

Radical Housing Justice Within and Beyond Caring

Michele Lancione 

Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning (DIST), Polytechnic and University of Turin, Turin, Italy, michele.lancione@polito.it

What does it mean to care, and who does the caring, in these violent times? Times that are violent not only because of prolonged conflicts and environmental backlash, but at a more substantive level, one where abjected subjectivities are circulated and sustained to enable dispossessive praxis to be reproduced, over again. Violent times that build on top of more violence, of entrenched patriarchal modes of being, the institutionalisation of the mad, the medicalisation of love, the exportation of migration management and control, the racialisation of entire histories that are turned silent, contained, controlled, killed. How to think and to talk about care in times where the legal frameworks allowing for lives to be confined so that several forms of extraction can go on are accepted by the many, evoked by the many, embraced by the many as the solution to lingering fears and a fluctuating sense of doom?

The problem is not just of impossibility, but of collusion. Because care and caring play a huge role in all this mess. *Loving* the poor—as a machinery of social control. *Protecting* the other from the other—as a justification to a whole racialised industry of incarceration and containment. *Curating* the sick—as a way to define a domain of knowledge based on the definition of someone else’s fundamental inadequacy-to-be. *Managing* sexuality—as a shortcut of the powerful on their fear to be. *Recuperating* the damned—as the moral caging of those addictions deemed in need of control. And there is more in the vein of normative frameworks of care, which are underpinned by a morality that elevates itself at the level of the normal, therefore requiring the other to either comply or be outcast (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). *L’autre*, the other, is abstracted from life and installed in the magma of history as a subject to be institutionalised through care and its representation, not despite it (Foucault 2016). *Caring for l’autre*—in a merry orgy of charitable humanitarian entrepreneurialism—is not a side product, a recuperation from annihilation, but the acceleration of a logic of dispossession, as powerfully illustrated by scholars investigating the humanitarian colonisation of the Black Mediterranean (Dadusc and Mudu 2022; Danewid 2017; Hawthorne 2021).

Such caring is instrumental to annihilation, not its opposite. And yet, “care” offers an almost undoubted “truth”, a warmth luring one to it. The academy seems to be particularly affected by such power and its normative desire. Entire disciplinary fields carry flows of caring material, a discursive salivation made from hundreds of papers and conference presentations per year. A quick search in the

Scopus database reveals 5,538 peer-reviewed contributions in the social sciences and humanities containing the word “care” or “caring” in the title, for the year 2021 alone. As noted by Jessica Cooper (2019), at the pre-pandemic 2019 American Anthropological Association / Canadian Anthropology Society conference in Vancouver (the major gathering of anthropologists in North America), in recent years care has become a trendy asset of enquiry (showcased throughout 43 panels around “care” at that conference). Did the academy become colluded to care as a field of enquiry, a domain of knowledge, a specialisation for the few? Part of the firm concern moved to the fore by Victoria Lawson (2007), now more than a decade ago, on the ways in which care has become both over- and under-exposed in contemporary market-driven and individualistic instantiations of well-being focused on this question. Early on, Doreen Massey (2004) asked similar pointed questions on localised, bounded understandings of the practice of caring, which eludes both the relational grounds of the violence one is supposed to tackle through caring, but also the extended relationalities at work in the labour of being and becoming “responsible”, as an object-subject of caring. The academic performative reduction of caring as an end point, a “fix”, and as a specialised (often normative and medicalised) field of expertise, knows little of the tensioned politics at play in caring. Is there another ground between the masculine forgetting of “care” and its reduction to a manageable, measurable, medicalised speech? Such a different grounding would mean to theorise *care* as the most intimate site of politics, the most visceral. *Caring as the metabolic act of the counter-political*.¹

