Densities of care

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ABSTRACT
Densities of care, weaving together public moods, physical forms, and deliberative actions, shape a critical synergy in the 2019–20 Anti-Extradition Bill (Anti-ELAB) movement. This essay unpacks urban density through a radical sense of 'care' - the solidarity ethics and actions that create, bond, and repair political crowds. Drawing on three forms of 'densities of care' – mobility, atmosphere, and sound – in the social movement, this essay offers a nuanced account of political crowds, challenging the traditional understandings of the crowd as a form of unruly density. By reticulating 'density' – the very physical quantifier – with 'care' – the affective engagement, the notion of 'densities of care' contributes to explicating the solidarity basis with an urban geographical understanding. In so doing, it reveals the ways that the seemingly dispersive, unorganized crowds in orchestration with the hyper-dense built environment that bolstering relational ethics for curing and navigating possibilities at every moment.

KEYWORDS
Care; sensorial density; social movements; Hong Kong; political intensity

Introduction

Revolts, first triggered by dissent, are then mobilized and sustained through care. The 2019–20 Anti-Extradition Bill movement in Hong Kong has summoned the political crowds which have longed for profound social and political changes. However, the introduction of the National Security Law of Hong Kong by the Chinese Communist Party immediately overshadowed the city and her stakeholders. The new law, equipped by lax discretion, undergirded targeted arrests, seeming to inculcate the idea that "Hong Kong can no longer return" and to pre-empt the dissolving of "one country, two systems" – a political deal supposed to expire in 2047. Nevertheless, what has been cultivated and learned through the collective soul-searching journeys did not disperse so quickly ever since it mushroomed and resonated beyond Hong Kong. This essay explores emerging practices of "densities of care" and argues that the solidarity basis needs an understanding of "topological operations" in the movement. Such "densities of care" form quantitative and affective multiplication across material objects, people, things, environments, and practices. Besides, it also serves as an ethical compass for navigating forms of oppression and opportunity.

The pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong has intrigued many for its leaderless and yet prolonged strength. People attribute such intensity and flexibility of political crowds to the ethical principle of solidarity – "Do Not Split" (不割蓆).[1] The political scholar Francis Lee (2020) argued that three reasons constitute the solidarity basis: the pre-movement reconciliation process across different political flanks; the role of digital media platforms as a tool of consensus-building; and indiscriminate police action have renewed the quotidian experience for solidarity. Chen and Barber (2020) explore forms of anonymously support that shape "the topological operations of a city's psyche." This essay follows this thread and elaborates on the nuanced sensorial density in political crowding (see also Colin McFarlane in this issue), discussing how density goes beyond a quantitative benchmark as patterns of concentration, levels of physical crowdedness, and governance statistics. For example, from the coordinating effort of crowd-sourcing to the late development of cross-generational support, and the mapping of local solidarity economy, examples in the Anti-ELAB movement have shown that "density" alone cannot capture things that developed beyond numerical counts of political crowds. The conception of "densities of care" thus emerges to encapsulate how the haptic and emotional bondings of the political crowds are configured in material forms and shaping reciprocal strengths. *Densities of care* move "political density" beyond an objective measurement and add a vector of sensorial intensity. In this way, political density could also be extensively understood as a socio-political process that shapes imaginative identification. Therein, care as critical ethics and praxis (De la Bellacasa, 2017) is building upon "a politics of interdependence" which could be exerted as a powerful tool against authoritarian and neoliberal regimes.

This essay develops around the notion of *densities of care* to explore how urban density weaves into a solidarity basis. "Densities of care" are the corporeal, affective, and urban topological interface. They offer an urban geographical explanation of the solidarity basis that stitches between variegated political crowds. By reticulating "density" – the very physical quantifier – with "care" – the affective engagement, this notion explicates the quantitative-affective multiplication of the solidarity action and ethics that create, bond, and repair social threads and forces. To demonstrate urban density as the conjunction of the material and affective forms of solidarity, below we visit three vignettes – mobile care, insurgent care, and sonic care. Each thread reveals the ground workings of the "densities of care" – a stitching force of crowding politics.

Mobile care
Mobility both mediates urban itineraries and enables a mass rally. As such, the disruption of mobility has been a key characteristic for diverse tactics and forces, for instance, the state action in suppressing the crowd, or people's actions that stress-testing the governmental/ capital infrastructures. Despite the metro system plays a key role in transporting crowds of nearly two million people rallied in June and August 2019, two major tensions arose in such a transport system. Firstly, taking the metro is economically burdensome. Second, "smart" techniques, such as travel cards, could feedback personal itineraries to digital surveillance. Mobile care thus emerges at rally venues: people, especially the

salaried class, leave coins, notes, and clothes on the ticket machines in the metro for others in need. Without designated recipients, the care for the mobility of the anonymous weaves to a micro-socio-economic infrastructure.[2] Such forms of mobile care resonate with the feminist ideas that pair vulnerability and care, bonding relational subjects (Butler et al., 2016) in collective ways.

