
Article:
KINGSTON-REESE, ALEXANDRA BAILEY and James, David (2025) The Aesthetics of Care Praxis. ASAP/Journal. pp. 355-371. ISSN: 2381-4705

https://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2025.a991184

The Aesthetics of Care Praxis

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ASAP/Journal, Volume 10, Number 3, September 2025, pp. 355-371 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2025.a991184*

David James and Alexandra Kingston-Reese

EDITORS' FORUM:
THE AESTHETICS OF CARE PRAXIS

INTRODUCTION

As infrastructures of state care are dismantled—where they existed at all—what are the forms of care, conceptually or otherwise, that don't require state or physical infrastructure? What is the role of the aesthetic (for affective representation, for politico-ethical imagining, for how we understand audiences' potential responses) in relation to the terrains, temporalities, and scenarios of care? If care's routines entail intimate and adaptive modalities of attention, how in turn might they inspire and require new forms of aesthetic labor and interpretation? Encompassing some of these questions, the essays in the Editors' Forum operate at the intersection of care's theorization, exhibition, and dramatization, reckoning with the relation of lived practice with aesthetic praxis. In so doing, these pieces also experiment with alternative idioms for critical writing itself, counterpointing scholarly conventions of detachment by pursuing immersive, personal, and contemplative styles of engagement with care's forms.

It's not surprising that these essays thereby elaborate embodied experiences of caring, for as much as the structures and infrastructures of care are vital to enmeshing care work as the essence of our social poesis, our *acts* of care are paramount. Together, our forum contributors limn these threads of care in and beyond the bounds of the academy and gallery, leading us to consider what the vicissitudes of having a duty of care may practically look like. They encircle not only our aesthetic objects or methods but our social ecologies: our friends, parents, grandparents, children, ancestors, neighbors, and strangers. As theories of care insist, acts of care draw from a limited resource, forever in deprivation

ASAP/Journal, Vol. 10.3 (2025): 355–372

by the systems in which we live. Covering a range of subjects, our contributors consider these acts irreducible to pragmatism, showing instead how care sometimes requires life-sustaining magical thinking, affective apprehension, and collective deliberation.

ON LEMONGRASS TEA

AMBER JAMILLA MUSSER

Scenes of care: my mother shows my three-year-old niece how to pound the dense lemongrass stalk using a mortar and pestle. My niece often spends weekend mornings with my parents while my brother and his wife run errands and otherwise recuperate from daily life with a toddler. She has lately become very interested in what happens in the kitchen, following my mother around and asking how she can help. My mother has decided that helping to prepare lemongrass tea is work that my niece can do, and indeed, she proves to be expert at pulverizing the lemongrass with her strong, dexterous hands. Once she has finished her task, she watches my mother submerge the lemongrass in water and they both wait for the mixture to boil and become lemongrass tea. After ten or so minutes, my mother pours a bit of the tea into a cup, adding in some colder water to lower the temperature and my niece sits at the dining table drinking her tea and proclaiming it "tasty."

While the intergenerational aspects of care between grandparent and grandchild emerge palpably in this scene—and I do want to emphasize that the arrows of care go both ways in that my parents benefit tremendously from these joyful interactions—embedded in this scene are also forms of care that come from ancestral knowledges and relationships with the earth. I am speaking, of course, of the lemongrass tea, which has many folk uses, even as Western medicine does not verify any of these claims. When I took an herbalism class in 2020, I learned that lemongrass tea was useful for calming anxiety.[1] In that blistering summer of uprisings and pandemic unrest, we were urged to make lemongrass popsicles. In a recent book put out by the HUB Collective based in Bequia, the largest Grenadine of the Caribbean nation from which my mother hails—St. Vincent and the Grenadines—they speak of still other uses for lemongrass:

> Commonly called lemongrass or fever grass in many countries, including St. Vincent and the Grenadines, this hardy grass is robust as it rehydrates and helps when one is suffering from diarrhea, stomach pain, fever, flatulence, flu, colds and coughs. . . . Lemongrass is a powerful digestive aid. It contains

> citral, which is antibacterial and antimicrobial and can soothe stomach aches or digestive pain.[2]

Lemongrass is even said to have spiritual utility: it is the primary ingredient in Van Van oil, which is used in Vodou and Hoodoo rituals to ward off bad spirits.[3]

This lemongrass lesson, then, brings together several forms of care—the production of a medicinal tea designed to boost immunity and to soothe the mood—and the continued transmission of knowledge about how to prepare the tea and more broadly how one might receive care from one's environment (in herbalism this process is called partnering). My mother has been making lemongrass tea or what she calls bush tea my whole life, and she learned how to do this from her mother who probably learned it from her mother or other older relatives in her community on Union Island, another Grenadine. In other words, everyone has been making this tea for each other for generations. One way that I know that these lessons have been passed down in a hands-on way and not, say, found on a website, is that none of the recipes that I have seen for lemongrass tea describe the process of pounding the stalks, which is necessary for water to penetrate its more nutritionally dense parts. This process, however, is central to my mother's pedagogy. All of this speaks to how this strand of knowledge came from people who learned how to survive using the tools that they had ready at hand—their local vegetation.

