

Introduction

Media Mutualities

Trinankur Banerjee and Stephen N. Borunda

“The State, based upon loose aggregation of individuals and undertaking to be their only bond of union, did not answer its purpose. The mutual-aid tendency finally broke down its iron rules; it reappeared and reasserted itself in an infinity of associations which now tend to embrace all aspects of life and take possession of all that is required by people for life.”¹

--- Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*

“But this relation is of the simplest sort; there is none simpler or easier: it always goes in the same direction. The same one is the host; the same one takes and eats; there is no change of direction. This is true of all beings. Of lice and men.”²

--- Michel Serres, *Parasite*

“Is it possible, then, to develop a deeper notion of relationality, one in which the relational basis of existence radically pervades the entire order of things?”³

--- Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*

Mutuality, if these quotes are anything to go by, is a fraught concept. Is it a “political activation of relationality,”⁴ as Escobar proposes, a horizontal distribution of vital ethos as Kropotkin imagines, or a fantasy of bidirectionality that Serres denies? Is mutuality inherently parasitical or the

basis for a progressive co-becoming that rejects purely competitive logic? Might it produce a structure of respectful obligation, or can it become a site of collective desire, as Kropotkin imagined? A genealogy of mutuality is sadly out of bounds here, but some extrapolations are certainly not. Mutuality is not merely a moral praxis. It is an ethical imperative that precludes any potential of being or becoming together, an elementary relation. Recognizing mutuality is to understand the political implications of relationality between the constituents of a milieu. The conceptual paradigms that have shaped academic humanistic thought in the last two decades, be it "Hemispheric Imagination" (Taylor 2001), "Friction" (Tsing 2004), "Entanglement" (Barad 2007), "sym-poiesis" (Haraway 2016), or the persistent question of "Global South," all grapple with relationality's political potential.⁵ To turn attention towards mutuality is not merely to understand its subterranean flow through these concepts but also to inquire into the scope of mutuality between these concepts. The popularity of these concepts within media studies is hardly a coincidence, for the political implications of relationality are always mediated by processes and/or objects. These implications, whether they appear as momentary flashes in popular expressions or inscrutable signs that conceal subaltern gestures, provide the discipline with an ever-expansive array of concerns. Media studies have always grappled with potentialities, and even potential mutualities are always sites of political lessons. To arrive there with "Media Mutualities" is to not only understand how mutualities are mediated, but also how mediation potentiates mutuality. The processes of co-constitution, co-presence, and co-emergence and their attendant mediations inform the impetus of this issue. If bodies, publics, infrastructures, environments, and milieus are some of the most enduring and emerging concerns in media studies, this issue dwells upon how their mutualities and mediations illuminate each other. The case made by this issue of *Media Fields* is that mediation does not merely causally interpret mutuality but provides a material intervention whose analysis has pedagogic value for political actions of the future.

The articles in this issue all grapple, in one way or another, with the temporal vector of mutuality. In orienting themselves towards a mutual future, these articles also unequivocally gesture towards praxis as the inevitable horizon of mutuality. Futurity permeates throughout these articles. Some consider the potentials of the body and space or other sites of extractive relationships, and some show how the apparatus often conceals the mutuality foundational to its conception. Others invite us to think of discourses that shroud mutuality in a normative cloak, hollowing out the elements of the political

from its core. Sequencing is the original sin of any edited volume, and this issue is no exception. So, the description that follows is based on one of the many possible threads of mutualities between the articles. To use Roland Barthes's distinction between the rigidity of a schema and the fluidity of an arrangement, the following is merely an arrangement.⁶ The reader is invited to imagine other mutualities, other ways of homing these articles together as they read along.

