

Ecospheric care work

Caring for other beings – both human and more-than-human – is crucial to our ongoing existence. This article connects an analysis of care work with an ecospheric perspective to conceptualize how the ecosphere, in which humans are embedded, might become both a recipient of and participant in care. Such ecospheric care work might help people learn to come back ‘down to Earth’ in a good and equitable way, during and after the collapse of energy-intensive systems. A brief reflective case study of an ecospheric care work project in perennial agriculture is used to suggest the value of urgent service to transformative long-term solutions, and to explore how humans may learn to practice ecospheric care work skilfully and collectively.

“[An imagined postwork utopia] about recrafting the world and, later, sustaining vulnerable beings across the hardest centuries of planetary crisis and suffering [...] will likely involve familiar kinds of housework and tasks involved in social reproduction today with some additions: preparing and cooking food, building shelter, telling stories, keeping each other cool and warm and tending the sick combined with caring for soil communities, maintaining energy systems, finding clean water and growing and harvesting crops. How is this work the same as earlier forms of housework? How is it different?”

Hamilton (2019: 9)

Humans are social beings who need each other. Cooperating and working together are clearly necessary traits for humans to respond adaptively to the change and collapse of social-ecological systems. In particular, as people contemplate how to make decent human futures through an era of intensifying crisis, *care* may be more relevant than ever. So I am heartened that care-related aspects of human life – such as housework, social reproduction, emotional labour, mutual aid and community – are increasingly being perceived and investigated in ecologically minded efforts not only to remember how

people might cope and survive, but also to conceive of and work for a just transition.

Jennifer Mae Hamilton’s (2019) questions in the quotation above, emerging from her critical engagement with the literary imagination of a ‘postwork utopia’, come at the right time to invite further feminist reflections. I feel grateful for the many ecofeminist inquiries that frame, inform and enable such reflections about the relations between women, the Earth and systems of domination (e.g. Plumwood, 1993; Salleh, 1997; Alaimo, 2000; Gaard, 2010).

I feel both relief and grief about how the kinds of care work needed now, at this moment in human and planetary history, may be the same as earlier forms. Relief because undervalued but vital work is being paid attention to; grief because paying attention to such work doesn’t mean it will become valued beyond its ability to serve currently dominant social and economic systems.

And I feel intensely curious about the ways housework and care work more broadly might become different. Oxfam International’s *Time to Care* report explains how the vast amount of unpaid and underpaid care work – done primarily by poor and marginalized women and girls – is “crucial to our societies and to the economy” (Coffey *et al.*, 2020). The report

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points to a coming “care crisis” and calls for implementation of a “4Rs” framework to *recognize, reduce, redistribute* and *represent* unpaid care work. I wonder about how to connect this social and economic framework and other analyses of care work with an ecological understanding of humans’ places in the planet, including human agricultural pasts and presents (Jackson *et al.*, 2018).

My question here is: How might the ecosphere, in which humans are embedded, become a recipient of and participant in care? How might ecospheric care work help people learn to come back ‘down to Earth’ during and after the collapse of energy-intensive systems?

Care work

It is first useful to distinguish between ‘caring about’ and ‘caring for’ something. There are plenty of good reasons for why humans should care about each other and the Earth at this moment in time. Lives and ways of life are at stake..

But I question the suggestion that the solution is for people in general to care more *about* lives and ways of life. For many, the amount we already care about plants, peoples, places and this planet is a struggle. In emotional terms alone, people – especially young people – are grappling with concern, fear, anger, despair and grief due to the harm that is happening and is to come. Reckoning with mortality is one thing, and in fact a very human thing, but reckoning with the accelerated loss and extinction of species and ecosystems at the planetary scale is unprecedented and can feel overwhelming. Even though we may possess skills and methods for coping, such as those discussed by eco-psychologists (Macy and Johnstone, 2012; Pipher, 2013), we are venturing into the unknown.

