The Inevitability of Care in a Posthuman World

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This presentation is part of my ongoing research on connections and tensions between ecofeminism and new materialism. I will focus this presentation on Sherilyn MacGregor and Rosi Braidotti: the former as a representative of “political ecofeminism” and the latter a representative of “posthuman feminism”. I argue that MacGregor’s ecofeminist approach is political and ethical, but remains anthropocentrically centered on the human issues of sex, gender and work. MacGregor’s inspiring insight into the inevitability of care, however, could be connected to Braidotti’s posthuman stance on the agency of the more-than-human world (ecosystems) and the nonhuman world (animals and living beings). First, I will present MacGregor’s “ecofeminist citizenship” approach, and then I will proceed to delineate Braidotti’s posthuman view of agency. I believe reading MacGregor’s political account of caregiving work with Braidotti’s posthumanist feminism can lead us to consider climate change, the environment, and the ‘Anthropocene’, by bridging the political and the ontological together. Although two different approaches, ecofeminism and new materialism can inform each other of what and who we should care for.

MacGregor’s Ecofeminist Citizenship Approach

Care work, traditionally associated with women and femininity, must be taken into account when we envision new ecological alternatives to capitalism. That is why Sherilyn MacGregor calls for an ecofeminist citizenship that politicizes care work by making it inevitable work—work that has to be done, that is necessary because it allows political communities to be sustained; she thus questions the sexual/gendered division of labor and the public-private divide. MacGregor is wary and critical of (cultural) ecofeminism’s praise of mothering and caregiving as feminine dispositions. By disconnecting caregiving activities from gender roles, MacGregor aims to frame care work as inevitable and necessary, contrasting de facto with some ecofeminists’ glorification of care work as either a “mothering” for others or a “mothering” of nature.

MacGregor usefully distinguishes between “caring as a set of material practices (i.e., to take care of something or someone as a form of labor) and caring as an ethical disposition (values or ethics)”. (MacGregor: 58) When some ecofeminists want to revalue women’s material contribution to work, they are positing a universal ethical disposition supposedly shared by all women1. This highly gendered conflation between caring as a praxis and caring as an ethics is rooted in patriarchal dualisms that exacerbate the traditional maternal role. While praising

1“For many ecofeminists (e.g., Mies and Shiva 1993; Merchant 1996; Salleh 1997; Mellor 1997), the two are closely interrelated. Because it is women (as mothers) who do the caring, nurturing, and subsistence work that sustains human life, women care about (assume a sense of compassion, responsibility, and connection towards) their environments which in turn leads them to take action to preserve and repair them. This relationship is to be celebrated, they argue, because caring for people and environments produces special insights about the interrelated processes of life that are different from the individualistic and exploitative (read: masculine) approach to these processes that has led to environmental degradation.” (MacGregor: 58)
women’s “special connection” to other human beings and to nature, some ecofeminists uncritically reinforce the association of women to motherhood and to care, and women’s subsequent relegation to the private sphere within a patriarchal and a capitalist order. To deconstruct cultural ecofeminism’s problematic stance on care, MacGregor outlines three practical notions to identify how it can be harmful: *feminization*, *privatization*, and *externalization* cast care as apolitical work.

First, *feminization* refers to the process of socialization and the division of labor: women are taught to develop a compassionate set of values that leads them to take on caregiving roles and jobs in society (especially by overvaluing the maternal role). The feminization of care relies on “essentializing” women's supposedly more compassionate nature (their ethical disposition to caring), but it refers also to the unequal distribution of caregiving work on women, especially migrant women and women of colour. Caregiving activities (the material set of practices of caring) are thus enforced on these women, making their social positions invisible in the public realm.

Second, *privatization* means the withdrawal of care activities from the public domain and its transfer onto individual responsibility. It is the way that states dismantle social programs and reassign caregiving work to private corporations or families; hence the responsibility of caring is displaced from the public to the private. Privatization thus *intensifies* women's domestic labor while reaffirming a strict public-private divide that controls the division of labor. Caregivers thus work for free, at their own economical and emotional expense. And as we know, women pay the highest price for this exploitative process.

