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## 16. Caring labour: redistributing care work

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### INTRODUCTION

Feminist writers have long critiqued masculinist visions of the economy and politics that overlook the care labour required for the reproduction of life for all of us – human and non-human. Care is the work that makes all work possible – as Joan Tronto puts it, care is ‘a species activity that includes all we do to maintain, continue and repair our world so we might live in it as well as possible’ (1993, p. 103). Maria Puig de la Bellacasa asks us to expand Tronto’s ‘we’ beyond our own species, and to consider the care work that non-humans perform, some of which is for us (2017; see also Barron and Hess, Chapter 17 in this volume). The point is that ‘we’ all require care at some point in our lives, and ‘we’ all no doubt give care at some point in our lives. There is no denying however, that even if sometimes enjoyable and meaningful, this ‘life’s work’ (Mitchell et al. 2004) is deeply gendered and political. Tronto goes so far to argue that ‘political life is ultimately about the allocation of caring responsibilities’ (2013, p. xiii), and builds on her argument that care requirements for all of us are generally beyond the capacity of the nuclear household, insisting that ‘it is not *whether* care responsibilities will be more broadly allocated but *how*’ (2013, p. xiii).

Before thinking about how care work is to be reallocated, however, we must get a sense of the care work that is being done, and indeed, how and whether it is compensated. Care work is different from other forms of work in that it can build deep connections and enable different ways of thinking (Ruddick 1989) and being in the world – it touches us (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). A diverse economics approach to examining care work allows us to pay attention to the multiple and complex forms of ‘compensation’ and motivation that compel or invite us to perform this labour. While some of this care work is compensated in wages (for professional care givers, for service providers), much of it is performed in a mixture of complex class processes (Cameron 1996) with a complex range of affective motivations (Healy 2008). Much of it is performed by women, and indeed in some places, even when white women are able to reduce their care labour, it can be passed over to women of colour or immigrant women to perform (Weir 2005). Thus the larger networks of *who* performs care labour remains as important as *why* they do so, and with *what* it is compensated (Dombroski, Healy and McKinnon 2019). Once we are able to recognize what motivates and perhaps compensates this important care work we can then ask how we might *redistribute* the labour of caring more equitably across gender, class, race and even species boundaries – not because we want to encourage *less* caring, but because indeed we might want to *proliferate* the benefits of care work for both those that care and those that receive care.

## DIVERSE ECONOMIES OF CARE LABOUR AND COMPENSATION

Diverse economies scholars include consideration of care labour as part of a more general consideration of diverse forms of labour including labour compensated by wages or salary (paid labour), labour only partially compensated for by wages and salary (alternative paid labour), and labour that is compensated completely outside of a system of payments, or not at all (unpaid labour). Labour is categorized here by virtue of how it is compensated, and we can immediately see that care labour can fall into any of these three categories: indeed, Cameron and Gibson-Graham (2003) use the diverse economy of child care to illustrate how an activity (or industry) can be simultaneously capitalist and non-capitalist. The point of identifying diverse labour practices and the diverse economies concept more generally is to bring visibility to the range of economic relations that are more-than-capitalist.

Other feminist economists have also tried to bring visibility to the unpaid and non-capitalist labour of people in modern economies. Marilyn Waring famously challenged the UN System of National Accounting because it did not include the contribution of the unpaid labour of New Zealand women to farming (in particular the work of ‘farmers’ wives’), early childhood education and child care (in particular, ‘Playcentre mums’<sup>1</sup>), volunteer organizations and charities, and in the home – whereas it did recognize as ‘productive’ the cost of cleaning up environmental disasters, trade in weapons and illicit drugs, and health care costs related to smoking (Waring 1988, 1999, 2003). Waring’s work focused on getting this accounting system to better acknowledge the ‘productivity’ of women’s work through adding in hours of care and volunteer labour (this is now used in a number of census systems including Canada and New Zealand although still not officially in the national accounts). She points out that women’s productivity includes both the production of goods and services (how we might traditionally define labour), such as agricultural goods and child care services, but also provides the conditions by which the commodity of labour might be itself reproduced, what minority world Marxist feminists call ‘social reproduction’.

The concept of social reproduction tries to get at all of the work that must be done in order to return the factory worker to the factory gates the next day. This can include actual reproduction, as in reproducing the labour force through having and caring for children and thus raising the next generation of workers. It also includes all of the care work needed for the worker to be able to eat, sleep, have shelter and live in a comfortable environment. As Katharine McKinnon discusses in the introduction to this section, the idea of eight hours labour, eight hours leisure and eight hours sleep overlooks the work that must be done in the home, often carried out by women. Some feminist analyses of (particularly Western) patriarchal societies identify the belief that compensation for this labour is part of the so-called marriage contract, where a (historically) male breadwinner provides for a (historically) female homemaker, who in turn takes up the care work needed for his well-being. While care work can be deeply meaningful and a source of delight, the issue feminists might have with this historical contract is that it has resulted in women being trapped in (sometimes abusive) relationships with no financial means of independent living, or at risk of homelessness and poverty if the relationship ends and the woman has no income to support herself (often with children to provide for). At that point, even if she can find a job (which may be difficult if she has taken time out of the workforce to raise children), her earning power is not comparable even if women and men were to get equal pay (in most countries, they do not: see Neate 2018).