The issue is bookended with two articles that respectively challenge the conception's genealogy and potential (mis)directions. Sudipto Basu's introductory article, by arguing for a "disciplined mutuality" in his analysis of the online media piracy website, Karagarga (KG), shows how mutuality's anarchist genealogy, affirmed initially by Kropotkin and later reinforced by James C. Scott, can still be further complicated.⁷ Taking off from the inherent mutuality in the *dispositif* of cinema that gets suppressed by Screen theory, Basu's article demonstrates a practice of mutuality through file-sharing cultures. In analyzing KG, Basu attends in equal measure to the necessities of mutuality in the digital piratical domain as well as its potential limit conditions. Megan Wiessner draws on the proliferation of sylvan metaphors in contemporary rhetoric to show how even extractive practices like financial technologies and information capitalism can appropriate mutuality. She shows how the performative impetus of these metaphors often treats nodes in networks as individuated forms, a symptom of neoliberal ethos, obscuring actual processes of interdependence. Identifying mutuality's invigorating presence across discourses as an epistemic emergence that follows the ecological turn in humanities, Wiessner suggests the overemphasis on collaboration and communication may dilute the radical potentials that a biological mutualism may harbor. The two articles, situated at the two extremes of the issue, trace a throughline for mutuality from its conceptual origins to its capacious and capricious futures.

Basu's concerns with the *dispositif* and its inherent mutualities also inform Ziwei Chen's analysis of the floating screens in Shanghai's metro tunnels. Chen shows how the neoliberal aspirations of the post-socialist state manifest in its desire to produce a paradoxical immateriality in its advertising screens, achieved through a mutuality between the materialities of urban transportation infrastructure and avant-garde screen technology. Yet, as Chen argues, the "shudders" or black spots on these screens remind us of the contingent nature of such mutuality, preparing grounds for new subjectivities to emerge from the fissures of the *dispositif*. The haunting

contingencies of the digital also dwell in Allison Leah Farrell's analysis of the Winchester Mystery House. What emerges from the analysis of the house's pandemic-era VR tour vis-à-vis its physical tours is a mutuality between spatial orientation and bodily sensations. Whereas haunting was previously produced by a combination of scale, objects, and legends, in its digital remediation, the virtual wanderer experiences it through glitches in the simulacra; a concrete architectural wonder now exhibits mutual spectral porosity. The "aura" of the media object, as they show across disparate contexts, rests squarely on contingent mutualities of the body and the space.

The issue then adjusts its sight from underground infrastructures and haunted dwellings to the expansive landscapes as meditations of mutuality. Kyle Conway's introspective takes on a particular photograph of a vacant plot that contains signage from the Whiting Oil & Gas Corporation in North Dakota. Conway reads each signage as an interpretative action that underlines a particular orientation towards the site. For Conway, to imagine mutuality with the landscape is not merely to confront the othering that permeates these inscriptions and a settler-colonial history of erasure, but also to relinquish interpretive authority. Only then does a reorientation of relationalities—a worlding not based on erasure—become possible. Daniel Mann thinks of the desert as a landscape that historically vacillates between invisible nowhere and a zone of hypervisibility. From colonial fantasies to dominant media representations, Mann traces a history of erasure that empties the desert of existing lifeworlds to mutilate it into a nonplace, which paradoxically enables extractive processes financed by neocolonial machineries. To imagine a desert otherwise, he notes, requires recognizing the extremity of the desert as the ground zero for mutuality, where life and environment encounter each other in a bare relationality. To not recognize the mutualities that a landscape brings forth, as Conway and Mann underline, is the poverty of imagination endemic to colonialism in all forms.

Colonialism's site-specific critiques continue in Henry Osman's tracing of invisible relationalities that colonialism produces in the most unexpected places. Examining a monazite processing plant in Brooklyn, New York City, Osman argues for chemopolitical borders to better understand how extractive processes sieve beyond the existing ones, engendering insensible relationalities between seemingly disparate spaces, processes, and bodies. The radiant fallout of toxic waste in Brooklyn, he asserts, exposes the mutuality between the crisis of the present unfolding towards an uncertain future, the *longue durée* of human history, and the deep time of geologic

history. Kanika Lawton picks up the necropolitical nature of extractive processes in their imaginings of trans futures. Refusing to align with the mainstream ethos of celebrating visibility, Lawton shows how trans lives often become visible only in their deaths and commemorations, to say nothing of the racialized nature of such violence. Identifying Zach Blas's artistic project *Fag Face* (a faceless mask that escapes detection, comprehension, or recognition) and Trans Day of Remembrance as counter-tactics, they show how mutualities between opacity, solidarity, and trans livability can produce an elsewhere for queer and trans people. In bringing forth mutualities that remain invisible or prefer nonvisibility, both authors identify mediations that defy sensible regimes.

