

COMMENTARY

THINKING WITH, DISSENTING WITHIN: CARE-FULL CRITIQUE FOR MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLDS

Kelly Dombroski

Review essay for Journal of Cultural Economy, Book Review Symposium

Matters of Care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds, by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, 265pp., ISBN 978-1-51579-0065-6.

In a world where we use words like post-truth and post-political non-ironically, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's exploration of the politics of knowledge production is, for me, a long cool drink of water in a parched confusing desert full of ever shifting mirages. This review symposium seeks to bring together a set of reviews that explore aspects of Puig de la Bellacasa's book in relation to work in cultural economy, particularly community economies, feminist economic geography, and more-than-human geography.

Like myself and others in this review symposium, Puig de la Bellacasa engages with the work of Bruno Latour in his attempt to bring attention to the 'matter' in 'matters of fact', and indeed in shared 'matters of concern'(Latour 2004). Like us, many readers will be familiar with his interrogation of the value of a social constructivist perspective engaged in the intellectual project of deconstructing 'matters of fact', and familiar, too, with his recent call for social scientists to also *build* new realities around shared 'matters of concern'. Like Latour argues in his somewhat confessional piece 'Why has critique run out of steam?', our job as social scientists should be thinking through the shared matters of concern for our time and contributing to transformative material change(Latour 2004).¹ Of course, many readers familiar with feminist approaches to making knowledge with careful attention to the materiality and sociality of the bodies who make it will, like Puig de la Bellacasa, point out that Latour's insight is one that has long been present in feminist work.² Puig de la Bellacasa argues -- as she has elsewhere (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012) -- that while 'matters of concern' is more helpful than totalising explanatory theory, 'concern' is not the most useful concept for identifying what's at stake. This is because the concept of 'matters of concern' indicates a more generic notion for a politics of things where everything can be potentially thought of as a matter of concern, a neutrality which Puig de la Bellacasa's term 'matters of care' deliberately forgoes.

Puig de la Bellacasa's concept of 'matters of care' makes a deliberate connection between matter, global concerns and a thinking practice of care. In my work on maternity and infant care, the materiality of care is front and centre: vaginas, uteruses, bellies, stretchmarks, clothing, blood, placentas, microbes, hormones, molecules, instruments, beds, machines, sanitary pads, wipes, milk, ointments, nappies, slings, cots, strollers just to name a few (Dombroski 2017, Dombroski, McKinnon, and Healy 2016, see also other work on maternity and new materialities, such as

McKinnon 2016, Boyer and Spinney 2016, Boyer 2018). In some of my work, care is connected most significantly with the materiality of disposable and cloth nappies -- and the different material assemblages that emerge in the absence of these items (Dombroski 2016a, 2015). Care in Puig de la Bellacasa's work is likewise material and embodied both, paying attention to the materialities of care assemblages of soil, but never losing sight of the feminist concern for embodied and gendered care. But she goes further than many working in the area of assemblage thinking, drawing our attention to care as 'something we can *do* as thinkers and knowledge creators' (41), in that what we care for as researchers has material consequences, or 'contributes to mattering the world' (41).

What is clear in this book is that while care is not a topic limited only to feminists, feminists have something particular to offer any theorisation of care -- even in thinking about care with and for a seemingly non-gendered substrate such as soil. Puig de la Bellacasa, like other feminist (and indeed non-Western) thinkers, does not shy away from the mix of intentions that 'contaminate' the ethics of care -- obligation, for example, features in her work as a key concept that is returned to throughout the text. People -- often women -- 'become "obliged" to care in actual practice and relational arrangements, in messy material constraints rather than through moral dispositions' (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 204). I think about this in relation to Sara Ruddick's work on maternal thinking: she notes that children 'demand' care, and although we can choose not to give it, we are obliged to do so (Ruddick 1989, Dombroski 2017). It is this gap between choice and obligation where ethics lies. Care, then, is a *doing* not just an affective response, no matter how embodied, reflexive or how strong the demand or obligation feels. Indeed, it is in an *ethical doing* -- and since we are thinking about the agentic nature of things and materials, we might now see that things can also 'do' care, and hence, how we might care with, for, and be cared for by the more-than-human. And this is where *Matters of Care* becomes *Speculative ethics in more than human worlds*, because it falls to us to speculate what part the more-than-human might play in these ethical-doings of care. In that vein, Puig de la Bellacasa asks us to consider the following:

...while a critical stance can bring attention to such matters as who cares for whom, to what forms of care are prioritized at the expense of others, *a politics of speculative thinking also is a commitment to seek what other worlds could be in the making through caring while staying with the trouble of our own complicities and implications* (204).

