology used by the groups and interviewees themselves, and because this term centers the histories and politics of these collective care practices. Like the crisis of care they responded to, the initiatives that started during the pandemic did not emerge without precedent. They are part of a long history of resistance, survival and radical world-building by and for poor people, queer and trans, disabled and racialized people (Arani, 2020; Hartman, 2018; Mochama, 2020; Norman, 1977; Piepza-Samarasinha, 2018; Spade, 2020). Mutual aid is a form of political participation where individuals and communities exchange of care and resources to support each other's survival, enabling them to imagine and begin to build futures beyond the imposed scarcity of white supremacist capitalism (Firth, 2020; Loizidou, 2021; Sandberg, 2020; Spade, 2020). The term mutual aid was first used by anarchist theorist Pyotr Kropotkin to describe the innate drive towards sociality and solidarity that he observed between and among species in his biological research (Graeber & Grubacic, 2020). This points to the belief that mutual aid is inherent to both human and non-human relationships, however anarchists, and others on the left, have also used the term to highlight the ways the people come together to survive and resist both acute disasters

and the everyday ravages of capitalism (Firth, 2020; Spade, 2020). Mutual aid is also a response to neglect and violence from the state, and the charitable institutions that claim to provide care for the most vulnerable members of society. While we might be tempted to separate the caring arms of the state, such as schools and hospitals, and the charitable system from the more violent arms, such as police and prisons, they are often not so distant. They frequently operate through the same punitive model that blames people for their misfortune, and interaction with the former often increases the likelihood of interaction with the latter (Spade, 2020). Unlike charity and state welfare, mutual aid does not blame people for being poor or force people to prove that they are deserving of assistance. Instead, mutual aid assumes that everyone has something to offer, and that everyone needs something as well (Firth, 2020; Spade, 2020). To write about mutual aid, then, is to write about practices of care that do not just fill a gap left by state neglect but also attempt to resist punitive models of care and engender other, more life affirming, ways relating to each other.

Until recently, mutual aid has received limited attention from academics, however, the pandemic, and the increased visibility of mutual aid in the media and online have been mirrored by an interest from scholars. These studies have highlighted some of the possibilities and challenges of participating in mutual aid in a digitally mediated world (Bender et al., 2021; Chevée, 2021; Firth, 2020; Qadri, 2021; Travlou, 2020). Some noted the challenge of utilizing digital media to coordinate mutual aid deliveries in their city, specifically the skill and access gaps that arise when learning many new tools/applications/platforms (Travlou, 2020). Others noted how communities of precarious workers already working in industries driven by platforms, such as gig-workers in Jakarta, used WhatsApp, alongside in-person basecamps, to protect each other's safety and build worker solidarity (Qadri, 2021). In their emergent media study of the use

of digital media by US mutual aid efforts, Bender et al. note that these projects enabled people to exchange resources and reduce isolation in the early days of the pandemic (2021). However, their study raises, but does not answer, crucial questions about the barriers posed by unequal access to technology, data privacy, and relying heavily on corporate social media tools (Bender et al., 2021). Additional work looks specifically at the emergence of at least 130 CareMongering Facebook groups. These groups, most of which started just days after the WHO declared the global pandemic, were locally organized to provide a digitally mediated space for community building and for the exchange of material resources and information (Seow et al., 2021). The research on these groups in one case uses broad content analysis to examine the groups' effectiveness as health promotion tools (Seow et al., 2021), while another paper engages in more in-depth ethnography to understand how they enacted a complex understanding of care (Kipp & Hawkins, 2022). While these studies do not describe these groups as "mutual aid", some of these groups, including CareMongering-TO, did describe themselves this way, and all exemplify the emergence of digitally mediated collective care early in the pandemic. This research begins to identify some critical questions about digitally mediated mutual aid that require further examination.

In this research I engage with some of the questions raised in this research, particularly around privacy, surveillance, and reliance on corporate platforms, however, I argue that social media creates a more fundamental tension for those practicing mutual aid. This tension becomes evident when we look at social media from a platform studies perspective. Intersecting with code studies, and software studies, platform studies is attentive to the stuff that makes up the digital, whether hardware or software. It posits that the underlying technical computing systems are also cultural artefacts, subject to, and exerting influence on, culture, economy, and society (Montfort

& Bogost, 2009). As platforms, including but not limited to social media, become central to many spheres of life from education and healthcare to transportation and real estate, the field of platform studies has grappled with the ways that platforms increasingly shape the economy and society. Scholars have challenged the utopian visions that imagine participatory, internet-facilitated connectivity, and decentralization replacing both state and private legacy organizations. Instead, these scholars point to the ways that platforms and the companies that own them have accumulated power, often to the detriment of workers, and the public (van Dijck et al., 2018). They have emphasized that platforms are not neutral service delivery systems but have their own logics and values that are embedded in their architectures. They have shown that platforms reflect the private interests of the companies that own them; companies whose business models rely on capturing user attention, so that they can generate and sell user data. Platforms reflect the private interests of the companies that own them; companies whose business models rely on capturing user attention, so that they can generate and sell user data (Milan, 2018; Neumayer et al., 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018; van Dijck & Poell, 2013). This means that platforms cannot be understood as neutral tools that can be used for any purpose, but instead must be understood to enable and constrain the activity and relationships that they mediate. For this reason, it is important to consider how the aims of platform companies and the architectures of platforms shape the practice and potential of digitally mediated mutual aid.

It is also important to look beyond platform studies to address the varied experiences of people engaging in digitally mediated mutual aid. Despite its importance in recognizing the ways that platforms increasingly structure society, platform studies research has not engaged in robust analysis of gender, race, and ability, and technology. As Rianka Singh writes in her dissertation “...Platform Studies seems to, for the most part, forget that bodies inhabit platforms and that

some of the corporeal concerns of those on the platform are longstanding and critical to survival.” (Singh, 2020a, p. 121). The role of culture, race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability in shaping technology have received less attention and require an approach that includes both technical analysis and cultural and feminist theory (McPherson, 2014; Singh, 2018; Soon & Cox, 2020). Feminist media studies has raised many critical questions about the ways that technology is shaped by gender and racial hierarchies, and how it is experienced by different bodies. For example, Judy Wajcman argues that gender and technology are mutually shaping, with gender relations reflected at every stage of the technologies production and use (Wajcman, 2010). Others have detailed social media and digital technology’s reliance on feminized and racialized labour from the factories where microchips are produced (Nakamura, 2014) to the paid and unpaid labour of content creation and moderation (Adair & Nakamura, 2017; Nakamura, 2015; Roberts, 2021). Ruha Benjamin’s work on race and digital technology has shown that technology often retrenches racism under the premise of progress and objectivity (Benjamin, 2019). Her work and the work of others also demonstrates that widespread surveillance and visibility enforced and enabled by digital technology’s architectures have differential impact on racialized and otherwise marginalized people (Benjamin, 2019; Cho, 2018). As Jessie Daniels reminds us in *Rethinking Cyberfeminism*, it is necessary to account for the material conditions and embodied experiences of those engaging with technology when analyzing the internet’s liberatory or feminist potential (Daniels, 2023). This extends to those engaging in digitally mediated mutual aid, whose technological experiences are mediated by their embodied experiences of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ability and other aspects of identity and proximity to power.

The challenges of doing mutual aid in a socially mediated world become especially clear when we turn towards activists, scholars and communities who have been practicing, thinking

and writing mutual aid since well before this moment. Rhiannon Firth writes about the risk of mutual aid's cooptation and the disruption of mutual aid by middle class people and politicians who see mutual aid as a way of achieving career goals or earning good favour. When it is no longer led by poor and working-class people engaged in non-hierarchical community building, mutual aid can be stripped of its radical potential, turned into a kind of technocratic charitable operation where the assumptions of the privileged dominate the interests of the collective (Firth, 2020). Similarly, both scholars and activists express concern about the neoliberal state's increasing reliance on community labour to make up for its withdrawal from communities (Spade, 2020; The Care Collective, 2020). The pandemic brought this into particularly clear focus as corporations and austere governments adopted the language and symbols of care without changing their practices (Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Wood & Skeggs, 2020). Concerns about surveillance and criminalization also appear frequently in writing about all Mutual aid projects (Spade, 2020). This is well grounded as organizers for projects like Food Not Bombs have faced arrest for handing out food in parks (Sung, 2017). Likewise, money pooling amongst Black women in Canada is kept largely secret to avoid skepticism fuelled by classism and anti-Black racism from those outside the community. In one case, police even seized the money collected by a group of Somali women during a neighbourhood raid (Mochama, 2020). Alexia Arani writes about the risk of "exceptionalism", which she describes as the possibility that once attention on the Covid-19 pandemic subsides people will stop caring about mutual aid and leave those who have always practiced mutual aid to struggle alone (Arani, 2020). These concerns show that issues with state surveillance and repression, co-optation, lack of sustainability, and distribution of labour are neither new or nor unique to digitally mediated mutual aid. Instead, these challenges represent intensifications of problems that mutual aid has long struggled with.

Attending to platforms through the lens of platform studies and feminist media studies offers a way to grapple with the challenges of digitally mediated mutual aid as part of a long history of adapting mutual aid to new circumstances and infrastructures.

Methods

The research for this project used a mixed-methods approach combining semi-structured interviews and a review of the posts and comments on three Toronto-based mutual aid projects on social media. Data collection took place between the winter of 2022 and summer of 2023 after the groups at the heart of the research had all indefinitely paused their activities. The social media review included two Instagram accounts, OpenYrPurse and Climate Justice Toronto (CJTO) and one Facebook group, CareMongering-TO. I selected these projects to capture some of the variety among the self-described mutual aid that was taking place on social media in Toronto throughout the pandemic. OpenYrPurse exemplifies the use of a dedicated Instagram by an individual and later a collective to engage in redistribution between followers to meet the survival needs of people requesting aid. The groups first posted starting in June 2020. They decided to take a hiatus in September of 2021 as a result of exhaustion on the part of the volunteers running the account and certain emerging challenges that I will discuss in more detail in chapters two and three. The CJTO Instagram account exemplifies how existing activist groups made fundraisers and mutual aid requests, often reposted from other accounts, a focus of their social media activity throughout 2020 and into 2021. CJTO started in the spring of 2019, and while they have an established social media presence especially on Instagram, their work has included a variety of tactics from electoral organizing to non-violent direct action to mass rallies.

They have also worked in collaboration and solidarity with a variety of local and national movements for housing, and racial justice and decolonization. Their work throughout 2019 was not devoted to mutual aid, but in 2020 this became a much more prevalent focus on their Instagram account until the mid-summer of 2021 when they paused posting mutual aid posts because of a lack of protocol for deciding which mutual aid requests to share. I was involved in organizing with Climate Justice Toronto from summer of 2019 until mid-2021, including being part of the community care team which assisted with some mutual aid activities; however, I was only fleetingly involved with their social media. Finally, CareMongering-TO exemplifies the creation of Facebook groups for organizing the exchange of information, support and resources, often with the emphasis on local resources and sometimes including hybrid engagement (i.e. exchanges were discussed online but conducted offline). The group was started in March of 2020, days after lockdown measures were declared in Ontario, by a handful of local community organizers (Neuhaus, 2020). The Toronto group inspired the creation of hundreds of other Caremongering groups in communities both within and beyond Canada's borders (Kusmer, 2020; Venn, 2020). The group continued until fall of 2021 when they decided to take an indefinite hiatus. As with OpenYrPurse, this decision was prompted by many factors that led to the fatigue of those involved, something I will discuss more throughout each chapter of my thesis, but particularly in chapter three. I reviewed all three of these projects after they had already suspended operations, making my work less digital ethnography than a review of a digital archive related to these caring practices.

Doing research on mutual aid and activist practice is a process of documenting the reflections and learning of activists and mutual aid practitioners who learn through the process of doing. I approach this work with the mentality that organizers and mutual aid practitioners are

already engaged in a form of action research. This approach is informed by scholarship that uses militant research and co-research methods. Scholars engaged in militant and co-research do not only study activism but collaborate with activists, understanding them as knowledge producers whose actions open new directions of struggle and research (Borio et al., 2007; Colectivo Situaciones, 2007; Renzi, 2020). While timing and scope did not allow me to engage in a fully collaborative research process, my understanding that the mutual aid practitioners I was speaking with had expertise that often exceeded my own continuously shaped my research. As I will return to later in this methods section and in other parts of this thesis, organizers like the ones I spoke with are often pressed for time and caught up in a continuous cycle of urgency and crisis. Research like this provides time for reflection. The interviews that I conducted provided a time and structure, even if it was only 45 minutes, for participants to think back and articulate some of the lessons they learned or are still learning from their experiences with digitally mediated mutual aid. Organizers often do not have time to write down or document these lessons. This adds additional responsibility on the part of a researcher to write something that is both useful to organizers and that honours the knowledge that they share, without claiming to write on behalf of or speak for the organizers. These are tensions I have struggled with throughout writing this thesis and that I will continue to reflect on even after it is complete.

Early on I decided to limit my project geographically. This was a way to both limit the scope of my research and to focus on a context with which I am personally familiar. As someone who has been involved in organizing in Toronto for many years, I could tell that there was a lot to examine how digital media use was shifting among organizers in the first months of the stay-at-home orders. In the end these geographic limitations were slightly less relevant than I had initially thought, especially for OpenYrPurse and to a lesser degree for CJTO. These accounts

accepted many requests from people who live outside Toronto in both Canada and the US. I have no way of knowing where every follower lives but given the breadth of requester locations it is likely that the accounts followers are also not limited to Toronto residents. CareMongering-TO, as the name indicates, was focused entirely on supporting people living in and around Toronto. However, as Seow et al. point out in their review of CareMongering groups across Canada, there may have been members who did not live locally but wanted to assist local family or friends (2021).

In addition to my review of posts and comments on these two Instagram accounts and Facebook group, I conducted two semi-structured interviews with people who helped to run these mutual aid projects. I spoke with one member of the collective that ran OpenYrPurse, Julia Giraudi, and one former CJTO member, Dani Michie, who was extensively involved in running their social media during the height of their mutual aid activity. I knew each of these people through community organizing and advocacy work that we had done together in the past. My existing relationships with these two meant that when reaching out to ask them to speak with me they already trusted me and trusted that my interest in their mutual aid work would be respectful and supportive of the goals of their work. I would have liked to speak with CareMongering-TO's admin team, and I reached out over Facebook messenger to two people who seemed to be most active in the group. The first was very supportive and responded to my request to review the group's contents, but suggested I speak with someone else for my interview. Unfortunately, that second person did not get back to me. Unlike in the cases of CJTO and OpenYrPurse, I had no existing relationships with these two people. These interviews were guided by a set of prepared questions about the way that CJTO and OpenYrPurse organized their mutual aid work and the experience that Julia and Dani had as organizers throughout the period when the groups were

active. Additionally, I asked prompting questions based on the responses I received to these prepared questions to gain a deeper understanding of what the interviewees shared with me. The two interviews helped me to understand digitally mediated mutual aid from the perspective of people who had been deeply involved, and influenced how I approached and understood the social media content I was reviewing. The interviews are featured most prominently in Chapter two where I discuss Instagram and reflect on temporalities of digitally mediated mutual aid and Chapter three in my discussion of social media platform's logic of visibility and its effect on the labour performed by administrators and moderators.

