Assembled with Care

Assemblage thinking comes easily to trans folks. Most of us find Eurocentric myths of maximal agency, atomistic selfhood, and radical self-possession a really hard sell. We lack the privilege of having an uncomplicated “I” (and the ability to conjure oneself into such an “I” is always a product of privilege, to be sure). Recognition comes to us in the form of a gift—though we tell others what pronouns to use, what names, how to refer to us, we’re also thrown directly into a series of complicated ratiocinations as we attempt to infer how others are understanding their conferral of gender unto us. In a 2019 interview following the publication of Andrea Long Chu’s *Females*, she and McKenzie Wark directly address this:

**MW:** The way I read it, the way you’re thinking about gender, is that it’s always in the gift of the other. It’s not “mine.” I rely on the gift of the other to have it at all. But then that implies an ethics. Right? Is that a way to connect these two things—language and gender—together?

**ALC:** Do you mean that it implies an ethics in the sense that you are also giving gender to other people?

**MW:** Yes. Both being indebted to the other and giving it to others. But I think if you start, first, with just the dyad, a me and a
you, then one starts as a supplicant, requiring that the other give
gender back to me. And for us, for trans people, it’s in the way we
are asking; in that, for us to be free to be ourselves is to insist that
others give recognition to our gender.

**ALC:** Right. Yeah. The thing that I am especially thinking about
when I say something like that about gender, on the most gran-
ular empirical level, is early transition. For instance: I was out at
NYU, I was in New York. I was surrounded by people who were
more or less prepared to give me what I was asking for, right? So
in a sense there was, on a sort of surface level, there was a kind
of generosity there. And then I would go into Walgreens or what-
ever, and have an interaction with someone at the register, and
get misgendered, and would instinctively consider that a more
genuine reaction than the reaction of people in my department
or friends of mine. And, in part, that’s because the cashier was
probably telling me something that felt like it had the structure
of something like a secret. And so it felt realer. But it was also
because actually that person owed me nothing.

**MW:** Right. So that’s an honest statement from the cashier.

**ALC:** The person at Walgreens had the opportunity to actually be
genuinely generous, which is to say, to know nothing about me.
The problem with my friends is that they were my friends.

I love Wark’s phraseology in this passage, love her articulation
of supplication as the existential posture of gender. One asks
for it, one relies on the other to grant it, to confer the desired
recognition. We may attempt to exert some minimal agency as
supplicants—semaphore certain visual, auditory, and linguistic
cues—but we are in no way in control of the exchange, can in
no way determine the outcome. In relationships structured by
mutual indebtedness or reciprocal duty—where we know and
thus owe the other—we usually get what we want, insofar as
gendered recognition is concerned. It’s still a process of suppli-
cation, but in friendship, we’re bossy bottoms—and our friends
are, usually, service tops.

But the encounter with the stranger has always held the real
weight—and burden—as far as the conferral of gender goes.
As Chu says, it feels “realer.” This is, of course, why “real-life tests”—where folks were expected to live in their gender full-time before being given access to surgery and, sometimes, hormones as well—were given such weight in the early decades of medical transition. Though the gatekeeping and the emphasis on cisnormative, heterosexual desirability (not to mention the ways in which both of these expectations were shaped implicitly by White aesthetic ideals and gendered norms) was (and remains, when and where it operates) ethically and politically abhorrent, there is a certain operative truth that subtends the practice: that social recognition, and nothing other than social recognition, grounds gender. It is from such social recognition that assumptions regarding embodiment (and, particularly, genital configuration) are made. This is what Talia Mae Bettcher is getting at when she writes about the ways in which gender presentation “isn’t merely a euphemism for restricted discourse about genitalia, it’s a euphemistic stand-in for genitals” (2012, 329). She details how, in Eurocentered cultures, the boundaries that regulate intimacy (through degrees of proximity and distance) implicitly denote who has access to the body parts deemed “intimate.” The most “intimate” of these parts—the genitals—are also subject to a differentially and dichotomously gendered moral structure, where (so-called) male genitals are presumed to be “violating” and (so-called) female genitals are “violated” or violatable (326). This then entails differential motivation for practices of clothing-as-concealment: “a female will cover up to protect her privacy, whereas a male will cover up to prevent his body from offending through indecency” (327).