Because if there is something to be cared for in caring and care, that thing is not at the level of individual practice, nor at the level of individual inclinations, nor at the level of discussion of the plight of the poor. Those are easily subsumed within the cog of the institutionalising machine because the language is corrupted and because the conditions of labour reproducing that language are fundamentally corrupted too. If there is something to be cared for in care and caring, that thing is only at the level where extractions, annihilations, and violence can be thought of and fought (Anzaldúa 1987). And that site, given the histories to which I’ve pointed at, which include our conditions of labour, can only be “in” but not “of” care (Harney and Moten 2013), lateral and collateral to the entrenchments of caring (where the latter are of the institutions reducing “care” to a slice of its emancipatory power). That means refusing the entrapment of “care”—its theorisation, its prescription, its moral configuration for and by the many—to look instead for how dispossessed subjects carve out a space in-between, on the side of what has been made of “care”, in order to open up the possibility of retrieving affirmations where one is called to see, morally so, only annihilation and deviance (Grosz 2005). Looking for how that space is inhabited is an analytical move: it requires attention to those affective and material practices that do not sit squarely with the givens of “care”, but nonetheless enact forms of “being concerned with” collective endurance, in the face of the given violence. At the level where such forms of “caring otherwise” (Lester and Lauren forthcoming) or “radical care” (Hobart and Kneese 2020) come to the fore, there is an implicit double-refusal: both of the “care” that is administered

from afar, and of the status quo. Such a refusal is not in the negative, but a real (lived and felt) affirmation. It denies access to the forces that aim to “save” and to “fix” (the humanitarian, the state and its police), while at the same time enacting a struggle to endure and potentially transcend the historic forms of injustice one is made to inhabit. This is what I have called the “propositional politics” of care: a form of autonomous concern, which speaks of un-announced concrete, collective, counter-affirmations (Lancione 2019).

For grounded care has its own propositions, which sometimes are not announced in the language of the political, but by resisting complete annihilation they nonetheless become of-concern, and therefore of politics. Crucially, this is a fugitive move where the escape is never realised, because the prevailing forces have colonised and foreclosed that path throughout. It is an impossible line of flight, because the diagram of racial possession cuts through bodies, contexts, and collective subjects (Byrd et al. 2018; Roy 2017). This is not to say that the politics of caring otherwise, in its radicality, is a simple gesture, but that its “revolution” can only necessarily be an ongoing struggle. Analytically, this implies two things. First, that the definition of what counts as “care” and of its multiple propositions needs to stay open and needs constant revisions, since one is dealing just with ephemeral traces (Stevenson 2014), “chants”, more often than not, “unaccounted for” (Hartman 2018). Second, that the predisposition of those doing the tracing must be one of the liminal. *Caring otherwise* is never just about exiting, because even the act of walking away is always already partly captured—by finance, by planning, by the ways that phenotypes have been diagrammed culturally and socially, by the law. Inhabiting this in-between transcends resilience: it is about staying with the freight of the trouble one has been given (Haraway 2016).

The latest volume from AbdouMaliq Simone (2022) speaks of the latter. Particularly, how to grasp forms of the political that are effected “within and beyond capture” (see also Angel 2017). For Simone, these forms have a spatial component, a gathering of and in space that he calls “the surrounds”: a modality of urban inhabitation done by residents at the tail end of dispossession to carve out a chance to inhabit what has been made uninhabitable. This is both being “beyond” and a being “in”, because—as I’ve sketched earlier—conditions to get out, and to be cared for, are out of the question. The surrounds are not immune from capture. As we can see in the cases of Seattle, Atlanta, Oakland, and Detroit presented in this Symposium, a dispossessive sense of direction despite resistance is forcefully maintained in the form of financialised diagramming of dwellings, urban land grabs, the militarisation of neighbourhoods, beautification, touristification, and more (Quizar 2022; Rodriguez 2022; Summers and Fields 2022; Thompson 2022). But when space is striated, when the material and affective relations making up the urban become fragmented and conflicting, a transversal milieu of organising, a terrain of and for struggle, can also emerge. Housing, in becoming a terrain of extraction through brutal force and trauma, produces renewed forms of embodied politics that sometime are dispersed and re-captured, but at points map onto new collective subjects (see, for instance, García-Lamarca 2022). The constitution of those individual and affective stances is an

emergence from the plane of possibilities that can come together as a form of infrastructural support for more of the same, as is clear, for instance, in the history narrated by Akira Drake Rodriguez (2022) in this Symposium. As Simone writes, “the surrounds are infrastructural in that they entail the possibilities within any event, situation, setting, project, for something incomputable and unanticipated to take its place” (2022:5).