My experience suggests that relationships of trust are essential to doing research with social movements, but not always fully compatible with the timelines and demands of research. My existing relationships of trust made it possible for me to speak to people who would otherwise have been skeptical, or simply too busy to make time for a researcher. With more time, I might have been able to build the necessary trust to schedule interviews with other organizers. This highlights that the rhythms of trust and the rhythms research are often misaligned. Conducting interviews with those with whom I had established relationships of trust allowed me to skip the long, slow trust building process, but at times it highlighted that trust-building is not always about slowing things down. During my research process it was sometimes the slow process of getting bureaucratic approvals that inhibited my ability to build and maintain trust. Both the people I knew and those that I reached out to for the first time for this research were kept waiting sometimes months even though they were ready to speak with. I kept my contact at CareMongering-TO waiting for at least a month before I could send a consent form with the minor changes they had requested to my consent form. Once someone has invested their trust and attention it can be detrimental to make them wait to participate, and their time can quickly

become occupied by other more pressing demands. I often felt that conversations I could have had as more casual reflective discussions were delayed and constrained within the structured form delineated by research ethics expectations.

The research methodology was informed by certain ethical commitments. The first was a desire to centre the experience and expertise of those practicing and organizing mutual aid. As an organizer myself, I am committed to supporting the practice of mutual aid and sharing knowledge about the use of digital media among activists. I understand mutual aid as a form of research and action, and organizers as experts whose perspectives shaped the way that I approached my project. This approach is informed by Eve Tuck's provocation to engage in research with marginalized communities through a "desire centered framework". Rather than conducting research that centers on proving the harm a community has experienced in order to argue for reparations, desire centered research creates space for community wisdom, hope and imagination (Tuck, 2009). Even when focusing on challenges in my interviews I asked questions that investigated the ways that practitioners of digitally mediated mutual aid produced knowledge and exhibited creativity in confronting those challenges. I also frequently adapted my research process to meet the needs and respect the limited time the mutual aid organizers worked with. At times this meant adjusting the timelines of my research because the people I contacted informed me that they were dealing with crises or because the research process needed to be reviewed by a collective rather than by a single individual. I hope that in documenting this work and experimentation, this research will create opportunities for organizers and community to deepen their understanding of social and digital media and contribute to shared knowledge about the practice of digitally mediated mutual aid.

An additional ethical consideration that arose throughout my research was the use of digital data. As I discuss throughout this thesis, digital privacy and data extraction by social media companies are critical issues. I did not want to reproduce this same dynamic of extraction and privacy violation through my research. At times this meant adapting my research ethics protocol and data collection process in conversation with mutual aid organizers. For example, for my work on CareMongering-TO I did not collect screenshots during my research. This was requested by my contact to protect the privacy of CareMongering-TO members and their families, especially parents and children. I have also chosen not to identify any of the people whose posts I reviewed on social media. Those identified in this research are the two interview subjects who gave their express consent for me to do so. This is an imperfect strategy as posts can sometimes be found through searching direct quotes, thus undermining the anonymity of those quoted. I have for this reason also avoided quoting posts that may have drawn the kinds of unwanted attention that I discuss in chapter one.

Chapter breakdown

Mutual aid has long relied on intimacy that takes place outside of the private or domestic sphere, something that becomes particularly visible when it is practiced online through social media. In chapter one, focusing on the Facebook group CareMongering-TO, I explore the complicated, sometimes uneasy, relationship between publicity and intimacy in digital publics. In the first part of the chapter, I discuss the political potential of public intimacy and care. Practicing care in public has the potential to disrupt the privatization and domestication of all caring relationships, challenging normative assumptions about who should care and what care

should look like. It also has the potential to form new, transgressive intimacies between strangers who might otherwise not have learned to care for one another. Because of the reach of social media publics, social media has the capacity to expand and make more visible these forms of resistant and transgressive intimacy that have long sustained mutual aid and community care. Not all intimacy, however, is desirable or helpful. The second section of chapter one turns toward these more challenging forms of intimacy. The histories of care, especially institutional care are full of examples of intimacy that is coercive, intrusive, or abusive. This is particularly true, and harmful, for members of hyper-surveilled or vulnerable communities. To demonstrate this, I discuss the issue of CareMongering-TO members with children having Children's Aid Society called on them. This issue caused CareMongering-TO members to question the privacy settings of their group. The conversation that followed highlights the complexity of navigating digital publicness. The opacity and complexity of Facebook's privacy policies create situations where people cannot control the visibility of their information, which in the case of the information shared on CareMongering-TO might be quite vulnerable and personal. This situation emerges out of Facebook's default towards a highly binary vision of public/private and out of their commercial interest in being able to track, collect and sell your personal information as effectively as possible. These defaults are particularly harmful for those who hold marginalized identities.

In the supposedly slowed-down world of Covid-19 lockdown's and against the proposed immediacy of social media, those engaged in digitally mediated mutual aid consistently showed that the temporality of digital technology is more varied and uneven than is often discussed. Focusing on the OpenYrPurse Instagram account, and on my interviews with Julia of OpenYrPurse and Dani of CJTO, the second chapter explores the temporalities of digitally

mediated mutual aid. Throughout the chapter, I argue that the temporalities of digitally mediated mutual aid are technologically specific, while also being shaped by structures of power that exceed the impacts of technology. As Sarah Sharma has argued, the changes that technology has brought to society cannot be described as a uniform speed-up (2014). Instead, she argues, this narrative of speed-up obscures the way that time and control over our time is distributed unevenly, which she calls the biopolitical economy of time. Some are expected to move fast and benefit from infrastructures of time-management that are reliant on the labour of others who must find their own ways to keep up. Building on this, I argue that the temporalities of digitally mediated mutual aid are as much a result of the biopolitical economy of time as they are of the specific technology they use. This chapter explores three overlapping temporalities, urgency, waiting and longevity. Each section highlights the role of power in shaping the way that time is experienced by those participating in digitally mediated mutual aid and challenges the narrative that social media temporalities can be understood as a simple or uniform acceleration.

The first two chapters raise questions about the work that went into both sustaining mutual aid pages and groups, and to ensuring they remained safe and caring spaces. In the third chapter I engage more directly with the question of how to understand the labour undertaken by administrators of CareMongering-TO and OpenYrPurse. I place this work in the context of broader conversations about labour in the digital age, particularly conversations about how to understand the value created for by user generated content. Beyond this, I connect the work of moderators and administrators to other forms of techno-labour and reproductive labour that historically, and contemporarily rely on feminized and racialized labour force. I argue that admin labour is both emotional and embodied, and that it reflects the complex and political nature of caring. In the final section of this chapter, I focus on the way that visibility and hypervisibility

factored into what it means to care, and perform care labour, on social media. While making posts and requests for aid visible was essential for the function of these groups and pages, visibility also opens people to surveillance, and objectification as requesters feel compelled to circulate their trauma to garner more attention. For mutual aid administrators caring often meant refusing the demand to be hypervisible, and making on difficult, and emotional decisions that often did not seem to resolve these challenges.

Chapter Two: Uncertain Publicness, Unwanted Intimacies

The Facebook group CareMongering-TO began just days after the Ontario government implemented its stay-at-home order in March 2020, which required people to shelter in place and closed all “non-essential” businesses. The group aimed to create a digital space for people to share information and coordinate the exchange of support and resources across the city of Toronto. It grew quickly and inspired other similar groups in other communities around the world (Kusmer, 2020; Seow et al., 2021). This success however was not without its challenges, some of which are shared in a post and poll created by CareMongering-TO admins on June 9th, 2020, just three months after the group’s formation. The post reads:

We have had 3 different people report having had actual or threats of CAS being called when they posted here for assistance. A member suggested changing group settings from PUBLIC to PRIVATE to increase safety and privacy for members. Please weigh in with your opinion. The reason we had it initially set to PUBLIC was to make it easier for folks to find us. If we go private, we cannot reverse the decision.
 YES to go PRIVATE
 NO to stay PUBLIC (CareMongering-TO, 2020)

As the post describes, group members were reporting that people had called or threatened to call the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) based on the group members posts in the group. The poll and comments on this post reveal further tensions surrounding the groups privacy settings and highlight the opacity of Facebook’s privacy policies. Taken together, this post, the circumstance that led to its creation, and the poll responses and comments that follow demonstrate the difficulty of bringing mutual aid into the digital public sphere.

This post, and the work of CareMongering-TO more broadly, point to some of the challenges of engaging digital care practices. On the one hand, CareMongering-TO creates a space for caring relationships to take place in public between strangers on the internet. The

exchange of care is often an intimate experience, it is also one that like all intimacy has been understood to belong within the narrow space of the private sphere (Berlant, 1998). Mutual aid and collective care have long challenged these constraints on care and intimacy. They rely on and emerge from intimate relationships that exceed the bounds of family, friends, or romantic relationships, conventionally conceived of as the only sites of intimate life. For disabled, queer and racialized peoples, collective care has been intertwined with the creation of liberatory politics (Berlant & Warner, 1998). These forms of care and intimacy often rely on public spaces and as they are translated to the digital sphere this provides newfound visibility to the complex and ambivalent labour of care (Dobson et al., 2018). This helps challenge the notion that intimacy belongs only within the private sphere.

At the same time, putting these intimate relations in public, and specifically online, creates new risks, at times inviting unwelcome eyes into these exchanges. Mutual aid efforts have long faced unwelcome intrusions from very state institutions they seek to resist (Spade, 2020). But as I will argue, Facebook's architectures, which have a bias towards what Alexander Cho has called "default publicness" (Cho, 2018) and which are often opaque to those navigating them (boyd, 2006), make it especially difficult to protect against these unwelcome intimacies. Default publicness refers to the ways that normative beliefs about what it means to be public are baked into Facebook's structures, promoting maximal publicity in service of the platform's data-driven business model. This thesis traces the complex relationship between intimacy and mutual aid focusing on how this relationship shifts as mutual aid moves onto platforms like Facebook. In it I argue that the public care practices taking place in the CareMongering-TO Facebook group build on a history of activist care practices that rely on and promote transgressive intimacies. However, as the poll I opened this paper with demonstrates, public intimacy is not without its challenges.

Engaging in vulnerable exchanges of care on social media platforms can also invite encounters with state power and the scrutiny of strangers. I return to this poll as a way of understanding how CareMongering-TO members confronted these unwelcome intimacies and navigated the social media architectures that made them difficult to prevent. I argue that to sustain the resistant forms of online care and intimacy that CareMongering-TO enabled, members had to learn how to navigate the opaque and often shifting structures of privacy and publicness on Facebook.

Resistant Intimacies and Social Media (care in public)

CareMongering-TO and other digitally mediated mutual aid extend mutual aid's long history of challenging normative institutions of intimacy. In the introduction to *Intimacy: A Special Issue*, Lauren Berlant argues that rather than being confined to our private lives, intimacy is consistently public; it is shaped by the institutions and ideologies and practices that shape our lives (1998). Institutions like marriage and the nuclear family are constructed as a private space, unsullied by public and political affairs, where intimate life can take place (Berlant, 1998; Berlant & Warner, 1998). This separation of public and private supports the gendering and devaluation of care labour, which is naturalized as an expression of familial, particularly motherly, love (Berlant, 1998; Federici, 2012; The Care Collective, 2020). It also limits intimacy and care to these structures, demonizing, making invisible or even criminalizing forms of care and intimacy that exist outside of or transgress the boundaries of the private and public spheres (Dobson et al., 2018). These forms of transgressive care and intimacy are often linked to each other and to liberatory movements. In their article provocatively titled "sex in public" Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant argue that public sex and intimacy have been essential to queer

community formation and the establishment of liberatory queer politics (1998). More recently, the Care Collective, a group of scholars of care writing in response to the global Covid-19 pandemic, have argued that community-based caregiving, which often relies on and takes place in public space, has long been essential to political movements (2020). Both the Care Collective, and Berlant and Warner draw on Douglas Crimp's 1987 essay "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic" in which Crimp connects the development of grassroots aids collectives and safe-sex initiatives to queer promiscuity and the rejection of heteronormative attitudes towards sex and sexuality (Crimp, 1987). Following Crimp, the Care Collective encourages what they call "promiscuous care" gesturing towards an abundant and transgressive approach to care (2020, p. 36). Mutual aid and the digitally mediated Mutual Aid of CareMongering-TO exemplifies this kind of care and the public intimacy it relies on.

CareMongering-TO provides a medium for exchanging care that relies on extended forms of kinship typical of mutual aid. As a form of political participation that uses the exchange of care and resources to support people's immediate survival and to expand their ability to imagine other possible futures (Firth, 2020; Loizidou, 2021; Sandberg, 2020), Mutual aid has often created networks of care and intimacy that extend beyond the nuclear family (Firth, 2020; Loizidou, 2021; Sandberg, 2020; Spade, 2020). In *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes about her experience of belonging to disability justice collectives as a queer, disabled, woman of colour and survivor of abuse. She describes how these communities took care of one another's emotional, physical, artistic, intellectual and spiritual needs while creating opportunities for kinships and intimacies between disabled people (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). Posts in CareMongering-TO tell similar stories. For example, on July 12th, 2021 someone posted a request for pen pals who could write to them during their time in the

hospital. The original poster and commenters bond over the loneliness of illness and hospitalization and reflect on the connections they have made through CareMongering-TO. This post reflects not only the need for extended networks but also the role that CareMongering-TO has played in facilitating intimate exchanges both in the group and beyond through private messages and even letters. Other posts in the group are more explicit about the way the group meets needs that extend beyond what friends and family can or will offer. These posts can be devastating to read, like one on March 18th, 2020 written by someone who identifies themselves as a wheelchair user in crisis. They write: “I am being neglected by my friends and family”. Another, from a different group member posted on February 20th, 2021 reads “I’m dying inside the depression is getting the better of me I’ve exhausted my friends family they just don’t have time to help.” These posts demonstrate some of the limits of family ties and the need for the networks of care that CareMongering-TO tries to support. In this sense, CareMongering-TO tries to extend the practice of mutual aid and community care into the digital sphere, and in doing so also extends the promise that non-normative intimacies and extended kinships can be supported by digital infrastructures like Facebook.

Social media can support mutual aid not only by facilitating care but also by making care and intimacy, in all their complexity, visible to others. In the first chapter of *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*, Amy Dobson, Brady Robards and Nicholas Carah draw on queer and feminist scholarship on intimacy, including Berlant and Michael Warner, to explore how intimacy happens on social media. They argue that the common refrain that people are being too public with their emotions, exposing details of themselves that are too intimate is an attempt to reassert the normative boundaries between private and public space (Dobson et al., 2018).

Instead, they suggest that social media could push the potential of public intimacy further by creating a public record of the messy reality of intimacy. They write:

Beyond the visual display of social connections, being able to trace the words of care and support that people share with each other, read about people's crises and challenges at work, with family and loved ones, unforeseen health problems and accidents, as well as seeing when and how certain identities, images, words or interactions results in conflict and abuse, raise a potentially important challenge, if we recognise it as such, to the hetero-patriarchal framework of privatised intimacy, boxed and bounded within families, that Berlant and Warner (1998) critique. (Dobson et al., 2018, p. 7)

Digitally mediated mutual aid and collective care initiatives, like CareMongering-TO, might be particularly well equipped to challenge the “framework of privatized intimacy”. For example, a post from July 2nd, 2021, states: “I recently met another amazing mom on here. She’s currently having a hard time; she’s currently going through some medical issues while caring for her son herself. She could use a helping hand at this time.” This post, and others like it, show not only the wide range of caring relationships that people rely on, but also the roadblocks, and labour that people face in getting the care they need. Digital mutual aid can successfully provide care that meets people’s needs and affirms their humanity, but it also often makes visible complexity and ambivalence of care. In doing so, it can provide inspiration and lessons for those seeking alternatives to privatized, domesticized or state-led modes of care and social reproduction.

