

project 2 | assignment 3

For Thursday, October 1, I ask that you read Part 2 of *The Last Town on Earth* (115-210). Commonwealth is a town unlike many others in the United States. It is a privately-owned town, sited and developed by Charles Worthy as a corporate “experiment” in communal living, its residents primarily employed by Worthy’s shingle mill, so that the rhythms of residents’ lives are largely governed by the mill’s functioning. Economic conditions are tied to hourly wages, and homelife is governed by the shape of the workday. Even workers’ bodies are affected by the conditions in the mill, which bring fatigue, lung disease, and the loss of digits to nearly all who toil at the saws.

In some ways, Commonwealth resembles any number of “company towns” which flourished in the country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Often anchored in dangerous and difficult industrial work like coal-mining, steel processing, and textile production, residents of company towns were beholden to the company in many ways. The town owned the local businesses where resident workers were required to purchase items, not with their own monies, but with the corporation’s credits distributed to laborers instead of regular pay. The town’s governance was controlled by the mill owner, who fashioned laws and set standards. In such an arrangement, workers’ rights were curtailed to coordinate with the needs of the corporation, which held an interest in entertainment, schools, and churches. In exchange for having steady work, residents agreed to the company’s extensive reach into families’ and individual’s lives.

Charles Worthy fashions himself as a beneficent owner of the mill. He founded Commonwealth as an alternative to traditional company towns like Timber Falls. Guided by vaguely socialist ideals, Worthy prides himself in “taking care” of the mill’s labor force, paying them a living wage, and treating them in fairly democratic fashion. When news of the pandemic arrives, he is able to garner among the residents, a collectivist spirit of self-protection and communal security, a shared feeling that some may define as mutual care.

But, is protectionism, fueled by uncertainty and fear, a viable form of solidarity? If residents of Commonwealth exhibit a degree of mutual care (however robust or tenuous), where exactly does it get enacted? Who “cares” about who else, and what assumptions guide the distribution of concern, empathy, and aid? In other words, who is “worthy” of mutual support, and who is not? What can the behaviors and feelings of the inhabitants of Commonwealth (especially as evidenced in Part 2), tell us about the strengths and limits of common concern? To what degree is mutualism—a deep regard for the welfare of others—demonstrated in Commonwealth? Can the pandemic catalyze this regard for some while prompting self-interest and disregard for others?