The ‘marriage contract’, of course, is not just about domestic labour such as cleaning, washing, cooking or child care – it also has a sexual and emotional component, which feminists argue women have been socialized into providing. In recent times scholars have called this part of the work ‘emotional labour’. Emotional labour refers to all of the work to smooth over fraught relationships, to manage households, to make family plans and decisions such as what kind of toilet paper to get, whose birthday is coming up, not to mention whose emotional needs are not being adequately met and what needs to be done about it. This emotional labour can be compensated but can also be exploited (Fraad 2000). Again, in much of the world, more of the burden of this work is taken up by women than by men, and indeed, in some cases we might argue that men have been historically *excluded* and *prevented* from taking up this load through concomitant processes of masculine socialization. Some scholars have argued that this emotional labour is also performed by women in the workplace, sometimes to their career detriment, but to the benefit of the employer (Hochschild 2012). It is also performed in activist circles and particularly by women of colour (Ahmed 2004; hooks 1989). Feminists argue that this ‘emotional labour’ has primarily been done by women because they have been socialized into this work and have had their identities based on succeeding in making others feel good, often from a very young age. A recent cartoon by the French cartoonist known only as ‘Emma’, has sparked an international discussion about the importance of redistributing some of this ‘mental load’ if we are serious about equality in both the workplace and the home.<sup>2</sup> One emerging perspective in the minority world is that it is not just for women’s well-being that men need to have responsibility for organizing and maintaining domestic matters, but also for their own well-being. Masculinist discourses that shame men for care work also work to produce masculinities where men’s caring sensibilities are denigrated and shut down, and the relationships of care and connection that sustain mental health may also suffer. Redistributing social reproduction labour and emotional labour is therefore an important feminist project not just for women’s well-being, but also for men’s.

It is worth mentioning that although potentially meaningful and always important, the work of care, social reproduction, and emotional labour has also been carried out by people who have had little choice but to accept it. Because of class systems, slavery, racism, or other less obvious systems of oppression, the hard, tiring, and not well compensated work of care can be loaded onto some groups of people who have less power to choose not to do it, for people they might not choose to do it for. As we see in the diverse labour framing, not all labour is compensated. For people who are working as slaves or indentured workers, for example, they may only receive food and shelter in return for their labour and have no choice but to labour: for example, domestic workers from the Philippines working in Saudi Arabia or Hong Kong might have wages withheld and end up trapped there (Gibson et al. 2001). Feminists have thus developed theories of ‘intersectionality’ to get at the different forms of discrimination that individuals might face when they belong to or ‘intersect’ with multiple groups that face discrimination or even systemic oppression – for example, working-class women of colour such as the aforementioned Filipina domestic workers who might face direct sexism, racism and classism in everyday life as well as the ongoing economic and social systems that work to inadvertently exclude them. The work of redistributing care work assigned to indentured or oppressed groups is therefore also an important emancipatory, anti-racist and decolonizing project.

Redistributing care work is not just about social reproduction and oppressive labour relations however. Firstly, emerging research in diverse economies scholarship points to recog-

nizing the unpaid care labour of other beings and how care work is *already distributed* over larger care networks than we might first imagine: as Barron and Hess argue in Chapter 17 in this volume, the work of non-human beings, while not intended for sustaining human life, does actually contribute to sustaining human life or ‘social reproduction’. It also provides uncompensated labour in the form of ‘ecosystem services’ to enterprises in the formal economy. Other diverse economies scholars have paid attention to the care work that inanimate objects as well as microbes and hormones do in the context of humans giving birth (Dombroski et al. 2016; Dombroski, Healy and McKinnon 2019; McKinnon 2016). Thinking about the distribution of care that enables us to maintain, continue and repair our world is therefore also an important posthumanist and environmentalist project. In what follows, I discuss two examples in this emerging research: the first in the area of redistributing the work involved in caring for an infant and what the compensation for this might be, and the second diversifying our understanding of who is doing care labour in a youth well-being focused urban farm in Christchurch, New Zealand.