Coercive Intimacies and Mutual Aid (Unwanted intimacies)

However, just because mutual aid disrupts traditional norms of private intimacy does not mean that all eyes are equally welcome. These forms of care are frequently challenged by coercive, or carceral logics of state care that try to reassert themselves. In a panel discussion for the series Co-opting AI hosted by NYU’s Institute for Public Knowledge, Hannah Zeavin

suggests the concept of “coercive intimacy” for understanding algorithmic intervention into mental health care. Of AI-facilitated therapy she says: “groups are made familiar to and by algorithmic systems for care” (Hannah Zeavin speaking at NYU Institute for Public Knowledge, 2021, 40:08), drawing a connection between the act of making something familiar and the idea of intimacy. She goes on to explain how this making familiar takes place as groups are datafied and as individuals navigate exclusion, and carceral logics within the medical and psychiatric system (NYU Institute for Public Knowledge, 2021). While Zeavin highlights how coercive intimacy is extended by algorithms, something I will revisit in the next section, it is important to highlight that coercive intimacy is deeply embedded in normative institutions of care. Nick Fox argues in his 1995 article “Postmodern perspectives on care: the vigil and the gift” that professionalized care has led to a model of care as discipline and surveillance. This framing not only reasserts a binary of carer and cared for, but also leads to increased scrutiny of the person receiving care and their environment as the caregiver is called upon to know, or become expert about, the person for whom they are caring (Fox, 1995). The intimacy of caring, while potentially generative and resistant, can also deepen power imbalances and open people to unwelcome observation.

The reported calls to CAS are a particularly chilling example of coercive intimacy experienced by people seeking aid through CareMongering-TO. Children’s Aid Societies are one part of the Canadian child welfare system. Calls to CAS can lead to investigations involving police and social workers, encounters that for Black, Indigenous, trans, mad or disabled people could result in death or child removal. The organizations that make up the child welfare system in Canada are supposed to protect children from neglect and abuse. This is an important task, but one that has been undercut throughout history by biases against parents and families who are

poor, disabled, Black and/or Indigenous (Bennett et al., 2020; Maynard, 2017; McConnell et al., 2021; Stevenson, 2021). These institutions' caring mandates have often served as justification for hyper-surveillance of racialized and marginalized people. Lack of resources or divergence from white middle-class norms of child-rearing have been constructed as neglect or maltreatment and used to justify removing children from their families and communities (Adjei & Minka, 2018; Mason, 2019; Maynard, 2017; Stevenson, 2021). The continued overrepresentation of Indigenous children in child welfare has been tied to the history of residential schools, and later the 60s scoop (Stevenson, 2021), while Black children's overrepresentation can be seen as a continuation of the dynamics of family separation under slavery (Maynard, 2017). The child welfare system fits within a long history of colonial intervention into the intimate relationships of racialized and colonized peoples. As Lisa Weems outlines attempts to control the intimacy and sexuality of Black, Indigenous and racialized peoples, has played a key role in the embodied experience of both colonialism and resistance to it (Weems, 2017). The child welfare system has frequently been implicated in these intimate expressions of colonization, racialization, and other forms of oppression, as the state uses the care of children as a justification for the surveillance and discipline of marginalized people.

This threat of coercive intimacy is particularly unsettling because these are some of the very systems mutual aid is trying to resist. One comment from the discussion following the poll suggests that these calls, and threats to call CAS, show us that established organizations and charities are simply better equipped to provide aid. However, established organizations are often quick to involve police and child welfare services. Just as Zeavin highlights that teletherapy and digital therapy providers can be quick to involve police and the carceral psychiatric system, schools, hospitals and service organizations often cooperate with CAS or police in the interest of

“caring” for those in need (Hwuang, 2022; Maynard, 2017; Spade, 2020)¹. Naomi Murakawa and Katherine Beckett call this enmeshment of the penal system with other institutions “the shadow carceral state” because that it both mimics carceral approaches and provides to additional routes to involvement with the criminal legal system (Beckett & Murakawa, 2012). This risk of punishment, as well as the experiences of racism and discrimination that many face in these institutions, often deter people from seeking services (Barker et al., 2015; Denison et al., 2014; Greene et al., 2022). Coercive intimacy in this case comes not from unknown observers or algorithms but from service providers themselves. Mutual aid, whether digital or not, is meant to offer an alternative.

Unfortunately, mutual aid initiatives have always had to protect themselves against coercive intimacy, in the form of surveillance, scrutiny and even weaponization by state institutions. For example, in an article for the Walrus on the history of Black mutual aid, Vicki Mochama discusses how Black (mostly) women who pool money for their communities keep their activities secret. She tells the story of a community of Somali women who say their money was seized by police. The police claimed the money must have been raised through illegal activity; They simply could not understand how these women could have raised the money by legal means (Mochama, 2020). Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic people living in encampments and those who offered them support were beaten by police when they tried to prevent the encampments from being cleared away (Bingley, 2021; Raza, 2021). Encampments,

¹ In his 2020 article *Solidarity not Charity*, Dean Spade highlights the relationship between the charitable model of aid and the carceral state citing a story told by organizers from Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MADR). In the wake of Hurricane Irma, police issued a notice that they would arrest anyone at the shelter who had outstanding warrants. As one MADR participant states: “[This] . . . essentially weaponizes aid against the most vulnerable and put numerous lives in danger. . .” (MADR as cited in Spade, 2020, p. 141).

which often form as a way to provide some safety and community to unhoused people, have long be subject to harsh treatment and criminalization (Schein, 2011; Speer, 2016). These examples highlight the ways that state intervention disrupts mutual aid's goals of survival and care, forcing mutual aid projects to find ways of evading these encroachments.

Uncertain Publicness: Understanding Facebook Architectures

The architectures of social media often enable these coercive forms of intimacy because of economic incentives and universalizing assumptions about what privacy and publicity mean. As danah boyd argues in her keynote lecture in 2010 at SXSW, privacy is not dead. The idea that people have stopped caring about privacy is often coupled with the idea that people are already sharing their most intimate details in ostensibly public places, and that people have entirely accepted the corporate collection of data. However, boyd argues that people are very concerned about privacy, it's just that privacy, and publicity, are simply more complicated than a simple binary. For boyd, privacy is about "control over how information flows", which means understanding the setting, the architecture of the room, and who is there to listen to what is said (boyd, 2010). This is often difficult on social media where, as boyd and Zeavin both articulate, there is always someone else listening (boyd, 2010; NYU Institute for Public Knowledge, 2021). This is fundamental to the economy of social media which turns all social interactions into data that can guide targeted advertising and program design and be sold to third parties (boyd, 2010; Couldry & Mejias, 2019; van Dijck & Poell, 2013). These economic factors, as well as universalizing assumptions about the risks of publicity, also shape the way Facebook structures its profiles and groups. As Alexander Cho argues in his article "Default Publicness: queer youth

of colour, social media, and being outed by the machine”, features like Facebook’s policies enforcing one-to-one profiles that align with people’s legal identities, or the platform’s choice to map online relationships so that they mirror people’s offline networks (Cho, 2018). These structural elements create unwanted flows of information that are especially risky for those with marginalized identities and in this case for those seeking care from strangers online, who are more likely to face surveillance. From third-party advertisers to lurkers who decide to call CAS on those practicing mutual aid, Facebook’s architectures invite intimacy that is sometimes unwelcome and unexpected.

The responses to the poll about whether the group should go public or remain private reflect a desire to protect people from these intrusions, but also make clear how difficult it can be to tell who is watching, and who is using and sharing what they see in unwelcome ways. People responded to this post by adding poll options, selecting poll options and commenting. In the end, 66% of poll respondents selected making the group private, while 14% opted to remain public with no additional information. However, an additional 14% responded not to the original Yes or No options but to an additional option that states: “As much as many people would rather it be private...there are people in need that can’t find it and they are the ones that matter most” while 3% each responded with “Public, w/ recommendations to folks upon joining to consider anonymity for some posts” and “Contacting CAS before offering help yourself is disgusting. There are over 25k members on this group, setting it to private doesn’t fix”. While the majority were clearly in favour of going private, which the group eventually decided to do, it was not a simple issue. The final poll options show group members’ uncertainty about how public a private group would be, for better or worse, and reflect the challenging balance that the group was trying to strike amidst this uncertainty.

The comments following the poll show CareMongering-TO members trying to ascertain how making the group private, or keeping it public, would affect their ability to reach more people, while also protecting people from unwanted observation. Early comments on the CareMongering-TO poll reflect a desire to keep the group public to make sure the group could still be found through searches and recommendations by non-members and people in need. However, others posted screenshots and links to Facebook's policies to explain that making the group private would not prevent people from searching the group or having it recommended to them. The difference between public and private groups, as these commenters explained, is that in private groups the list of members and the posts in the group are hidden from non-members. While this information is available through the Facebook website, it is not intuitive and leaves several questions unanswered. This explanation of the difference between the groups is reiterated multiple times in the comment section. Often, it is re-stated in response to people's concerns that a private group would be harder to find for non-members, and without information about how Facebook recommends groups. Through this discussion the members of CareMongering-TO develop their understanding of Facebook's group structure, specifically to better understand how to maintain some control over who could see, and thus share, the information shared in the group with unwelcome parties like CAS.

Even months later, group member comments express concerns about the publicity of posts that reflect how important, and challenging, it is to control the flow of information on Facebook. On August 5th, 2020, in response to a CareMongering-TO admin post acknowledging group fatigue and requesting suggestions from the group about how to improve, a commenter refers to the June decision to make the group private. They write: "I think the change to a private group has been good, even if just for the fact that people can ask for help confidentially within

this group and not have it show up in their Facebook friends' newsfeeds". This comment raises the spectre of context collapse, the fear that sensitive requests for aid and expressions of vulnerability that are meant for those in the group would be seen by other Facebook friends (Cho, 2018; Marwick & boyd, 2011). As Cho points out, people with marginalized identities, in his case queer youth of colour can face major consequences because Facebook tends to map online social networks onto offline ones and publicize posts and offer recommendations accordingly. For queer youth, this might deter them from joining a queer group or RSVPing to a queer event on Facebook because of the risk that this would be publicized to their homophobic family and friends (Cho, 2018). In the case of CareMongering-TO, the risk is not necessarily of being outed as queer, but as discussed in section two of this paper, not everyone's families and friends are supportive in their times of need. The fear that unwelcome eyes might see people's disclosures of vulnerability both re-affirms the need for mutual aid, and the need to control the flow of information.

This fear of context collapse is based on a misunderstanding of Facebook's sharing norms, a fact that once again highlights how opaque Facebook's norms of publicness are. The comment assumes a degree of publicity that exceeds what Facebook's protocols would have produced at that time. In 2018, Facebook did update their algorithm to prioritize group posts in people's newsfeeds, which means that people are likely to see a lot of group posts from the groups they have joined in their own feeds (Gotter, 2020). However, until October 2020, these posts, even posts in public groups, were only shared to the newsfeeds of group members (Dag, 2020). This changed in October 2020, and, as I will discuss in the following paragraph, frequent changes like this make it even harder to maintain a clear understanding of how Facebook will share people's posts and information. Additionally, even at the time of this comment, and the

larger poll from June 2020, when content from public groups was not directly sent to non-group members' newsfeeds, the group might have drawn unwanted attention from the family and friends of newly joined members. Facebook may share when someone joins a public group as an update to their friends' newsfeeds (Facebook Help Centre, 2022). So, while this comment is technically based on a misunderstanding of the way that posts in the group might have been publicized (at the time), it both shows that these fears of unwanted attention shape people's behaviour on the site and demonstrates once again just how difficult it is to assess the effect of Facebook's architecture on a post's publicity.

Social media companies also make understanding publicity difficult by changing their privacy settings and defaults frequently, often to increase the reach of information. In "Facebook's "Privacy Trainwreck": Exposure, Invasion, and Drama", danah boyd writes about Facebook's 2006 decision to create News Feeds and the panic that ensued. Effectively "News Feeds" for the first time created a stream of updates from your friends including a whole bunch of updates that previously would only have been visible to you if you specifically went to their profile, things like when they accepted friendship requests, or who else's photos they had commented on, or what groups they joined. As she explains, this completely changed the way people experienced Facebook by making everything they were doing on Facebook visible to their friends in ways they had not anticipated. Facebook justified this using a binary understanding of privacy, arguing that this is a small change because this information was already public (boyd, 2006). They made a very similar mistake four years later changing their privacy policies again in a way that reset people's settings so that all of their activities were shared publicly to anyone on Facebook, regardless of how these had been set before (boyd, 2010). Again, the tendency to assume that publicity exists in a simple binary with privacy and

that it is equally harmless for everyone can create dangerous situations, especially for the most marginalized users. It also means that users must learn all over again how Facebook's architecture will shape the publicity of their posts. CareMongering-TO members were dealing with a similar context when the June 9th poll was published. Facebook had recently changed its group options to private/public from a system of open/closed/secret groups, an article from May 5th, 2020, just one month before the poll lays out the old system (Facebook, 2022; Hirtz, 2020; Hutchinson, 2020). Facebook had also only recently made changes that would make it impossible to change private groups to public (Hutchinson, 2020). Other changes have followed since June 2020, this update from October 2020 removes the ability for public groups to set admin approvals to entry and, as discussed in the previous section, would share public group content to people's newsfeeds (Dag, 2020; Facebook, 2022). This feature, as I will discuss in the next paragraph, was critical for CareMongering-TO. The frequency of these changes, and their tendency to undermine key features for controlling information flow, often with little notice, create a challenge for groups like CareMongering-TO rooted in Facebook's universalizing, and often profit-driven, thinking about publicity.

The public or private status of the group, and what that meant for the visibility of posts, was not the only aspect of Facebook's architecture that the group found itself trying to navigate. Many of the responses to the poll reflected how it was difficult to tell whether, as one commenter put it, "the call was coming from inside the house". Some felt that this made making the group private pointless, though this commenter later noted that making the group private would at least mean that if calls to CAS, or something similar, happened in the future they could be sure it was a group member. Recognizing that using Facebook settings to limit the publicity of the group's content was only a partial solution, members recommended stronger moderation and vetting

when people requested to join the group. These comments often included replies that reminded people of how much work the admin team was already doing. The admin team also admitted that while they were trying to figure out who had made the reports and threats to CAS so they could remove them from the group, they were struggling to do so. These discussions provide some sense of how challenging it is to establish and maintain norms about privacy, or about whether or how information should be shared beyond a particular context. As boyd argues, we trust people and machines to understand and respect the context within which we share vulnerable information (boyd, 2010), however, in our relationships with and through social media platforms, it is hard to back this trust up with accountability. The challenge of knowing who can see your posts, and what they will do with that information, makes it difficult to know how the calls to CAS happened, and thus how to prevent this harm in the future.

Other solutions that group members suggested, such as having an admin or a friend post anonymously on people's behalf or limiting the details in their posts to avoid unwanted drawing attention, highlight some of the other ways that Facebook's default publicness makes people vulnerable. Cho writes that one way that default publicness manifests on Facebook is the site's insistence that users have a single account that aligns with their legal identity. While some people do manage to maintain pseudonymous profiles, Facebook discourages this by limiting name changes, and asking for verification when a name does not resemble a "real name". These practices support Facebook's business model by making it easier to track people and sell their data, however, they also enforce normative ideas about identity and publicity (Cho, 2018). While Cho focuses on how these policies make it difficult for queer youth to fly under the radar, and to choose and change their names in ways that represent their changing identities, I would add that for people posting in CareMongering-TO this gives people few options but to tie their vulnerable

disclosures directly to legal names. To avoid this, commenters suggested that posters should either leave out details about their lives that might provoke calls to CAS (such as having kids) or should ask an admin or another group member to post on their behalf. As other commenters noted, leaving out details is not always possible. For example, as one commenter mentions, if someone asks for diapers, it reveals that they have kids. I would add that someone's profile might also reveal these details in unexpected ways, such as photos or publicly visible posts. People did ask others to post on their behalf whether admins, friends, neighbours, or people they met through the group (like the post I mentioned in section one), and in doing so subverted Facebook's insistence on linking on and offline activities. Both interventions, while they have limitations, demonstrate how CareMongers worked around the default publicness of Facebook to protect each other from coercive intimacies, like the intrusion of the Children's Aid Society.

