REFLECTION HUMAN-ENVIRONMENT RELATIONS SCALE CARE EDUCATION
KNOWLEDGE INFRASTRUCTURE
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PLANETARY INTIMACY

Are we alone or together on this earth? As it undergoes the manifold transformations wrought by the climate crisis, for example, so too do notions of distance, proximity and intimacy become reconfigured, acquiring new resonances—and tensions—across scales. Reflecting on such shifting relations, in this essay Jamie Allen outlines how they underscore the urgent need to learn (or relearn) new forms of planetary intimacy; from the trust and vulnerability necessary for building networks of solidarity to rethinking space not as a homogeneous global grid but as an interconnected network of locales. Through such an approach, Allen suggests, the multiple distances—in terms of both geography and understanding—at play within the Anthropocene might be better apprehended.

“If you take a handkerchief and spread it out in order to iron it, you can see in it certain fixed distances and proximities. If you sketch a circle in one area, you can mark out nearby points and measure far-off distances. Then take the same handkerchief and crumple it, by putting it in your pocket. Two distant points suddenly are close, even superimposed. If, further, you tear it in certain places, two points that were close can become very distant.”

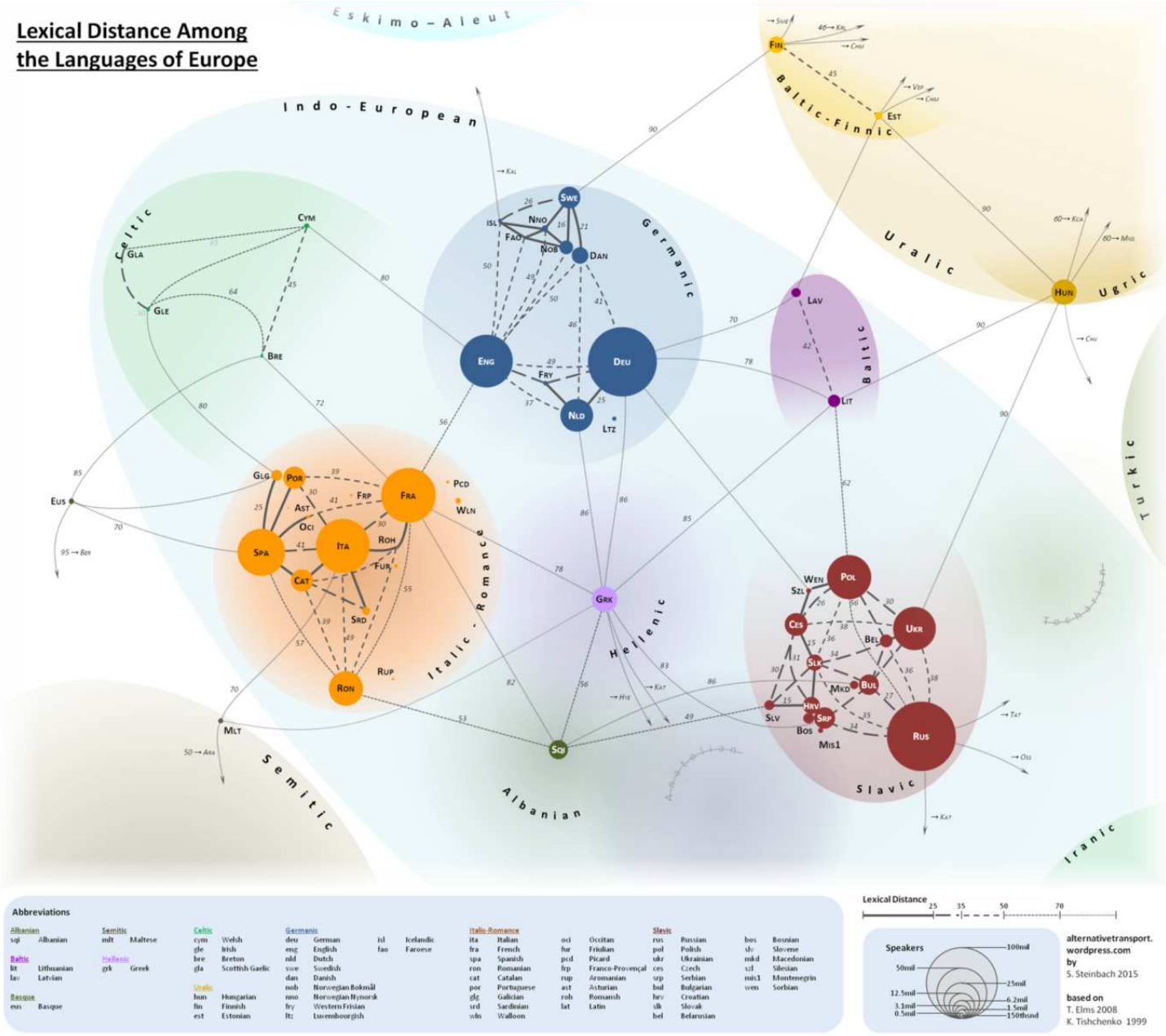
—Michel Serres [1]

“If we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away—and thus to think of it is already to transgress, for, in spite of our forays into what we render through metaphor, differently, as outer and inner space, it remains that what is above and beyond our own reach is not continuous with us as it is not, indeed, specifically discontinuous.”

—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak [2]

The shortest distance between two points is often unbearable.