Indeed, the history of Black herbalism is rich. Since the African continent was dense with trade roots, knowledge of plants and their powers was part of a broader set of cultural exchanges between Africans, Arabs, Asians, and Europeans. As Alyson Morgan argues, "African American herbalism is a rich mélange of many cultural traditions with deep origins rooted in African history dating back to ancient Egypt. It includes Arab and Asian practices that crossed paths due to trade and cultural exchange on the African continent."[4] Both the lemongrass plant, which is native to Southeast Asia, and knowledge of its healing properties may have been one of these transnational travelers moving from Asia to Africa and then the Caribbean as enslaved Africans were transported to work on plantations and farms in the Caribbean and United States because of their specific knowledge of how to farm in warmer climates. And as Morgan further argues, drawing on Leah Penniman's history of Black farming,

> much of the herbal knowledge gained in America came from direct connection, necessary learning, and the use of plants foraged in the woods, forests, and wetlands that provided a refuge from enslavement on plantations. For enslaved Africans and their descendants, herbalism and spiritual nourishment were intertwined. Plants supported their endurance and resilience in the face of enslavement.[5]

What Penniman and Morgan point toward is how these intimacies with the earth provided

a respite from the difficulty of enslavement and its environmentally extractive processes. Working with plants, learning how to cultivate them, and understanding their salutary (or toxic) properties were part of nourishing ways of living apart from the demands of enslavement. Not incidentally, these knowledges also became crucial ways for enslaved people to learn how to take care of themselves and to take control of their lives (the abundance of herbal knowledge of abortifacients speaks to one of these nodes of care). This type of self-sufficiency was not without cost, however, as Europeans wanted access to these herbal remedies even as they feared them—ultimately working to delegitimize these herbal forms of knowledge.[6]

When I use lemongrass tea to think about care in the context of Black studies, it is to how these different layers of care coalesce that I want to bring focus. These forms of care exist, of course, in the shadow of Black dispossession and multiple abandonments by the state, but they speak to practices of resilience, communal living and knowledge production, and ecological modes of being. These folk practices are passed between generations and require very little in the way of infrastructure, but they are the byproduct of time spent in community where one listens and learns from others. Moreover, at the heart of these forms of care is an expansive understanding of the geographies of blackness. This is a version of blackness centered on what it means to think through the Afrodiasporic and to work with the gifts that different ancestral lineages have bequeathed. These include a version of personhood unbounded by the individual but that extends toward the ancestral, the futural, and the spiritual; and this is a version of blackness that also forwards its own nodes of south–south intimacies when one considers lemongrass's South Asian roots.

Notes

[1] The People's Medicine Herbal School of Reclamation, https://www.rootworkherbals.com/pmsregistration.

[2] Holly Bynoe, *Bush Medicine Revival*, ed. Jessica Jaja (The HUB Collective, 2024), 32, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1D_ZxzgVydpRGlM1gE6F9cwZWyQYpeR7r/view.

[3] Catherine Yronwode, *Hoodoo Herb and Root Magic: A Materia Magica of African-American Conjure* (Lucky Mojo Curio, 2002), 123.

[4] Alyson Morgan, "Roots of African American Herbalism: Herbal Use by Enslaved Africans," *The Herbal Academy*, August 18, 2020 https://theherbalacademy.com/blog/african-american-herbalism-history.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

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THE MIDDLE RANGES OF CARE: ON ALTERNATIVES TO HEALING IN ANNIE BAKER'S *INFINITE LIFE*

SCOTT HERRING

What else do we do when we try to take care of ourselves? What else goes on while self-care takes place? These two questions occurred to me while reading Annie Baker's *Infinite Life* (2023). I was unable to attend its premiere at Atlantic Theater Company's Linda Gross Theater, so my two queries may seem odd to those who saw it. Her wry and wrenching play is, after all, set at "*a clinic two hours north of San Francisco*" where its characters seek pain management and, for some, a cure that accompanies their "healing journeys."[1] One character refers to this facility as a "water fasting clinic in California! An affordable place with real doctors."[2] Although the said clinic remains unidentified, we learn the name of its administrator—Erkin—and that "the nurse on call" may or may not go by Bashka.[3] To me, this setting closely resembles TrueNorth Health Center in Santa Rosa, whose online presence tells us that it specializes in "Optimizing Health Since 1984."[4] The center was started in part by Alan Goldhamer, who affirms that "fasting [water-fasting, to be precise] is a way to help the body restore optimum health" as well as "very effective for many, but not all, common pathologies including arthritis, diabetes (adult-onset), heart disease, hypertension, asthma, fibroid tumors, obesity, chemical toxicity, and other difficult conditions."[5]