The “unanticipated” this Symposium is concerned with has to do with *caring for the endurance of collective struggles*, where neither “endurance” nor “collectives” are supposed to be. We see that in Brandi Summers and Desiree Fields’ (2022) careful tracing of embodied counter-political praxis to fight racialised financialised violence, where a performance of the intimate elaborates, as a knitting, a fragile yet strong, infrastructure of support for many Black residents in Oakland. A version of the same is beautifully presented by Jessi Quizar (2022), where a grounded approach to tracing the unfolding of grassroots forms of caring reveals forms of Black spatial imagination and resistance that would otherwise, simply, be lost. The “logic” here is one where relationality and well-being are centred to re-approach the land question in Detroit: not only in the sense of grounding struggles, but also of connecting those with the materiality of place and its possible re-envisioning from below. Both these contributions centre the embodiment of the everyday as a site where the tension of being within and beyond capture becomes apparent, a threshold where the “radicality” of struggles lies in their affirmative and propositional (in a material, affective, and relational sense), inhabitation of the stolen ground.

The other two contributions in this Symposium are crucial to understanding how such a radical politics of immanent inhabitation is not just an act of the here and the now, but constitutes forms of knowledge that trespass the present and can, with their own ways, percolate through history. Rodriguez’s (2022) centring of the notions of “infrastructures” and of “care capital” are extremely productive here. In digging through the history of Atlanta’s housing struggles, Rodriguez maintains, like Massey, an expansive relational-spatial analytic, revealing how individual preoccupations with housing can morph into a collectivity not only through declared politics, but also through the labour required to maintain social capital at the level of the neighbourhood. If the latter is traditionally individualised, or subsumed, in the functioning of the individual household, in the event of displacement a collective provisioning of infrastructures of care can emerge and render the fight for radical housing justice a real possibility. Carefully theorised, this is where the contribution of Samantha Thompson (2022) comes into the fore. As they write, “care is both a practice and a politics: the practice of work that enables survival and maintains lives, and a politics which uplifts care’s radical potential while refusing capitalist logics of individualism and profitability”. Analysing central moments in Seattle’s rent control debate, Thompson provides a fine contribution showing, at its core, how institutional “care” (for instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic) is very much part of the dispossessive logic reproducing racialised dwellings, and how residents have to fight that as much as—and as part of—racial capitalism.

The editors and authors of this Symposium are providing not only insights on the analysed cases, but also a methodology complementing and expanding those available to thinking “housing” beyond “policy”, and to centre the question of “housing” as one of intersectional justice (Lancione 2020; RHJ Editorial Collective 2020; Roy 2017; Roy et al. 2020). In particular, I believe these contributions show how the *radicality* of housing justice struggles is crafted being *within* and *beyond* caring. They do so by carrying a double-faced invitation: to trace how structural forms of violence, of which normative care practices are part, are (re) produced through the infrastructure (monetary, affective, material) of the “house”; and to paying attention to the situated labour of organising “beyond” the forms of inhabitation that are given, knowing that such a move is not a full escape, but an orientation, the assemblage of a form of livelihood that finds its own way to craft and propose its own salvation. Is this about giving up on structural change? No one said that radical housing justice cannot scale-up. But at its core it must remain a project attentive to its constituency. As I argue in a forthcoming text, the struggle to liberating home must not provide “a” solution, but enable multiple affirmations (see Lancione forthcoming). Scaling becomes then that horizontal praxis of showing where, how, and if histories and struggles are linked, to find common pressure points to open further caring spaces that refuse the entrapment of “a” cure. The contributions of Quizar, Rodriguez, Summers and Fields, and Thompson show how radical housing justice is a project of a mosaic of propositions united, but not subsumed, one-in-the-other. If the problem of dispossession is to reduce the many into one—life into proprietorship—then liberation requires caring for multiple forms of inhabitation to repeatedly escape such entrapment.

Acknowledgements

I am thankful to Desiree, Emma, and Kenton for inviting me to read the insightful works in this Symposium, to Devra Waldman for her feedback on an early version of this text, and to the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on this commentary. The writing of this essay was made possible thanks to the support of the “Inhabiting Radical Housing” European Research Council Starting Grant (no. 851940).