The crux of Bettcher’s argument is this: there is a whole moral structure that frames and regulates intimacy that gender presentation stands in for when it’s understood according to a “natural attitude” (Bettcher 2012, 319) that infers genitalia from gender presentation. When we talk about forms of gendered recognition
feeling “realer” or less real, my hunch is that the most “real” moments of recognition are those wherein we slip seamlessly into this moral structure. What jars about trans modes of gender presentation that aren’t stealth is that they disrupt the moral order that regulates intimacy (and that, thus, constitutes the public/private divide). This is why trans subjects are so often asked questions that euphemize about genital status: questions about having had “the surgery” or being “really” men or women. Our rebuttal to these questions is that they’re indecent, that they reference intimate matters that shouldn’t be routinely parsed in the public realm, that they’re questions that have no place in a public sphere where moral belonging hinges on genital concealment, in a moral order where the only people who need or get to know the answer are those with whom we’re intimate.

We come to gender as supplicants, all of us. And many of us fail the litmus test of decency because our modes of gender presentation are too vulgar, too louche, or genderfucked in such a way that we disrupt the “natural attitude” because we fail to enact and achieve a certain verisimilitude of normative, White maleness or femaleness. Failing this litmus test means we are repeatedly refused, turned away in moments of our imploring recognition. I’d wager that all trans people carry within them the memory of such refusals, even if they no longer actively shape our everyday engagements. This means that we all recognize gender as a morally loaded laborious process. It is work. And our labor is alienated, insofar as we don’t own what we produce and we rely on someone else to determine its value and worth.

This means that we labor under conditions we don’t choose, conditions that many of us actively want to destroy. But we also understand, intimately, that the concept of autonomy that underwrites romantic myths of the insurrectionary subject can’t hold. Gender recognition is sustained by a web of forces that
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we don’t control. Because we rely on others for recognition, we understand how selfhood is given through such forms of recognition. Because, when such recognition is withheld, we intimately sense that we are being relegated to the position of the monstrous, simultaneously both more and less than human. Because we exert agency in determining our forms of life and flesh, but that agency is always only one part of a much broader assembly into which our flesh—and its possibilities—are grafted.

Trans studies, as a field, has tended to approach the relation between trans experience and assemblage thinking through a focus on how our bodies are naturalcultural entities engaged (in a variety of heteroclite, divergent ways) in projects of biotechnical alteration. Not surprisingly, the emphasis has come to fall on the interface of trans embodiment with the medical-industrial complex, and articulations of trans-embodiment-as-assemblage have focused intensively on this nexus. What gets overlooked in this scholarship—my own on the topic included—are the ways in which everyday acts of interpersonal recognition are the crucible through which such assemblages come into (il)legibility. From Susan Stryker’s “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamonix” (1992) to Karen Barad’s “TransMaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings” (2015), trans bodies as particularly Frankensteinian—and thus naturalcultural assemblages par excellence—has dominated, though many of us are quick to point out that what is true of trans bodies is not at all particular to them—indeed, normatively gendered cis people, too, are just as assembled, just as biotechnically mediated, as we are. The deployment of the trans-body-as-assemblage, in its circuitous and widespread reiterations, bears a certain pedagogical and ontological value, as it demonstrates the stitched-together, intraactive constitution of all embodiment. Building upon Stryker’s call for cis folks “to investigate [their] nature” as she has been
compelled to (1994, 241), Barad writes that “materiality in its entangled psychic and physical manifestations is always already a patchwork, a suturing of disparate parts” (2015, 393).

So, while trans bodies are routinely theorized as a prompt for cis folks to reconsider the “nature of nature” (Barad 2015, 392) and, by extension, the nature of embodiment, we have not thought very much, or very carefully, about whether and what form of an ethics might spring from such a reconsideration. In other words, it matters deeply both how we care and who cares for these assemblages we are. Wark, Bettcher, and Chu each, in their way, point toward the fact that there is indeed, whether or not we like or desire it, a hierarchy of verisimilitude that continues to reign in the majority of our social interactions. This hierarchy determines, to a large extent, both whether and how we are understood as belonging to collectivities and communities. It plays a significant role in the frequency, intensity, and forms of violence to which we are or are not exposed. It plays out on the most mundane levels and mitigates our possibilities for agency, autonomy, and action—in other words, it informs how and where we may assemble our bodies and selves in interaction. When we show up in public, when we plug our assembled bodies into an assembled public, what’s the ethos?

