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Care as a 'New' Feminist Rationality

ELISA BOSISIO

Networks, Entanglements and Proximity

What could notions such as network and entanglement possibly mean for today's feminisms? The answer presented in this paper is: a new conception of care. Aiming to reframe the crucial feminist figure of care within new ontological and political horizons, I engage with cyberfeminism, neomaterialisms and feminist technoscience. Poised as we currently are on the edge of social and ecological collapse, these approaches question the stability of the autonomous subject typical of Modern Western politics and philosophy by proposing to move beyond the regime of so-called "skinned existence[1]" (Bosisio 2020, 6). Let me begin by outlining some key references of this shift from the last four decades.

1. Since the 1980s, the American biologist Lynn Margulis has challenged the dominant conception of evolution as a self-contained process, instead recognizing multispecies and trans-kingdom mutualism as generators of proximity: topoi/tropoi for the emergence of new cells, tissues, organs, and individuals. Margulis shows that the nucleated cell is the result of a process of cohabitation, cooperation and quasi-fusion between different bacteria and archea and, consequently, argues that the tendency of life (including that of homo sapiens) is to bind together and re-emerge in a new wholeness at higher and broader levels of organization. Conceptualizing life as a continuous "intimacy of strangers" (Margulis, quoted in Mazur 2009), Margulis displaces the centrality of the individual in dominant understandings of life by focusing on relationality.

2. In 2000, ecology scholar Beth Dempster (2000, 1) introduced the notion of the "sympoietic system" on behalf of those "semio-material mundane phenomena" in which constitutive matter, informative components and control tasks are situated and distributed in a complexity of quasi-individual, quasi-collective, multi-levelled parts. Dempster underlines that earthly systems depend not on the production of fixed boundaries but rather on ongoing complex and dynamic relations among the

systems' components and other influences. She thus emphasizes linkages, feedback, cooperation, and synergistic behaviors.

3. In 2007, theoretical physicist Karen Barad (2007, 160) put the notion of "entanglement" on the table of feminist philosophy. Entanglement does not mean simply being intertwined with others as a joining of originally separated entities; it instead entails the utmost disavowal of an independent and self-contained existence. Indeed, Barad's argument aims to disrupt the perceived separation of individuals and things by emphasizing that they do not exist before their interactions and only emerge through and as part of their intra-acting transformative proximity.

4. Since the early 2000s, anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli has interrogated Western philosophy's commitment to discontinuist environmentalism. She has launched this challenge by integrating into her writings Aboriginal conceptions of space and time as brimming with spirits as well as science-based evidence of the constant flux of toxic elements that connect up human, animal, organic and non-organic bodies (Povinelli 2016). In doing so, she has intervened in what I call "skinned existence" (Bosisio 2020), that is, an individualistic understanding of the self as ending at the skin. In fact, Povinelli argues that particles, emanations, factories, mines, lungs, pores, and roots all give rise to patterns of sufferance and mutual dependency beyond epidermal borders.

All of these arguments posed by feminist scholars from social/natural science and the humanities stress corporal experiences and seek to show how everything on earth is connected to something else in a proliferation of patterns of existence in which both emancipatory and suffocating co-habitation regimes are possible. In other words, they propose an onto-epistemological turn that allows us – as feminists and scholars – to acknowledge the world produced by material encounters, a world in which vicinity and touch must be taken into feminist political and ethical consideration.

Why Feminism Has to Deal with Webs and Complex Multi-levelled Systems

Why have feminist theorists (or theorists evoked by feminists) ended up discussing the complex systems that constantly and differentially materialize the planet as a *web of existence*?

I believe the genealogy of this engagement began in the 1970s, when Marxist feminist scholars and activists[2] emphasized that the reproduction of labor-power provides the "ground zero" (Federici 2012) of capitalist relations of production. Later, in the 1980s, feminist scholars addressed the issue of post-industrial revolution. The irreversible decline of Fordist manufacturing forced national and transnational capitalist formations to move from heavy industry to an innovation-based economy in which the creativity of the human mind and the regenerative power of living matter displaced the mass-production of industrial commodities (at least in the Global North). Scholars such as Nicolas Rose (2006) have argued that "life itself" has now be-

come productive and has been transformed into surplus value. Indeed, cutting-edge technologies of information are able to plunge affects, relations and semio-material connections into the schizoid fluxes of a new global economy. This multi-layered expansion of the now-precarious third sector is what the Italian neomaterialist feminist Cristina Morini (2010, 136) calls the "feminization of labor *tout court*". Morini's expression describes the emergence of a service economy that has absorbed many of the tasks previously performed in the home or, in Haraway's words, "the 'homework economy' outside 'the home'" (1991, 166).

This process could be described as a transition from the economic valorization of the working-time of an abstract male/human subject to the valorization of life itself, complete with its regenerative sympoietic tendencies as well as its unavoidable propensity for connections, relations, mutual aid, affects and proximity. As such, the neoliberal economy widens the scope of both production and reproduction and blurs perceived frontiers between subjects and their relational environment.