—widely attributed to Charles Bukowski [3]



A diagram of lexical distances between the languages of Europe. The idea that documents, ideas or terms are closer or farther from one another is captured by the computational linguistics term “lexical distance,” a problematic and contested measure of the likeness or dissimilarity of meaning or semantic content. *Diagram by Stephan Steinbach, www.alternativetransport.wordpress.com, CC BY-SA 3.0 AT, original research and idea by Prof. Konstantin Tishchenko*

The In-Between Game

A favorite road trip or idle time game of mine is called the In-Between Game. The basic rules are maddeningly simple: two people pick a word or short phrase entirely at random (usually, but not necessarily, in the same language), and on the count of three, they say out loud the word(s) they have picked—kind of talking or shouting over one another. After this

initiating round, the players count to three again, blurting out a word that is, in some sense, *in between* the first two words. This procedure continues until the same exact word or phrase is spoken by both players, at which point, everybody wins.

What the In-Between Game immediately provokes, along with the mild repetitive frustration and giggling that good games often do, are debates and discussions about what "in between" could or might mean. How close is one idea, word, object, index, phrase, concept, phoneme, category, to another, and where, therefore, does a "middle" occur? It's a game "about" the fact that there are many different ways of measuring and calculating middles, just as there are countless ways we interpret, metaphorize, and enact the concept of distance. Alphabetic strategies are straightforward ("monkey" is obviously in between "apple" and "zebra" in English), as are certain kinds of spatial or geographic tactics (the United States of America lies between Canada and Mexico, and the mantel is between the crust and the core of the Earth). But what sits between "rain" and "eyesight"? What bifurcates "brown" and "mirror," or mediates "sand" and "love"? The answers to such questions are somehow both apparent and opaque, interpretational, rationally defensible, and intuitively somehow invaluable.

When you play this superb little game, you wind up making inferences about language and the ways in which we describe the world, but also about qualities of human beings and of intimate relationships. You better understand the fields or patterns of thought and emotion you apply to the world, however similarly or differently from another person. If two people were, for example, to count to three and on the first go-round pick precisely the same word—"grass," say—these two humans are more than likely soulmates, romantic or otherwise, and are psychically aligned in ways inexplicable to modern science. If, however, you were to play this game through a frustrating number of iterations (more than twenty seems to be an upper limit), never arriving near even a homonymous winning word, concept, phrase, or strategy, clearly you and your co-player are

incompatible. You “live on completely different planets” from one another; *entre nous* there clearly is no correspondence or correlation. The In-Between Game serves as a test of how close words and ideas are to the world, but also if people, perspectives, and ways of being and things are close to one another. It is a game that builds and generates intimacy,[4] played mostly while travelling—covering distance—that speaks to the numerous, complex, and kismetic, but also simple, banal, and circumstantial, ways that proximity and distance situate how we think about, feel our way around, and experience the world.

A photo of the Earth-moon system, by NASA’s OSIRIS-REx spacecraft. Earth’s only natural satellite, the moon, continuously spirals away at an average rate of about four centimeters per year, as detected by the Lunar Laser Ranging Experiment. This is approximately the same speed at which human fingernails grow. *Image courtesy NASA/Goddard/University of Arizona*

Where “we” are

There aren’t all that many moments in which “we” experience something, together. The use of the word “we” is often thought offensive for this reason, at least. “We” cannot and should not speak of the “unpredictable planetary conditions ‘we’ are ‘making,’”[5] any more than “we” can or should speak of having privileged ownership or control of “our” planet. Yet

inclusive rather than exclusive readings of that "broadened 'we', as collective subjects of natural history," [6] seem necessary to articulate, as we struggle to find ways to express the experience of a finite, planetary commons that do not fall into presumptuous and privileged modes of generalization or negation of difference, opacity, and alterity.

Starting around March 2020, "we"—by which I mean most living things susceptible to viruses—were thrust into new, collective understandings of what it means to confront common challenges against a finite (biological) materiality. We learned how to care and take responsibility for, to recoil from, to be present to, and to mourn with a *more planetary* community. The COVID-19 pandemic forced upon us experiences of interruption, cessation, death, and bereavement, as well as of hope, renewal, revelation, reconnection, and reflection. It has offered a kind of compulsory, planetary curriculum—that is, if we might turn our losses into lessons, as is said so well, often, and insightfully in hip-hop. [7] "We" are newly attentive to sustaining, material, nondeterministic yet necessarily biospheric essentials, affordances, and limits, as well as to the systems, modeling, and mathematics of planetary phenomena: "for the first time a broad public debate is showing us what exponential growth actually means." [8]

Among the things that the materiality, sociality, and politics of a pandemic seem to produce is a renewed sensitivity for closeness and distance, for new forms of both abstract solidarity and connected restraint, new senses of common purpose that say to our fellow humans, "I got ya." For many, this has been a period of immediate connections, responsibilities, and caring for others, reigniting modes of care and living that were perhaps previously overstepped or ignored—the way many of us lived pre-pandemic. Such connections, oddly, have also manifested through the restraint of self and others—eachprophylactic worn, flight or trip *not* taken, every check-in message sent to a potentially lonely or just bored friend, colleague, family member. In a strange, perhaps contradictory, way, a lesson of gifting empathy and closeness emerges from our willingness to

“keep our distance”—from one another, but also from other Earth beings. Although it seems to be true that even a permanent pandemic-style lockdown would not in itself “solve climate change,” moments arise in which the variables of personal concern and common purpose are included in the same equations, and now seems to be one of them. [9]

A contradictory assignment at the heart of the co-learning experiences that a planetwide viral entanglement has precipitated is that we must learn transformative intimacy as a collective lesson while remaining physically alone, apart, and withdrawn. Infection, hospitalization, death, test, and vaccine statistics shared online reinvigorate nationalism, populism, and competition, as we come to engage in the ever stranger competitive events of an epidemiological Olympics. Yet we are brought closer via these statistical syncopations; like punch-clock union laborers or day-traders, we “come to feel each other’s co-presence through temporal coordination, since everyone is simultaneously watching the evolution of the same indicators.” [10] Such data are produced by and reproduce connections between the “common-sense experiences of earthbound creatures,” [11] and between the Earth, the Anthropocene, and planetarity. They are diagrams and stories that frame images of the world, producing inaccessible and withdrawn understandings and far-off familiarities. [12]