Endnote

¹ With “metabolic” I am, here, gesturing towards a feminist embodied reading of radical care (see later in the essay) but also towards an ecological, vitalist reading of a radical politics of care, which I can’t expand further upon here (see Haraway 2016).

References

- Angel J (2017) Towards an energy politics in-against-and-beyond the state: Berlin’s struggle for energy democracy. *Antipode* 49(3):557–576
- Anzaldúa G E (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books
- Byrd J A, Goldstein A, Melamed J and Reddy C (2018) Predatory value: Economies of dispossession and disturbed relationalities. *Social Text* 36(2):1–18

- Cooper J (2019) "Care in Relief: Problematizing the Ubiquity of Care in California's Mental Health Courts and Anthropological Theory." Paper presented at the 2019 American Anthropological Association / Canadian Anthropology Society annual meeting, Vancouver, BC, Canada
- Dadusc D and Mudu P (2022) Care without control: The humanitarian industrial complex and the criminalisation of solidarity. *Geopolitics* 27(4):1205–1230
- Danewid I (2017) White innocence in the Black Mediterranean: Hospitality and the erasure of history. *Third World Quarterly* 38(7):1674–1689
- Foucault M (2016) *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France 1974–1975* (trans G Burchell). London: Verso
- García-Lamarca M (2022) *Non-Performing Loans, Non-Performing People: Life and Struggle with Mortgage Debt in Spain*. Athens: University of Georgia Press
- Grosz E (2005) *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*. Durham: Duke University Press
- Haraway D (2016) *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press
- Harney S and Moten F (2013) *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. New York: Minor Composition
- Hartman S (2018) The anarchy of colored girls assembled in a riotous manner. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117(3):465–490
- Hawthorne C (2021) *L'Italia meticcica? The Black Mediterranean and the racial cartographies of citizenship*. In The Black Mediterranean Collective (eds) *The Black Mediterranean: Bodies, Borders, and Citizenship* (pp 169–198). Cham: Springer
- Hobart H J K and Kneese T (2020) Radical care: Survival strategies for uncertain times. *Social Text* 38(1):1–16
- Lancione M (2019) Weird exoskeletons: Propositional politics and the making of home in underground Bucharest. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 43(3):535–550
- Lancione M (2020) Radical housing: On the politics of dwelling as difference. *International Journal of Housing Policy* 20(2):1–17
- Lancione M (forthcoming) *For a Liberatory Politics of Home*. Durham: Duke University Press
- Lawson V (2007) Geographies of care and responsibility. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 97(1):1–11
- Lester R and Lauren C (eds) (forthcoming) *Traces of Care*. Durham: Duke University Press
- Massey D (2004) Geographies of responsibility. *Geographiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 86 (1):5–18
- Puig de la Bellacasa M (2017) *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Quizar J (2022) A logic of care and Black grassroots claims to home in Detroit. *Antipode* <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12842>
- RHJ Editorial Collective (2020) Covid-19 and housing struggles: The (re)makings of austerity, disaster capitalism, and the no return to normal. *Radical Housing Journal* 2(1):9–28
- Rodriguez A D (2022) "What is our city doing for us?": Placing collective care into Atlanta's post-public housing movements. *Antipode* <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12858>
- Roy A (2017) Dis/possessive collectivism: Property and personhood at city's end. *Geoforum* 80:A1–A11
- Roy A, Rolnik R, Graziani T and Malson H (eds) (2020) *Methodologies for Housing Justice Guide*. Los Angeles: Institute on Inequality and Democracy, UCLA
- Simone A M (2022) *The Surrounds: Urban Life Within and Beyond Capture*. Durham: Duke University Press
- Stevenson L (2014) *Life Beside Itself: Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic*. Los Angeles: University of California Press
- Summers B T and Fields D (2022) Speculative urban worldmaking: Meeting financial violence with a politics of collective care. *Antipode* <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12900>
- Thompson S (2022) Caring housing futures: A radical care framework for understanding rent control politics in Seattle, USA. *Antipode* <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12874>