Against the backdrop of this global network capitalism, critical feminist scholars such as Haraway have been working to update the feminist anti-capitalist critique. Drawing on insights from Science and Technology Studies (STS), they have scrutinized the way capitalism has become successful in both exploiting and dominating affects and relation-ability. Simultaneously, feminist STS provided fertile ground for developing epistemologies capable of detecting the bio-info-techno mediations at the core of the ontological relation-ability and hybridism of the existent, always-already in 'fix and flux' of matter, ideas, and conditions. Moreover, feminist scholars and activists have transformed their understanding of the "web of the existent" as both a cartography of exploitation through vectors of racialization, sexualization, and naturalization and as a new terrain for alliances.

Care as More Than a "Politics of Love": Care as a Sympoietic Concrete

It is in this spirit that I would like to problematize the ethical dilemmas we encounter as humans, especially feminists, on having recognized how deeply we are immersed in a web of differential relatings. María Puig de la Bellacasa is the author who has helped me the most in questioning our practices in an entangled world. In *Matters of Care* (2017) she thoroughly considers the complex cosmologies we – as differential humans – produce with and within the non-human. Describing forms of affect as world-makers, she claims that care surfaces as an unavoidable affect in the encounters bringing *natureculture* (Haraway 1997) together with technoscience. Subjects, objects and the field in which they intra-act and relate emerge only in intra-dependence: here, care is always active as both something that is present or something that is missing. Existence, Puig de la Bellacasa argues, is ontologically a matter of care in that being proximate necessarily involves care.

Yet what is care, more precisely? And how to practice care? Let us proceed step by step.

The concept of care is a milestone in feminist political theory. Care is women's practical labor, a form of labor historically concealed under the interwoven assemblages of capitalism and patriarchy. Care-as-labor was the cornerstone of the so-called "politics of love" (Dalla Costa 1978, 19), a specific articulation of oppression as a spontaneous, rewarding sentiment typical of seemingly biologically determined women. From this perspective, reproduction is not considered a specific and pivotal form of work, but rather as a natural and hence outside-wage propensity of women.

And yet, care is more than that: It is a vital affective state or, as Joan Tronto (1993, 45) writes, "everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair 'our world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life sustaining web". Tronto's notion of care entails the form of relational ontology I have emphasized from the outset of this article and paves the way for an affirmative vision of care as entanglement and the networks we produce/are produced by. However, in order to avoid inadvertently romanticizing care as spontaneity and un-mediated maintenance, we as differential humans should interrogate this definition by asking: whose world is mentioned? When Tronto uses a "we" embroiled in the possessive "our," who does she have in mind? And what does "as well as possible" mean? Instead of proposing a universal answer, I want to underline that care already *lies in* and *emerges from* this very act of situated knowledge. Indeed, in the ongoing process of the world's entangling, the continuous act of interrogating positionality and dynamics of in-/ex-clusion is unquestionably an act of care. By hacking Tronto's notion of care, I understand her "life sustaining web" as the act of *staying in the entanglements.* The *detournement*[3] of Tronto's conception of care aims to problematize the mutual unfolding of the vectors and nodes that make up the changing networks. More precisely, mapping how these nets operate reveals a geography of our mutual differential enfolding: staying alert and keeping our gaze vigilant so as to grasp where the patriarchal and capitalist vectors of power strike is a *caring* radical and rational exercise for a useful and critical feminism. We map their centers and, with particular care, their margins as well. In this exercise, rationality and epistemology are unavoidable tools for deploying care as a cartographic instrument. Because care is the effort of living and thinking within. The feminist project of rehabilitating rationality is an intense commitment to practicing social change by taking care of the neglected. As the cyberfeminist collective Laboria Cuboniks (2014) stated in their *Xenofeminist Manifesto*, new epistemologies and relentless streams of thought must be implemented if we are to figure out how to interrupt monodirectional patriarchal and capitalist social reproduction. Caring thus means noticing and tracing the vectors of power that constitute these entanglements. Caring is a synonym for being responsible for the light we shed and the way it travels along complex assemblages, nodes that are neglected by the dominant humanist gaze.

As a scholar involved in discussions about such new ontologies, I have taken the notions of network and entanglement seriously. But it is as a feminist that they have

become crucial to me as both ethical-political and ontological lenses. Indeed, while feminisms have always focused on relationality and proximity as critical concepts[4], contemporary cyberfeminism and neomaterialism are further de-territorializing these concepts by moving beyond those dualisms that have historically reduced the performative role of women to so-called 'female duties.' What I am therefore proposing is a cartography of the theories that ground relationality on ontological rather than moral foundations. Following Barad (2007), I consider ontology to be inseparable from epistemology and ethics and, therefore, I define care as an onto-ethico-epistemological object that challenges our human mode of being in the world.[5] What could care become if it were based on these cyberfeminist and neomaterialist discussions? The following suggestion of care as a mode of thinking could be defined as a critique that reveals itself as embedded cognition, a matter-based (or body-based) rationality that is prepared to substitute modern, male, western, ego-centered rationality. It is a form of thinking that not only engages with a new ontology by resisting the drive to impoverish epistemological gazes, but which also fundamentally includes matter-based experiences in the process of knowing.