Novelist Amitav Ghosh lauds Pope Francis’ 2015 communiqué *Laudato si’* as an image of the world that is “more than rational,” concluding as it does with an appeal for help and guidance outside of secular human thought and the teachings of the Church, in recognition of the limits and flailing instability of human endeavors, and how the human “is not only a freedom which he creates for himself. … He is spirit and will, but also nature.” [13] We might also posit images of the world that are held as “less than rational,” in the sense of a Hegelian teleology of mere nature that continues to be a means of dismissing, canceling, and violently excluding marginalized groups, [14] as anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena has written, by classifying ways of being into “the lower echelons of humanity due to their

alleged distance from historical consciousness, which in turn resulted from their proximity to nature." [15] What new abstract affinities might we compose that would be neither less than nor more than a rational determination or representation and that instead would allow for the change, custodianship, and continuous vigilance suggested by philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of planetarity—one that is "a species of alterity"? [16] What is a planetarity that is *intimated*, or as we shall develop here, a *planetary intimacy*, that communicates with "the sparest of signs and gestures" and "has the quality of eloquence"? [17] Popular non-fiction writer Ziyad Marar, trained in both psychology and philosophy, writes in the book *Intimacy* how intimate experiences require, similarly, "something less and more than full confidence" [18]: less than full confidence in the sense that intimate relations are risky and uncertain; more than, in that intimacy requires a generosity and trust that hopes, anticipates, and has faith in the possibility of a continued, perhaps infinite, process. The dominant framings of colonial rationalism, also by self-definition, are definitional and denominational and can only provide answers and pin things down, struggling to open room for faith, belief and radical unknowability. How could systematic or pragmatic knowledge systems renew intimacy between subjects and objects of investigation? Such intimacy may indeed be a way to approach things of Spivak's genus "alterity," leading to subjectivities and sensibilities that help us resist resource extraction in the service of continual accumulation.

The asymptotic and unrequited ways that rational science approaches planetarity may be part of why these pursuits so fervently seek to gather ever more data, with higher and higher resolution; inching ever closer to the Earth. Certain forms of planetary intimacy, for some, require that ever more attention, energy, labor, and technology be applied to measuring and rerendering it at ever higher resolution, such that a "vast posthuman assemblage of satellites, weather stations, computer simulations, researchers, mechanisms of international cooperation ... renders hyperobjects like climate change visible, sizable or calculable in the first

place.” [19] These vast, interconnected, and discontinuous infrastructures are among the ways we have devised to face, or embrace, Gaia. [20] John Beck and Ryan Bishop write how the current deployments of massive, cutting-edge, distributed networks that compose the sensing programs used by Earth system science are given especially corporeal names, like the Planetary Skin Institute (a Cisco Systems and NASA project) and Central Nervous System for the Earth (CeNSE, by Hewlett-Packard). [21]

That this kind of projected cybernetic familiarity might prey on desires for, or create, a dysfunctional global familiarity is not lost on Beck and Bishop: “The information generated by the Planetary Skin Institute could be used as the basis for resource futures investment, using the same real-time technologies to track environmental conditions and futures markets.” [22] The confidence and trust bestowed in science and technology could be tempered by the modern parable of the baby monitor: misuse of the data from our most intimate knowledge-practice technologies—such as video-based and internet-enabled baby monitors—thieves and con artists spy and prey on the domestic spaces of homes and on families. [23] Intimacies are not created equal in the communities, values, and value they serve, or purport to.

A satellite image of the African cities Brazzaville and Kinshasa, both of which lie downstream of Pool Malebo, a circular widening of the Congo river thirty kilometers in diameter. Brazzaville and Kinshasa are the world's closest national seats of government, which number around two hundred in total. These capitals—of the Republic of the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, respectively—are less than two kilometers from one another. Canberra, Australia, and Wellington, New Zealand, are the farthest apart, at a distance of more than 2,200 kilometers. *Image courtesy NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center, CC-BY-NC 2.0*

Two nanowires touching under an electron microscope, allowing the crystal lattice of atoms in both wires to be seen. Cold welding of ultrathin gold nanowires occurs when wires between three-billionths and ten-billionths of a meter wide are brought into close proximity. Wires at this scale join together when they come into contact; their atomic structures fuse, creating a weld without the need for heat. *Lou's clues lead to nano revelation, Rice University, 2010*