Finally, *externalization* is the capitalist refusal to address the social consequences of the privatization of care. Instead of being recognized as socially or collectively beneficial, as a work that sustains the political sphere, care work is dismissed as ‘private concerns’. Externalization means a *removal* of political discussion of care out of the public sphere. It means that states avoid taking responsibility and accountability for care practices in political discussions and practices. In other words, care must be considered a relevant political contribution to society, not merely a private and feminine task. Hence, ecofeminism’s uncritical celebration of women’s roles as caregivers is dangerous since it risks reinforcing - rather than challenging - the *feminization*, *privatization*, and *externalization* of care work. MacGregor’s “ecofeminist citizenship approach” separates the set of practices from the ethical attitude, but it does not ‘drop’ either of them. The material practices of caring and the ethical attitude are important; the former is inevitable and necessary (and everyone should equally contribute to it), and the latter is informed by one’s upbringing and values. Ideally, in order to politicize care, we ought to separate them from gendered connotations and roles.

To summarize, this “ecofeminist approach to citizenship” implies: a) that we question the public-private divide within cultural ecofeminism, through ecopolitical alternatives to capitalism, b) that we “de-gender” caring activities, and c) that we make care a crucial and inevitable part of work. Blurring the private-public distinction can allow care to become a political issue inscribed within our definition of citizenship². In her words, “an ecofeminist approach demands that care is

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² MacGregor addresses this criticism to both ecofeminists and ecological political theorists: “At a minimum, an
not only an ethic that can inform citizenship but as a set of time consuming practices that make citizenship possible.” (MacGregor: 79) Care activities should be valued as an important yet *inevitable* contribution to society regardless of gender. MacGregor casts care work as “inevitable” because it has to be done: it cannot be *totally* removed from the private sphere. For instance, caregiving work like food transformation, healing psychological or physical wounds, cleaning a household, are all examples of work that is done within what we call the ‘private sphere’, but it has a real political impact in the sense that it allows a caregiver one to go about her life, professionally and/or politically. Importantly, seeing care as necessary work also acknowledges our inherently interdependent nature. It is impossible *not* to do care work for ourselves and for others, and we reciprocally need care from others. 

MacGregor thus highlights how the distribution of care work is an issue related to a global *transformation* of economy in general. In striving for new ecological ways to rethink cities and communities, we must take into account the distribution of necessary work such as caregiving activities. In order to maximize diversity in decision-making processes, MacGregor points out the importance of a thoughtful non-gendered (and non-racialized) distribution of necessary work in sustainable ecological alternatives to capitalism. To avoid the *feminization* of care work, an ecofeminist approach to citizenship would make care practice(s) a crucial part of political engagement. If everyone partakes in care practice(s), ideally its gendered burden would decrease. Hence the active participation of women in political and environmental change would be encouraged. I agree with MacGregor that we ought to have “a public debate over *who does what, when, how and under what conditions* [and that this] ought to be built in to the very definition of environmental citizenship.” (MacGregor, 2007, 10) Necessary labor is a crucial part of our political discussions and practices on sustainability and environmental change. Sustainability is a

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3 “Also central to feminist citizenship theory is an acknowledgement that as embodied human beings, all citizens are inevitably dependent on others for care and nurturance.” (MacGregor, 2007: 8)

4 “For example, without an analysis of the gendered division of necessary labor, green notions of self-reliance, sustainable communities, and “doing one’s bit” at home and in the public domain threaten to intensify women’s already unsustainable burden of responsibility for care. (MacGregor: 77) Notions of “self-reliance”, “self-discipline” and “sustainability”, if disregarding care and gender, obscure our dependent nature and women's unequal burden in care work …“sustainability”, if disregarding care and gender, obscure our dependent nature and women's unequal burden in care work.

5 “The nature of household or family relationships is not considered relevant to democratic public debate even though changing the practices and behaviour of individual citizens in the private sphere is becoming an important part of many visions of an ecological society. Moreover, when environmental citizenship is said to include a sense of personal responsibility for actions in the private sphere, the private sphere seems to be synonymous with (unsustainable) consumption or it is a place where people procreate (too much). Only in rare cases is it considered to be a space of *productive and reproductive work* as feminists have been arguing since the 1970s. And in all cases, self-discipline and self-reliance are ecological virtues.” (MacGregor, 2007: 8)

6 “Citizenship, understood as being about active participation in the public sphere, is by definition a practice that depends on ‘free time’; it is thus not designed for people with multiple roles and heavy loads of responsibility for productive and reproductive work. As Carole Pateman (1988) and Anne Phillips (1993) have argued, modern theories of citizenship fail to take into account the sexual division of labour that not only sustains democracy but also makes it extremely difficult for women (and others with time scarcity) to participate as equal members of a political community.” (MacGregor, 2007:8)
feminist issue.