Mobile caring further renders urban density with physical crossings of visions. In the leaderless movement, mobile care has inevitably translated into various actions that interrupt the daily mobile experience. These non-cooperation movements rapidly spread across metro cabins and airports, troubled commuters, and travelers. The series of protests called "Flying Together [和你飛]" disrupted international traffic and succeeded in making headlines in international media as it captured the city's symbol of pride – the Hong Kong International Airport (Hale & Kuo, 2019). Such mobile care creates paradoxically through disruption and resonates as "intensification of involvement and proximity" (De la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 19). Mobile care took place above the clouds and at ground level. It emerged when the captain made the landing announcement and flight attendants offered voluntary guiding service in sit-in protests.[3] By suspending the transport infrastructure, such "mobile care" risks to defer others' itineraries in order to pressure the government, meanwhile, to make temporal stopovers and crossings of visions. Ethical bonding was demanded, by the locals, to not just treat Hong Kong as one of the many high-end, one-off transit-shops, but to pay an ethical toll by enduring the temporal inconvenience.

Insurgent care

Political intensity – either the statement of sovereignty or policing – is often felt and learned through the haptic encounter with the "crowd control" weaponry (Adey, 2015; Nieuwenhuis, 2016). From the indiscriminate tear gassing events to the blue-dyed water cannon firing at protesters and a mosque, a steep learning curve of insurgent care was shaped across streets, alleys, plazas, in metro stations and malls against the intensified attacks and arbitrary arrests. Over the first six months of movement, the Hong Kong Police detonated more than 16,000 rounds of tear gas on the streets of Hong Kong on record (Hui, 2020). The excess volley of teargas canisters the Hong Kong police discharged in the densely packed environment were condemned "indiscriminately, unnecessarily, and disproportionately" by the UN Special Rapporteurs on hazardous substances and rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association. People and non-human living beings in Hong Kong were forced to breathe in and exposed to a density of toxic air and suffered from health symptoms like "tearing and burning sensations in the eyes, cough, dyspnoea, skin rashes, blistering, hypertension, nausea, vomiting, and agitation" (Chan et al., 2019, p. 1517) alongside the death of non-human lives (Yu, 2019). The intensity of months-long nonobjective atmospheric attack has evidently shown what Peter Sloterdijk (2009, p. 41) put, "that turns the enemy's environment into a weapon against them."

Meanwhile, insurgent care against the escalation of police attacks in Hong Kong have seen not merely the swift improvisation – in quality and quantity –

of protest materiality but also tactical improvisation that turns people who meant to escape into experts of defense. Since mid-June 2019 onwards, the fast-growing resource-pooling, dissemination of medical masks and umbrellas have advanced to home-made or professional gas masks, goggles, and helmets. The fast-spreading protest materiality – an unusual scene for "protesters" cities in the past – was not simply a reflection of Hong Kong's socio-economic base. Strategically speaking, the insurgent care is generated through the fact that many protesters (and later, residents) constantly returned to the frontline after being attacked (Figure 1). At sites of the rally, people give donations and share protective gear on-site anonymously to persist longer in the toxic air. This often reflected the aim of further delivering breathing care. As police began to discharge tear gas beyond rally sites, improvised teamwork orchestrated with makeshift tools, such as tennis rackets, metal dinner plates, wok lids, water bottles, and traffic cones, to play out life-threatening impromptus: to douse tear gas canisters and to save other protesters and general citizens. Similarly, the yellow-vest team "protect the children" – a group of pro-active "peaceniks", composed by older generations with non-confrontational strategy – has been an unfaltering force, fully geared at the battle zone and intervened to buy time for the "radicals" to retreat (Kuo et al., 2019; Lin & Leung, 2019). Both imperatives have shown how protest materiality becomes the affective attachment of care.

Figure 1. Anonymous protesters geared with N95 respirators work together to neutralize tear gas grenades. Photo credit: Kenji Wong/ Stand News.

Secondly, and extensively, the emergency call of insurgent care at one place could sometimes evoke unexpected intensity, manifesting through citywide and cross-border resource pooling. Amid the escalation of conflicts since July 2019, the Hong Kong government began a series of crackdown on hardware stores, banning the import of yellow umbrellas, helmets, black shirts, laser pens, and gas masks amongst other protective gear, accusing that these could turn into weapons against the police. Insurgent care transpires through proximity across East Asian cities. For instance, citizens in Taiwan launched various modes of group buying of protective gear, carefully dispatching the stocks to Hong Kong. Practical knowledge rapidly built up among online communities, specific models of the protective gear, such as higher-grade air and cartridge filters were named and made into shareable online posters to enhance the precision of the purchase order. The scale of purchase somehow suggested the densities of care across locations as "the Minnesota-based protective gear manufacturer have been out of stock on the island" (Chan, 2019).