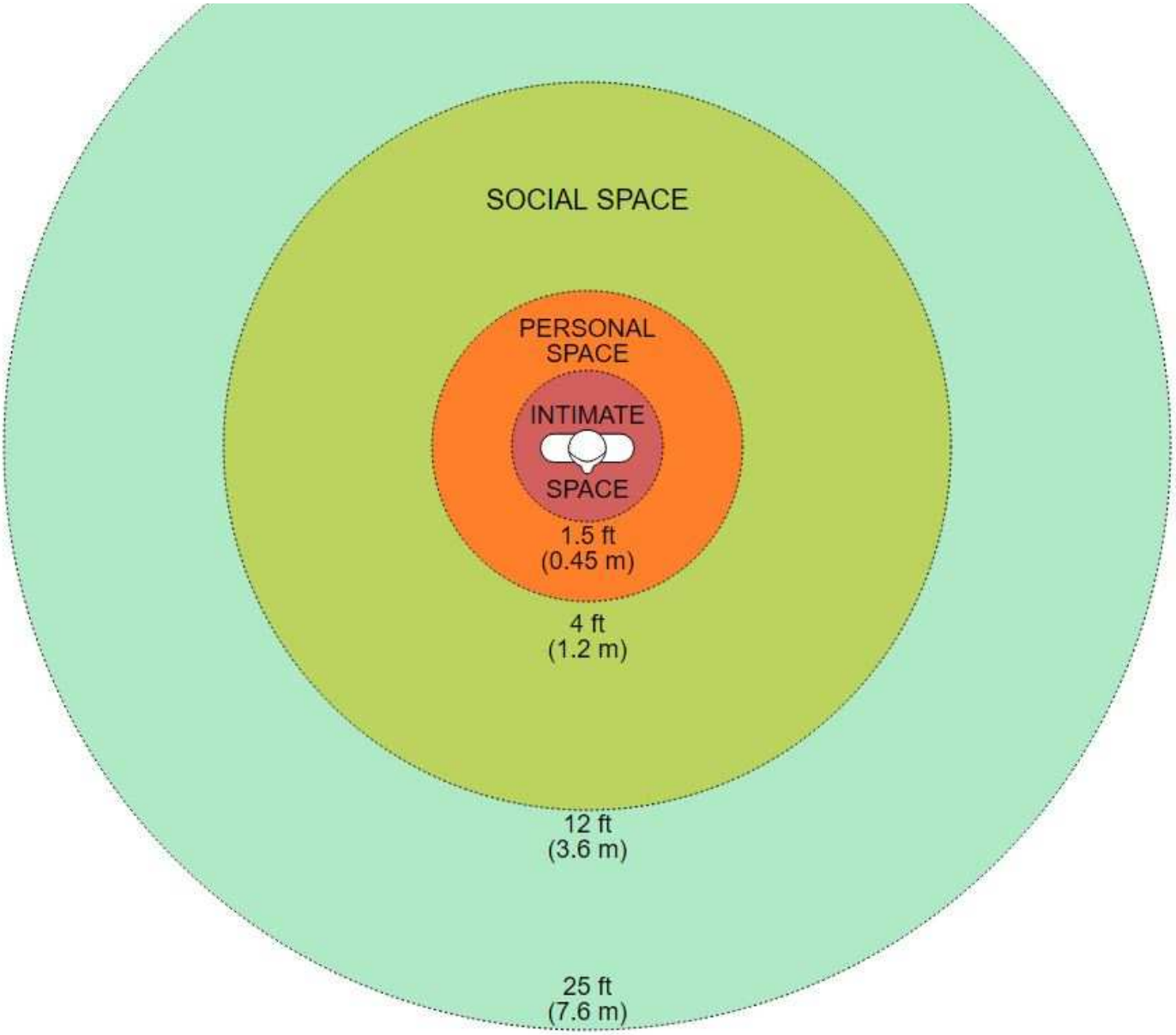
When Hannah Arendt wrote in 1958 that it was "precisely when the immensity of available space on earth was discovered, [that] the famous shrinkage of the globe began," [24] she voiced an insight elaborated through studies of media, and one that applies to ambiguous and divergent aspects of all technological sensing, networks, archiving, and mediation. Communication technologies always reveal how multiple experiences and meanings of "distance" are extant. Newfangled mediations are always, at first at least, both abstractly alienating *and* suggestive of (new kinds of) connection, companionship, living together, and intimacy. The mediation's function is first and foremost a modulation of spatial and temporal experience. And, likewise, it is a consequence of mediating imaginings that we also, contradictorily, become attached and detached from other beings.

Communications scholar Mél Hogan, in "The Pandemic's Dark Cloud," [25] notes how "compassion" is a lesson that emerges, etymologically at least, from the experience of "co-suffering." "The dread by now is cumulative," emphasizes Hogan. The recurrent, repeated hope—that human activity, or "humanity," might be conceived in a global sense, sensitively and with appropriate humility and nuance—is resident in each aspirational reworking: from "-scapes" (media-, techno-, ethno-, finance-, ideo-, etc.), [26] to "-spheres" (bio-, techno-, etc.), to "-cenes" (Anthro-, Capitalo-, Cthulu-, etc.), [27] from Gaian systems, [28] to "planetary urbanization," [29] to other attuned, diplomatic, or careful "ways of being planetary as praxis." [30] The planetary, according to historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, [31] also emerges from the rampant and totalitarian "success" of globalization as a project, from the effective and devastating project of human mastery. This project has many names, but most are elaborations of capitalist, colonialist, and patriarchal cultures that strip Earth's critical zone of what it labels all too summarily as "resources": "A planet incinerated by the rich, and by the desire to count among them." [32]

Pedagogies of proximity

These storied compositions, images, diagrams, and concepts all arise from attempts to bridge, circumvent, heal, or force into contact the central contradictions of modernity—of which there are so very, very many. They are juxtapositions of the situatedness, the presumed locality of experience, and the collective, aggregate, and globalized feedback loops that now increasingly approach real time. An "Anthropocene curriculum," which some felt might be needed to support the navigation of these contradictory demands, is necessarily also a study of this alone-togetherness, of collective lessons learned individually, of autonomous experiences that attempt to render as common stories. The core topics of such a curriculum must include hints at how to find resonances in alterity, those momentary oscillations in which psychosocial, biomaterial, and sociotechnical intimacies and separations occur.