Of course, some people should care more about other lives and ways of life. The reasons why they do not care – for example, because they are caught within the current systems and preoccupied with pursuing such things as money, status and power – matter. That failure to care enough on the part of some is one of the reasons why other

people must take up the additional work of *caring for*.

In many cases, those taking up such necessary care work are themselves survivors of historical trauma and ongoing structural violence, and are now bravely working to heal and flourish. For example, in North America, Indigenous Peoples who have survived catastrophic and genocidal system change, and who have already experienced climate change through forced relocation, are leading ecological advocacy efforts, which depend on practices of care work (Kimmerer, 2013; Whyte, 2016). As Kwaguł researcher Sarah Hunt remarked at a conference I attended in late 2019, at the most basic level when it comes to organizing and community events, “there has to be somebody to make the sandwiches.”

I would like to foreground that aspect of caring for others: care is work and requires skill and effort (Folbre, 1995; Meyer, 2002). Caring for others is the necessarily repetitive, incessant work that doesn’t get ‘done’ in any final sense – it has to be done over and over again for daily life to continue.

Care work has been treated in particular ways in the current society and economy. It is understood as necessary, but it is not very well monetarily rewarded, if at all – at least not in its everyday forms. Care work is often rendered invisible and taken for granted. Though some of it is visible – such as in professions like childcare, nursing and teaching – much goes unseen, underground, unrecognized and without status, such as the care work of parenting. As feminist economists have been demonstrating for many years, care work is also unevenly distributed. In the context of the dominant Western patriarchy, care work is often ‘feminized’ or stereotyped as essentially feminine work (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984). Kate Manne (2017) refers to this as “human giver syndrome,” the patriarchal norm that the humanity of some humans (women) is contingent upon them primarily giving their time, bodies and attention to the moral support and needs of other humans (men).

Giving care is good, but since care is work, it comes at a cost. In a world where giving care is not valued and supported, human givers get burnt out (Nagoski and Nagoski, 2019). That is not an accident: it is the logical outcome of a system in which some people are allowed to exist only to serve the creation of other people's wealth.

For those of us working to build ecologically resilient networks, we should seek to make visible and recognize (the first of the '4Rs' identified by Oxfam) who is doing the *caring for* in those collaborative relationships. For example, in a US context, we should ask: In our organizations and communities, is the care work that goes into building partnerships evenly distributed, or is it mostly people of colour and women who carry that responsibility? How are care workers and their work recognized (or not) socially and economically? How could white people and men become more willing and able to do care work and do it well? And who will do the work of teaching people how to care well?

Care work connects physical labour, emotional labour and the ethical work of justice. As Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) puts it, care has three dimensions: labour/work, affect/affections and ethics/politics. Care work across these three dimensions acknowledges the tricky realities of what beings (both humans and more-than-humans) need, and calls for those needs to be met in ways that are equitable rather than exploitative.

This concept of just care work grows from ideas of disability justice. Disability, illness and mortality are realities shared across the human community – though the care work of attending to these realities is not shared evenly. As Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018: 35) reflects about her visionary work:

I wrote this because I believe we stand at the crossroads, between both the gifts and the unexpected, inevitable collapses of our work, and we have the opportunity to dream and keep dreaming ways to build emergent, resilient care webs. I believe that our work in creating the new world depends on it –

because all of us will become disabled and sick, because state systems are failing, yet 'community' is not a magic unicorn, a one-stop shop that always helps us do the laundry and be held in need.

All humans depend on the care work of others, and that dependency is only likely to increase in a world with less discretionary energy. While there may be cases where the best form of *caring for* something is non-intervention, generally people do need to care for each other and for the plants, animals, soils and places of the more-than-human world.

Long-term social justice is inseparably interdependent with the health of the Earth's ecosphere. To build ecologically just communities, we need to learn how to care more skilfully, collectively and ecologically. How to recognize and value the care of others. How to join with them. And how and where to direct our care.