Conclusion

How does a community trying to care for one another on social media protect each other's privacy? How do they do so without shutting down the possibility of the very care and intimacy between strangers that sustains mutual aid? What does privacy mean in a world where data about even our most intimate social interactions is continuously collected by social media companies? These questions are at the heart of CareMongering-TO's discussion about whether to change their group settings to private, and their ultimate decision to do so. The discussion, which was prompted by an admin poll, and by an unspecified number of incidents in which CareMongering-TO members were reported to the children's aid society because of posts they had made in the group, was both heated and thoughtful. Both those who wanted to change the

group to private and those who wanted to keep it public were deeply invested in the group's potential to provide care and foster intimacies between community members who may never have met before. In this way, CareMongering-TO follows in the footsteps of so much mutual aid both past and present that has enabled care within and between communities when the state, market and even people's families have not. The desire to keep CareMongering-TO as public as possible reflects a profound need for more abundant and transgressive forms of care and intimacy, and a belief that social media might be able to facilitate just that.

At the same time, those doing digitally mediated mutual aid, like the members of CareMongering-TO, face privacy and safety challenges that are shaped by Facebook's architecture, and the normative ideas about privacy ingrained therein. Facebook's privacy policies reflect an understanding of privacy that centres the white, hetero-masculine subject. They are also designed to make Facebook's data gathering as easy as possible by defaulting towards increased publicness. The experience of CareMongering-TO members reveals that these norms and architectures of publicity are often at odds with the safety of the most vulnerable, racialized, and marginalized members of our communities. They open already hyper-surveilled people up to further unwelcome scrutiny, often without those people's knowledge. This includes not only surveillance by the social media company itself, but also by friends, family, employers, and government institutions. What is more, these architectures are often opaque and change frequently, making it even more difficult to know, let alone control, who will have access to the vulnerable information shared in the group. Through their discussions of Facebook's privacy settings CareMongering-TO worked to understand Facebook's architectures, to respect the labour of admins, and to take seriously the risks people faced in accessing digitally mediated mutual aid. This made it even more clear just how opaque these settings are. While platforms

know an ever-increasing amount about us, their shifting and opaque norms of publicity ensure that the reverse is not true. There is no reciprocity in our understanding of platforms, how public they will make us, or to whom our most intimate information will be visible. The members and admins of CareMongering-TO worked hard to confront these challenges and continue to facilitate vital, intimate and caring relationships.

Chapter three: Give now, give often: temporalities of digitally mediated mutual aid

I remember towards the end, like in winter, like January 2021, things were really bad. Posts were barely getting any traction at all. And that was around the time that we had so many requests that we had to post 20 times a day with all the slides just to get through even a quarter of the requests. And I think the more that you post, the more the algorithm decides to not show your posts. Yeah, and there was really no workaround to that. Like, at that point, we then had to decide who was more important to post on a day, which got really frustrating. I remember there were times where, because you never wanted to post more than once in an hour (we had all these like little rules that we would follow to try to beat the algorithm, so we would never post more than once in an hour). And I would have alarms on my phone so that I could wake up at like 2am to post another post. Because like there wasn't enough time in the day to only post once per hour. Which was, that was also a lot. (Julia, personal communication, August 4, 2023)

In an article published in the *Conversation* on June 4th, 2020, Giana M. Eckhardt and Katharina C. Husemann, a marketing professor and lecturer from the Royal Holloway University of London, write: “Before lockdown, our lives were defined by speed. Rushing around, living life at rocket pace was the norm... But in lockdown, the pace of life slowed dramatically overnight for everyone” (Eckhardt & Husemann, 2020). The article, “How to maintain a slower pace of life after lockdown”, leans into a familiar narrative, that time in the modern era has accelerated because of technology, particularly digital technology (Bauman, 2007; Tomlinson, 2007; Virilio, 2006). Other articles presented different visions of the slowdown brought on by Covid-19 lockdowns. Some articles were decidedly less positive than Huseman and Eckhardt, discussing the impacts of economic slowdown and supply chain disruptions (Atske, 2020). Others speculated that the slowdown of travel and other human activities would have a beneficial impact on carbon emissions and air pollution (Rabson, 2020; Watts, 2020). Others still echoed Eckhardt and Huseman’s discussion of the lockdown as an opportunity for relaxation (Mitchell, 2021).

Eckhardt and Huseman's article is just a particularly overt example of this narrative, one that demonstrates how the slowdown narrative can reinforce broader assumptions about technological acceleration. These narratives, whether viewed positively or negatively, flatten time, assuming a uniform experience that ignores the role of power in shaping temporalities.

As the quote that begins this chapter indicates, digitally mediated mutual aid cannot be narrated as a sudden slow-down from our technologically accelerated world. The quote is from my interview with one of the volunteer administrators of the OpenYrPurse Instagram account, Julia. It articulates the importance of time to the experience of participating in digitally mediated mutual aid, which is what this chapter explores. Her experience struggling to keep up with persistent, urgent requests for aid, against the tide of Instagram's limitations demonstrates that the technological temporalities that emerged out of pandemic mutual aid are complex and varied. This is also apparent from the online record of digitally mediated mutual aid which includes a multitude of posts showcasing the experiences of many marginalized people for whom the "slow-down" of lockdown was not a blessing, a relief, or an opportunity to pick up a new hobby, but the beginning of a new rush to find ways to pay bills, buy food, and access medical care. Despite this rush, and the urgency with which volunteers like Julia worked, her quote shows that technology does not always accelerate, and can even cause friction.

Increasingly, scholars have called for a more critical and specific approach to analyzing the effect of digital technology on temporality. As Emily Keightley argues, more attention needs to be paid to the ways that socially situated subjects negotiate mediated temporalities (2013). In their article, "The Politics of "Real-time" Esther Weltevrede, Anne Helmond and Carolin Gerlitz argue against a conception of "real-time" as a universal temporality of digital media. Rather, the specific technical features of platforms and search engines create "distinct forms of real-time for

specific users” (2014, p. 130), inviting engagement that keeps up with the ideal of real-time information exchange (Weltevrede et al., 2014). Building on this work in the context of activist communication, Thomas Poell uses the term “temporal regimes” to indicate that social media produces many, heterogenous temporalities. He highlights one of these temporal regimes, pointing to the continuity between the 24-hour live news cycle and the “real-time” bias of social media that both incentivize episodic, rather than issue-based, coverage of events (Poell, 2020). This work shows that technology can shape time in ways that are both technologically specific and dependent on the broader context within which the technologies exist.

Time is also shaped by power in ways that exceed technological developments. In her article of the same name, Sarah Sharma coined the term “the biopolitical economy of time” to describe “how the time of life is biopolitical, differentially managed, regulated and experienced” (2011, p. 441). She asserts that biopolitics increasingly operates through the regulation of time, which pushes people to constantly “recalibrate” (Sharma, 2011, p. 442) their time to the demands of capitalism. For Sharma, it is this expectation of recalibration that defines temporal experiences of late capitalism, and that is differentially experienced depending on factors such as race, gender, immigration status and labour (Sharma, 2011). As Sharma elaborates in her book “In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics” recalibration is made easier for those whose labour and time are more greatly valued through access to “temporal infrastructures” (2014, p. 50). She uses the example of airports to illustrate the abundant infrastructures that help the frequent business flyer to rest, arrive on time, work on the go, and otherwise support their fast-paced lifestyle. Those whose labour supports these temporal infrastructures like masseuses, taxicab drivers and airport cleaners, among other often low-wage and precarious workers, do not have access to equivalent infrastructures and must find their own ways to recalibrate their time

(Sharma, 2014). These social, political and economic factors are just as important to the temporalities of digitally mediated mutual aid as the technology itself, and the two cannot be separated.

In this chapter, I explore how power and technology shaped the experience of time for those participating in digitally mediated mutual aid. Focusing on Instagram-based mutual aid, I analyze posts from the OpenYrPurse Instagram account posted between June 2020 and their eventual hiatus in September 2021. I complement this analysis with material drawn from Interviews with two volunteer administrators from two Instagram accounts engaged in mutual aid, one from OpenYrPurse (OYP) and one from Climate Justice Toronto (CJTO). OpenYrPurse is an Instagram page run by a collective of volunteers that was dedicated to mutual aid and economic redistribution for Black, Brown and Indigenous people, with a focus on caregivers. The collective running OpenYrPurse started out as two separate pages, OpenYrPurse and Funds4Caregivers, that merged in October 2020. CJTO is a Toronto-based, youth-led grassroots climate justice collective that began in the spring of 2019. Unlike OYP, CJTO's Instagram page was created to support their various campaigns and only redirected towards mutual aid activities in the spring of 2020. CJTO continued to post both mutual aid and other climate justice-related content.

I have broken this chapter into three temporalities that emerged out of both the OYP Instagram feed and my interviews: urgency, waiting, and longevity. Urgency is a constant theme on OpenYrPurse as organizers continuously emphasize the crises faced by those requesting aid. Through colours and storytelling posts encourage followers to keep pace with the needs of requesters and take the time necessary to address it. This is not a call for slow-down or speed-up, but for keeping time with those most marginalized within the biopolitical economy of time.

Despite administrators' best efforts, and digital media's promise of immediacy, those most in need consistently found themselves waiting. The reality of who gets aid, when, or how quickly is never uniform, and in the case of mutual aid on Instagram is frequently shaped by the platform's algorithm. Requesters and administrators helplessly wait for engagement, wait for visibility, wait for money to be sent, or wait to see if they can pay their next bill. The final section, Longevity, focuses on how administrators tried to sustain these projects over time by encouraging followers to build a sense of habit, to think of themselves as part of a collective and to understand the needs people faced as part of a structure, and not simply the result of an immediate crisis. These strategies resist, not always effectively, Instagram's bias towards novelty. I argue that organizers work to bridge between multiple temporalities shaped by digital media and crisis. They work to both communicate urgency and to maintain attention over time, sometimes getting caught in the tension between these two needs. They encourage people to give now, responding to ever emerging crises, but also to give often, creating habits of solidarity capable of confronting ongoing structural inequity.

Urgency (Give Now)

Urgent. Do Not Scroll Past. Time Sensitive Request. Emergency. These words litter the graphics and captions of mutual aid requests on Instagram. They signal an orientation towards time defined by crisis, not only the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic, but also the constant crises of living within capitalism as a person whose life, and time, is not valued. These crises are described in the stories of people requesting aid and the urgency is announced by the bright, bold colours of the square graphics that make up OpenYrPurse's grid. This language, the colours and

the emotional stories of crisis serve two purposes that are at once contradictory and complementary. On the one hand, by standing out from the flow of identical squares that make up people's Instagram feeds, they call for people to slow down, stop scrolling and pay attention. On the other, they call for followers to act quickly to support people whose need for support is dire. In this section, I focus on this urgency and the way it factors into the work of digitally mediated mutual aid. I argue that, though the urgency faced by those requesting aid contradicts the idea that the pandemic has brought a universal slow-down, urgency is also not about speeding up. Instead, the posts on OpenYrPurse call on observers and followers of the page to see that capitalism and state welfare systems can be at once crushingly fast and crushingly slow. They try to centre the survival of people requesting aid, and demand that followers take the time to care, immediately, and quickly.

The stories of crisis contained in most posts on OpenYrPurse describe the experiences of those whose temporalities are subordinated within the biopolitical economy of time (Sharma, 2011). In a graphic shared on both May 9th and May 18th, 2021, the text describes a family who is trying to get the money they need to pay their rent by June 1st. The family is struggling because, according to the post, their landlord is increasing their rent by \$1300 and has been harassing the family. This family's ability to maintain the roof over their heads depends on their ability to meet this deadline, and to be able to pay this additional sum every month. Rent increases like this highlight the limited control tenants have over how long they will be able to stay in a particular location, and when they will find themselves faced with a hefty rent hike. Their experience of time is shaped by their landlord's desire for increased profits. Often, to keep up with increasing costs of living, people need to work more hours, once again subordinating their time to someone else's, in this case, an employer. A post from January 18th, 2021, tells the

story of a requester who is short on money because their work hours have been cut. While there are no details about the person's job, this was a common experience early in the pandemic (Atske, 2020; Clarke & Fields, 2022) and is always a possibility for people whose jobs are shift-based. How many hours a person is being paid for is not within their control. These are just a few examples that highlight how people seeking mutual aid through digital media faced pressures to recalibrate and keep up with the timelines of others. These situations are part of what creates the urgency in the posts as people must find ways to meet the deadlines and timelines of those who hold power over their lives.

Those asking for aid are, in many cases, identified as caregivers, whether paid or unpaid, further highlighting the challenges faced by those whose labour upholds temporal infrastructure. The people requesting funds on OpenYrPurse are often caring for children, elders, or other family members, or working in caregiving fields. While this may be particularly prevalent on OpenYrPurse because of the page's specific history merging with Funds 4 Caregivers, which focused on mutual aid for caregivers, caregiving responsibilities are also a common feature of requests made in the other groups I looked at. This demonstrates the way that the often racialized and gendered work performed by caregivers is devalued within the biopolitical economy of time. As Sarah Sharma argues the work of maintaining "temporal infrastructure incorporates a component of care that is meaningfully linked to traditional forms of women's work or feminized labor" (2014, p. 44). Those whose time is privileged rely heavily on this labour, but those who perform this do not have the same support. This also extends along racial lines as care work is frequently outsourced by wealthier, mostly white women, to racialized, Black and immigrant women, or increasingly to gig-workers, who do this labour often at the expense of time spent with their own families and kin (Francisco-Menchavez, 2018; Hartman, 2016;

Sharma, 2018; The Care Collective, 2020). A post from November 25th, 2020, describes a Black caregiver who asks for support raising funds for a car. The post says she is “...never not exhausted” because she works “around the clock” to support her two-household family². This post and others like it highlight, on the one hand, the importance of architectures of time maintenance, access to things like transportation for example, shape people’s experience of time. At the same time, the post points to the devaluation of the time of Black and racialized caregivers specifically. These caregivers must find time beyond the demands of racial capitalism to care for their own families and communities, whose survival is deprioritized as the result of white supremacy (Hartman, 2016). By treating these challenges as urgent issues and calling on others to take time to care, digitally mediated mutual aid provides the opportunities for solidarity with those divested within the biopolitical economy of time.