The importance and awareness of distance *qua* distance has no doubt increased for an entire generation of people through the experience of a pandemic. "Proximics" (a heretofore somewhat disregarded branch of knowledge looking at spatial dynamics as communicative processes, elaborated by Edward T. Hall in the 1960s) has of late become a renewed, essential area of research. [33] The study of "use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture" and its effects on interpersonal communications, [34] contemporary work, and field studies have inaugurated a "new proxemics" over the past few years that is helping to define, orchestrate, and increase understanding of "distancing" behaviors, norms, and their effects. [35] The writings (2017) of anthropologist of science Lisa Messeri describe how scientists cultivate "proximal encounters in planetary science" and how practices of "overcoming distances" propel empirical science from the nanoscale to the "invisible movements of the atmosphere," all of which are "*beyond* human experience in the same way that planets are." [36]



A graphical representation of the interpersonal distances described by Edward T. Hall in his foundational work on "proxemics" or space as a mode of human communication, *The Hidden Dimension (1966). Image from Wikicommons, CC BY-SA 3.0*

Digital network communications and practices add yet a further convolutedness to how distances are closed in the social and physical sciences. Algorithmic ethnographer Angèle Christin looks at how digital interactions have become a primary source of qualitative data (practices massively intensified in a time of pandemic travel restrictions). The interpretation of distant interactions and data collected without direct experience of its collection, and how these skew, morph, and filter both

quantitative exposition and their qualitative resonances leaves Christin asking: “What does it mean to do fieldwork if there is no field to work on?” [37] Environmental historian Etienne Benson writes of the “*Fingerspitzengefühl* (fingertip feel)” that networked scientists can cultivate, whereby proximities to a field site become less about embodied or physical intuition, and more about a cultivated *feel* for data, models, and renderings that make this data *real*. “The nature of the ‘field’ experienced by the scientist changes: it becomes digital, distant, distributed, discontinuous,” writes Benson. [38] Feminist architect and technology scholar Nerea Calvillo and environmental researcher Emma Garnett add to this idea the possibility of “data intimacies,” through encounters with data that refrain from focusing on visibility—such as data transformed into water particles that “access our skin, hair, noses, lips, and through the air get inside our bodies, distributing the vapour’s content between different organs.” [39]

How do we redefine and practice new relational geographies of knowing that are neither armchair epistemologies [40] nor a reiteration of the blinkered extractive knowledge practices that entrench both the privileged positions of well-resourced expert researchers and the ignored positions of those “who have been instrumentalized, exploited, and forgotten”? [41] Which knowledge practices, styles, and orientations, what sensitive, respectful, and varied definitions of *proximity*, develop understandings and intimacies that might approach *planetarity*?

The amplification and acceleration of the need for internalizing and acting on disparate, distant realities sharply intensifies the need for new metaphors and modes for *distance learning* and/as *learning distance*, [42] as well as the need for a honing of sensitivities to *different kinds of distance*. Among these we might count social and physical distances, but also psychic, intellectual, emotional, and many, many others, all calling to mind the handkerchief that Michel Serres pulls from his pocket in the quotation that opens this essay. Many of the relevant course requirements and learning goals for this kind of planetary pedagogy of distance

accumulated long before the pandemic, and at least since the Anthropocene proposition began to proliferate as both a speculative question and an aspiring answer to the question of transmitting planetary forms of cultural learning.

Underground boroscopic images from Maria Maciak's Hole Society project, 2021. *Hole Society Presentation, video by Maria Maciak*

> "I put my finger in the ground and turn the whole world around."
>
> —Dolemite (Rudy Ray Moore), in *Dolemite* (1975)

Epistemic geographies

The philosophical problem of knowledge, as conceived in the dominant frames of Western, European, colonial-settler consciousness, is staged as a play of proximity and distance, holds and horizons. Colloquially, being "close" to someone means they know you well, and when faced with complex problems, novel circumstances, or information overload, the need for "distance" arises. Sociologist Lynn Jamieson notes that "in everyday English language use in Euro–North American cultures, the phrase 'nearest and dearest' often alternates with 'friends and family' to signal

key intimate and personal relationships." [43] To *distance ourselves* from an idea (or person) is to disagree or dismiss it. Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas asks, "How does the subject take leave of itself to attain the object?" [44]—a contrasting scenography of beings that also results in flailing attempts at defeatist, needless leave-taking. The "flights to nowhere," an *unheimlich* practice of profligate jet-fuel consumption and potentially virus super-spreading events offered by airlines during periods of COVID-19 travel restrictions, may be one such egregious example. [45]

To speak of the "problem" of knowledge is to underline that it is an irresolute term that is not at all self-evident or straightforward. The problem of knowledge lies not only in the transhistoric question of what knowledge is but in the question of which knowledges can be practiced, by whom, and how these are transported from dynamically situated, translocal experiences and perspectives. The problem of knowledge arises, perhaps above all, through its ambiguities and ambivalences, as both precursor to attention, attachment, and care and harbinger of the presumptions of mastery and generalizability that themselves precurse prescriptive political authority, physical domination, and material extraction.

A geographic epistemologist if ever there was one, Bruno Latour often metaphorizes knowledge production in terms of travel, hiking on and off paths, with and without maps. [46] Knowledge for Latour is constructed, accumulated, and *mobilized*, retaining the military antagonisms of a philosopher who understands the world to be at war with itself. [47] "Mobilization" refers to the metaphoric "transportation" required for the creation of durable, stabilized scientific fact, also invoking the need for allies, forward-thinking temporalities. The idea is summarized by Levi Bryant as "Latour's principle": "There is no transportation without translation." [48] Transportation is a helpful counterpoint to the myth of "infinitely mobile vision" that Donna Haraway also cautions against, [49] and which is regularly put into ordinary practice, such as in Charles and Ray

Eames' famed film *Powers of Ten* (1977).[50] Although also at times a literal transfer—of, say, a laboratory notebook from a scientific lab to an engineering research and development department, or a translation from one language into another—the geographies and translations in question should be understood as figurative, and broadly epistemic. Latour writes:

> Translation does not mean a shift from one vocabulary to another, from one French word to one English word, for instance, as if the two languages existed independently. Like Michel Serres, I use translation to mean displacement, drift, invention, mediation, the creation of a link that did not exist before and that to some degree modifies two elements or agents.[51]