**Braidotti’s Posthumanist Feminism**

Yet if care is inevitable, within such a political ecofeminist approach, we are actually caring specifically for human beings. In the face of climate change and the ecological crisis, should we not extend care to the more-than-human world? Should we not seek different ways to think about nature? Posthuman feminists argue that we ought to seek both interspecies and intergenerational justice if we are to live through the ecological crisis that we are already experiencing. For example, Rosi Braidotti focuses her work on ontologies and epistemologies of nature, rather than examining alternative economies or environmental policies; I think her posthumanist stance could decenter MacGregor’s anthropocentric perspective on gender and work and even possibly extend care to the more-than-human world. MacGregor addresses her critique to ecofeminists and to ecologists: we must rethink the distribution of care work if we want to be sustainable. However, her framework limits care work within the delineations of human societies. MacGregor thinks about human relationality and intrinsic dependency within ‘our’ communities. Posthumanist feminists, on the other hand extend agency to (other living) nonhuman beings, and to the more-than-human world because it is on them that we rely also. Framing care as inevitable could go along with a posthuman account of agency because we have to be attuned to the world - its flux and its multiple “becomings”, as per Braidotti’s account.

Braidotti’s nomadic account of the “becoming-” aims at decentering the subject from the dualistic grip of oppositional consciousness that is traditional in identity politics. Her Deleuzian understanding of becoming takes into account embodiment as it is internally differentiated, or in other words, every being that ‘becomes’ does so because of some specificities proper to its species, its gender or its race. Indeed, Braidotti posits three axes of differences: sexualization, racialization and naturalization (sometimes she also adds animalization) that will determine one’s process of becoming. Braidotti’s becomings are multiple paths of being that change according to one’s positioning: “These point of asymmetrical and differentiated paths of becoming, which unfold from dissymmetrical and ultimately irreconcilable starting-off subject positions.” (Braidotti: 49) What is particularly difficult to grasp about her account of becomings is that it’s radically anti-essentialist while being neo-materialist:specific embodied subjectivities are the starting point of her thought, but (crucially) these embodied locations do not fix/determine identity. Furthermore, all embodied agents are “surfaces of intensities and an affective field in

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7 “Few ecopolitical theorists have addressed the question of how necessary labour [...] will be distributed in a sustainable society. [...] Yet few greens call, [...] for the democratization of the household that would allow for a more equitable distribution of this necessary work. In fact, the question of how green practices in the private sphere are to be initiated, distributed, and sustained is seldom, if ever, asked.” (MacGregor, 2007: 8)

8 By “more-than-human”, I understand natural elements such as air, soil, water, temperature that affects living beings, but also human-made forces that surrounds us and are part of our way of life (communication systems, waste, etc.). They all impact the environment in various ways.

9 (becoming-woman, -nomadic, -minoritarian, -animal, -posthuman)

10 “A nomadic becoming-woman starts from the recognition of the dissymmetry between the sexes and the emphasis on female specificity as the starting point for the process of redefining subjectivity. [...] It moves toward a broadening of the traditional feminist political agenda to include a larger spectrum of options [...] issues that seem to have nothing to do with women at first sight.” (Braidotti: 41)
interaction with others." (Braidotti 2011: 50), which means that we are always affected and affecting each other, whatever species we are. Subjects are never, for Braidotti, fixed and determined; rather, a subject, for example ‘woman’, is always multiple, complex, and constituted by a number of variables. Braidotti believes that those referents of otherness such as gender, race, and species can be useful to politically organize sometimes, but ideally we should move away from identity politics because of the intrinsic risk of essentialism. Subjectivity is closely related to agency and for Braidotti and other posthuman feminists, agency is always ‘co-emergent’ with the world: biology, nature, organisms, objects and sociohistorical contexts all shape one another. In an Aristotelian vein, Braidotti argues that we ought to rethink the current tendency to conceive of life as bios - centering itself around human needs and rights - in favour of a concept of life as zoe - a “generative vitality”, “a transversal force cutting across previously separated domains” (Braidotti 2011: 92). Zoe is the “endless vitality of life as a continuous becoming” where the “subject is dissolved and regrounded in an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings” (Braidotti 2006: 41).