## REDISTRIBUTING INFANT CARE WORK

Given that it is in and with the bodies of women that infants are conceived, grown, birthed and subsequently physically nurtured, it is perhaps unsurprising that the majority of the care work required for keeping an infant alive and thriving is carried out by women. However, unlike other forms of intense maintenance care work, it is not a form of labour easily commodified, and it is not a form of labour commonly understood as undesirable. The connection a mother might feel to her infant child may compel her to undertake this work, even as she is exhausted and wishes someone else could take over for just a little while. Indeed, she may even desire this work, feel compensated for it through feelings of love and connection, and have an actual physical bond and connection reinforced through hormones, breastfeeding, and the pheromones and microbes involved in the touch and smell of bodies. Feminists have tended to shy away from examining these forms of ‘compensation’ for the care work of infants, most likely due to the dangers of it being used to further compel women who *do not* want to care for infants into doing so, ‘essentializing’ the embodied desires of some women and mothers to somehow represent the essence of *all* women and mothers. Yet still, humans continue to reproduce, people continue to desire children, and when they are born, continue to love and desire to care for them, without monetary compensation at least. A diverse economies framework might enable us to examine the forms of compensation that are not usually included in our analyses of care work, and thus consider how the care work of infants might be gently and sensitively shared with others, particularly fathers or male co-parents who have historically avoided or missed out on some of this work.

Caring for infants is obviously work – it requires us to expend energy, to maintain and continue repetitive tasks that enable the survival of this small being dependent on others for survival. The unfortunate experiments of the Romanian orphanages of the early 1990s (where babies either died or grew up severely mentally stunted; see Simms 2014) show us that loving touch is essential for survival. The work of caring for infants goes beyond merely providing food and shelter, but includes human connection. In economic terms, caring for infants is not so obviously ‘productive labour’. Of course, parts of it are considered economically productive: some aspects of infant care can be commodified into paid child care hours. Yet the calcu-

lation parents make about who does the work of caring for their infant is something more than economic – it strays into the arena of affect: desire, shame, values, beliefs. Although it is hard, repetitive and exhausting work, it is not necessarily work that we might want to redistribute to others, given our own attachments to our children. It is also not without compensation, as I discuss next.

In my own work on infant care in China, Australia and New Zealand, I researched families practising a form of infant hygiene known as ‘elimination communication’. In this practice, care givers attune themselves to the signs and signals of infants, and hold them out over appropriate receptacles to eliminate their urine or faeces. In my research this was mostly a care and communication task taken up by mothers (and in China, grandmothers), resulting in closer communications and a form of embodied intuition around their infants’ needs. Yet men and co-parents taking up this extra care work of ‘learning to be affected’ by infant communications can also be compensated by the joy of increased embodied intuition and connection with their infant (Dombroski 2018; see also Roelvink, Chapter 47 in this volume). What this means is that an argument for redistributing care work becomes less about redistributing the oppressive and exhausting or exploitative labour of care (although this is still important), but also about redistributing the possibility of connection, intuition, embodied desire and alternative thinking (Ruddick 1989) that might come from certain forms of care work that have historically been performed by women or mothers. Caring for infants in this way, responding to their communications by holding them out to eliminate their waste free of a nappy, also promotes a form of hygiene care that actively benefits the environment and the more-than-human worlds of microbes, compost, sewerage systems and landfill (Dombroski 2016). I argue that these all constitute a kind of hybrid human/more-than-human activist collective of carers.

Feminist arguments for the redistribution of care work then, do not have to be just about righting the wrongful essentialization and subjectification of women to care work, but also about righting the wrongful exclusion of men from care work, and indeed expanding the collective of care workers to include more people in the benefits of being a carer. This is important if we are to address that key political question Tronto leaves us with, ‘how do we distribute care fairly?’ As Tronto argues, this kind of care labour might help move all humans away from the masculinist *homo economicus* and towards the inclusive, perhaps feminist, always collective subject *homines curans* (Tronto 2017). This collective caring subject is one which includes human collectives but also the more-than-human as discussed next.

## DIVERSIFYING CARE LABOUR IN AN URBAN FARM

In the city of Christchurch, New Zealand, a series of devastating earthquakes in 2010 and 2011 left the city with large gaps: literal gaps in the city landscape where 1240 of the central city’s buildings had to be torn down,<sup>3</sup> and other kinds of gaps in the services for city youth, including mental health services which could not cope with the overload of traumatized children becoming youth (Dombroski, Diprose and Boles 2019; Sepie 2015). Stepping into some of these gaps, the social enterprise Cultivate Christchurch developed an urban farm on some cleared land, building up the soil cover of what was once a gravel demolition site with food scraps collected from city restaurants unserved by the city council greenwaste collections and truckloads of tree mulch from arborist services avoiding landfill fees. Started by a social worker and a permaculture ecologist, the organization sought to provide a nurturing space for

young people in Christchurch – particularly those struggling with mental health issues, in the justice system, or at a loose end after leaving school. With colleagues, I spent a year studying this social enterprise and the care that was provided there.<sup>4</sup>