These posts communicate urgency, but they also highlight the need to slow down and direct sustained attention toward these stories, over all the other content that can easily occupy people's time and attention. In “Social Media, Immediacy and the Time for Democracy”, Veronica Barassi writes about the challenges that the assumption of immediacy on social media pose to activists. Though immediacy on social media is the result of political and economic factors, Western narratives of technological progress, and a variety of everyday practices,

² The caregiver in this post is identified as a Black, queer, non-binary woman, these identities raise important conversations about Black and queer temporalities that are largely beyond the scope of this chapter. For example, Sarah Stefana Smith writes that Black temporality has concerned itself with the ways that Black futures are often foreclosed upon and how those foreclosure might be resisted. While work on both Black and queer temporality has subverted the connection between futurity and biological reproduction. She joins others in noting the ways that Blackness and queerness overlap, particularly the ways that slavery and its aftermath transformed both sexual and gender relationships (S. S. Smith, 2019). This includes what Hortense Spillers has called “ungendering” (Hortense, 1987), and Saadiya Hartman’s reflections on “the gender non-conformity of the black community” and “its queer domesticity” (2016, p. 169)

technology enables the belief that instantaneous connection is both possible and desirable. For the European activists in Barassi's study immediacy posed challenges to making their activism visible and to their ability to develop their political analysis (Barassi, 2015). To remain visible amid the constant flow of content, activists must continuously post engaging content and stand out from the "social noise" (Interview subject cited in Barassi, 2015, p. 82). The language, colours and stories in these posts are designed to stand out from all the other information people are seeing on social media, often calling for people to "STOP!", or to "stop scrolling and redistribute". As OpenYrPurse volunteer Julia put it in our conversation:

So on Instagram, things your post needs to be eye-catching. It needs to be like this feels really bad to say because it is really icky, but it needs to be guilt-inducing. Like you need to invoke some sort of emotional response in the person who's reading the post for them to actually sit down and read it because there is so much content on your timeline that if something is not immediately interesting, you will scroll past it. Like I do it all the time. I'm sure everyone in the entire world does this. If something doesn't immediately catch my attention, I will scroll right past it. (Julia, personal communication, August 4, 2023)

From Julia's experience, posts need to be both visually eye-catching and hit an emotional nerve. This aspect gave Julia pause as she felt uneasy sharing the trauma of requesters so publicly for the sake of generating traction. As she said, this disclosure "provides enough people to see [the post] for [the requester] to get enough money to get what they need. But the thought of the emotional impact that that has on the person, like that really was hard for me to get past." (Julia, personal communication, August 4, 2023). The emotional impact of posting people's most difficult experiences on social media is just one example of the complexity of doing digitally mediated mutual aid. The public and performative aspect of social media is sometimes at odds with the caring impulses of mutual aid organizers. The need to communicate the urgency of the crises faced by those requesting mutual aid, and to ensure that people take time to respond to

them, shapes the way posts are structured in ways that can come with costs. The posts must catch the eye, and be *immediately* interesting, the post must operate fast if it wants the person scrolling to slow down and take the time to care about the person in need.

Creating eye-catching graphics and compelling stories takes time on the part of the pages' volunteers. Later in our Julia returned to the fact that the posts needed to be eye-catching, saying that taking time to create unique graphics could increase their chance of receiving funds. "... when you had the time to make someone a new graphic that was really visually eye-catching and had things that were moving around, had an artistic flair instead of just one color-block and text, that really helped" (Julia, personal communication, August 4, 2023). In Julia's case this sometimes included getting to know someone a little better and using their taste as inspiration. On the CJTO account, Dani's strategy was less personal, but their reflections also indicate that taking time to craft each post made a difference to their ability to draw others in:

I think there's a bit of a classic template that folks use, which is like either including a photo or not including a photo, but quite text heavy, of like, you know, like a headline, ... a person needs funds for blank, a couple of sentences explaining the urgency of what they need, the goal and then their Cash App or their Venmo or their e-transfer information. And I feel like when we did it that way, it didn't work as well as when we actually approached it from a communication standpoint of being like, what is the story that we're telling? And especially for our audience who did not follow us for mutual aid and followed us for climate justice content. *Anytime that we took some time* to think about how does this connect to that organizing? How can we make the case that sending \$20 to this person is climate justice organizing? (Dani, personal communication, July 27, 2023, Italics added)

While Julia emphasizes the eye-catching nature of posts, and Dani emphasizes the sense of story and connection to a particular audience, both emphasize that when it was possible, putting time and care into posts, could result in more people taking the time to respond. Unfortunately, it became harder as the pandemic went on and administrators were increasingly pressed for time.

The timelines faced by the most marginalized demand a rapid response, and a response that involves both organizers and followers to take the time to care.

Waiting

The immediacy and real-time bias of social media should complement the need for urgency however, the realities of the Instagram algorithm reintroduce often create delays and uncertainty that organizers constantly need to negotiate. Visibility and engagement are not evenly distributed across all content on social media; instead, they are shaped by social media's algorithms and platform architectures, which are in turn shaped by the commercial interests of social media companies (Gillespie, 2010; van Dijck & Poell, 2013). As a result, different people's posts are seen at different rates, and for different lengths of time, if they are seen at all. Administrators tried to shape posts to fit patterns of engagement and visibility that they observed, but despite their best efforts, people frequently found themselves waiting for responses to their urgent requests. The algorithm shaped the frequency of posts, whether requests were posted individually or as groups of "slides", as well as the language that administrators used in captions and how they asked followers to engage. Still, requests went unmet, and administrators were left feeling a lack of control over the visibility of content and by extension how long people waited to receive aid.

Waiting is a temporal experience that can be deeply disempowering, reflecting, and sometimes reproducing deep power imbalances. In *Waiting and Temporal Control: The Temporal Experience of Long-term Unemployment*, Louise Overby Nielsen, Sophie Danneris and Merete Monrad argue that wait times pose a significant challenge for unemployed people

seeking social services. Focusing on the Danish welfare system, they show that unemployed people experience multiple overlapping wait times within the health, social and employment services systems that delay their access to services and reduce their sense of temporal control (Nielsen et al., 2021). Nielsen et al. cite the ethnographic work on welfare lines of Argentinian scholar Javier Auyero, who argues that while waiting people experience uncertainty, confusion and arbitrariness (Auyero, 2011; Nielsen et al., 2021). While they recognize that the Danish welfare system, where clients wait at home and receive benefits as they wait, is very different from the Argentine welfare lines, they argue that waiting still has the impact of teaching social service recipients to be patient and to subordinate their own temporalities to the arbitrary workings of state bureaucracies (Nielsen et al., 2021). Waiting, especially in uncertainty, can be costly and discouraging.

For some, digitally mediated mutual aid promised an immediate and direct response to the struggles they faced while forced to wait for other forms of support. An OpenYrPurse post from January 19th, 2021, describes a person who is looking for housing but has nowhere to stay in the interim because the shelters in her area are full, temporary housing options are too expensive. This post is one of many where finding housing is even more urgent because social services are threatening to take a mother's children if she cannot find housing. A December 1st, 2020, post describes a family trying for a second time to raise the money they need to secure an apartment. They are worried about meeting the deadline to pay a deposit due only nine days later and have not heard back from the government assistance they are waiting for. In both these circumstances, the people in question are unable to find housing at least in part because they are being forced to wait for access to government services. The first person waits for shelter beds to open, while the second waits for the money they need to pay for their new apartment. In the face

of these challenging timelines, and delays, these individuals turned to digitally mediated mutual aid which promises an immediate stopgap, trusting that money from strangers could be sent and received almost instantaneously over the internet.

The reality, however, is that, while digital payment apps like Interac e-transfer, PayPal, Venmo and Cash App can facilitate instantaneous money exchange, the time it takes for requests to be seen and responded to varies greatly, reproducing the same lack of control. Many posts showcase just how long people sometimes waited to receive aid. For example, a post from November 28th 2020 describes a mother of six who has been fundraising for 6 months and still has not made enough money to meet her needs. Other posts are simply repeated or reposted multiple times, each time describing the same need, indicating that the person had still not met their initial goal. Many also include GoFundMe campaigns with notes about how little support they have received. These stories show that social media's speed did not create instantaneous results for those seeking mutual aid. Many people were left waiting and struggling to get the money they urgently needed to pay for food, rent, and medical bills.

Administrators also noticed this challenge and lamented that it prevented requesters from consistently achieving their goals. Both Julia and Dani were clear that the Instagram algorithm made it hard to determine how long a person would wait to receive money, or if they would receive money at all. Towards the end of our interview, Julia, who volunteered with OpenYrPurse, told me that:

Even when we didn't have a lot of requesters, and we had much more volunteers than we had work to do, so it was like no one was overwhelmed. It was still not sustainable because of the algorithm. because our posts were getting muted so much. We were dealing with that problem even right at the beginning. (Julia, personal communication, August 4, 2023)

I will go into more detail about the overwhelm organizers felt in the following section, longevity, but even before it had set in, Instagram already worked against many posts. Posts would fail to gain the traction they needed to meet people's needs in a timely manner. Similarly, Dani, who organized with Climate Justice Toronto (CJTO), told me that CJTO had:

... people coming to us and being like, I need this amount of money, or I'm going to lose my housing, or I'm not going to be able to access urgent medical care. And then being a little bit at the mercy of the Instagram algorithm for whether or not that was true, and having to go back to those people and be like, this is all that we've been able to do, and kind of there does reach a point where posting about it more and more actually isn't going to bring in any more money, which is really hard. (Dani, personal communication, July 27 2023)

Dani and Julia each shared that their groups had ideas about what language to include or leave out to avoid being muted or suppressed by the algorithm. They could tell certain posts were doing poorly because they could see that some posts would get almost no engagement, while others were generating hundreds of comments, likes and views. Despite these observations, and continuous adaptation, both shared a sense of futility regarding how to overcome this challenge. Their experiences create the impression of an arbitrary system that sometimes produces positive results, but at other times leaves people waiting indefinitely for essential support that may never come.

Reposting was also an inconsistent way to remedy the lack of response some posts received. Julia told me that OpenYrPurse frequently reposted for people and continued to push for their needs to be met, as I observed on the OpenYrPurse page. However, Dani observed that re-posting people's requests often did little to increase engagement:

I think the best successes that we had were ones where we would post one time and hit a peak off of that one post. But with the initial post didn't do super well, and we were then trying to follow up and continue to boost it, to try to meet a goal, I really saw exponentially lower and lower and lower engagement with almost the more we posted about it, which is, 'cause then you kind of reach a place of like, kind of a desperation of like trying to like, keep

doing the same things that you've been doing, expecting the same result, but for whatever reason, it's like lower and lower and lower engagement. (Dani, personal communication, July 27, 2023)

This claim that posting the same requests again led to limited improvements in engagement only adds to the sense of powerlessness. Though it is difficult to confirm whether the Instagram algorithm caused this apparent decrease in engagement on reposted content, the experience of posting requests again and again to worse and worse results is still disheartening. The same is true of other observations that mutual aid organizers made about the Instagram algorithm and the success of mutual aid posts. It is clear, that the experience of using Instagram to raise funds felt like a constant struggle against the algorithm as a force that shaped people's ability to meet their needs and regain any kind of temporal agency.

Longevity (Give Often)

As time went on, the need for mutual aid, digitally mediated and otherwise, continued to rise and organizers had to find ways to capture people's attention in a timely manner and sustain it over time. Both my conversations, and the increasing frequency of posts on OpenYrPurse's account, indicate that the crises that inspired many mutual aid efforts had not abated. As Julia put it when I asked about her main takeaways from the experience as an administrator with

OpenYrPurse:

... the amount of need that is out there, like you will never be able to meet all of those needs. No matter how many times you post a person, no matter how many hours you put into making their graphic as visually capturing as possible, like an Instagram account in itself will not meet that level of need. (Julia, personal communication, August 4, 2023)

The need these accounts were trying to address are greater than these pages can address; they result from deep structural issues that the global pandemic and racial justice uprisings across the United States and Canada in 2020 served to highlight. However, overtime, both the attention of followers and the energy of administrators became increasingly difficult to maintain. As Dani described in my interview with them:

We definitely saw that posts about mutual aid over time would have a steep decline in how much people were even seeing them, much less engaging with them. And then it created this dynamic where at one point, we had this kind of power to be able to meet people's needs really quickly. And then over time, that became less and less true. And so there was also a real challenge of setting up expectations for people that it could be this urgent, rapid response, like survival funds source. (Dani, personal communication, July 27, 2023)

The urgency and immediacy that seemed possible, if inconsistent, in March of 2020 and throughout that summer became even harder to achieve over time. The desire to keep attention on mutual aid, and to resist the tendency towards flagging engagement, shaped how these pages communicated with followers. Social media's emphasis on notable events, and eye-catching spectacles can create a bias against coverage that focus on an issue's structural causes and dimensions. In this section, I look at how organizers tried to balance the ongoing need for urgency with knowledge that the crises facing mutual aid requesters are the product of permanent, structural problems. Though it did not prevent the exhaustion that eventually led both CJTO and OpenYrPurse take indefinite breaks from mutual aid, OpenYrPurse engaged in multiple strategies for sustaining their activities including encouraging followers to form habits of giving, cultivating a sense of collective action, and emphasizing the structural, ongoing nature of the issues faced by requesters.

Mutual aid did not start or end with the Covid-19 pandemic, and while the invocation of crisis can be politically potent, it should not overshadow the ongoing need for care and the

structural barriers that those seeking mutual aid face to accessing it. In *Crisis Time, Constant Border*, Sophie Smith reflects on the relationship between temporalities crisis and permanence in the humanitarian disaster playing out at the US-Mexico Border. She argues that while crisis framing is politically useful for mobilizing resources towards humanitarian aid, it may not be adequate for addressing the persistent militarization of the border. The government has also used crisis rhetoric, in their case, to justify constructing vast infrastructures, implementing aggressive policies, and investing in military technologies that intensify violence towards migrants. In the face of these durable, structural changes, Smith asks, what happens when crisis becomes a permanent state of affairs (S. Smith, 2017)? People expressed similar sentiments about how mutual aid was adopted early in the pandemic (S. Smith, 2017). Some voiced concern that popular attention to mutual aid would only last as long as the sense of crisis could be sustained, despite the fact that mutual aid was nothing new and would continue to be needed far beyond the crises of the moment³ (Aberg-Riger, 2020; Arani, 2020; de Loggans, 2021; Firth, 2020; Mochama, 2020; The Care Collective, 2020). In “Mutual Aid and its Ambivalences”, Alexia Arani describes her fear the hype about mutual aid as a pandemic response might overshadow the importance this work has had, and will continue to have, for sick and disabled, queer and trans people of colour who have relied on it all along. What will happen to those communities when the moment has passed, the attention has moved on to the next issue, when the sense of collective crisis has faded (Arani, 2020)? Her question raises concerns about the temporalities of mutual aid, like Smith she points to the political potency of crisis rhetoric, but also to its

³ In the article “From carewashing to radical care: the discursive explosion of care during Covid-19”, Chatzidakis et al. write that, while the pandemic brought on a discussion about the “crisis of care”, care has been in crisis for a long time because of disinvestment from a variety of caring infrastructures under neoliberalism. This crisis extends beyond a single moment and will require sustained attention to address.

shortcomings in sustaining a struggle against structural violence in the long term (Arani, 2020; S. Smith, 2017).

The challenge of framing mutual aid as part of a broader struggle against ongoing, structural issues are heightened by social media's temporal bias towards continuous update. In social media, temporality and the legitimacy of protest, Thomas Poell looks at the ways that media institutions, infrastructure and practices shape change the temporalities of protest communication. He argues that like mainstream news media and the 24-hour news cycle, social media has a bias towards the present, and towards episodic coverage of issues that emphasizes "events" rather than issues. Poell recognizes that social media, like all media create space for many temporalities, but argues that social media institutions, infrastructures and practices create an immediacy bias, a prioritization of things that are happening "live", or in "real-time". This bias, he argues, influences activists to communicate and act in ways that can be framed as an event, prioritizing what can be immediately consumed, what can catch the eye (Poell, 2020).