Moving from bios to zoe entails a change of position and a change of ontological status of the subject/agent: “The zoe-centered subject is shot through with relational linkages of the symbiotic contaminating/viral kind that interconnect it to a variety of others, starting with the environmental or eco-others.” (Braidotti 2011: 95) How we think about life itself should be decentered from humanity, and it should have a strong emphasis on what Braidotti calls the “prehuman” and “nonhuman” elements that “compose a web of forces, intensities and encounters” that ground subjectivities (Braidotti 2006: 41). For example, thinking about the becoming-animal, she states that animals express their own kind of immanence while in the same material world; they are in zoe just as we are. They are embodied subjects with a consciousness completely immersed in their habitat/environments, unlike human beings who have created a distance between them and their environments. Braidotti thus posits a radical interdependence between various subjects (various becomings) in this material world we inhabit all together. Her ontological nomadic philosophy presents this multiple belongings of various subjects as affectively interconnected. Finally, she says that her nomadic theory implies a “bio-centered”/“trans-species” egalitarianism deeply rooted in ecological thinking as it “strikes an alliance with the productive force of zoe – or life in its inhuman aspects.” (Braidotti 2006: 97). Braidotti advocates for this “bio-centered egalitarianism” by recognizing the generative and positive account of the non-human, the more-than-human, and inorganic life. Given her view of life as zoe, Braidotti is adamant to expand our care beyond humanity itself in order to counteract ecological degradation.

In her book Transpositions, Braidotti affirms being wary of the liberal subject constructed in traditional moral ethics of care. As such, she sees the ethics of care as an accountable and situated practice – a moral variation of feminist standpoint theory. Although she acknowledges

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11 Hence Braidotti argues that her nomadic theory is anti-essentialist. “In other words, feminist emphasis on embodiment goes hand-in-hand with a radical rejection of essentialism.”(Braidotti 2011: 50).
12 “One of the key points is not so much that sexualized, racialized and naturalized differences don’t matter, but rather that they no longer coincide with sexually, racially and naturally differentiated bodies. Advanced capitalism has delinked the empirical referents of otherness (woman/native/earth other) from the imaginary institutions of sexuality/race/nature, which traditionally framed them. […] The sexualized, racialized and naturalized others are no longer the boundary markers of categorical distinctions.” (Braidotti: 51)
that “care entails qualities of attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness that can help construct better citizens as well as making better agents.” (Braidotti 2006: 119), she remains critical of the liberal subject embedded in a care theory that is construed as anthropocentric or humanist. Rather, Braidotti believes that interconnectedness (on her account of the multiple *becomings*) constitutes us as active ‘caring’/affective subjects. Analyzing the power dynamics of the gendered division of labor (as per MacGregor’s account) and the distribution of care work would be one practical step for Braidotti, but it would not be sufficient to explain *how* caring subjects come to be. She strives for an ontological change in our categories of subjects and agents that would lead us away from a “humanist impasse”. Interestingly, then, her view of sustainability is closely linked with subjectivity:

> What sustainability stands for, then, is a regrounding of the subject in a materially embedded sense of responsibility and ethical accountability for the environments she or he inhabits. What is at stake is the very possibility of future, of duration or continuity. Becomings are the sustainable shifts or changes undergone by nomadic subjects in their active resistance against being subsumed in the commodification of their own diversity. (Braidotti 2006: 137).

Here, then, Braidotti’s ontological version of sustainability can enhance MacGregor’s political/practical view of the inevitability of care within sustainable communities. There are multiplicities of becomings in the world, and if we really aim for sustainability, we ought to integrate a variety of beings and forces (beyond our human collectivities) that we affect and by whom we are affected. I think that Braidotti’s definition of agents as “affective entities” is compatible with MacGregor’s stance on the importance of caring as an ethical disposition. MacGregor’s ‘ecofeminist citizenship’ considers *important* the set of caring practices *and* the ethical attitude of caring, although she wants to separate one from the other, and more importantly disconnect them from gender roles. I push this line even further by saying that it is all affective agents who deserve care to some degree. We also need to be sensitive to how non-human affective agents, such as animals, demonstrate care in ways that are hard for our human minds to grasp.

MacGregor’s ecofeminist citizenship recasts care as a crucial political practice for ecological organising, and Braidotti’s account of *becomings* and affects, in its assertion that affective entities are all interconnected, further pressures such an ecofeminist political view. I do not think Braidotti’s viewpoint undermines MacGregor’s; rather I am positive that they can inform and complement each other. In conclusion, if “caring” (as a humanist concept) for rocks or mountains or the effects of garbage disposals on climate, or the change in air currents, seems irrelevant, then being *attuned* or *responsive* could work instead for this Anthropocene era that is ours, already here. It is inevitable that we will *have to be* attuned and responsive to other beings and forces that inhabit and evolve in this shared world and I believe a strong feminist commitment, be it a political ecofeminist or a posthumanist one, is necessary to overcome our destructive anthropocentric worldview.

**Bibliography**