Geographers Nigel Thrift and Nick Bingham give "Some New Instructions for Travellers," in an essay subtitled "The Geography of Bruno Latour and Michel Serres." Knowledge, conceived along the lines of spatial geographically, is for Thrift, Bingham, Latour, and Serres thoroughly ambiguous: either tyrannical or philosophical, either reductionist or irreductionist, affording either violence or justice to the world. Thrift and Bingham write:

> Too often ... the world is understood—whether implicitly or explicitly—solely in terms of proximity-distance, defined as a homogeneous space, a gridlike surface in which the path from the local to the global is always already given and unproblematic (in this sense, most contemporary narratives of "globalisation" are simply the degree zero of a long tradition of thinking. This purified, ordered vision is a long-term result, as Serres and Latour see it, of the "global victory of a local phenomenon": an extension, that is, of the "space of measure

> and transport" that forms the basis of Euclidean geometry and later cartographic geography, a space in which all may be calibrated and quantified without complication or confusion. [52]

Chakrabarty's "earth/planet" distinction, which "maps onto the distinction that some Earth system scientists make between the zone of the planet that is critical to the maintenance of life—the critical zone, as it is called—and the rocky, hot, and molten interior of the *planet*," [53] reminds us how geographies are never fixed but literally fluid and temporal. The planet oozes through, warps and ignores our imposed grids, changing as its observers also change. Tim Ingold makes distinctions between "transport" and "wayfaring" that are a helpful addition to the conceptual metaphorics that privilege closeness-as-comprehension. While transport is an orientation that favors both origins and destinations, wayfaring is "a development along a way of life." [54] While humans may lack the specialist senses required for magnetoreceptive piloting (such as pigeons use) or absolute positioning (also known as dead reckoning and used by ants and geese), wayfaring is a cultural technique that is resolutely situated and mutable. Wayfaring is travel and mapping through change and interaction, the sensing of shifts, and perceptual proprioception. [55]

Haraway's extremely oft-cited and generative feminist objectivity, of "situated knowledges," is a call to "switch metaphors" from relativist and universalist conceptions of how and what we know (it goes without saying that "situation" is a geographic, or at least spatial, metaphor). The epistemic locationality, or geography, of situatedness denies both ways "of being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere" [56] (relativism) and "of being everywhere while pretending to be nowhere" (universalism). [57] In committing to an epistemic location, the partiality of perspectives is presumed, and the grounded attachment we have makes for more responsible ways of knowing that bear witness to Haraway's own

situatedness: her background as an ecologist. Evolutionary theorist Lynn Margulis, similarly, uses the image of Gaia "herself" as having "proprioception"—those stimuli produced and perceived within an organism that are connected with the position of that organism. For Margulis, Gaia's positional self-awareness also predates animal and plant life, neural complexity, and human consciousness. Planetary proprioception suggests that the Earth intuitively knows *where it's at*, as the "sensitivity, awareness, and responses of plants, protoctists, fungi, bacteria and animals, each in its local environment, [is what] constitutes the repeating pattern that ultimately underlies global sensitivity." [58] This is why the intellectual project at the intersection of Latour's and Haraway's thought calls, in the end, for a questioning of "critical distance or critical proximity?" [59]

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed elaborates that proximity and distance are shaped by gender and class, calling on us to rethink the very phenomenality of these, and in particular through the geographic term "orientation." [60] Orientation—a word often used to denote patterns of romantic or sexual attraction—highlights how plays of distance and proximity are also plays of passion, desirous oscillations, flirtations even, between getting close and taking leave. "How we proceed from 'here' ... affects how what is 'there' appears, how it presents itself," Ahmed writes. [61] The multiplicity of *kinds of distance* (a common theme of the lessons wrought by the pandemic) is further compounded by the ways in which distant things can still be transported, can still contact, and can still make a mark. Ahmed continues: "Even what is kept at a distance must still be proximate enough if it is to make or leave an impression." [62] Distance is, in this sense, nonspatial and nonphysical—one can, after all, feel alone in a dense crowd or closer to people or things thousands of miles away than someone or something very near. Distance, as perhaps another species of alterity, renders stable positions untenable while requiring self-awareness and self-exposition of untenable positionality. Geographies of knowledge deceive if we imagine that they are

uncomplicated matters. They are instead evasive *matterings,* or as theorist Mel Chen terms it, “transmatterings,” [63] that through their own resistive contradiction and alterity stave off modernist demands for clarity, transparency, and permanency. Queer phenomenology outlines geographies of knowledge and thinking that do not negate, but rather encompasses and engage with, “that which is immediately before us.” [64]

> “Thinking is, indeed, essentially the negation of that which is immediately before us.”
>
> —Georg Hegel [65]

“Some knowledge is unbearable and a threat to living,” write cultural theorists Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart, [66] capturing the ambiguities and overlapping senses of belonging, alterity, and forced imposition that arise in contacts between humans, and also with nonhuman others. Anthropologist Hugh Raffles writes of the “bundling of admiration and slaughter” that takes place in the appreciative act of scientific and hobbyist collecting, cataloguing, and keeping of insects. [67] Can we ever distance ourselves from the inherent colonial and racist violence that discontinuous and continuously binds and affords privileged ways of knowing and living? The imposition or exacting of forced proximities shows how demands for intimacy can be violent, or a violation of distance. Distancing as a privilege, right, or luxury that is unevenly distributed and completely available to some. Infrastructures researcher Tom Clark’s recent notes on distance and proximity point out the ways that selective distance to racial violence are willfully, materially constructed, through the expansiveness of resolutely colonial technologies. [68] Close encounters between colonial pathogens, microbes, and mentalities and other ways of living and being are among the markers

that stratigraphers and some academics, including cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter, have suggested as a way to "date" the start of the Anthropocene, inaugurating an inhuman humanism. [69]