Infinite Life, for the most part, gravitates around conversations between five fasting women ranging in age from their forties to their seventies who seek care and cure for chronic conditions that parallel these diagnoses. One, Sofi, is "here for a pain thing," "a chronic pain thing," and states that "there's something wrong with my bladder."[6] Another, Eileen, has "Complex Regional Pain Syndrome. It's in my nerves."[7] Yet another, Elaine, has "thyroid problems" along with Lyme disease.[8] Ginnie has "autoimmune thyroid stuff but mostly I'm here for my vertigo."[9] Yvette has a host of health issues including arthritis "and the labyrinthitis. And the polymyositis. And the pericarditis."[10] The sole male-identified member of the cast, Nelson, has cancer, or "Primary Signet-Ring Cell Carcinoma with Peritoneal Dissemination," to be diagnostically accurate.[11] These characters come and then they go after fasting for a few days or a few weeks with hopes of alleviating their respective pain.

Yet, paradoxically, amid this alternative healing facility, *Infinite Life* asks us to think to the side of the care that the fasting clinic promotes. In short order, the play decenters its unnamed healing center. Across nineteen episodes, *Infinite Life* proves uninterested in the nitty-gritty of fasting or in any staff who

run the clinic. The latter never enter or exit the stage. Nor do we see the clinic's interior spaces staged for the audience: no bedrooms, no hallways, no indoor congregating areas, no examination or consultation rooms, no dining halls. Such institutional architecture is absent since the setting remains outdoors.[12] Noting that the clinic was once "some kind of roadside motel," one character states that "we sit in these lawn chairs and we all spend hours staring at a parking lot behind a bakery."[13]

I also note that the playscript never once embraces what Jennifer C. Nash calls "the romantic investment in care."[14] Even as its characters drink the facility's cure, there's no pseudo-medical resolution to anyone's pain, diagnosis, or disease. In *Infinite Life*'s final scene, one character asks another, "How are you feeling?" Their shrugged reply: "Mostly the same."[15] That said, the play never once dismisses chronic pain or its characters' respective searches for care and cure either. There is no mockery in their quests. As such, it's best to think of *Infinite Life* as a disability play revolving around rehabilitation that does not especially concentrate on rehabilitation.[16] To apply Nash's helpful phrasing, the play "elects to *think with* care *about* care rather than posing a critique or staging a celebration."[17]

Now that we are several paragraphs into this short piece, I hope you sufficiently appreciate what *Infinite Life* is not and what this play does not wish to do. But what about alternatives to healing suggested by my subtitle? Given its disinterest in successful healing journeys, what Baker's play does ask of its audience is to think deeper about what disability justice theorist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha terms "the dichotomy of fixed or failed" that can only see "either cured or broken and nothing in between."[18] When one fasting character states that "I spent all of today throwing up bile. And I don't think it's working," *Infinite Life* commits to what we might call the middle ranges of care, or what occurs within institutional care spaces when we're really not getting that much better.[19]

Baker's characters, I mean to say, do not solely spend their hours staring out at a parking lot, sipping liquids; they also spend hours talking to each other. In *Infinite Life*, Sofi, Elaine, Yvette, Eileen, and Ginnie banter back and forth while they fast and lay in the clinic's lawn chairs. This chit-chat is a substantive portion of the play's non-plot. And when they chatter, these five do not just talk about their chronic conditions. They converse about West Coast flora, unholy traffic in Los Angeles, pornography for blind folks, George Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronda*, Thích Nhất Hạnh's poetics, verbally abusive partners, a "kind of weirdly cute" Nelson, and organic produce.[20] Even after Nelson tells Sofi that he and his partner "Ceridwen and I have always had an open relationship," it turns out that an intrigued Sofi is as interested in their repartee as she is in a potential hookup.[21] "I think," she tells him, "maybe all I'm looking for is a conversation like this."[22]

When Sofi speaks these lines, the stage directions tell us that she makes "*A gesture of expanse and freedom*."[23] That six-word description is terribly important. Banter, for *Infinite Life*, doubles as a form of compassion that connects singular worlds of pain. Even when one is stuck in a discomforting bodymind that wishes for pain to cease, these conversations take the edge off. Conventional modes of pain care management might refer to this as a distraction technique, about which we have shelves of popular and medical literatures. *Infinite Life*'s contribution to these dialogues is to suggest that we distract ourselves by talking with those we hardly know.