We found that the care is provided by trained social workers, working alongside young people in the urban farm, passing on key life skills like how to nurture one's own physical body and mental health with food, how to stick at a difficult task for the reward it brings, how to care for others – both small and vulnerable plants and one's human co-workers. But it is not only social workers who provide this care: the farm is managed by staff trained in organic horticulture and includes the labour and care of paid untrained workers, of unpaid volunteers, of alternatively compensated earthworms, microbes, fungi, birds and insects. Some of the youth are provided a living allowance by the Ministry for Social Development for a six-month internship, and are thus cared for by the taxes of the nation of Aotearoa New Zealand. The enterprise began with start-up funding from Vodafone, who added additional layers of care by accepting oral reporting from the founders rather than have them taking time out of farming and caring to write lengthy reports on outcomes. Members of the local community care by choosing to invest in 'broccoli bonds': an alternative finance that raises money for expanding composting infrastructure through providing a 15 per cent return on investment for each minimum \$1000 bond, to be repaid in vegetables or landscaping services ('muscle') to the value of \$1150. The land upon which the farm is situated was provided free of rent by private owners who were matched with Cultivate through the social enterprise Life in Vacant Spaces, and who receive a rates exemption from the city council for enabling their land to be used for free until another use is desired. The landowner thus cares for the youth too, and the soil, microbes, insects, vegetables, and of course the urban farmers and social workers employed there. We could also say that the land and plants care for the youth in turn: in our interviews, youth articulated the feelings of peace and calmness that the space provided, or the meditative repetitive work that transplanting seedlings enabled, or even the basic satisfaction of completing a tough job, or holding it together for one's co-workers who are struggling (see Dombroski et al. 2018).

Some of this diverse care work is compensated, and some is not. Some of this compensation is in the form of wages and some not. The point is, the diverse forms of labour and compensation and the diverse forms of care work form a hybrid caring collective that acts to improve not just youth mental health, but environmental health and the well-being of staff, volunteers, restaurants and the general public who purchase the organic vegetables. The work of caring for youth mental health in the city of Christchurch is distributed via a 'hybrid' human/more-than-human caring collective, but in distributing it, youth also learn to care for others and many others are cared for within this collective. Indeed, it seems to be a great example of what Tronto calls 'caring with' – care that cares alongside, where the needs of one being are interconnected and interdependent with a whole host of others. The redistribution of care work is not then a simple calculation of shifting care from one type of person (such as women) to other types of people (such as men), but a complex arrangement of interdependent caregiving that shifts us all from one type of person, *homo economicus*, to another type of being that goes beyond the collective caring subject *homines curans* to a hybrid caring collective that includes the more-than-human.

## CONCLUSION

A diverse economies approach to thinking about care pays attention to the diverse forms of care work humans and non-humans undertake, including the forms of compensation that may or may not be provided for this work. Like any form of work, care labour may become commodified, but in this chapter I have paid attention particularly to those forms of care work that remain situated in affective bonds, complex networks, and distributed collectives. Feminists seeking to redistribute care work may do so as part of anti-oppressive practices, but we also must recognize the complex arrangements of care in which we are all embedded, to not cut back the care that is given to infants, young people, and all, but to rather increase and amplify it through wider arrangements of care that build on the diverse forms of compensation that care might allow. From men and co-parents taking greater shares of both the frustration and joys of nurturing work, to the complex negotiations with the more-than-human that make up the care task of farmers and social workers in a therapeutic urban farm, we must allow that redistributing care is an ongoing process, a shift in complex networks, an opportunity for greater joy and deeper connection with others beyond ourselves and our narrow understandings of labour and care. As we pay attention to shifting oppressive practices of care and redistributing it across hybrid collectives with diverse forms of compensation, we move towards a vision of care labour and work where compensation becomes less about an individual return on investment and more about the environmental and psycho-social benefits of care for the family and the broader human/non-human community economy of care.

## NOTES

1. Playcentre is a cooperative early childhood education centre with over 70 years of history in New Zealand. Parents (until recently almost entirely mothers) do early childhood education training and run the centres by committee. More recently, the association has federated and is government funded, and has thus become less independent. At the time of Waring's analysis, however, it provided almost the only form of child care and early childhood (and parent!) education in rural New Zealand towns.
2. See 'The gender wars of household chores: A feminist comic' accessed 8 March 2019 at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/26/gender-wars-household-chores-comic>.
3. See <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/christchurch-earthquake-2011/66290638/1240-central-Christchurch-buildings-demolished> (accessed 8 March 2019).
4. Our research project was funded by National Science Challenge 11: Building Better Homes, Towns, and Cities. Primary investigators were myself and Gradon Diprose, working closely with associate investigators Stephen Healy and David Conradson. See <http://www.cultivatingurbanwellbeing.wordpress.com> (accessed 25 March 2019) for more details.

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