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun argues that crisis is a defining attribute of new media. In *Crisis, Crisis, Crisis; or, The Temporality of Networks* she writes:

"Crises cut through the continuous stream of information, differentiating the temporally valuable from the mundane, offering its users a taste of real-time responsibility and empowerment. They also threaten to undermine this experience, however, by catching and exhausting us in an endlessly repeating series of responses" (Chun, 2015, p. 140)

Here she identifies a crucial tension that emerges from the need for crises to cut through the noise. While a crisis offers the possibility of drawing attention, the possibility of feeling connected to an issue in real-time, constant attention is much harder to sustain.

The experience of organizing digitally mediated mutual aid reflected this emphasis on events, and the problem with tackling structural problems within a media ecosystem that

emphasizes continuous updates. An unprecedented crisis, like the first months of the coronavirus lockdowns or continent-wide uprisings for racial justice, draws attention that can be directed towards mutual aid. As Julia described:

... if something was trending, like during the George Floyd protests, we were at an all time high. Like all of our posts were getting thousands of views, thousands of likes. It wasn't hard for us to get our posts out there 'cause I think the general public was interested in this type of community interaction. But as BLM protests dwindled, so did attention on our accounts. And it was really obvious that people had a short attention span for this type of work. If nothing was trending, we also were not trending. trending. Like this this wasn't a sustainable thing, it really had to do with what was happening in the world at the time. (Julia, personal communication, July 4, 2023)

Julia highlights both the fact that as general attention is drawn to big news stories people pay attention to mutual aid, and the fact that this folds in with the norms of social media. By using the word “trending” Julia points to the way that social media emphasizes issues temporarily before moving on to the next big thing. This tendency to emphasize trends makes it difficult for mutual aid to survive long term. In general, mutual aid, and care work more broadly, are not eye-catching spectacles, rather they are the everyday maintenance of life. Care is often the least visible, least valued labour in society (The Care Collective, 2020), and as Sarah Sharma describes in “TaskRabbit: The gig-economy and finding time to care less”, for those with a choice this work is often deemed menial and unworthy of their time (Sharma, 2018). Though the protests may not be in the news after a few months, the need for care, and the problem of structural anti-Black racism continues.

Confronted by these challenges, the OpenYrPurse Instagram account made continuous efforts to spotlight structural issues, and to develop strategies for longevity. As early as September 11th 2020, admins posted about the need to sustain momentum. The first slide of this post contains a repost from another account invested in mutual aid organizing. The text reads:

Overwhelmed by the sheer number of people who need support right now?

Don't be. Give what you can. Help where you can. Be generous. Budget your time and resources so you aren't over or under extending yourself. Encourage others to take care and realize the importance of wealth redistribution. Keep focusing on the most marginalized. It's not your job to save everybody. It's our collective job to make everyone it's taken care of (sic).

Whatever you do, don't get apathetic.

#WeWillWin

- @TheDiDiDelgado

This post offers some significant advice for continuing to engage with digitally mediated mutual aid even when people felt overwhelmed by the scale of the need. This includes giving what you can, giving when you can, remembering you are not alone, and finding ways to prioritize. These strategies both highlight the emphasis on enduring, and remaining consistent, and acknowledge that mutual aid must be undertaken collectively. This advice is reflected in the other efforts that administrators made to keep digitally mediated mutual aid sustainable.

Many posts reflected account administrators' desire to not only address the immediate crisis but also to cultivate enduring digitally mediated mutual aid projects. These posts encouraged followers to form habits around saving and giving, most observably by including statements like "give now, give often", or "redistribute now and forever". These posts are complemented by others that include more detailed directions for how people can become consistent, active mutual aid participants. A good example of this is the "highlight reel" at the top of the OpenYrPurse page called "b4 you follow", where the account lays out its follower and requester mandates. The follower mandate asks those choosing to follow the account to participate actively by responding to posts and giving money. It also asks that they take care to

respect the time and labour of the person (later people) running the page. One of these slides has a series of bullet points, the fourth bullet states: “If you are not in the habit of supporting mutual aid efforts, begin to look into budgeting especially if you have class privilege”. The mandate also encourages saving so that followers have enough to give regular, but still substantial amounts. The post notes that for those receiving funds, sending small amounts of less than a dollar or two can feel demoralizing and insulting. By suggesting budgeting and saving, the mandate asks that followers work mutual aid into their broader financial habits, planning mutual aid into their lives now and into the future.

In addition to encouraging individuals to adopt habits that facilitate sustainable, generous, and regular giving, OpenYrPurse organizers also developed strategies that reminded followers that mutual aid is a collective action. The post from @DiDiDelgado quoted above offers one example among many of those practicing mutual aid on Instagram emphasizing the importance of collective responsibility. Collective responsibility comes up in other ways across the OpenYrPurse account. For example, several posts include what Julia called a “payment plan”, as she describes:

We would work it out of like how many people needed to send a certain amount of money. And then, so we would make a payment plan, post it on the graphic, and then say like comment this flower emoji after you send the 20 or 25 dollars or whatever we could do. That was another little tactic we used to help people and I think those helped a lot because seeing the number being broken down into smaller chunks, I think that was the thing that would help people. 'Cause like if you're confronted with the fact that someone needs \$1,700 and you know that you don't have \$1,700 to send them, like it feels better to be like, "Okay, I can be one of these people that sends \$20 and then there's one less person that has to send \$20." Yeah. (Julia, personal communication, August 4, 2023)

These plans reduce the feeling that any one person is single-handedly responsible for covering someone’s rent, electrical, medical or grocery bills. Given that these can be thousands of dollars, it is important that these “payment plans” show that it’s enough to pitch in and collaboratively

meet someone's needs. This not only makes the task feel manageable but reminds you that you are not alone in caring for others. Others can follow along in the comments as people who have contributed comments on the post with the suggested emojis. While CJTO did not adopt this exact strategy, Dani did observe that people wanted to see results from their participation:

I felt like it was important to be accountable to people and kind of share the amount of money that was raised, and whether it was just like directly given to a person, or like in the cases where like we were using it to like purchase things, doing that kind of report back to folks in a way that like makes people feel like it was like a victory or a win or a success. So it's like motivating instead of feeling like, gosh, I'm seeing the same mutual aid graphic, like weeks and weeks in a row, this person was just in a really, really bad spot. And like, we're not meeting the goal, it's very demoralizing, even though it's kind of true. (Dani, personal communication, July 27, 2023)

Reporting back allows people to follow along with what's happened to the people requesting aid. This can help build a feeling of relationship between a requester and someone sending money beyond just seeing the initial post. Julia told me that OpenYrPurse did not follow up with most of the requesters because they did not want to burden people with having to report back. However, when she personally heard back from someone who had received funds it had a strong emotional impact that made her feel connected to that person despite them knowing little else about each other. These two strategies, though different, share an ability to produce more collective engagement that can alleviate overwhelm, and create more sustained investment in people's requests.

Though the long-term impact of digitally mediated mutual aid cannot be defined by any one group, page, or account's ability to persist, it was still hard for groups to end their activities. Though both OpenYrPurse and CJTO have stopped posting new mutual aid requests on Instagram, and more broadly, government has stopped thinking about COVID-19 as a crisis, it would be impossible for me to measure here the long-term or overall impact of digitally

mediated mutual aid. The ripples will continue for years. They might include a watering down or co-optation of mutual aid terminology, but they also may include an expanded number of people who can imagine a community response to a disaster or social problem. A recent article in the *Globe and Mail* following up with a variety of pandemic mutual aid projects describes the work that the founder of the Facebook group CareMongering-TO, Mita Hans, has been doing to bring the concept of CareMongering to hospitals (McGinn, 2023). Ongoing efforts to continue mutual aid are particularly important because when these projects end it can have real consequences and be hard to substitute. Dani told me about a moment when CJTO's mutual aid was going well and they were providing people with good food boxes, paying for people's therapy, and providing individualized care packages delivered to people directly. But as they say:

we hadn't really talked about what is the timeline of this. What is the commitment that we can make? And I think when you don't talk about that, that you don't think about the care that's needed at the end. Of like, how do you end this relationship or end this particular moment without it feeling like you're just dropping somebody?... And we made a real effort to be like, let's think about, we wanna connect people to other resources in this transition. And then doing that research and discovering that there aren't that many other resources. There actually aren't that many places to send people, which is why this is happening on Instagram (Dani, personal communication, July 27, 2023)

The support people needed was ongoing, but there was no readily available replacement to the digitally mediated mutual aid they were providing. As Dani shows, having a plan for longevity is deeply important, as is finding ways for mutual aid to continue. Despite the many challenges, both Julia and Dani still express interest in the possibility of using social media for mutual aid, and a curiosity about how to do it better. This includes exploring other apps where mutual aid would not rely on broadcasting people's requests and where the success would be less dependent on an algorithm. There are many lessons to learn from these experiences, and the long-term impact of the digital care practices developed and heightened during the pandemic cannot be

evaluated based on the continuity of any single project. Their impact includes the relationships built, the actions inspired, the new initiatives formed, and much more.

Conclusion

For those participating in digitally mediated mutual aid, experiences of time were varied and complex, shaped by both technology and power. In recent years, scholars have described a world sped up by technology. A world of fast capitalism, where time is meaningless. As the digital record of mutual aid on Instagram shows, the experience of those struggling to meet their basic needs, especially at a moment of global crisis, shows that this is only part of the picture. The graphics and captions of OpenYrPurse are dominated by the language and visuals of urgency. This urgency is a call to both move quickly, and to stop, redirect and take time to care. It calls attention to the pressing deadlines faced by those people and families who have been divested within the biopolitical economy of time and ask others to keep up with those timelines. These constant reminders of urgency, however, are also part of a struggle to uphold the promise that digital technology holds rapid, immediate, real-time response. In a system that is constantly forcing the most marginalized to wait for services, to be patient, and to accept their lack of temporal control, it is disheartening that this speed cannot be attained. Instead, mutual aid requests face uncertain engagement and visibility. The Instagram algorithm curates posts in a way that can seem arbitrary and at times even hostile to mutual aid. This is something account administrators struggle to get around so that those in need can reach their goals and know how high to set their expectations. These experiences of waiting and urgency are not solely the result of Instagram's specificities but extend from the way that time is bound up in biopolitics.

Longevity, and the struggle to attain it, is, similarly, a reflection of how both power and technology shape time. The rhetoric of crisis can draw attention to efforts to resist capitalism, anti-black racism or imperialism. However, these systems, their harms, and efforts to undermine them predate the crisis and will continue after it. Recognizing this, OpenYrPurse adopted strategies to normalize mutual aid, to remind people that it is a collective practice and to emphasize the structural causes of the many unfolding crises that needed addressing. They did this even though their posts seemed to get less and less engagement over time, despite a sense that the success of the aid requests they were posting was deeply dependent on what was trending at the time. Though OpenYrPurse, and Climate Justice Toronto, are no longer receiving mutual aid requests, those who administered the accounts, and many others, continue to think about the longevity and sustainability of mutual aid, both digitally mediated and otherwise.

Chapter Four: Caring against platforms: the labour of administering digitally mediated mutual aid

In a post from September 3rd 2020, when OpenYrPurse was still run by one person, they later joined and combined their efforts with the collective that ran another account called Funds4Caregivers as I discussed in chapter 2, the person administering the Open Yr Purse Instagram account posted that they were taking a break. In the post the administrator shares that they will be deleting messages received between September 4th and September 6th:

I attempted one ill-fated break a few weeks back and returned to over 50 DMS that took a considerable period to catch up to. For that reason, any requests received in the above time period will be deleted - I do not want to return to a back log of requests, you may resume submissions on Monday.

The post goes on to plug the Nap Ministry, an account run by Tricia Hersey, author of *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto*. Hersey and the Nap Ministry advocate for rest as a way for people, Black women in particular, to liberate themselves from hustle culture, and the compulsory productivity of capitalism and anti-Black racism. Hersey's work highlights the links between digital labour, which encourages the subsumption of people's social lives into the value production of capitalism, and gendered and racialized labour, particularly the labour of Black women (Hersey, 2023). By referencing Hersey in their post about taking a break, the administrator, who in other posts identifies themselves as a Black person, reminds us of the toll that the labour of administering digitally mediated mutual aid can take. Both the Covid-19 pandemic and the uprisings of 2020 made clear to the world that certain bodies, primarily poor, Black, Indigenous and racialized bodies were disposable (Sirleaf, 2021). While mutual aid, including OpenYrPurse, exists in resistance to capitalism, white supremacy, and anti-Blackness

and the logics that make poor, Black and racialized people disposable (Firth, 2020; Mochama, 2020; Spade, 2020), this does not in itself prevent it from being exhausting work.

In the previous chapter, I discussed how the rhythms of digital media and the biopolitical economy of time make it incredibly difficult to sustain the work of digitally mutual aid over time. For administrators, like the author of the post above, who ran the OpenYrPurse account alone for months in 2020, the realities of this care labour took a real toll. They experienced exhaustion and emotional distress that serves as evidence not only of the difficulty of care work, but also of the political and technosocial dimensions of the work of digitally mediated mutual aid. This chapter draws on my review of both CareMongering-TO and OpenYrPurse, as well as my interview with Julia, one of the OpenYrPurse organizers. It directly examines the labour of administrating digitally mediated mutual aid, putting it in the context of broader conversations about digital labour. I begin with a brief discussion of labour in the digital economy, discussing the concept of immaterial labour and the debates whether social media use constitutes exploited labour. I lay this out not because I intend to weigh in on this question in this chapter, but because I hope to highlight the importance of taking the conversation beyond this question when it comes to understanding digitally mediated care labour. I follow this with a discussion of race and gender in techno-labour, connecting the work of OpenYrPurse and CareMongering-TO admins to a long history of reliance on feminized and racialized labour in the production and maintenance of information and communication technology. I argue that this helps us to understand the work of the mostly queer, femme and racialized people who administrated and moderated mutual aid pages and groups as not only emotional and embodied, but also shaped by race and gender. Finally, I discuss the influence of platform visibility on the work of digitally mediated mutual aid. I argue that navigating the logics of visibility created additional affective

labour for admins and moderators as they confronted the limits of visibility as a political strategy and tried to protect those seeking mutual aid from the damaging effects of hypervisibility.

Labour in the digital economy

While a lot has been written about the shifts in labour in the digital economy, this scholarship has rarely attended to race, gender and embodied experience. Labour in the digital economy is often described in relation to broader economic shifts from an industrial economy where material products are the dominate output, to one dominated by intellectual or informational labour. In 1996, before the internet had been widely adopted, the Italian autonomist theorist Maurizio Lazzarato was already using the term “immaterial labour” to describe these shifts. He argued that one consequence of these shifts would be an increased role for activities that had not previously been considered work, for example the production of norms, values, tastes and public opinion, in the production of commodities (Lazzarato, 1996). Another consequence of the rise of immaterial labour is the commodification of more and more of our social and emotional lives. Value is increasingly extracted from the reproductive, social and emotional aspects of life, and leisure and work become harder to distinguish (Hardt, 1999; Lazzarato, 1996). Michael Hardt has characterized this as “the social factory” in which the whole of the human experience becomes subject to the systems of economic production (Hardt, 1999)⁴. For Hardt, while this represents an extension of capitalism’s reach into our lives, it also

⁴ Hardt acknowledges that this is not an entirely new terrain for capitalism and specifically points to feminist analyses of reproductive labour and caring labour as helpful to understanding the affective component of immaterial labour. He argues that this type of labour is immaterial in the sense that its primary products are immaterial, affects and relationships.

creates new opportunities for resistance. These opportunities, he argues, arise from the fact that this form of labour creates new social relations and subjectivities, allowing the production of what he calls “biopower from below” (Hardt, 1999, p. 98). This work on immaterial labour has not, however, analyzed the ways that these shifts are shaped by race and gender or experienced differently by women, racialized, and other marginalized people.