As the play does so, Baker makes a convincing case that "just" lounging around with others is a form of crip care anchored in shared and unshared pain. These exchanges do not formalize into radical self-care or disability justice—nothing explicitly political emerges from this play—but they are nonetheless an alternative to the "*curative imaginary*" that disability studies scholars such as Alison Kafer have detailed so well.[24] In a complementary essay, Alyson Patsavas reminds us that "pain also happens in relationships."[25] That's undoubtedly true, with Patsavas going on to identify these bonds as both hyperintimate ("bound to the 'romantic couple'") and structured by "medical—doctor-patients—relationships as well."[26] Baker reminds us that relations of pain management, however momentary, can also occur between unfamiliar folks simply waiting around.

The play's final scene between Sofi and Eileen exemplifies my last claim. It's not a moment between a couple or a couple-to-be. Nor does it take place between a doctor and their patient. It occurs between two older women who may never meet again. Right before she departs for Los Angeles, Sofi asks Eileen, "Where is your pain exactly?" Eileen replies, "It's my back and my hips and my shoulder. My left shoulder." She then tells Sofi that, since "elevating my legs can help," she likes it when her "husband lifts my feet up in the air for fifteen minutes every night and it's the happiest I am all day." Sofi asks, "Would you let me do it for you? Before I go?"[27] Eileen agrees and experiences a brief moment of pain reduction. She, in turn, proceeds to tell Sofi a story about wanting sex with strangers—and her dog—that may do the same.

The decentered clinic certainly facilitates their passing connection, but so too does the space of the theater with its own middle ranges of care. Let's not forget that during its runtime, Eileen told her tale not only to Sofi but also to the audience members who watched them when the play ran from August to October 2023. Like those fasting on stage, these ticket holders lounged in their seats as well. I imagine that many of them were unfamiliar with each other. But maybe as they witnessed *Infinite Life*'s many worlds of chronic pain some of their own calmed for an hour or two. Maybe the questions with which this essay began weren't that far removed for these theatergoers. In any case, I wish I had reserved an aisle seat.

Notes

[1] Annie Baker, *Infinite Life* (Nick Hern Books, 2023), 6, 52.

[2] Ibid., 20.

[3] Ibid., 25.

[4] TrueNorth Health Center, https://www.healthpromoting.com.

[5] Douglas J. Lisle and Alan Goldhamer, *The Pleasure Trap: Mastering the Hidden Force That Undermines Health and Happiness* (Healthy Living, 2003), 197, 186.

[6] Baker, *Infinite Life*, 12, 17.

[7] Ibid., 58.

[8] Ibid., 52.

[9] Ibid., 13.

[10] Ibid., 20.

[11] Ibid., 44.

[12] For more on the complexities of institutional care that greatly influenced this essay's thinking, see Rachel Adams, *Love, Money, Duty: Stories of Care in Our Times* (Columbia University Press, 2025).

[13] Baker, *Infinite Life*, 29.

[14] Jennifer C. Nash, "Thinking with Care: A Critique of Love Across Interdisciplines," in *Enticements: Queer Legal Studies*, ed. Joseph J. Fischel and Brenda Cossman (New York University Press, 2024), 307.

[15] Baker, *Infinite Life*, 54.

[16] For a small sampling of scholarship on disability and performance, see *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance*, ed. Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander (University of Michigan Press, 2005); Patrick McKelvey, *Disability Works: Performance After Rehabilitation* (New York University Press, 2024).

[17] Nash, "Thinking with Care," 307.

[18] Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018), 236, 226.

[19] Baker, *Infinite Life*, 29. I intend "the middle ranges of care" to invoke "the middle ranges of agency" referenced in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003), 13. For a fascinating interpretation of Sedgwick on this matter that also gels well with *Infinite Life*, see Elizabeth Freeman, "Parasymptomatic Reading: Medical Kink, Care, and the Surface/Depth Debate," *differences* 34, no. 2 (2023): 1–26, https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-10713791. While this essay, unlike Freeman's, does not revolve around extended psycho-scenarios of caretaking between two persons, given its focus on relatively brief social encounters between relative strangers, I remain a staunch advocate for her theorization of "parasymptomatic reading," which "risks being wrong about symptoms, or simply being beside them, with them, alongside them, rather than trying to cure them." Freeman, "Parasymptomatic Reading," 20. Lastly, as I see middle ranges functioning in Baker's play, they should recall but remain distinct from care theories outlined in pieces such as Barbara Riegel, Tiny Jaarsma, and Anna Strömberg, "A Middle-Range Theory of Self-Care of Chronic Illness," *Advances in Nursing Science* 35, no. 3 (2012): 194–204, https://doi.org/10.1097/ans.0b013e318261b1ba.

