

Notes on Care in Light of Securitization

Rose-Anne Gush

Marked by the author's own sociopolitical context and its special urgency, in this essay Rose-Anne Gush draws connections between the 1970s feminist movement *Wages for Housework* and the current crisis in healthcare in the UK, rendered visible through the Covid-19 outbreak. She points out the significant connection between the under-resourcing of the health care sector and the over-resourcing of the state security apparatus. Security in its very definition refers to an absence of care. To be secure means to be able to be careless, but this – made horrifically literal with the lynching of George Floyd and others – is not the case for many. Quite the contrary, people of color, women, trans people and the young and old are endangered by securitization and dismantling care.

According to scholars, the word »care« is derived from the German *Kara*, a word which also resonates as »lament« and »sorrow.« From this view, care links to its sister »anxiety.« Within an often cited Heideggerian discourse these terms come under the umbrella of *Sorge*, the German word for »concern.« More commonly, the notion of care brings us to the activity: the verb »to care« describes watching out for danger and looking after, it links to protecting, as well as acting carefully and responsibly. Caregivers take care of those in need – people too young or too old or simply unable to manage on their own.

Yet, another root of care leads us to its opposite, carelessness. In this sense, negligence, lack of care, resides in close proximity to the Latin *securitas*, often translated into English as security. Security in its noun form means the removal of »se« from »cura,« care, or concern. John Hamilton aptly describes the ambivalence inherent in the kind of care(lessness) from »cura« when he writes »to be without care is to be protected or vulnerable, safe or negligent, carefree or careless.«¹ In this view, to be without care is to not have to worry. To be careless is both to break with orthodoxies, and to be clumsy. Whereas security would shutter off care, it would show where care is no longer needed, where care is surplus to requirement, care indexes the positive, affirmative variant of these ways of being secure, safe, and carefree.

Across the world, the majority of care-work falls on the shoulders of women. Today, it is dominantly women of color who clean homes, shops, gyms and offices, as well as looking after the sick, children and the elderly. This so-called unskilled work is ideologically naturalized as gendered and rendered invisible. Struggles against the naturalization of care work as women's work played a decisive role in the 1970s when second-wave feminists politicized care under the sign of housework. In her now-infamous essay »Wages Against Housework« (1975) Silvia Federici identifies a strategic

identification that galvanized women in their struggle against capitalism. The slogan »wages for housework,« which names the transnational political movement of the 1970s, is posited in Federici's essay as a perspective. Rather than referring to a lump of money, namely a wage, the »housewife« is a figure who embodies a »fate worse than death.« In this view, women can gather around this figure in order to struggle against its imposition. For Federici and the women who rallied with this slogan, »housework,« the historically unremunerated work mostly undertaken by women, reproduces the conditions of life for the working class. Housework is not merely a job. Rather, it is described as »the most pervasive manipulation, the most subtle and mystified violence that capitalism has ever perpetrated against any section of the working class.«²

While the wage both mystifies and obfuscates exploitation, it nevertheless renders one's position as a worker legible, inaugurating a social contract. In Federici's view, contra this explicitness, the unwaged work of housework metamorphoses into a »natural attribute« of what she describes as the »physique and personality« of women. It becomes »an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of the female character.«³ Depicted as the outcome of a socialization process undertaken in the family, for the Wages for Housework Campaign, the figure of the housewife is a creation of capital, molded by capital, to play the role of servant and protector of the working class. In this role, the housewife would service her husband physically, sexually, and emotionally, just as she would also care for his children, feed and clothe them and him. She would mend his clothes and attend to his ego if it was bruised. She would function as a buffer soaking up his rage. She would restore him. By politicizing housework, the wages for housework movement aimed to both denaturalize and attack housework and by extension all »caring« as a natural attribute, as a female role, showing its function as contributing to the production of value and thus also rendering it positively intelligible as work. Additionally, this movement would politicize the home and render it legible as a site of isolation that contributed to the difficulty women's collective struggle in the West.