Ecosphere

People might (re)turn to the ecosphere as a recipient of and participant in care work. The ecosphere is the dynamic mantle of life on this sun-fed planet in the Milky Way – the nexus of airs, waters, rocks and creatures whose interactions together with light make life (Rowe, 2003). The ecosphere includes lithosphere, hydrosphere, atmosphere and biosphere. Davis (2009) has also postulated the layer of the ethnosphere, the intellectual and spiritual sphere of thoughts, ideas, concepts, stories, cultures, *etc.* An ecospheric approach prioritizes integration and process across what has often been divided into these static abstractions. In sum, the ecosphere is a way to name the astonishing realization that there is a dynamic mantle of life on *this* planet at *this* time in *this* galactic place – and here we are, all of us, ecospherically entangled and interdependent in ongoing emergence.

In practical, affective and ethical terms, care is about people's relationships to each other and people's relationships to the ecosphere. And the term 'people' here does not mean a collection of 'atomic' individuals – singular, self-made and self-willed. We exist

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as people only in the ecospheric community, in those relationships to one another and to the ecosphere as a whole.

Ecosystem processes are the supposedly 'background' work of ecosystems that is necessary for Earth as ecosphere to sustain human life. These ecosystem processes are vital, yet they are made invisible by our anthropocentric culture: not fully understood or properly valued, and increasingly disturbed, disrupted and degraded. Similarly, care work is the 'background' work of our lives and jobs that is necessary for our communities to sustain human life, but is too often undervalued and degraded.

So perhaps I could say that care is about doing the background work of the world, and doing it with love. Except there is no background down here on Earth. Since human communities are inextricably embedded in ecosystems and the ecosphere, we humans need both ecosystem processes and care work to continue. We need them to be valued – which is not to say that they should be appropriated, subsumed and commoditized by the global economic system.

An ecospheric perspective points to the particular relevance of agriculture in addressing our current predicament (Jackson *et al.*, 2018). For example, here in Kansas, USA, the Land Institute's Ecosphere Studies programme works to integrate sociocultural research and educational projects with agroecological research. In complement to wide-ranging traditions and ongoing practices of perennial and polycultural agriculture systems around the world (*e.g.* Indigenous agroforestry), the development of new perennial grain crops in diverse agroecosystems contributes exciting possibilities for landscapes and soil communities (Crews *et al.*, 2018). But fundamental questions arise about whether human communities are willing to do the work of ecospheric care, and if so, how they can learn to do such care skilfully, collectively and with abiding love and respect for humans and non-humans alike.

No human being or community is a blank slate – care work and ways of caring

are profoundly shaped by society and economies, often in ways that are deeply unjust. Hence, as the '4Rs' framework insists, it is not enough merely to recognize unpaid human care work – people must also seek to reduce, redistribute and represent that work. Even further, as the diverse feminist inquiries of Hamilton, Puig de la Bellacasa and Piepzna-Samarasinha indicate, understandings of care must go beyond the human and place people in their ecological, relational context.

To learn new ways of caring for other beings – or remember ways that others have known but we have forgotten – some humans may first need to *unlearn*. For instance, members of the dominant society in the US will need to let go of and dismantle certain things in order to care for the ecosphere. They will need to let go of the denial of crisis and harm, to let go of the domination of fellow non-humans and humans, to dismantle current systems and structures that actively reinforce domination and undermine the potential for equitable care, and to return homelands and make reparations to the Indigenous Peoples of the continent.

Ecospheric care work

It is hard to overstate what is at stake in attempts at ecospheric care work, and it is not possible to know the outcomes of experimental projects based on this approach. What can be known generally are the choices available about social, cultural and ecological practices and knowledges, such as: what to carry forward, what to leave behind, what to accept, and what to learn for the first time. Even as some options for human communities close down, other options are opening up, such as with the possibility of new perennial grain crops and new ways of feeding ourselves and relating to the more-than-human world.