[20] Baker, *Infinite Life*, 33.

[21] Ibid., 42.

[22] Ibid., 43.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indiana University Press, 2013), 27. For more on this particular form of care, see Jina B. Kim and Sami Schalk, "Reclaiming the Radical Politics of Self-Care: A Crip-of-Color Critique," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 2 (2021): 325–42, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8916074.

[25] Alyson Patsavas, "Recovering a Cripistemology of Pain: Leaky Bodies, Connective Tissue, and

Feeling Discourse," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (2014): 215, https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2014.16.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Baker, *Infinite Life*, 61.

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WITHERING FLOWERS: MAINTENANCE AND PRECARITY IN JESSE DARLING'S *UNTITLED (STILL LIFE)*

CHARLOTTE MATTER

Colorful flowers of various types are displayed on white museum pedestals inside glass cases. The plinths, varying in width and height, are illuminated by spotlights from above. Dimmed lighting creates a calm, focused atmosphere.

Figure 1.
Jesse Darling, Untitled (still life)*, 2018–ongoing, Flowers, vases, water, vitrines. Installation view* Interdependencies: Perspectives on Care and Resilience*, 2023/24, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst Zurich. Courtesy the artist and Arcadia Missa London. Photo: Studio Stucky.*

The display follows museum conventions to protect artifacts from prohibited touch, accidental damage, dust and pollutants, or theft and vandalism. In this work by British artist Jesse Darling, however, the supposed protection causes decay: Effectively trapped, the flowers are deprived of fresh air and water. Over the exhibition, condensation forms on the display cases, partly obscuring the view as the flowers wither. Like tired bodies, they become flaccid, gradually losing color and leaves, while the water turns yellow and evaporates. Eventually, rot and mold appear.

Darling's *Untitled (still life)*, ongoing since 2018, addresses precarity and maintenance—the term "maintenance" used deliberately in the following to foreground labor and its conditions, in place of the ubiquitous language of care that frequently obscures the work that

Figure 2.
Jesse Darling, Untitled (still life)*, 2018–ongoing, Flowers, vases, water, vitrines. Installation view* Interdependencies: Perspectives on Care and Resilience*, 2023/24, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst Zurich. Courtesy the artist and Arcadia Missa London. Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography, Zurich.*

sustains it. On first encounter, *Untitled (still life)* engages the history of European still life painting, a reference articulated in the series' title and, more explicitly, in its recent presentation as *Vanitas* at the Petit Palais in Paris.[1] In early modern painting, flower still lifes celebrated nature's beauty and diversity while emphasizing the transience of life; their lavish, often impossible compositions alluded to luxury, wealth, and power—and, by extension, colonial relations. Many flowers depicted in such paintings circulated through globalized trade systems rooted in exploitation. Exotic flowers functioned as status symbols, demonstrating imperial reach and symbolic control over colonized regions whose plants had been domesticated.[2]

The reference to floral painting in the dawn of modern capitalism and its reliance on exploiting human and more-than-human bodies forms an important backdrop to *Untitled (still life)*. Equally crucial is the fact that this work not only represents but materializes precariousness through slowly decaying flowers. It questions permanence and preservation as core ethics of museums, challenging what is considered worth caring for. As such, Darling's work also resonates with the turn toward unstable materials in the more recent history of art, such as Dieter Roth's sculptures made from edible substances.[3] Both Roth's and Darling's works disrupt ocularcentrism as the dominant mode of knowledge in Western museums, inviting consideration of other, neglected senses and ways of knowing.[4] In Roth's former studio in Basel, the olfactory dimension of the crumbling sugar and chocolate casts of *Selbstturm; Löwenturm* (*Self Tower; Lion Tower*, 1969/70–1998) is inescapable. The sour smell is quite unpleasant yet central to experiencing this installation. Darling's *Untitled (still life)* stages a different relation to smell. The flowers evoke diverse olfactory associations depending on when they are encountered: sweet, fruity, or powdery at first and earthy, foul, and rotten as time passes. Yet smell is only imagined—the flowers are sealed behind glass, and they likely lacked fragrance from the outset, as modern industrial plant breeding (designed to maximize longevity, color, and form) has caused many varieties to lose their scent, further highlighting the precariousness of all forms of life—including the storebought flower—under capitalism.