The aim of the movement was to improve the conditions of women within a wider political field consisting of recipients of this service or care. To make housework legible as work was part of making visible the invisible, bringing the background to the foreground. In the context of the movement, to ask for money from the state for social services was also to maintain a degree of control over a social process, rather than give more control to the side of the state. For the women involved in these struggles, the struggle against housework as a form of carework, is a struggle to refuse: »Only when men see our work as work – our love as work – and most important *our determination to refuse both*, will they change their attitudes towards us.«⁴

For the women involved in these struggles, the struggle against writing this essay I encounter my own contradictory feelings towards care, feelings which intersect with my experience of its lack. I have noticed a special inability to care which also appears to be founded on one's lack of experience of being cared for. To lack care or experience negligence can birth emotional renunciation, a kind of coldness loaded with fear of emotional proximity. In my case, an absence of care in early life manifested as fits of rage and feelings that register this injustice as an adult. Care makes me think of my father, who silently cared. I have justified and explained his care as resigned. I have dispossessed myself of the need to feel concern for it. Yet, to care one must be able to speak and act without defensiveness. If one is blocked by one's own trauma, how can one begin to recognize the needs of others? In this sense, care is often unconsciously given as the gift that one is seeking.

In the UK where I am from, care is often experienced as underfunded, rationalized »social services.« Care is the necessary constant, because of this, it is trusted that care workers will work despite terrible conditions. With austerity, social care has been effectively defunded. With the outbreak of Covid-19, the UK's Conservative government claimed that care workers would need to significantly lower their standards; those in need of care would receive less.

After failing on every level to take seriously the reality of the pandemic, after advocating for »herd immunity« and allowing mass contagion, Boris Johnson's government slowly ventured toward building pop-up hospitals such as the Nightingale Hospital in London. In an interview with Georgia Anderson for *MayDay Radio Notes*, a health worker employed there, described it as a »virtuosic« display intended for the press.⁵ As COVID patients were steadily released from hospitals back into care homes, and as care homes were struggling to contain infections (at the time of writing, excess deaths in care homes reached 34,000)⁶ the Nightingale hospital, under-resourced due to lack of trained health workers, didn't see more than sixty patients and was quickly closed.⁷ Like everything that has happened on the UK's journey through corona-times, the government has consistently behaved only ineptly, neglecting and sacrificing those it claimed to »cocoon« from the virus in order to care for, and to attempt to protect and save »the economy.« Additionally, increasingly within the UK [P]olitical landscape,

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the right to criticize is rescinded. The case of Johnson advisor Dominic Cummings both being on the government's supposedly impartial Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, and breaching the rules that he contributed to making, is a case in point in demonstrating the pervasive »citizen above suspicion« mentality. Within this supposed liberal framework, those who wish to criticize are forced to resign. Those who are meant to serve the people merely serve the interests of capital and the ruling class.

Returning from the present to Federici's emphasis on emphasis on *refusal*, refusal to love and to care until such activities are recognized as work that capital profits from, points us to the materialist feminist tendency to strategically illuminate gendered labor as the site of a potential and necessary struggle against oppressive conditions and capitalism *tout court*. In recent years, this has become known as social reproduction theory (SRT). Françoise Vergès has repositioned this argument showing its transmutations for the present. She writes: »Unlike Federici's 1970s strategic identification with the housewife, Vergès' corrective diagnosis of the work of care in the present is global in reach. Under neo-liberal and patriarchal capitalism the invisibilised work of women of color and refugee women (caring in, and cleaning the industrial spaces and homes of global capitalism) which capitalism simply cannot function without, is most often supervised, regulated and managed by white women. The emphasis on refusal must remain.«⁸

Care and social reproduction, if observed within the framework of the current conjuncture, puts into view with sharpened lucidity, the fears, anxieties, and biases of capitalists. As countries ground to a halt during the spring of 2020, as it became necessary to distance ourselves from one another to stop the spread of infection, a wide variety of workers continued their jobs out of necessity, including all home-workers. Those working, spread across care and distribution sectors throughout the world, found themselves in the limelight. In a moment of high de-obfuscation, those who are most often the least visible, the least powerful, and the least remunerated, whose work is considered »unskilled« suddenly appear as the people whose work holds together the threads of our social world. As the pandemic increasingly reveals capitalism's prioritizing of profit-making and property over human life in all cases and senses, as it reveals the continued necessity of human labor to yield profits, it is the work of care and social reproduction that remains constant, and that must be fought over. While authors like Paul B. Preciado have focused on analyzing notions of immunity and health, such as »governmental practices of biosurveillance and digital control,« on »extreme digital-surveillance measures« on government actions, this view fails to foresee a perspective of overcoming these conditions of emiseration. »What has grown is not the immunity of the social body but the tolerance of citizens under the cybernetic control of the state and corporations,« writes Preciado.⁹ One must ask

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if Preciado noticed the refusals of the wildcat strikes across distribution networks against unsafe working conditions, the militant tenant organizations and rent strikes, the mutual aid groups, and the convulsions of political possibility thrown into relief with this crisis.