Transing Care

When I invoke the question of ethos, I’m calling attention to collective ways of doing and the norms and principles that emerge from such ways of doing. This is a very different conception of ethical behavior than one that proceeds from ethical rules or first principles and features a moral agent who has maximal agency and unmitigated choice in the actions they take. An ethos emerges from an ensemble of practices; when we shift collective practice, we reconfigure ethos. Practices of
care are always part of an emergent ethos. Because care isn’t abstract, but only ever manifested through practice—action, labor, work—it is integral to our ways of doing.

In thinking through the relation of ethos and care, I’m following the work of María Puig de la Bellacasa, who writes that ethical obligations of care are “commitments that stabilize as necessary to maintain or intervene in a particular ethos (agencies and behaviors within an ecology). They are not a priori universal, they do not define a moral, or social, or even natural ‘nature’: they become necessary to the maintaining and flourishing of a relation through processes of ongoing relating” (2017, 154). So much of contemporary trans activism is about intervening in a particular ethos (that is trans-exclusionary or trans-antagonistic) in order to shift relational terrain in ways that are more inclusive. Think, at the level of pedagogy, of the innovations deployed in classrooms—pronoun go-rounds, slots for chosen names on index cards, use of the singular “they” in course materials, the list goes on and on. At the level of institutions: shifts in bathroom architecture, calls for implicit bias trainings, enabling the digital systems utilized to facilitate name and gender-marker changes without flagging security threats. At the level of the juridical: bringing cases against insurance exclusions for trans-related procedures, ensuring that trans folks are able to readily and easily navigate the bureaucracies that determine access to name and gender-marker changes. None of these struggles are particularly sexy, and it’s easy to indict any of them as accommodationist and reformist. Yet they are each necessary, and cumulatively they lay the groundwork that begins to ensure that basic access to public space is possible for trans subjects. This work—like all care work—is about fostering survival; it is maintenance work that must be done so that trans folks can get about the work of living. But the mere necessity of this work also points to the fact that the most fundamental
networks of care that enable us to persist in our existence are often threadbare or, sometimes, nearly nonexistent.

In the summer of 2019, Aren Aizura and I cotaught an intensive course on trans and queer care labor. In drafting our rationale for the course, we were forced to grapple with the failure of dominant articulations of care work and care ethics to do justice to the complexities of care labor trans subjects both need and undertake. We wrote about how feminist theorists of care have yet to substantively address queer and trans forms of care labor, instead centering women’s domestic labor within heteronormative households, naturalizing a set of values from such labor, then extrapolating and exploring the deprioritization of those values in the public sphere (Berg 2014). Domestic and transnational feminist examinations of care labor, relatedly, rely on a logic that undergirds theories of the relations of gender and care labor, which Martin Manalansan frames as “domestic = family = heterosexual woman = care and love” (2008).

We wanted to think about what care labor and ethics looks like if we start from a different set of locations and relations. We tried to begin not with the family but instead from the intricately interconnected spaces and places where trans and queer care labor occurs: the street, the club, the bar, the clinic, the community center, the classroom, the nonprofit, and sometimes, yes, the home—but a home that is often a site of rejection, shunning, abuse, and discomfort. We asked:

What happens if we decenter the emphasis on the domestic and the reproductive that has so long informed theorizations of care, and begin instead by investigating networks of mutual aid and emotional support developed by trans femme communities subject to transmisogyny, transmisogynoir, and multiple, interlocking forms of institutional marginalization and structural violence? Or when we investigate caretaking labor involved in forms of historical recovery that piece together trans and queer
The terrain of what constitutes care shifts radically once such decentering occurs. For queer and trans subjects, this is often less about exporting the feminized values of care associated with the White, bourgeois home to the public sphere than it is about seeking ways to make the multivalent and necessary care hustle that structures so many of our lives more sustainable, especially as we’re often actively engaged in inventing or piecing together the units—domestic, familial, intimate—that are just assumed a priori in much literature on care labor and care ethics.