Cyberfeminism and Tentacular Caring Epistemologies

As outlined above, my understanding of care as a form of critical epistemology is primarily inspired by Puig de la Bellacasa, and she was stimulated in turn by Haraway's (2016) tentacular thinking. Haraway moves through the bio-info-techno mediated entanglements in which women, racialized subjects, queer subjects, new technological devices, nonhuman animals, bacteria, viruses, indigenous collectives, and activists move in networked relations with each other but also with men, Sapiens, multinationals, fuel industries, extractivist companies, white supremacists etc. Haraway's multi-layered resistance to conceptual enclosure expresses the desire and necessity to think of earthly entanglements in a way that moves beyond individualisms and *discontinuisms.* In this vein, she argues for an understanding of environment and subjectivity, body and mind, matter and ratio, nature and culture, self and non-self as mutually unfolding. When all these contacts materialize, there emerges an idea of care that overlaps with the willingness to follow the mutating differences that articulate earthly ecopolitics.

A similar conception of care is pivotal in cyberfeminism's political ethics. Cyberfeminism, indeed, also relies on connectivity as a process of collective liberation. This insight entails perceiving rationality as a subversive tool of care that transforms those who are related to each other and the worlds they live in, as suggested by the Russian artivist and cyberfeminist scholar Irina Aristarkhova (2007). Aristarkhova proposes that we place the body at the core of a generative network which, as a matrix, substitutes the re/productive and nurturing figure of the mother: we are all the offspring of a complex system of techno and biological molding in which sex, linear biology and vertical transmission play limited roles. For Aristarkhova, our selves are

the result of a continuous semio-material, organic and inorganic cutting and patching. Alongside our porous borders we have to *do* politics, and in this space care both materializes and must materialize out of feminist attention.

Conclusions

From natural/techno-sciences and experiences we learn that nothing comes without its world and that the political consequence of recognizing networks and entanglements is an endless act of acknowledging the systems in which we, as earthly beings, are immersed. In such systems, we always assume differential hierarchical positionalities in an intricated web of life structured by vectors of power. New forms of rationality that are attentive to these proximities work as counterclaims to the understanding of *ratio* as a patriarchal enterprise or as a standardized transcendental logic detached from needs, desire, and change. A cyberfeminist and neomaterialist understanding of networks and entanglements functions as an epistemology of all those geographies that place bodies in communication with a relational environment. Yet, which movements put the bodies in particular stances? Who is at the center and who is at the margins?

Granting so much attention to epistemologies, rationalities and thoughts has brought me to read feminist *thinking-with*, *thinking-within*, *thinking-for* as an epistemology that enables us to incorporate multiple issues into the daily analysis of complex systems. As such, they help in drafting caring cartographies of confusing geographies where no margin should end up being neglected. Indeed, considering care as an act of recovering rationality – and reshaping it in a non-individualist way – opens up an opportunity for new futures in which the as yet neglected relations between differential elements are acknowledged. This mode of thinking allows us to consider the "becomings and heterogeneity as opposed to the stable and eternal, the identical and the constant", as Sadie Plant (1997, 80) once put it in her cyberfeminist classic. This shift in thinking seeks to move towards a non-exclusive and liberating ecopolitics.

Care is a method, namely a way of seeing; it is a complex epistemological approach to entanglements and networks, a constant questioning of positionalities in which someone touches and someone is being touched. Care means living in the wrinkles that arise within the fabric of the world, wrinkles in which we have to learn to notice the others who are co-weaving our shared ecologies. In this vision, caring is the process of learning and practicing noticing. *Care as a feminist rationality* is a relational practice of ethical *response-ability* for which lives come to matter. It is an ecology that uses compassion to mold rational critique in the affective encounter; it is the ability to affect and to be affected (D'Alessandro 2020, 24).

Notes

1 I define skinned existence as the dominant, standardized pattern of self-contained subjectivity distinctive of the Modern Western understanding of bodies and their environment (Bosisio 2020).

2 Silvia Federici, Selma James, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and the grassroots women's network The International Wages for Housework Campaign have been campaigning for recognition and payment for all caring work, in the home and outside.

3 This is an artistic-political and conceptual technique developed in the 1950s by the Letterist International and later adapted by the Situationist International that was defined as the integration of present or past artistic production into a superior construction.

4 I am thinking in particular of Carol Gilligan's (1982) famous and controversial essay *In a Different Voice* and the way it launched a tradition of thought that anchored the origins of caring ethical subjectivities in the figure of the nurturing mother.

5 The neologism "ethico-onto-epistemology" (Barad 2007, 90) marks the inseparability of ontology, epistemology, and ethics. The analytic philosophical tradition takes these fields to be entirely separate, but this presupposition depends on specific ways of figuring the nature of being, knowing, and valuing.

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