This, for me, is the crux of the book. In my own work on the environmental and care labour of mothers and others in domestic settings of Australia, China, and New Zealand, I have been interested in how we think about ethical actions of everyday maintenance that occur in ostensibly individualised or privatised settings (Dombroski 2017, 2016a, 2015). Although I was careful to explore these questions across place, class, gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, and to carefully show the complexity of the ethical-doings of those I researched, I inevitably was faced with reviewers' questions along the lines of 'but isn't this all just white middle class neoliberal privatisation and individualisation of women's care labour?' Can these actions still be considered 'ethical' and 'political' if they are interwoven with obligation, care, affect and labour, and occur mostly within the 'private' sphere of the home? What complicities am I embedded in as a white, educated woman researching these activities and publishing in academic journals behind paywalls?

One answer is to use new materialist thinking around hybrid collectives to think about these 'ethical doings' as more-than-individual, more-than-human, and indeed to use community economies thinking to argue these online and hybrid more-than-human collectives engage in more-than-economic negotiations around matters of concern for new 'worlds' (see particularly Dombroski 2016a). But Puig de la Bellacasa does not try to argue us out of these critiques and complicities, as I did: instead she asks us to *stay with* 'the trouble of our own complicities and implications' (204), and reminds us that our noninnocent thinking must reside 'in the inevitable entanglement between the critical and the speculative stance' and that 'there is not such an outside position that our involvements have no effects' (204). Puig de la Bellacasa asks us to 'dissent from within' our own commitments -- disciplinary, political, theoretical, ethical. She invites us to stay with the trouble, to openly attach and commit to our matters of care, to dissent in such a way that our critique builds alternatives rather than merely destroys the cares of others. In Puig de la Bellacasa's terms, then, I am using the notion of hybrid collectives to move my analysis of mothers doing environmental or care work away from peremptory dismissal of the matters of care they -- and I -- gather around. Instead, I am working to *think with* and also *dissent within*. Thinking with might involve firstly acknowledging the ways in which these mothers' experiments are genuinely able to enact a thinking shift from individualist 'I' to collective 'we' (Dombroski et al. 2017), where we is complex, nuanced, hybrid and placed, but has meaning and significance beyond the individual human. Dissenting within might mean 'staying with' the complicities that arise, asking questions of the assumptions underpinning the collectives, and pushing back through widening the discussion to include previous excluded others -- for example bringing in the voices of mothers and grandmothers doing similar work in the far west of China (Dombroski 2016b).

In all this, we can recognise care as a necessary everyday doing that is interconnected with regimes of power and complicity, and even that 'political life is ultimately about the allocation of caring responsibilities' (Tronto 2013, xii). As such, we must operate our academic analyses of care in such a way as to support, construct, and enact collective change. Puig de la Bellacasa's thinking approach is attentive to multiplicity and possibility, teaching us to dissent from within these commitments with deep care and concern. While the common metaphors we might use for a good book are ones of swords and slicing ('cutting edge scholarship', or 'piercing critique'), I think for *Matters of Care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds* a more appropriate metaphor is that of a penetrating yet kind gaze, where all the care and attention of Sophia, Goddess of Wisdom, is brought to bear on the things we most care about in these troubled times. This is indeed what is soul-refreshing about Puig de la Bellacasa's work: it seeks not to merely cut, analyse and deconstruct, but to carefully acknowledge, question and think-with, in order to enable us to dissent-within those traditions of scholarship and activism we call home.

Notes

1 Indeed, Latour himself appears to be following his own advice -- a recent article in *Science* reports that he is putting his efforts into building up trust in climate science (de Vrieze 2017).

2 Donna Haraway, for example, precedes Latour in arguing that our work should be less about deconstruction and more about passionate connection and passionate construction in resistance to patriarchal and other forms of domination (Haraway 1991).

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Carolyn Hardin and Gerda Roelvink for their insightful feedback on my drafts, and to Stephen Healy for his contagious enthusiasm for this project. Thanks also to Maria Puig de la Bellacasa and Beth Reddy for their kind engagement in this symposium.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on Contributor

Dr Kelly Dombroski is a senior lecturer in human geography at the University of Canterbury Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha in Aotearoa New Zealand. She is a member of the Community Economies Collective, and her research interests include feminist geographies of the home, body, and everyday life as sites of social change, as well as hybrid collectives and community economies. She conducts fieldwork in Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, China and other parts of Southeast Asia.

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