So how do we do that? Through mutual aid, which Dean Spade glosses as “work that directly addresses the conditions the movement seeks to address, such as by providing housing, food, health care, or transportation in a way that draws attention to the politics creating need and vulnerability” (Spade 2019). Through what Aizura calls the “communization of care” (2017)—which is a practice of reworking care so that it doesn’t rely on the family, one’s intimate circle, or an abstraction of community as its locus of distribution and circulation but instead organizes care around those with whom we are socially consubstantial (Povinelli 2008, 511), all those folks with whom we’re interdependent, many of whom we may not know intimately or at all. Through what I’ve called an “infrapolitical ethics of care” (Malatino 2019), which indexes the forms of care that enable co-constituted, interdependent subjects to repair, rebuild, and cultivate resilience in the midst of, and in the aftermath of, experiences of overwhelming negative affect. Through drawing on what Amy Marvin calls “trans ethical wisdom” about communal “solidarity in dependency” (Marvin 2019, 112), where she focuses on the mutual caregiving enacted by trans women of color Sylvia Rivera and Marsha
P. Johnson through their work with STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries) House, where they practically fostered the survival of trans youth and street queens expelled from most all hegemonic loci of care. And, finally, though not exhaustively, through what I’ve described as a “t4t [trans4trans] praxis of love,” which is many things: “an ideal, a promise, an identifier, a way of flagging an ethic of being. It is antiutopian, guiding a praxis of solidarity in the interregnum; it is about small acts guided by a commitment to trans love, small acts that make life more livable in and through difficult circumstances” (Malatino 2019). These concepts all overlap, and we can shift between them as we recalibrate and continue to develop an ethic of care that ensures trans survival and flourishing in the midst of ongoing racialized depredation, rampant and metastasizing economic inequality, and imminent environmental collapse.

**Mismeasuring Care**

Though care is fundamental to our continued survival and flourishing, it is impossible to calculate within a logic of exchange, though we seem to try our damnedest. The main insights of Marxist feminism bear precisely on the simultaneous necessity and incalculability of care, insofar as it argues that though reproductive labor is labor is considered beyond, adjacent to, or on the margins of the market, it is nevertheless labor without which the market—and our collective selves—would collapse. What the wages for housework demand (Dalla Costa and James 1975) illuminates is the fundamental necessity of reproductive labor. If minoritized, feminized, and racialized brown and Black subjects failed to perform it, the economic system would rapidly become inoperative.

Care work is essential, though historically and contemporaneously either unremunerated or very poorly remunerated. Care
work is work, but a form of work that is consistently denied and disavowed. Whatever the economic form of social organization we happen to inhabit, whatever the locale, whatever the historical moment, care work is necessary for survival and flourishing. We are fundamentally dependent and thus fundamentally interdependent. The work we do to keep each other alive exceeds mensuration. How could we ever actually quantify the daily acts of care that circulate in the interspecies milieu we inhabit? I think of something simple—a squabble with my long-term partner about whose turn it is to do the dishes. This quickly devolves into a mutual, tit-for-tat list-off concerning our domestic labor (“Well, I took the dogs out this morning,” “Well, I shoveled the driveway yesterday,” “Well, I changed the cat litter today;” on and on). We stop after a minute and laugh, hard, realizing the obvious fact that both of us, intimately entwined in our domesticity, are doing essential work according to our relative and fluctuating capacities and that this work is actively aiding the flourishing of the other. Keeping count is futile and unnecessary; the rhythms of our care work are tied to the frailty or strength of our bodies, our fluctuating levels of exhaustion, the intensity of the demands placed on our time by other intimates, by our jobs, by advocacy work, by other dearly held commitments. The fantasy that care work—within and beyond the home—can be somehow equalized (a fantasy held dear by many feminists, myself included) ushers into the ostensible private sphere the same forms of neoliberal task tabulation that circulate (unjustly) in our waged labor. Why would we want that kind of accounting infecting our homeplaces? Why would we want to import it to those other spaces—of friendship, collectivity, community, solidarity—that we co-constitute and on which we depend? Why would we want to subject these relationships to the neoliberal “discourses around measuring, accounting, and auditing that have proliferated in management practices and
institutional policies” (Manalansan 2018, 493)? But, more to the point, why does this tendency toward mensuration persist, even though we might understand that the care we perform and receive always takes place in excess of exchange logic?

If we’re serious about addressing the production of burnout, fatigue, exhaustion, debility, and disability within trans lives and communities, we cannot afford to internalize and operationalize a concept of care as debt. As queer materialist feminist artists Park McArthur and Constantina Zavitsanos put it, “can we find other convivial forms for this labor (care work) that do not depend on exchange” (2013, 127)? And, once we do, “how are we to accept and coordinate our mutual and divergent forms of precarity and risk” as we go about such work (127)?