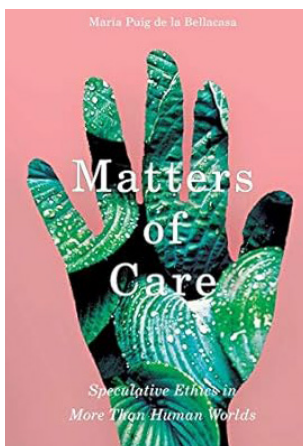# Thinking and acting with care 'as well as possible'.
Insights from *Matters of Care* by María Puig de la Bellacasa.
University of Minnesota Press (2017)
Giusy Pappalardo

While conducting my fieldwork for a research project focused on multifaceted forms of territorial heritage (Magnaghi, 2020), I sat on the wet soil in front of an old house surrounded by trees, weeds, ants, and piles of things waiting to find their place, in a messy yet vibrant yard far from the chaos of the city.

Lara, a young farmer in her thirties with a background in anthropology, sat close to me. When I asked why she moved here, she had no doubt about sharing the story of her choice:

«Someone has to take care of this small corner of the world, this house, these trees, these nonhuman things. It is not just because I own it or have inherited it; heritage can be a burden, an obligation, a chain that perpetuates oppressive dynamics. It is because I chose it. Care cannot be imposed on anyone» (my thoughts, written based on Lara's story; notes from the field, 2022).

She was talking while I touched the soil, recognizing it as a living entity, woven into a web of interdependent life, immersed in a net of caring relationships: the garden, the open-air kitchen, the animals wandering nearby, the fruit hanging within reach, the composter.

The conversation and the surrounding landscape recalled *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More-than-Human Worlds* by María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), published by the University of Minnesota Press in the *Posthumanities* series (258 pages). This book, I argue, has significant potential to shape a transdisciplinary perspective on urban studies. Working at the intersection of feminist materialist epistemologies and

environmental humanities, María Puig de la Bellacasa is a scholar who transcends conventional disciplinary boundaries.

Moving from the assumption that the world 'we' inhabit is a complex web of life – recognizing that 'we' encompasses a range of positionalities – books like *Matters of Care* provide a profound exploration of these intricacies.

This work contributes to reframing the understanding of socioecological dynamics and proposes pathways for 'thinking and acting with care', not as a romanticized or unproblematic notion, but as a critical framework, even within ambivalent and contested terrains.

The reading is engaging yet demands 'careful' – a deliberately chosen word – attention, as it explores the intricate domain of Science and Technology Studies (STS). This academic field emerged in the latter half of the 20th century, profoundly shaped by Thomas Kuhn's seminal work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962).

STS examines the interplay between scientific knowledge, technological systems, and society, emphasizing that science and technology are deeply entwined with social dynamics – far from neutral or purely objective – and significantly shaped by power structures. STS scholars explore how scientific knowledge is constructed and validated, its societal implications, ethical concerns in technological development, and its relationship with policy and governance.

In examining the cross-fertilization of diverse forms of knowledge, STS underscores the importance of civic engagement in the co-production of knowledge and the ongoing challenge of bridging the gap between expertise and public understanding.

STS critically interrogates the concept of the technological fix – the idea that technical solutions alone can resolve the contemporary systemic crisis – highlighting how this approach often obscures its deeper political dimensions.

The crisis, when viewed through Puig de la Bellacasa's perspective that problematizes the notion of 'we' that prompted it (Do 'we' all have the same role? Who is included in this undifferentiated 'we'?), can be conceptualized within the framework of the Capitalocene (Moore, 2015), which centres capitalism's role at the core of the crisis.

Returning to STS, this field has been profoundly influenced by the

French thinker Bruno Latour, a key figure in developing Actor-Network Theory. His concept of «matters of concern» (Latour, 2008) – which challenges the presumed objectivity of «matters of fact» – serves as a pillar in Puig de la Bellacasa's work.

Both in the Introduction (*The Disruptive Thought of Care*) and in Chapter One (*Assembling Neglected 'Things'*), Puig de la Bellacasa's perspective is clear when shifting from Latourian «matters of concern» to her feminist frame of «matters of care».