If Darling withholds maintenance, Roth's sugar and chocolate towers require complex and continuous attention, including air conditioning, temperature monitoring, video surveillance, and daily inspections. Such infrastructures in art are necessary but resource-intensive; they are typically unnoticed, and therefore rarely questioned; as Marina Vishmidt notes in her formulation of infrastructural critique, infrastructure comes to the fore when broken or malfunctioning.[5] Indeed, when the cooling system for Roth's installation failed during some unusually warm days in spring 2007, one tower partially collapsed. Consequently, elaborate conservation work became necessary and monitoring was heightened.[6]

In Darling's work, the allowance of decay dispenses, to a degree, with labor-intensive museum service. There is no need for anyone to tend to the flowers every day, trim their stems, change the water, or replace the bouquets when they wilt. This work renders the larger issue of institutional neglect visible and tangible. Yet the denial of attention is not mere cynicism. It also functions, conversely, as a way of caring for museum workers by minimizing their tasks—perhaps akin to Maria Eichhorn asking the staff of the Chisenhale Gallery to withdraw their labor for the duration of her show *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours* in 2016.[7] Darling's work thus subtly reconsiders what maintenance might mean in art, entering into a possible dialogue with the practice of Mierle Laderman Ukeles. In 1969, Ukeles imagined exhibiting everyday acts of maintenance—cleaning, cooking, renewing—as art, thereby articulating a feminist critique of reproductive labor. As she noted in her *Maintenance Art Manifesto*, "Maintenance is a drag; it takes all the fucking time (lit.). The mind boggles and chafes at the boredom. The culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs = minimum wages, housewives = no pay."[8] Since then, Ukeles has consistently foregrounded forms of labor that are essential yet largely invisible and either poorly paid or entirely unwaged.[9] Darling is equally invested in questions of labor. He first exhibited *Untitled (still life)* in an exhibition titled *Crevé*—meaning "flat," "exhausted," or "broken"—which addressed fatigue in a productivity-driven society.[10] Alongside withering flowers, works on the floor, such as concrete-filled folders and crashed paper planes in aluminum, evoked exhaustion under capitalism, particularly for those whose precarious lives due to disability, chronic illness, unemployment, or immigration status require additional self-maintenance in managing pain, seeking employment, or navigating health care and bureaucracy. Darling has spoken about his own experience of illness and disability and the pressure to remain "functional" while sidelining bodily needs.[11] This reflection on precarious labor and the expectation to remain perpetually available while simultaneously being disposable recalls Mark Fisher's analysis of the "privatization of stress" as a central feature of what he termed "capitalist realism."[12]

Untitled (still life) questions ideals of permanence and longevity, exposing them as artifices sustained through exploitation and precarization as a tool of governance.[13] Many fresh-cut flowers sold in Europe are produced under exploitative conditions, sometimes at the workers' risk of chemical poisoning due to the pesticides used.[14] Most workers are under thirty because the labor is so arduous that it cannot be sustained over an extended period. Their bodies are truly *crevés*, worn down by the demand for flowers in the Global North. Darling exposes the perverse contradictions of an economy of care in which flowers are traditionally offered as gestures of compassion yet simultaneously enmeshed in systems of global exploitation. *Untitled (still life)* unfolds precarious forms, inviting reflection on the maintenance of life and bodymind in a capitalist world in which "care" is unevenly distributed and all too often based on the abuse of others.[15]

Notes

[1] Darling's exhibition *Vanitas* took place in October 2024 as part of the Art Basel Paris Public Program. Besides a site-specific iteration of *Untitled (still life)*, it included his metal sculptures made of pedestrian barriers, *Come on England* (2023/24).

[2] Roger Diederen and Franziska Stöhr, eds., *Flowers Forever: Blumen in Kunst und Kultur*, exh. cat. (Prestel, 2023), 103, 242–56. More generally, see also Emma Barker, ed., *Art, Commerce and Colonialism 1600–1800* (Manchester University Press, 2017).

[3] Conservator Carolin Bohlmann discusses Roth's works in relation to the motif of the vanitas in "Vergänglichkeit für die Ewigkeit? Zur musealen Konservierung des Ephemeren," *Paragrana* 27, no. 2 (2018): 105–7, https://doi.org/10.1515/para-2018-0039.

[4] For an account of critical thought on ocularcentrism, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (University of California Press, 1993).

[5] Marina Vishmidt, "Between Not Everything and Not Nothing: Cuts Toward Infrastructural Critique," in *Former West: Art and the Contemporary After 1989*, ed. Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh (The MIT Press, 2017), 265–69.

[6] See Isabel Friedli, "Remarks on the Restoration," in *Dieter Roth: Selbstturm; Löwenturm*, exh. cat. (Laurenz Foundation, 2023), 171–74; Marcus Broecker, "Conservation Measures for *Löwenturm*," in Ibid., 175–80.