Filmmaker Francisco Huichaqueo Pérez's afterword to this issue coalesces many of the concerns the contributors have voiced thus far, but Huichaqueo offers a crucial turn towards the media mutualities that have emerged within his Indigenous Mapuche community in Chile. Indeed, his piece prompts us to consider that if the future is to be decolonial, what praxis of mutuality constitutes such futures beyond the critiques of coloniality and colonialism in its many nefarious forms? In this, Huichaqueo continues along the line of artistic provocations proffered by Lawton to reflect on his own curatorial practice at Palacio Pereira in Santiago, Chile. His efforts to decolonize occidental exhibitions of Indigenous cultural heritage, to let heritage break out of the glass displays, involved wading through bureaucratic resistance. What prevailed, he argues, is his insistence on imagining an exhibition that mends the "broken" mutuality between cultural objects and Indigenous subjects in the wake of colonial expansion, expropriation, and ever-increasing extraction. The right to preserve through reconstruction is not the colonizer's alone, he reminds us, but a decolonial reconstruction always involves reforging the mutualities shattered by colonial violence.

In laying out the tracts of mutuality between these articles, contrary to best intentions, many other relational possibilities between them may have fallen by the wayside. How to think of the binding forces of imagination that permeate through Conway's meditation and Lawton's agitation? What are the different modalities of opacity and/or invisibility that shape desert futures and trans futures, as Mann and Lawton so persuasively suggest? Can we think of extraction as a logic of place-making, as it does for Mann and Osman? Does mutuality allow us to see through the invisible palimpsests of a place, as gleaned through Osman and Conway? Are Basu and Farrell converging on a suggestion that virtuality potentiates mutualities in

unanticipated forms? Do Chen and Wiessner both offer a window into the neoliberal hijacking of mutuality? The possibilities are not endless and they certainly do not end here. "Media Mutualities," among other things, is an invitation to think of the myriad transversalities that these articles engender against each other.

Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank Francisco Huichaqueo Pérez, whose guest contribution provides a fitting afterword to the issue. Trinankur also wants to mention his co-editor Stephen N. Borunda in this regard, who worked with Francisco to produce the English version of the piece. Stephen and his partner Victoria became first-time parents to their beautiful son Elías Salvador during the publication process of the issue and he is deeply grateful to Trinankur for his leadership and expertise in guiding the publication to completion. We are thankful to our contributors for providing the intellectual bedrock of this issue. We also extend our gratitude to the *Media Fields* Collective and the Department of Film and Media Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. A special note of thanks must go to the patience and labor of Miguel Penabella, the coordinating editor of *Media Fields*, and the watchful eyes of head copyeditor Muhammad "Mo" Muzammal. Lastly, we remain indebted to Cass Mayeda for taking care of the web design for this issue.

Notes

- 1 Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution* (New York: McClure, Philips, and Co., 1902), 293.
- 2 Michel Serres, *Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 7.
- 3 Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Independence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 101.
- 4 Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*, 95.
- 5 For a detailed discussion of "Hemispheric Imagination," see Diane Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001). "Friction" was first introduced by Anna Tsing. See Anna L. Tsing, *Frictions: An Ethnography of Global Connections* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). The recent popularity of "entanglement" in humanities owes much to Karen Barad. See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). "Sympoiesis" was developed by Donna Haraway in her theorization of multispecies entanglement. See

Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). “Global South” as a concept has a longer genealogy and has been used by a number of scholars with slight modifications. For a specific spatiality of Global South, for example, see AbdouMaliq Simone, *Improvised Lives: Rhythms of Endurance in an Urban South* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

- 6 Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 5.
- 7 See James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 309–342 for a discussion of anarchic mutuality.

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