The continually rising death toll of COVID-19 is the result of infelicitous proximities between free-roaming animals and the overwrought attention human beings pay to the productivity of agricultural food practices. [70] A much more lethal closeness was forced upon pre-Columbian Indigenous populations by European bodies from the fifteenth century onward, creating devastatingly deadly pandemics of measles, smallpox, and influenza, as well as introducing scaled modes of war, slavery, and subjugation. In the century following Christopher Columbus' arrival to what Europeans would name the Americas, an estimated fifty-six million Indigenous people died, or 10 percent of the global population at the time. [71] Rozalinda Borcilă and Nicholas Brown underline fellow geographer Kathryn Yusoff's recognition of "the proximity of black and brown bodies to harm," which addresses "too many voidings of experiences that span multiple scales, manifestations, and ongoing extractive economies." [72]

What if bringing things, not physically, but epistemically, closer, by paying more attention to them, results in more harm than good done to selves and others? Perhaps, "the history of recent, industrialised and urbanised, civilisation, it is an excess of attention—not a lack of it—which has played a huge (and hugely under-acknowledged) role in overheating this planet. … Creatures and persons were literally dying as a result of the 'attentions' paid them." [73] Kotva advocates instead for a kind of attentional distancing, a broadening of focus that would slow the pace of desirous, rapatious, accelerated sciences, as philosopher Isabelle Stengers describes the current state of these disciplines, and allow for "vital feelings and crucial cares—compassion, decency, companionship" to distract from the consuming intentness of extraction, productivism, and the accumulation of capital. [74] "Epistemicide," legal scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos' term for the killing off of knowledge or ways of knowing, is similarly an effect of misplaced or overabundant attentions, or the probing

proximity of singular, blinkered modernist scientific projects. Writing on philosopher Luce Irigaray's thinking of love as mediated, directed attention, social researcher Fanny Söderbäck suggests that true interest in another would be to respect the "inter" and "rest," of the momentary aporia of what lies between. Love, itself a practice that encloses and emerges from practices of intimacy, requires that we pause the closure of distance, allowing for an "intermediate terrain" and "space-time of permanent *passage.*" The power of love, for Irigaray, is ultimately in its role as a mediator. [75]

> "Nothing makes the earth seem so spacious as to have friends at a distance; they make the latitudes and longitudes."
>
> —Henry David Thoreau [76]

Approaching planetarity

"How are we to account for the 'means of survival' at the level of a singular human and at the species-level of humanity as such?," artist Patricia Reed antagonizing "the winner-take-all ethos of neoliberal individualism." [77] As elaborated by Ara Wilson in "The Infrastructure of Intimacy," intimacy as a mode of interaction, engagement, and living occupies a similarly resonant, antagonistic role. "A concept of proximate [or] close relations," [78] intimacy is a term and mode of resistance that integrates the common binary cuts made across territories that are public/private, local/global, personal/political. In incoherently expelling intimacy from public economic, political, and intellectual spheres, patriarchal modernity maintains control over, while devaluing, this binding and solidarity-generating mode of action and thought. [79] Intimacy, for Raffles, "is a site for the social production of knowledge and the reworking of human–nature boundaries … within a field of power … [that]

knowledge fails to capture." [80] Wilson suggests that we apply the hermeneutic of intimacy to the global economy and to sites of capitalism, such that they "might be recognized not only as signs of eroding intimacy, but as significant stages for intimate life as it plays out in the present." [81] What would it be to apply this lens, including to the species of alterity that is planet Earth and to our planetary condition?

Wilson writes:

> The desire to resist forms of knowledge that perpetuate or rationalize global inequality (e.g., ideological reifications of family, sexuality, community) motivates the use of intimacy as a rubric. Because it is a flexible, provisional reference that emphasizes linkages across what are understood to be distinct realms (scales or entities), intimacy is a placeholder. It allows analysts to look at relational life, including the feelings and acts that comprise it, in relation to colonial empire or capitalist modernity, without a fixed analytical definition. [82]

What if it is experiences of "abyssal intimacies" that inspire learning? Following Jacques Derrida, and inspired by Raffles', abyssal intimacies would be those that are counterintuitive, at once intimate and wholly other, invoking new imaginings, temporalities, and scales of contact and care. Abyssal intimacies express the "impossible, uncertain intimacy between you, me, and those others that are simultaneously most commonplace and most alien," writes Raffles. [83] That is, Jamieson writes, practices of intimacy, just like knowledge practices, are deeply ambivalent, "implicated in innovative individual efforts to change biographies and histories but … also implicated in protective responses to enforced change and in the re-creation of tradition." [84] The "directionality" of intimacy, as a wanton act, expresses needs and develops attachments,

and under conditions of planetarity, it becomes resonant and reciprocally shared. Human beings are mostly "bad at" intimacy, according to Berlant, because "the drive toward [intimacy] is a kind of wild thing" that is not organized conventionally, "or at all." [85] We are also bad at intimacy because of how "minoritized," splintered publics, communities, and collectivities have been taught to resist, or are explicitly denied, practices of intimacy, complicating "the possibility of (and even the ethics of the desire for) a general mass-critical public sphere deemed to be culturally and politically intimate with itself." [86]