«I propose a notion of "matters of care" crafted in discussion with the problems stirred up by Bruno Latour's idea of "matters of concerns" and the knowledge politics underpinning it. I read Latour's move to rename matters of facts as matters of concerns as responding to aesthetic, ethico-political, and affective issues faced by constructivist thinking and its particular form of criticism of things. Not only does Latour's notion represent a particularly influential way of conceiving knowledge politics in technoscience, but it also introduces the need to care in a particular way. This conversation with Latour reveals that the implications of care are thicker than the politics turning around matters of (public) concern might allow thinking. Involving a feminist vision of care in the politics of things both encourages and problematizes the possibility of translating ethico-political caring into ways of thinking with nonhumans» (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 26).

Thinking with nonhumans recalls the opening vignette of this text and becomes explicit in Chapter 5 of the Book (*Soil Times: The Pace of Ecological Care*), where Puig de la Bellacasa engages with the specific landscape of socioecological care related to soil.

Between these chapters, readers can explore Knowledge Politics (Part I) and Speculative Ethics (Part II) through the author's connections with a constellation of thinkers, each adding specific layers to the epistemology of care. One is Donna Haraway, who emphasizes the importance of positionality in constructing situated knowledge (Haraway, 1991). In other words, Haraway argues for abandoning the presumption of universal and absolute objectivity in the processes of knowing and narrating.

Although these concepts have been more or less integrated into the theory and practice of urban studies (see, for example, Sandercock, 1998), such an approach often remains overlooked when it comes to a deep and committed reflection on how scholars and practitioners construct their narratives related to

the contexts they engage with.

To what extent is positionality fully incorporated into the shaping of contexts and processes through scholars' and experts' narratives in the field? From my perspective, this remains an open question that deserves attention.

Haraway also illuminates the centrality of relational ontology, focusing on interconnectedness and kinships and their potential to help 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016) of the contemporary age, differentiating the uncritical 'we' of the Anthropocene from a variety of nonhuman perspectives. With Donna Haraway, care is first and foremost a relational act.

However, as Puig de la Bellacasa states, this relationship is not always bidirectional; what is being cared for does not necessarily reciprocate the same act of care. It is the web of caring relationships and care labour that shapes the world, but this cannot be assumed to be a burden for some without recognition or at least problematization, particularly when considering caregivers or care workers (see also Federici, 2012; Barca, 2020).

In this web of caring relationships, a question remains: Who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power? Addressing this question cannot be considered separately from exploring spatial dynamics as power dynamics. Positionality matters in the form it takes within space – within our houses, offices, public spaces, neighbourhoods, cities, and rural and metropolitan contexts – as conditions that actively participate in the web of care.

What can be done from the perspective of 'undisciplined' scholars – including myself in this group – who consider the care of socio-spatial and natureculture dynamics central to the work we do within the territories we engage with? María Puig de la Bellacasa does not offer any easy or readily applicable solutions, but she certainly contributes to shaping our perspective, 'as well as possible', with her words throughout the book.

Bibliography

Barca S. (2020). *Forces of reproduction: Notes for a Counter-hegemonic Anthropocene*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kuhn T.S. (1962). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Haraway D.J. (1991). «Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective». In: *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature.* New York: Routledge. 183-201.

Haraway D.J. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Federici S. (2012). *Revolution at point zero: Housework, reproduction, and feminist struggle.* PM press.

Latour B. (2008). *What is the style of matters of concern. Two lectures in empirical philosophy. Department of Philosophy of the University of Amsterdam.* Amsterdam: Van Gorcum.

Magnaghi A. (2020). *Il principio territoriale.* Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.

Moore J.W. (2015). *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital.* New York: Verso Books

Puig de La Bellacasa M. (2017). *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Sandercock L. (1998). *Making the invisible visible: A multicultural planning history.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Giusy Pappalardo is currently a researcher at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, Institute of History of Science, focusing on the relationship between living heritage and climate change within the framework of environmental humanities. Trained as an engineer-architect with a PhD in ecological planning, she has engaged for years with action research, working in marginalized areas of Eastern Sicily and other southern contexts. Her research interests intertwine issues related to social and institutional learning, mobilizing transdisciplinary knowledge, including environmental history and social museology. She was previously a researcher at the University of Catania, where she currently teaches *Landscape Planning* and participates in the Research Project of National Interest (PRIN): *Reconnecting Social Innovation with Institutions in Urban Planning.*
giusy.pappalardo@uab.cat