I wish to alight on one final iteration of care. In the context of her exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery, titled, *Infinite Slippage: nonRepugnant Insolvencies T!-a!-r!-r!-y!-i!-n!-g! as Hand Claps of M's Hard'Loved'Flesh [I'M irreducibly-undone because] - Quantum Leanage-Complex-Dub*, during a discussion with Marina Vishmidt, the artist Ima-Abasi Okon talked about art-making as a form of palliative care in the context of capitalism.¹⁰ In this framework, palliative care is understood as a support structure that tries to do away with all pain. Okon cites capitalism as a disease in that it makes us all ill and robs us of life, but in a hierarchical way. In the context of her exhibition, Okon talks about being out of breath. Using a series of installed ventilators, her work brings air to the foreground making it visible. Breathing is presented as a necessary fact that facilitates languages and actions that occur in a multitude of ways, where any single rule of assessment will necessarily fail to operate. Okon says that while capitalism makes us all ill, deep-rooted biases mean that some people are still able to thrive. We know that these exist on a structural level. Her works use ventilation as an object, prompting us to ask who can take in air under racial capitalism. Who

has access to air? Whose air is clean? This is something made horrifically literal with the lynching of George Floyd, of Eric Garner, of Breonna Taylor, of all those robbed of breath and life by racist police for centuries. For Okon, an art-making practice as palliative care would aim to treat the ongoing pain.

The protests and insurrections that took place across the United States (and the world) from May 2020 onwards, reveal the overresourcing of the police just as COVID reveals the under-resourcing of meaningful social and health care. In this sense, the dominant mode of »care« that is being propelled is entirely on the side of securitization. Where Johnson and Trump and numerous others have resorted to gross negligence, they have knowingly sacrificed and continue to sacrifice hundreds of thousands of people to the principle of profit-making. Against the horror of carceral care, modes of care infused with solidarity and refusal are necessary for mobilizing the struggles against the negligent capitalist principles of profit, securitization and property. The proliferation of care infused with solidarity is necessary for understanding our embeddedness and situatedness as collective beings untethered from bourgeois self-possession, beyond the mere »I.«

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1 John T. Hamilton: »Securitas,« in Barbara Cassin et. al. (eds.), *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*. Princeton 2014: p. 937.

2 Silvia Federici, »Wages Against Housework,« Bristol 1975: p. 2.

3 Idem.

4 Idem.: p. 7.

5 Georgia Anderson, *MayDay Radio Notes: Nightingale Chronicles #2 – Failure* <https://soundcloud.com/maydayradi- onotes/nightingale-chronicals-part-2-the-closure> [accessed June 15, 2020].

6 Michael Savage, »More than Half of England's Coronavirus-Related Deaths Will Be People from Care Homes,« in: *The Observer*, June 7, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/soci- ety/2020/jun/07/more-than-half-of-englands-coronavirus-related-deaths-will-be-people-from-care-homes> [accessed June 15, 2020].

7 Denis Campbell and Rowena Mason: »London NHS Nightingale Hospital Will Shut next Week,« in: *The Guardian*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/ may/04/london-nhs-nightingale-hospital-placed-on-standby>, [accessed June 15, 202].

8 Françoise Vergès, »Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender,« in *E-Flux Journal*, 100 (2019) <<https://www.e-flux.com/ journal/100/269165/capitalocene-waste-race-and-gender/>> [accessed 29 June 2020].

9 Paul B. Preciado, »Learning From The Virus,« in: *Artforum*, <https://www.artforum.com/print/202005/paul-b-prec- iado-82823> [accessed June 15, 202].

10 Ima-Abasi Okon in Conversation with Marina Vishmidt <<https://soundcloud.com/chisenhale-gallery/ima-aba- si-okon-in-conversation-with-marina-vishmidt>> [accessed 6 June 2020].