The rise of the internet and social media has led to an ongoing debate amongst scholars about how to conceptualize the value produced by “digital labour”. These scholars provide competing theories for how social media, and creative and communicative labour done on the internet generates value for the companies that own social media platforms and profit off of our internet activities (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012; Fuchs, 2014a) (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012; Fuchs, 2014a). Building on autonomist theories of immaterial labour, some have argued that this value is generated through the exploitation of the free labour of those who create and engage with online content (Fuchs, 2014a; Terranova, 2000). They have discussed the increasingly blurry boundary between work and leisure, and debated whether the fact that this labour is unpaid, while still producing value for another, necessarily makes it exploitative (Andrejevic, 2010; Terranova, 2000). To try to explain how labour can be at once pleasurable and exploitative, feminist media scholar Kylie Jarrett has drawn an analogy to reproductive labour. She argues that looking at “women’s work” offers a pathway for understanding how digital labour might be exploitative, even as it is done out of love, passion, pleasure, or for its use value for the labourer and their family or community (Jarrett, 2014). Ursula Huws has made the case that this focus on labour reflects a failure to look at the other forms of capital accumulation that might be better suited to explain the economic relations of the digital economy. She instead proposes that social media platforms charge rents to advertisers for our attention, using the

analogue of billboards in high traffic areas that companies pay rent to use for their advertisements (Huws, 2014).

None of these frameworks are sufficient for understanding the stress and exhaustion experienced by administrators of digitally mediated mutual aid. While theories of immaterial labour and social media labour often turn towards reproductive labour as a model, they do not regularly engage with the use of digital media for care itself, or with the work that goes into caring in social media spaces. Moreover, they do not engage with the ways that race and gender intersect with these economic shifts or the experience of performing care labour in a digitally mediated world. In this chapter, I argue that the work of administering digitally mediated mutual is not immaterial, but is instead emotional, embodied, racialized and gendered labour. The work of administering mutual aid is clearly care or reproductive labour in that it involves both directly caring for people and facilitating care between others. As Huws writes, reproductive labour also includes the tasks “that help to produce the solidaristic bonds that may be necessary for survival in times of crisis” (Huws, 2014, p. 170). In the next section I explore the connection between this digitally mediated care labour, and other forms of racialized and gendered care and techno labour.

Race and Gender in Digital/Care work

Techno-labour has long relied on a racialized and feminized workforce, and on the reproduction of ideas about both the race and gender of their workforces. In “Indigenous Circuits: Navajo Women and the Racialization of Early Electronic Manufacture”, Lisa Nakamura writes about the ways that early circuit manufacturers relied not only on the labour of Navajo women, but also on narratives that connected circuit manufacturing to these women’s affective

and reproductive labour. Their promotional materials connected circuitry to Navajo quilt making and reproduced racialized and gendered ideas about the docility and dextrousness of these women in order to normalize their exploitation (Nakamura, 2014). Craig Robertson and Venus Green make similar arguments about file clerks and Bell telephone operators, respectively (Green, 2001; Robertson, 2021). Both industries, as precursors to more contemporary communication and information labour, relied on gendered stereotypes about friendliness and docility, and blurred the lines between information and communication labour and gendered care labour. Unlike circuitry, these jobs were largely available to native-born white women, and this too contributed to racialized ideas about respectability and gender (Green, 2001; Robertson, 2021). Contemporary call centres also rely heavily on gendered labour that is also frequently outsourced this labour to workers in the global south (Fuchs, 2014b), as does the contemporary production of computer hardware (Nakamura, 2015).

The work of moderating and administrating these groups and pages is a form of digital labour that, like these other forms of digital labour, is both gendered and racialized. In “The Unwanted Labour of Social Media”, Lisa Nakamura discusses the “labour performed by women of colour, queer and trans people, and racial minorities who call out, educate, protest and design around toxic social environments in digital media” (2015, p. 106). She shows that while this labour is distinct from that of the majority women of colour workforce that produces the hardware of digital technology, it can similarly be understood as a way of pushing the labour of making and sustaining platforms onto a low or unpaid feminized workforce. Volunteer moderation labour creates value for platforms by producing content that draws users to the platform and makes the platforms safer and more appealing for others. At the same time, those doing this moderating labour bear the brunt of harassment and accusations of censorship,

resulting in exhaustion and burnout (Nakamura, 2015). Like the moderation that Nakamura discusses, the work of administrating digitally mediated mutual aid for CareMongering-TO, OpenYrPurse and CJTO was largely done by queer and trans people, and women of colour. I will discuss more below how this influenced their experience administrating and moderating mutual aid.

This type of labour has continuities not only with techno labour, but also with the challenges of offline reproductive labour. In their article “The Digital Afterlives of ‘This Bridge called my back’”, Nakamura and Cassius Adair write about the circulation of, and commentary on “this Bridge Called my Back”, a seminal work of intersectional, feminist scholarship, on the microblogging site Tumblr. Writing about this commentary and the labour of circulating this text, they state that: “the unrewarded extraction of communicative labor in digital contexts only accelerates the norms of labor theft under which women of color have long suffered.” (Adair & Nakamura, 2017, p. 264). They build on Angela McRobbie’s feminist analysis of immaterial labour to demonstrate that these dynamics can take shape even when labour is devoted to liberatory projects. McRobbie writes that the culture of multi-tasking, long-hours culture, and passion in work that pervades immaterial, and digital labour, has long been the default for feminized labour. This even extends to resistant labour like that devoted to feminist publishing houses and child-care co-ops (McRobbie, 2010). Similarly, Adair and Nakamura argue that the harassment experienced by moderators and those creating digital educational content echoes the racial and gender violence that racialized have been subjected to when performing care work, especially in the white households (Adair & Nakamura, 2017). As Sadiyaa Hartman writes in the *Belly of the World*, Black women have often been tasked with providing reproducing labours for white children and families. These experiences, whether under slavery or in contemporary low-

waged jobs, are fraught with abuse (Hartman, 2016). The labour of administrating and moderating digitally mediated mutual aid also includes many of the challenges present in this care labour and techno-labour.

The labour of administrating digitally mediated mutual aid

The work of digitally mediated mutual aid is hard, exhausting work, especially for those who dedicate large amounts of time to administration and moderation of social media groups and pages. By the fall of 2020, administrators of these mutual aid projects were expressing a sense of exhaustion and a need for rest. The admins of OpenYrPurse posted several times while the group was active to update followers about administrators taking breaks or scaling back their activities. Sometimes admins shared that they would be taking a few days off, while at others they shared that admins would only respond to messages a few days of the week. These posts reflect the ongoing struggle with exhaustion that admins dealt with. Kipp and Hawkin noted similar challenges for the CareMongering organizers they interviewed. Many reflected on the demands to respond immediately and jump into conversations when things were getting heated (Kipp & Hawkins, 2022). In the CareMongering-TO group on August 5th, 2020, the admins posted a “roll call” with a request for feedback. This post acknowledged the “bumpy road” the group had been on as “we find our voice” and the exhaustion that everyone was feeling as they continued to survive with access to few resources, to process all the information coming their way and to care for each other. Many of the comments in response to the post read, simply “I’m still here”, acknowledging both a deep exhaustion and a stubborn insistence on continuing to show up and connect with others. This post at once acknowledges the physical and emotional exhaustion

brought on by caring during a pandemic, and the continued value that being part of CareMongering-TO offered. In general, the continued work of engaging with mutual aid was wearing down people's stamina.

The labour of administrating/organizing digitally mediated mutual aid is emotional and embodied and reflects the gendered and raced histories of care labour and administrative labour. In their article, *From the nice work to the hard work: "troubling" community-based CareMongering during the Covid-19 Pandemic*, Amy Kipp and Roberta Hawkins argue that the digitally mediated community care that took place in CareMongering groups across Ontario throughout the early pandemic demonstrate many of the same ambivalences of offline care work. Drawing on digital ethnography of multiple CareMongering groups, they argue for a view of care that moves beyond simple celebration to see the often grueling and inequitable nature of care for those who receive care and those who perform care-work (Kipp & Hawkins, 2022). They draw on extensive feminist scholarship on care and care work that argues for care that centres solidarity, reciprocity and collective action towards creating a more just world for all (The Care Collective, 2020; Tronto, 2017). This requires us to understand that care looks different for different bodies and different contexts, especially those bodies that diverge from the able bodied, white, hetero norm (Mingus, 2011; Murphy, 2015; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). Kipp and Hawkins respond to a call from Parvati Raghuram to "trouble" care by paying attention to "uncomfortable relations" (2022, p. 5). This call draws attention to care as a politicized practice that cannot be separated from sometimes uncomfortable engagement with race, gender, class, disability, and other systems of power.

Digitally Mediated Mutual aid evoked many conversations that troubled care and highlighted "uncomfortable relations", often requiring intervention from moderators and admins.

The work of these moderators and admins was guided by a commitment on the part of moderators to critically engage with structures of power such as race, gender, class, and ability that shape the way care is provided in society. Kipp and Hawkins write about many fraught conversations that took place on topics like rent strikes and food insecurity, and that involved discussions of racism, privilege, and colonization. The groups that they observed varied greatly in their approach to these discussions, with some actively discouraging them. However, they note that in groups where they did take place it was often because moderators and admins worked hard, chiming in, deleting comments and posts, and trying to guide the conversations in productive directions (Kipp & Hawkins, 2022). In my own review of CareMongering-TO, I similarly observed that conversations around rent and around disability and welfare payments frequently involved disagreements that required moderation. However, they could also open productive discourse as people shared their lived experiences and discussed the impact of these systems on the most marginalized. For example, in CareMongering-TO this included admin posts that explicitly discouraged Canada Day celebration posts, opting instead for posts that drew attention to Canadian colonial violence against Indigenous people. It was also reflected in admin posts that ask people not to post stigmatizing things about Ontario Disability Support Payments (ODSP) and Ontario Works (OW), the equivalent of welfare in the province. The admins did not shy away from expressing political opinions and did not discourage conversations that moved from direct aid requests into critical engagement with structural roots of people's struggles. OpenYrPurse admins also had to engage with disagreements and hateful comments. This was particularly apparent on posts that referred to redistribution or reparations, language that shows up frequently on their page. Those running the page created a follower mandate, and according to Julia, the organizer I interviewed, would remove hateful comments whenever they could. At

the same time, Julia spoke about the importance of having compassion for those requesting aid even when they were abrasive in their private messages to the group. In their effort to create “safe”, welcoming environments, on an often-hostile internet, admins and moderators engaged in difficult, emotional, technological, and political work to address the ways that care is shaped by power in a white supremacist, capitalist society.

For administrators, their own identities shaped their experience of moderation labour, including the emotional impact of dealing with uncomfortable relations. An example from Julia helps to highlight this. One difficult moment for the OpenYrPurse collective arose as the group decided how to respond to a “b-list” celebrity who reshared one of their mutual aid request posts. This celebrity had been in the news because of their involvement in sexual violence, raising concern about allowing OpenYrPurse to be associated with this individual. The decision was ultimately made to block the celebrity in question, a decision that I will discuss in more detail in the next section. However, reflecting on this experience Julia discussed the impact of moderating these pages more broadly:

Yeah, and it was that type of, those types of conversations that were really triggering for all the volunteers as well, 'cause all of us were, like all of us were kids, first of all kids at the time, we were like early twenties or in our teens, like mostly university students, mostly marginalized people in some way or another. And so it was like all of the content was triggering to us. (Julia, August 4, 2023, Personal Communication)

As she notes, Open Yr Purse was moderated by a group of young volunteers, many of them with marginalized identities. People who identified as queer and trans and as women and racialized are often the initiators of mutual aid projects, or otherwise take initiative to care for their communities (Mehreen & Gray-Donald, 2018; Mochama, 2020), and these digitally mediated projects are not different. The impact of moderating these conversations falls heavily on those

who hold these identities, both because they are more likely to understand and not ignore these difficult relations but also because they may echo their own painful personal experiences.

When not sharing is caring

Social media platforms structure political norms in ways that deepen the challenges faced by those moderating and administering digitally mediated mutual aid groups and pages. In “Sky High: Platforms and the Feminist Politics of Visibility”, Rianka Singh and Banet-Weiser argue that while social media platforms have made feminist politics more visible, they have also limited feminist politics centered around representation and visibility.⁵ This focus on visibility fails to account for the ways in which being visible is neither straightforward, nor straightforwardly empowering. Some bodies, especially racialized bodies, are more likely to go unseen, or to be rendered hypervisible to technologies of surveillance (Benjamin, 2019; Singh & Banet-Weiser, 2022). Moreover, visibility can force to be visible in particular ways that fit expected narratives, while having one’s body or one’s pain put on display can be objectifying and reductive (Singh & Banet-Weiser, 2022; Tuck, 2009). In “Resistance in a Minor Key”, Singh writes about the kinds of resistance that are necessary “...in this age of amplification that has led to the celebration of platforms as tools for making voices heard, visibility becomes antithetical to the survival and care of particular communities” (Singh, 2020b). The forms of resistance she highlights focus on care, survival, and refusal. For administrators of digitally mediated mutual aid pages and groups, the care labour they performed often included finding ways to refuse

⁵ Singh’s work on feminist politics and social media platforms goes beyond analysis of visibility, outlining what she calls platform logics of elevation and amplification (Singh, 2021). A full exploration of these platform logics is beyond the scope of this chapter which will focus on visibility as just one aspect.

visibility as the sole mode of resistance. While circulation and visibility of posts was essential for mutual aid requesters to have their needs met, administrators developed strategies and made difficult decisions to resist visibility when it conflicted with their understanding of what it meant to care for their communities, especially for the most marginalized members.

Throughout this thesis I have discussed many of the interventions that admins made to create safety or provide care for people participating in Mutual Aid. In Chapter one, I delved into the many challenges of protecting people's privacy within Facebook's architectures of publicity. As I discussed in that chapter, group admins posted a poll and the group had a heated discussion through comments about whether to change the group's privacy settings after the Children's Aid Society (CAS) was called or threatened against members of CareMongering-TO. Many people who commented on or voted in the poll expressed a desire for the group to stay public. In the comments they cited a need to make the group visible, and therefore accessible to the greatest number of people possible. Though this may have partially been informed by a mistaken fear that a private group would be completely invisible to all non-members, rather than simply restricting the visibility of the member list and posts, the divide demonstrates that the group was actively engaged in defining the role of visibility in care on digital media. Admins both moderated this conversation and tried to provide additional information about Facebook, and about why people were deeply concerned by the threats of CAS involvement. These calls are just one example of the heightened risk of visibility for marginalized people, and in particular Black and Indigenous families, demonstrating the way it can invite surveillance. With the support of many members, the admins made the decision to center the needs of vulnerable children and families seeking aid, over the ability to reach as large an audience as possible. The group decided to change from a public Facebook group to a private one. A private group would still be visible on Facebook by

searching, but the posts and the list of members would be invisible to non-members. To join a private group, you must request to join and have your request approved by one of the group's admins (Facebook, 2022). The hope was that in this way, they could limit the number of people who could report other group members to the CAS. This process demonstrates that caring for those in mutual aid groups can mean refusing Facebook's platform defaults and choosing to make the posts visible to fewer people. Coming to this understanding required work on the part of group members, and administrators. Group admins and moderators spent time orchestrating this poll, balancing the divergent opinions voiced by group members, and ensuring that the conversation continued to centre the needs of the most vulnerable group members.

