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Acting beyond the present: thinking care as radical reflexivity

Adam Walker

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Women in the Black Panther Party

There has been much recent writing on ‘care’. As a term, ‘care’ is malleable: it can be stretched into different meanings, mobilized to support different positions.

In this blog, I argue that – paired with a vital radicality – this fluidity can constitute a crucial facet of ‘care’ in an uncaring world. ‘Radical care’ offers a powerful ethical, conceptual and methodological framework to relate the flawed conditions of the present with imaginaries of a better future.

Neoliberal care

For many, care exists firmly within an experience of neoliberal capitalism. Care-work, in its bodily-ness, in its relationality, and in its supposed femininity, is a sector of work which paradoxically becomes more relied upon precisely as it is devalued and hidden. Meanwhile, care for property and assets (for those who hold them) takes increasing precedence. A logic of austerity capitalism trickles down: we take care of what we have; with frugality we make do and mend.

A shadow of ‘care’ is leveraged, appropriated, misrepresented.

In the uncaring present, care feels more vital than ever.

If care is to help contest structures of violence and exploitation, we must care for and about care itself. How might we do this: hold care away from cooption?

Mari Puig de Bellacasa presents a schema of three principal *interconnected* aspects of care. First, care is the bodily and material work of sustaining and looking after. Second, care is the emotional and relational affect of connection to another. Third, care is ethical or political conviction and concern for a cause, for truth.

Systemic power, however, presents these facets of care as discrete. For those in power, it is politically useful to obscure real, vulnerable bodies from discussions of justice, or to overlook the role of relationship and encounter in forging a truth (presuming an ‘objective’ accuracy cut apart from the care it requires). As ‘caretakers of care’, though, we need to hold it in its complexity, in its interconnected indiscreteness. Care becomes critical, with resistant and resilient potency, when it is reflexively entwined.

Caring through nourishment

The Black Panther Party’s programme of providing free breakfasts for schoolchildren met an urgent material need amid the conditions of poverty and discrimination in which it operated. However, as **J Edgar Hoover’s 1969 memo** stating that the programme was ‘the best and most influential activity going’ for the party (and thus the most urgent threat to incumbent power) demonstrates, this very material act of care contributed significantly to the Panthers’ broader political project. Material-bodily care was able to somewhat resist its usual devaluation through recognition of the manifest importance of the breakfast programme for the party.

Furthermore, the programme also enabled forms of interrelational care within the party’s structure and between its members. The bodily practices of working hard alongside one another (in combination, crucially, with recognition of its vital importance to the Black Panther Party’s political aims) fostered relation and recognition. **In prioritising the assertion of racial equality, many women in the party had accepted a degree of gender inequality in its workings, but the urgently needed material care of the busy and extremely effective breakfast kitchens** brought these into question. In the workings of the breakfast programme then, Puig de la Bellacasa’s three strands of care operated in mutual, reflexive interplay.

It is at the edge spaces, in the state of exception, that care is most needed, where violence and exploitation are most dynamically enacted. The inverse though, is that it is at these same spaces that the artificiality of the current order, of its contingently reproduced nature, might be momentarily revealed.

Critical care

Critical care is careful, reflexive, slow. It holds onto and values complexity and contingency; it refuses the violence of abstraction. We need to hold onto this care, contesting a simplified notion of ‘accuracy’ in the name of forward-rushing speed. A critical care refuses a view of the world as something simply linear, proceeding onward, the past forgotten. Taking care of the past is part of caring for the future.

Dare we hope for alternative futures?

Critical care is a vital approach to care in an uncaring world. Its reflexive slowness is a virtue, setting care apart from its uncaring context. But that context is one of ever faster accelerations through foreclosed futures and *faits accomplis*. For all its resilient value, a slow, reflexive critical care risks being left behind, a perpetual sticking plaster on onrushing violence.

Radical potentials?

Could critical care incorporate a radicality? An unexpected anarchic potential to interject into the reproduced proceeding of the perpetual present? To knock it off course? A permission to act paradoxically carelessly? The radical act *from* and *of* and *toward* care, but *carelessly* flung forward, unexpectedly invulnerable to appropriation.

This permission of radicality in care opens up structural change, coming from the edge space (where care is most urgent) but affecting the centre, from where uncaring logics emanate.

The radical must come with care. It cannot be untethered. Doing so reopens the same problematics of a care segmented between the bodily, the relational and the ethical-political. The radical as leeway, as possibility of structural disturbance, but always tethered to care. Without this, the radical simply echoes and risks exacerbating the carelessness of an uncaring world.

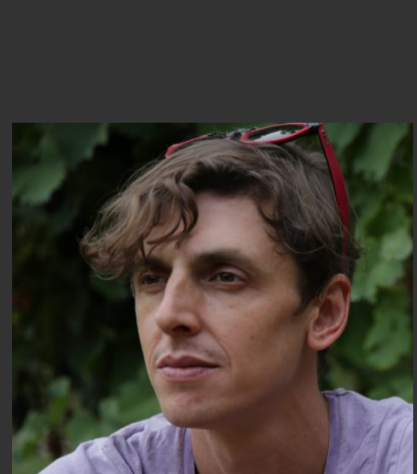
Care is not a weight or restraint on radicality. Care is both starting and end point, a navigational reference of ethics and practice through which the radical act is continuously reflexively reconsidered. The speculative forward flung act emanates from care for and about present and future conditions.

Radical care vibrates in dynamic tension between activity and reflexivity. It necessarily continually folds back on itself. Yet, as we navigate an uncaring world, it is an ethical-methodological framework by which we might proceed, in resistant resilient practice and thought.

By necessity, a radical care entails risk; unknown outcomes. And because of the uncaring conditions of our world, some are more at risk of the effects of this than others. Thus here, again, the imperative of holding care with and as the radical is clear. But, the world continues. If we hold out hope for a world of care –of complex, critical, reflexive care– we need to carefully, caringly, invite these acts of *paradoxically careless* radical care.

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Adam Walker is an artist and researcher with a practice focussed on critiques of self-perpetuating structures of inequality, and speculative profferings of other ways of being. His work takes textual, performative, collaborative, moving-image and digital forms. Recent projects, performances and exhibitions have taken place at and with the Serpentine Gallery, Tyneside Cinema and HOAX in the UK, and at Izalyatsia and Yermilov Centre in Ukraine. He contributed at chapter to CARE(LESS), recently published by Ma Bibliothèque. **His PhD**, from the Royal College of Art, develops a concept of ‘radical care’ in much greater detail than is possible here.

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