Contemporary ideas, stories, and concepts of varied earth beings attempt to bridge or thickly describe abyssal intimacies in terms of their materiality, affectivity, and aliveness. Concepts like (the aforementioned) data intimacies, technologies of intimacy [87], chemical and molecular [88] intimacies, and other expansive framings [89] orient understanding toward the potency, complexity, multiplicity, collectivity, and individuality of *close*, attached relations. We are confronted, through experience and mediated communications, in a more and more quotidian Anthropocene, with these relations, such that "atmospheric and ecological forms of relatedness … go beyond the *hic et nunc* as they incorporate the potential, eventful and global." [90] If "the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness," [91] then in the Anthropocene perhaps knowledge is met by its corresponding alterity, in planetarity? Under conditions where publics have *gone planetary*, planetary intimacy names the necessary trust in and opening out into vulnerable, fluid attachments that provide means of survival for living beings; an intimacy that, like the text of *Laudato si'*, includes an appeal for help and guidance, recognizing the flailing inability and instability of human endeavors in exacting custodianship over these means of survival. Learning (or relearning) *planetary intimacy* might be to learn (or relearn) "to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures," with a "quality of eloquence and brevity" and with an "aspiration for a narrative about something shared." [92]

Lichens are “two things that come together and alter each other collaboratively—two things becoming one thing that does not age… kind of model and metaphor for the intricacies of intimacy.” One of these organisms, a plant, provides the capability to photosynthesize, while the other, a fungus, provides a kind of home for the plant partner. A lichen covered boulder near Kilpisjärvi Biological Station on the Saana fell. *Photo by Jamie Allen*

Resonances can be felt between these characterizations of intimacy as a potentially global, or planetary hermeneutic, and critical theorist Roslyn Bologh’s idea of “erotic sociability,” [93] which reinvigorates eroticism and love as admissible in open, public spheres. And when feminist activist adrienne maree brown writes in *Pleasure Activism* of how trust is a “crucial part of the intimacy that yields pleasure for ourselves and others,” [94] she points to the ways that the kinds of intimacy we describe as solidarity are precursors to rebellious, reformist and abolitionist change. These metaphors for knowledge, intimacy, and love form a meshwork that purports wholly other kinds of distance-proximity relations: less transfer or “mobilization,” and more invocation and admission of longing,

attachment, and expectation. In ways also suggested by Stengers' advocacy for "slow sciences," intimate modes of attentional engagement —self-aware knowledge practices and reflexive research practices—admit of the limits of ability, stability, and ease in *how to do* intimacy, due to all "the aggression, incoherence, vulnerability, and ambivalence" that is "at the scene of desire" for knowledge, writes Berlant. [95]

Soot Breath // Corpus Infinitum (excerpt) by Denise Ferreira da Silva & Arjuna Neuman. Commissioned for the Glasgow International Festival 2021 by the CCA Glasgow the film is accompanied by an online archive and newspaper *Film by Denise Ferreira da Silva & Arjuna Neuman © all rights reserved*

> You know, I'm wondering if... to be intimate is to... is to... live with. Right? Even if you are talking about someone who is 1,000 miles away, or someone who is on the other side of the planet. If you are in touch with that person in some deeply spiritual way, I would say that is intimacy. And that it may or may not be, um...erotic. It may or may not involve some kind of intra-special relation. I think people can be intimate with their pets, or people can be intimate with their understanding of the ecological systems that hold the planet up. [...] I think that's what intimacy is. It is a way of living in the world that starts with empathy. And you know how things feel because you are touchable, right? (rubs hands together) The surface, the porous

> surfaces of the skin, and so forth. I think it starts biologically and it assumes a number of other shapes. So that's one thing. It is the capacity to… be in the world with other and not exploit it, or harm it, or hurt it, or need to destroy it in order to test or prove your own…self, your own being.
>
> —Hortense Spillers in conversation with Denise Ferreira da Silva, Arjuna Neuman

Chapter four of political philosopher Thomas Hobbes' *Decameron Physiologicum*, entitled "The Systems of the World," is written in the form of a most intimate dialogue—between a ninety-year-old Hobbes *and himself*. In developing a planetary ethics and meditation on the work of Galileo Galilei, he asks (himself) if a "true and *intimate* substance of the Earth, of the bigness of a musket-bullet" could be expected to observe those properties he ascribes "to the sun, earth, and moon." [96] Hobbes' wish to apprehend this "intimate substance of the Earth" is even more of an aspiration today, as we grasp for the objects, subjects, substances, and localities that will help us retrain, recalibrate, and reconceptualize ourselves and the planet—learning and relearning ways of seeing and acting that might allow us to be more sensitive, caring, and respectful epistemic geographers. Projecting the possibility of "planetary knowledge" and the hope of "care at planetary dimensions" [97] is a matter of the experience of localized experiences and temporalities. It is proximal knowledge and care that nonetheless necessarily approaches alterity and reconnects with contradictory orientations: the scientific wish for time, dislocation and instrumentation as factors that impart impartiality and objective distance, and the supposed importance of situated knowledges and critical intimacies. [98] These, along with the more emotional, sensory impulses and desires many feel as part of directly reckoning with, witnessing, grieving over, and repairing the anthropogenic transformation of *everywhere*, impels travel to and fieldwork in real, physical places. As

we choose among the concepts and practices that bring us closer to this planet, and planetarity, we can choose only those linear geometries of spatial proximities, or we can choose to proliferate the intimacies possible through other measures and means by which we “get to know,” as intimacy, where it is that “we” live through. Planetary intimacies as the possibility of creating new geo-metries as arts, processes, experiences, and sciences of living with a planet.

> “Why do birds suddenly appear
>
> Every time you are near?
>
> Just like me, they long to be
>
> Close to you”
>
> —Burt Bacharach and Hal David, *(They Long to Be) Close to You*

[They Long To Be] Close To You by Burt Bacharach. *Provided to YouTube by Universal Music Group. ℗ 1971 A&M Records*

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During the very final stages of preparing this essay, the person whose work inspired both its title and many of the ideas within departed the physical form by which they were known to this world. I am beyond grateful for the blessings and brilliance bestowed on us all by Lauren Berlant, who let go of what they diagnosed as the "aggressive need for the world to accommodate us" on June 28, 2021. This essay's title draws particularly on the ideas Berlant discusses in "The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 34, no. 3

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