[7] The project is described in an accompanying publication, including a discussion between Eichhorn and Chisenhale's staff, "Working at Chisenhale Gallery," as well as an essay by Isabell Lorey, "Precarisation, Indebtedness, Giving Time: Interlacing Lines Across Maria Eichhorn's *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours*," https://chisenhale.org.uk/2024/05/01/Maria_Eichhorn_Online_Publication.pdf. In this respect, *Untitled (still life)* differs significantly from an earlier artwork involving fresh flowers, John Knight's *Identity Capital* (1998) at American Fine Arts, New York. Knight's exhibition featured floral arrangements borrowed from over twenty New York restaurants, each labeled with the name of its lender, while corresponding labels in the restaurants indicated where the absent bouquets could be found. Here, flowers did not signify precarity or exhaustion but representational power. The bouquets were replaced on a weekly basis by the supplying florists, following standard restaurant practice. This continuous flow of goods inscribed the work into the logic of capitalist systems shared by both restaurants and art galleries, concealing processes of aging and decay as well as the labor of maintenance, which occurred outside exhibition hours. For a discussion of this work, including the labor involved, see Alexander Alberro, "Meaning at the Margins: The Semiological Inversions of John Knight" (2001), in *John Knight*, ed. André Rottmann (The MIT Press, 2014), 150–54.

[8] Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969! Proposal for an Exhibition 'Care'" (1969), in *Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art*, exh. cat., ed. Patricia C. Phillips (Prestel, 2016), 210.

[9] Ukeles memorably spent eleven months shaking hands with New York's sanitation workers—8,500 in total—thanking each of them individually for "keeping [the city] alive." See Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Touch Sanitation" (1979–1980), in Phillips, *Mierle Laderman Ukeles*, 216.

[10] The exhibition took place at Triangle-Astérides in Marseille from March 16 to June 2, 2019.

[11] Jesse Darling, interview by Céline Kopp, Triangle-Astérides, 2019, https://trianglefrance.org/en/files/2019darling-jessecreveconversation.pdf.

[12] Mark Fisher, "The Privatisation of Stress" (2011), in *k-punk: The Collected and Unpublished*

Writings of Mark Fisher (2004–2016), ed. Darren Ambrose (Repeater, 2018), 461–68.

[13] Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, trans. Aileen Derieg (Verso, 2015).

[14] Christina M. Miller, "Fresh Cut Flowers and Exploitation," *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 11, no. 1 (2012): 88–98, https://doi.org/10.1163/156914912X620752.

[15] The term "bodymind" is employed in disability studies to overcome the dualism of "mind" and "body" and to articulate their close and often inseparable relation. See, among others, Margaret Price, "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain," *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 268–84, https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12127; Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Duke University Press, 2017); Sami Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (Duke University Press, 2018).

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FERAL CARE

VICTORIA PAPA

I want you to consider the last time you cared. Don't worry about what I mean by care—go with your gut. Surely, you are caring about many things, people, creatures, projects, ideas, and causes right now and all the time. I'll wager that you care, and that you do it continuously. Pull up an ordinary moment. Nothing spectacular. Just the stuff of everyday life.

Here's one: It is 13°F and my dog Lupine is whining at the door. It's time for her morning walk. We exchange glances, and she quiets for a moment. I look back at my laptop. She stomps her paws and barks. I get up, pull on my coat, and grab her leash. She twirls at my feet, eagerly. Out we go into the freezing cold.

Care has an association with the quotidian and mundane. Love may send us spinning, but care, it seems, grounds us in fidelity, obligation, and duty. Care is practical and practiced. It is sustained by structure and systems. Care arranges, sets boundaries, gives us a frame. In its etymological roots in Latin and Old English, care is linked to concern and worry—it is a kind of brace against a heave of the world. Care is form against formlessness, and yet form is never where care begins. Before it settles into order, care arrives as a pressure that interrupts whatever coherence we imagine to be holding.

My care for Lupine, and her care for me, is grounded in routine. At the end of the day, when I sit down to read or watch television, she clocks my cue that it's time to unwind. She moves from her dog bed on the floor to the couch, where we sit together, side by side. These forms of care cohere our days. But what I'm interested in here are the unscripted moments that animate our engagements with

these forms of care. What is care's relationship to incoherence, in spite of—or perhaps because of—its scriptedness?

Lupine's whine at the door in the morning. Our shared glances. The tension between my stopping work and attending to her needs. My movement out of the chair. Her dance at my feet. Our stride out the door. Before it takes form, care shows up as a torque that cleaves us from ourselves. Here, the boundaries between self and other dissolve, if even momentarily. Care often arrives before deliberation, before ethics. I am pulled rather than persuaded. Something in me yields, not out of virtue, but because I cannot remain oriented as I was. What if care is not something we simply give or receive, but something that overtakes us, making and unmaking us along the way? What if care is a feral pursuit, a momentum that orients us away from self-coherence toward something untamed and unrecognizable?