Sonic care

Now we shift to the form of sonic caring, which is an experience made possible through Hong Kong's vertical building geometries. Sounds – cheering, clapping, booing, singing – are critical elements to radiate affective atmospheres (Figure 2). Nonetheless, for the opposition, such soudscapes may shape virtual walls, create feelings of being trapped and excluded in the undesirable proximity.

Figure 2. Hong Kong protesters gathered at a local shopping mall and sang the protest anthem together on 12 September 2019. Photo credit: Lam Chun Tung/ Initium Media.

During the initial mass rally in late April 2019, I found myself encompassed by the boosting soundscape where people burst into cheers when, on their way back, met the crowd of new arrivals heading toward the destination – the continual flooding population density as a political statement transpires inspirations. Yet, undeniably, months-long gruelling protests and the disappointing government response continued to frustrate and distress the public. From August 19th, 2019 onwards, every night between 9.30pm and 10pm, "a chorus of cries can be heard reverberating across districts" (Creery, 2019). Pro-democracy protesters belt out slogans from their windows: One yelled "five demands", many responded "not one fewer"; or "Hongkongers" echoed by "add oil" across vertical residential condominiums. This polyphonic soundscape is made possible through multi-story living.[4] The once widely blamed building density turned out to facilitate the vertical geometries that enabled the nocturnal soundscapes dubbed by media as "million screams" (Creery, 2019). The neighborhood soundscape shows that solidarity is not only revealing through centralized mass rallies. The care for Hong Kong's future is topologically reverberated across the vertical neighborhoods at the fringe, connecting anonymous responses in proximity. Individuals shouting out frustrations and immediately gained strength in the magic of one echoed by many. Sonic caring in this instance has transformed noise-making into a collective and societal self-healing therapy and this was later repetitively exercised in urban communities beyond Hong Kong during the lockdown of COVID-19. Nonetheless, we could not deny the paradox in the blend of the housing density and emotional intensity – the soundscape orchestrated through these topological operations could, at times, be exhilarating for some and irritating to others.

Conclusion

The various protest tactics sketched above only cite a few instances out of swathes of political actions. By depicting the myriad forms of caring practices, this essay recasts how the "densities of care" work as one of the distinct yet neglected forces in the topological operations of the 2019–2020 Anti-ELAB movement. Even though general debates would focus on the political demands of the movement, in this essay, I see the "densities of care" as the cause of the solidarity basis in the movement and the loss of it could risk stubbing out the hopes of a political crowd. Extensively, in hindsight, the notion "densities of care" offers an urban geographical lens concerning how, and why, a binary understanding of radical versus nonviolent flanks gradually unsettled and replaced with relational understandings. Put differently, as an alternative to the usual tendency that compares and disparages certain types of resistance tactics, "densities of care" is an affirming message that the "collectiveness" and "connection" of political crowds are co-constituted by topological operations of care.

A majority of Hongkongers believes this fight is not just a repudiation against political deprivation but also about the collective wisdom and visions to decide between democracy and totalitarianism for generations to come (Lee, 2019). This essay further points out the often neglected dimension of sensorial care – where the political crowds not merely embodied the synergies across different

people, things, environments, and times but also revealed an emancipative politics of interdependence. Such a reading of urban social movement overturned the traditional view of the crowd as an unruly, anarchic ensemble; instead, it promises a nuanced apprehension of multifarious, heterogeneous, corresponded, and inter-connected histories that have neither a beginning and thus nor an end. By placing densities of care in the context of political crowding, we could see that the anonymous collectivity and their skills in urban topological operations could always be empowering for navigating a city's political future. Hope, as the slogan of "liberating Hong Kong" suggests, does not reside in the hegemonic powers. Hope always resurfaces with layers of caring density in the unlikely present.

Notes

1. "Do not split" as a principle could be both emancipative and suppressive. It requires protesters to develop a sense of mutual respect toward their fellow protesters even in conditions that they disagree with each other's action strategy. By the constant negotiation of "democracy" and "political crowding", the principle "do not split" goes beyond a solidarity call. It constantly generates tensions between density and intensity – that the "mutual respect" could oftentimes shut the communication into modes of "mind your own business" and circumvent collective reflections. Thus the principle "do not split" is also an entry point to rethink the relatively untheorized "density-intensity" relationship.
2. Interpersonal caring practice is also seen in the development of economic options – from job matching to teen fostering – as life support.
3. Such voluntary action was followed by an entrenched surveillance and led to the layoff of hundreds of Cathay airline staff (Branigan & Hale, 2019).
4. Around the half-year of the protest, a public survey (sampling: 902 people) conducted by a scholar team revealed figures about the participation in various protest tactics: "78.9% tried joining the chorus in public spaces; 53.7% shouted out slogans from windows; 61.3% joined human chains; 60.7% expressed opinions on Lennon walls; 57.7% joined the strike; other methods – money and goods donations, online crowdfunding all fall to around 40%" (Lee, 2019).

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