The limits of a politics of visibility are also evident in the choices that those administering digital mutual aid made when creating engaging content. This was most important on Instagram where account administrators, rather than individual group members, decided how to craft posts. They had to figure out how to tell people's difficult stories respectfully, while still generating the attention needed to raise the necessary funds. Further, on Instagram, these posts remained public, and could circulate widely, unlike in Facebook groups that later became private. In chapter two, I discussed the need for posts to draw people's attention in relation to both the delays and uncertainty generated by the Instagram algorithm, and to the urgency that posts tried to communicate to viewers. I quoted Julia's reflection on how creating engaging content leads to a focus on emotionally difficult, "guilt-inducing" content.

So on Instagram, ... your post needs to be eye-catching. It needs to be like, this feels really bad to say because it is really icky, but it needs to be guilt inducing. Like you need to ... invoke some sort of emotional response in the person who's reading the post for them to actually sit down and read it because there is so much content on your timeline that if something is not immediately interesting, you will scroll past it. Like I do it all the time. I'm sure everyone in the entire world does this. If something doesn't immediately catch my attention, I will scroll right past it. So, you need to kind of do that, which feels really, really

icky and gross and not fun. And not like, *when you do, when you kind of like trauma display someone's like real issues I don't know if it helps the person who's requesting the mutual aid as much as it does. Like it provides enough people to see it for them to get enough money to get what they need. But the thought of the emotional impact that that has on the person, like that really was hard for me to get past.* (Julia, August 4th, 2023, Personal Communication, Italics added)

In this quote, Julia highlights a key tension she observed between the care that people need, and the way that social media platform's function. It is crucial for these posts to be shared, ensuring people see them and give money. However, the demand that people requesting mutual aid display their trauma and hardship to elicit an emotional response can be objectifying and harmful. Designing posts that represent the pain and suffering of marginalized people, in the case of OpenYrPurse mostly Black, and Indigenous, queer, and trans people, so it can be viewed, shared, and commented on by others is fraught. In addition to potentially adding to hyper surveillance, hypervisibility and violence, turning these difficult experiences into sharable content can be deeply objectifying, can be painful for others who share these experiences, and can inadvertently normalize this suffering.

The demand on racialized and marginalized people to represent their traumas when seeking recognition, and reparation for the harms they have suffered can reproduce those harms. As Eve Tuck writes in *Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities*, racialized and colonized communities are often over researched, using methodologies that try to display, represent and evidence the ways that they are damaged in order to gain reparations. However, Tuck argues, this process only replicates the harm, perpetually representing these communities as broken victims, and defining them by their oppression (Tuck, 2009). Similarly, many scholars have made the case that the continuous representation and circulation of Black death and Black pain, even when aimed at creating awareness or empathy, can perpetuate white supremacy. The opportunities

created through social media for people to circulate their own media and images has allowed Black people to record, recount and provide video and photographic testimony of their experience of white supremacy, even its most brutal manifestations. At the same time, some have begun to ask how this circulation can create an environment where Black suffering is hard to escape, where Black people bearing witness to this suffering are reminded again and again of the fear and pain of living in an anti-Black society (Johnson, 2015; Scott, 2022). And where this pain can be normalized or commercialized through its circulation (Scott, 2022; Sobande, 2021). As Francesca Sobande writes in “Spectacularized and Branded: Digital (Re)presentations of Black People and Blackness”:

Media content depicting the everyday lives of Black people and their experiences of pain, even, death, is often spectacularized online by individuals and institutions who post, share, remix, reframe and comment on such content in ways embedded in the anti-Black market logics of digital virality, clickbait culture, and the clout that may be afforded to brands that allude to their interest in Black and racial justice work but without substantially supporting such endeavours. (Sobande, 2021, p. 138)

Here Sobande notes that Black pain is subsumed within the market logics of digital media that push towards endless circulation, representation, and visibility. In this context, the question of how to share difficult moments for the purpose of requesting aid is one that, understandably, comes with discomfort, as Julia expressed. Digital media’s focus on circulation, virality, and visibility can lead to an endless circulation of pain that re-affirms rather than dislodges anti-Blackness, and by extension transphobia, anti-Indigeneity. Those administering digitally mediated mutual aid accounts face the contradictions and the emotional weight of decisions about representation.

The administrators of OpenYrPurse adopted many strategies to try to mitigate these potential harms, not all of them constitute a refusal, but all demonstrate care for the individuals

whose requests they shared, and an effort to wrangle with the tensions I've laid out here. For example, their submission mandate specifically notes that while people are welcome to share what they would like, they do not need to share details of their trauma for their requests to be taken seriously. They tried to encourage people to tell their stories the way they wanted to and to share only what they wanted. This strategy has limitations in that it cannot remove the implicit pressure to tell a story that will circulate widely and draw attention of social media, but it does show that OpenYrPurse admins were trying to make space for requesters to refuse this pressure. Another example is the way the posts on the OpenYrPurse page use bright, often playful colours, and images of smiling people, and describe people relationally as beloved community members, mothers, fathers, and caregivers. They also often include content warnings on the first slide, or above the main text of the slide, and in the caption. For instance, the first slide of a post from Feb 13th, 2021 is lilac with bold black block text that gives a "Severe content warning" for discussion of shooting and misogynoir on the next slide. The same content warning is repeated at the top of the caption. All these measures demonstrate an awareness and a desire to find a balance between drawing people's caring attention and solidarity towards urgent aid requests, and not exploiting people's trauma or putting them in harm's way. These administrators continue to do the hard work of mitigating the drive towards hypervisibility. The pressure to put people on display in ways that are objectifying and damaged-centered are at odds with caring for the community, and thus require additional care and attention from the administrators themselves.

Administrators also considered this double bind of visibility when making decisions about how to deal with unwanted attention and hateful comments. In the first half of this chapter, I discussed the way that moderators and administrators removed hate speech and engaged in political education to create pockets of safety online. Removing hate speech and blocking the

people who posted it was the default for administrators of OpenYrPurse. In my conversation with Julia, she explained: “We would block people. Like if people were posting hate comments, we would just block them, 'cause it was easier and safer for the requesters” (Julia, Personal Communication, 2023). This was also clear in the highlight titled “b4 you follow” where the administrator writes “Do not argue with detractors in comments, it can subject people to triggering rhetoric, report and block and I will try to be swift in purging these, apologies to anyone who sees them before I can, feel free to bring it to my attention.” Here, whatever attention might be drawn because of engagement from people with hateful views is understood as less important than the continued safety of those engaged in mutual aid through the page. However, not all decisions about who to block were so straightforward, including the decision to block the B-list celebrity I mentioned earlier. Unlike generic hateful comments, having a post shared by a person with a relatively large following had the potential to bring a lot of new attention, and new funds, to that post and to the page. However, it could also link OpenYrPurse to a celebrity who was involved in violent behaviour. As Julia explained,

Even if the repost was with good intentions, they were trying to get the post out there to more people. But it just felt so gross that we were like, absolutely not, we can't do this. Yeah, because also, I think we didn't want to be associated with someone who was like that (involved in sexual assault). I think I remember like the ultimate decision to block that person came from us thinking about, okay, this person has been in the news recently for being involved in a sexual assault. If I was a sexual assault survivor who needed to request mutual aid, would I go to a collective that has been reposted by an abuser? And the answer is probably not, because you're trying to distance yourself as far from that type of violence as possible. And so we ended up blocking that person despite them posting it, making the post go viral, because we wanted to still be available to everyone. Yeah, that was a hard decision though. (Julia, August 4th, 2023, Personal Communication)

According to Julia, this decision took a three-to-four-hour meeting, not to mention the emotional toll on administrators whose own identities made them particularly sensitive to the impact of this

kind of violence. While the attention would potentially be beneficial not only to the post that had been shared, but to all the posts on OpenYrPurse, it also could make the page seem supportive of the celebrity in question. This in turn could make the page less safe for survivors of sexual violence. Decisions like this to prioritize the safety of vulnerable community members over the possibility of increased visibility for the page created additional labour and emotional strain for admins trying to create community-oriented mutual aid projects.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have remarked on the ways that people engaged in digitally mediated mutual aid, especially moderators and administrators, worked hard to care for each other. In this chapter, I turned towards that labour directly, trying to understand this labour in relation to both digital labour and reproductive labour. I have explored some of the forms that this administrative labour takes, from moderating discussions, and deleting hateful or dangerous comments, to designing posts and producing educational content and guidelines aimed at making mutual aid possible. While I place this labour in the context of conversations surrounding immaterial and digital labour, understanding this labour also requires an understanding that what it means to care for people is shaped by their race, gender, and relationship to power.

Administrators engaged in emotional and embodied work and required continual reflection about how to mediate relationships amongst those participating and mitigate some of the challenges of working within an environment premised on heightened circulation and visibility. This chapter leaves open many questions about the relationship between digital care labour, and the administration of digitally mediated mutual aid, particularly in regard to the relationship between

this labour and the social media platforms where it takes place. The role of refusal in digitally mediated care also needs further examination. Further research on digitally mediated care labour, including mutual aid has the potential to add to discussion about labour and resistance in the digital economy.

Chapter Five: Conclusion: Mutual aid will never die

It might seem that the obvious place to conclude this thesis is with the observation that all three of the projects I focused on throughout this research have been on indefinite hiatus from mutual aid activities since 2021. The CareMongering-TO Facebook group and Open Yr Purse Instagram each went on hiatus for similar reasons, limited capacity and persistent exhaustion on the part of administrators, though Climate Justice Toronto continues to exist as a climate justice group with an active Instagram account, they ceased their mutual aid activities because they were unable to resolve certain questions about safety and vetting among other issues. Both Dani and Julia expressed an interest in finding ways to continue the digitally mediated mutual aid their groups had started, however they also both admitted that issues around the level of work and the suitability of Instagram would need to be resolved. Other research and reporting suggest that many other, though not all mutual aid initiatives started during the pandemic struggled to remain active as time went on (Kipp & Hawkins, 2022; McGinn, 2023). I have explored some of the reasons that this may have happened throughout this thesis. Especially the sheer level of work that went into maintaining the safety and functionality of these pages, often against the grain of platform's default publicity, temporalities, and hypervisibility. There is also the fact that the world has changed since the first year and a half of the pandemic, and lifting lockdowns, returns to work and the resumption of "normal" functioning of society give people less time to devote to mutual aid, and for many make it less top of mind.

However, when I look around at the world, at my social media accounts and at the continued activities of political/community organizers, I know that this is simply not the full story. While it no longer draws the attention it did throughout the early days of the pandemic, the use of digital

media for mutual aid continues. On Instagram and Facebook, and through messaging apps like WhatsApp, Signal and Telegram, requests for mutual aid continue to circulate, often from groups or individuals that also use their page for something other than mutual aid and are posting on behalf of a community member or friend. Nearly every day I see requests for funds or supplies for local community members facing eviction, grieving family members, experiencing unemployment, or seeking health care (including gender affirming care). These kinds of requests are both local and international and include both direct donations to individuals and donations to projects set up by and for the communities they seek to care for. I see fundraisers for people whose family members are stuck in Gaza, and for mutual aid initiatives operating on the ground in Congo and Sudan. Sometimes the fundraisers focus on raising funds to pay the legal fees or bail funds for those facing criminalization, especially for their political activities. As I have argued elsewhere in this thesis, this way of using social media and digital media was not born during the pandemic, and it will not disappear even as the pandemic is normalized.

As I write this I am also watching on social media as student encampments at the University of Toronto and beyond calling for divestment from genocide and apartheid expertly use a whole roster of digital tools to coordinate supplies and support from the broader community. I am reminded that now more than ever, there are endless crises that demand a collective response, and demand that we find ways to care for each other, both with and against the logics of social media platforms. The questions I have raised in this thesis about privacy, publicity and visibility seem particularly relevant given the heightened surveillance, doxing, and online harassment of Palestinians and their supporters (Chatelle, 2024; Chaudhary, 2023; Gupta, 2024; Valle, 2024). I am reminded that caring in times like these often means choosing not to share certain photos or certain plans or using pseudonyms when doing online scheduling meal delivery for an

encampment. The biased coverage of the ongoing genocide by mainstream media outlets (Ali & Johnson, 2024; Innes & Paling, 2023; Paling, 2023) has made the importance of social media for sharing counternarratives ever more evident. And at the same moment, evidence of suppression and censorship by social media platforms that demonstrates the power that these companies have and the lack of transparency that exists about their business practices and algorithms (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Siddiqui et al., 2023). The role of social media platforms in enabling resistance, and in facilitating radical politics is never simple or straightforward.

Social media will continue to play an important and conflicted role in social movements, and in our efforts to care for one another. Throughout this thesis I have approached digitally mediated mutual aid through the lens of platform studies and feminist media studies. Platform studies shows us that the materials and structures of technology matter to how they shape our experiences, our economy and our politics. Further, platform studies has repeatedly shown that these technologies are themselves shaped by cultural, political and economic forces (Montfort & Bogost, 2009; van Dijck et al., 2018). At the same time, feminist media studies have called attention to the way that technology is shaped by systems of power, and the ways that race, gender, sexuality, class and ability continue to influence technologies structures and its influence on our lives (Benjamin, 2019; Singh, 2020a; Wajcman, 2010). Researching digitally mediated mutual aid and care opens new questions that I have only begun to address about how technology influences everything from our experiences of intimacy, to time, to labour.

Throughout this research I have been continuously reminded that social media platforms cannot be understood outside of the context of political and economic context, and specifically, the way that race and gender shape the embodied experiences of those building relationships of care in this digitally mediated world. I understand digitally mediated mutual aid as an extension

of a much longer history of community care and survival practices that exist in resistance to capitalism, white supremacy, and state violence. The work of mutual aid and community care has often emerged most strongly in response to crises and massive disasters, and this moment was no different (Firth, 2020; Sandberg, 2020; Spade, 2020). The groups I focused on in this thesis, among many others, embraced digital and social media technology in response to the technological and biological constraints of the pandemic moment, but their work still reflects the challenges faced by all communities as they work to care for each other against the odds. How these groups used social media can teach us a lot about how we might resist and survive in a digitally mediated world.

Limitations

This research is only an initial exploration of these themes, drawing evidence from just three mutual aid projects that started on social media in 2020 to respond to the global Covid-19 pandemic. While I chose projects that demonstrate the use of two different platforms (Facebook, Instagram), and included one account (CJTO) that started before the pandemic and posted things other than mutual aid, these projects cannot stand in for the wide variety of platforms and initiatives that existed and still exist. A more specific look at one account or group with time for more interviews, including interviews of participants who did not take on moderation or administration might give a clearer understanding of the ways that a specific platform shapes mutual aid. However, in general more work is needed to understand all the different ways that groups used digital media to care for each other and their communities. Similarly interviewing people who played a wider variety of roles would likely help to understand how everyone, not

just the administrators, experience digital mutual aid. I have tried to surmise this through analysis of people's posts, but speaking to people directly would give more insight.

I hope this research makes space for more reflection forms of resistance and online political action that centre care, and on the use of digital media for care, survival and community building. The prevalence of mutual aid and digitally mediated mutual aid during the pandemic has created ample opportunity for research on these topics. Mutual aid and care on social media raise questions not only about what it means, and what it takes to care for people in a world of platforms, they also force us to ask different questions about how social media shapes our relationships, politics and society. Mutual aid is not only about surviving this current crisis, it is also about building the infrastructures and relationships necessary to transform society (Firth, 2020; Spade, 2020). As such, the use of social media for mutual aid raises important questions about the role of digital technology in building solidarities that will last through this crisis and the next.

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