One way that ecospheric care work may help people learn to come back 'down to Earth' (Latour, 2018), during and after the collapse of energy-intensive systems, would be to help build the community capacity needed to support a just transformation to diverse and

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perennial agriculture economies. Applied projects in perennial agriculture provide opportunities for people to engage in such ecospheric care work: to provide physical, emotional and ethical labour to build ecological relationships with plants, animals, land and water.

In 2019, the Ecosphere Studies programme collaborated with scientific colleagues at The Land Institute to launch a small civic science pilot community in which participants grow *Silphium integrifolium*, a native perennial North American prairie plant currently being domesticated for perennial oilseeds production (Van Tassel *et al.*, 2017). As a case study in ecospheric care work, the *Silphium* civic science community could be understood as an invitation for people to learn to care for a plant, a future crop, who could someday care for people by feeding them while holding on to soil and supporting biodiversity. Since the prairie ecosystems of this continent have done exactly that – nurturing a richness of lives and lifeways in the long term – this domestication project necessarily involves a reminder of, and ecospheric commitment to, the importance of prairie restoration and care for the land.

More than 40 people in eighteen US states accepted our invitation to join the pilot community in 2019. They tend *Silphium* plants by watering, weeding and observing them in a variety of growing environments. They share their observations with us and respond to monthly surveys. They explain the project to their families, friends and neighbours. While the scientific information gathered about how *Silphium* responds is important, so is the social information gathered about how people respond. The civic science project allows participants and researchers to learn together about *Silphium* and perennial agriculture and about how their individual and community care work shapes their motivation and learning. Preliminary results are positive, and we look forward to further analysis and publication.

In its pilot stage, the *Silphium* civic science project has already prompted us to examine the reasons and strategies for pursuing equity and justice by involving a broader

representation of people in a domestication process (specific to this project) and ecospheric care work (more broadly). What economic and social incentives and support will help make it possible for people with different lived experiences and motivations to participate? How could this project and other experimental efforts be organized to distribute and share care work more equitably across participants and researchers? What are the best ways to recognize and represent the care work being performed by participants and researchers in this project?

I'm involving my son in this work – I want him to have the chance to learn how to care. But far more importantly, I want to do everything I can to collaboratively create a project and world in which all children have access to and the ability to care for plants who sustainably feed them.

Perennial agriculture is a long-term vision for positive human reconnection with the ecosphere that stretches across generations and geographies. My experience in this particular *Silphium* civic science pilot project has helped me to realize that this long-term vision can be aligned with now-urgent human tasks. I have learned that serving potentially radical and justly transformative long-term solutions is exactly what I need to persist at this moment in time. Through this work of caring for other people as we together in community learn to care for perennial plants, I have started to grasp my personal answer to the question Kathleen Dean Moore and her colleagues pose: “What would you be willing to spend your whole life taking care of?” (2016: 18).

Care work that is ecospheric involves many of the same tasks but feels different to me from earlier forms of housework; it feels alive with possibility. I can exercise what choice I have to struggle to divest my care from exploitative systems (patriarchy, white supremacy, settler colonialism, nature domination – the list goes on) and to support and join with others in their work to do the same. I can come back over and over again to the humble, imperfect, ancient labour of collaboratively creating

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communities who care for each other and the land; and I can collaboratively help to make metaphors, experiences, relationships, opportunities, food systems and cultures that are new. I can slow down long enough to listen to what lasts, to remember what humans have come to know about care through much of the history of our species. And I can also move with the quick pace of courage, to face up to the consequences and choices now at hand.

I can physically and intellectually labour with books, notebook and a computer to write an essay that tries to conclude by situating my emotional efforts at self-care and community-care in critical proximity to unsettling ethical questions of privilege and equity, and social and ecological justice. I am one of the few whose care work is not unpaid, so I have a chance to question it and a responsibility to leverage it. Here is what I imagine and expect: to cope and to transition, many humans will need to practice ecospheric care work both skilfully and collectively. ■

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