Care becomes feral whenever it exceeds the arrangements and assurances of the world—that ordered enclosure organized around what Sylvia Wynter names as *Man*, a mode of being human that "overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself."[1] Within such a world, care is expected to be efficient, intelligible, reparative. What cannot be contained by those expectations—the unruly, the excessive, the more-than-human—is pushed to the margins. Feral care disrupts the self from its worldly plot. It refuses containment, tilting us toward in-between spaces where lines of relation blur and become messy. In this press, care opens onto what Nathan Snaza, drawing on Wynter, calls a "complex assemblage of tending," through which the "virtual, subjunctive potentialities for otherwise worlds" come into view.[2]

Care demands that we swerve our attention. Duty and duration may sustain care, but care itself is animated by the rush of the present. The experience of caring and being cared for is often bewildering, unfaithful to agendas. Care is supported by fidelity, and yet it demands an openness to *what-is*. Care feels feral when it shows up as a momentum that causes us to *be otherwise*—against convention and better judgments. It can feel risky and unruly, (un)making us in ways that do not immediately register. It cuts through expectation, leaving us to act without rehearsal or script, before explanation can catch up. This ferality does not announce itself as rupture; it is already present in what Kathleen Stewart calls "ordinary affects,"[3] the everyday moments where life reorganizes itself both within and without human will. Attuning to care's ferality teaches us something about how care shows up, how it gathers in moments that do not pass cleanly, lingering beyond explanation.

Mounting the stairs that lead to my friend's bedroom, I take a deep breath to steady myself. I approach his bed slowly. He is lying down. I smile. He holds out his hand and motions for me to put my head down on his chest. He pets my head, running his fingers through my hair. I can feel the steady thump of his heart through my cheek. Eventually, I break the silence. "Your heart," I say. "It's beating so strong." "Really?" he whispers.

The swift timeline of my friend Shun's illness sharpens the way care reorganizes attention as the future narrows. Holding this moment alongside the acts of tending that structure my days, I am trying to parse out something about how care both scripts and unscripts us into being. In turning toward ferality, I am gesturing toward something I can't quite pin down—something that moves out of language and lands more closely with Shun's hand petting my head.

If care turns feral in the cracks of the world, then it also sharpens our attention to the subtle textures of the present—those slight shifts in sensation or orientation that usually pass beneath our notice. Feral care attunes us to edges of form, reorganizing perception toward subtler registries of experience. This is where care begins to feel like an aesthetic concern, not because it becomes artistic or elevated but because it rearranges attention. It interrupts the world's pacing and draws us toward other ways of noticing: momentum before ethics, touch before explanation, presence before meaning, relation before category.

There's a question Shun asks in his writing on cross-species friendship—specifically, a devotional friendship between a human and a dog—that I find myself circling now, one that textures this scene: "In what ways can an ethos of friendship catapult us beyond categories and distinctions, where notions of subjectivity and space are given permission to play themselves out in nonhuman-centric and nonnormative ways?"[4] What stays with me is Shun's emphasis on friendship as a deorganizing force that "catapults" us beyond the known and familiar categories by which we are conditioned to live. Care, like friendship, has deep roots in reciprocity and duration, even as it defies categorization and completion. As a mode of attunement, care is not a metaphor or an ideal but a *being-with* that heeds a more-than-human call, prompting us to ask what it might mean to live alongside another being without insisting on coherence or hierarchy.

Downstairs in the kitchen, I watch Shun's partner, Greg, carefully divvy out Shun's medications of the day. Next to the four-tier pill case is a notebook where he keeps track of the schedule. I fix my gaze on the orderly log and stare at his neat handwriting the way you might look at a fixed point on the horizon if you were on a boat trying to ward off seasickness. Structure, here, is necessary and life-sustaining. As Jina Kim reminds us, care is animated by "infrastructural dreams," those that "organiz[e] life based in reciprocity and mutual support."[5] And yet something about care continually exceeds the logic of the log. Sometimes care refuses containment, moving us into the wild terrain of the unknown, of dreams, of sleepless nights and aching hearts. When I remark on the fastidiousness of the log, Greg looks at me off-kilter. There's no other way to keep track of all these meds, he explains matter-of-factly.

Feral care doesn't resolve; it is a gathering pressure against our plans, sometimes taking form even as it refuses to be held by it. What

carework can sometimes make visible is not a choice between order and ferality but their uneasy coexistence. Feral care sits inside the day as a small disobedience, playing itself out beyond our knowing, a reminder that relation is always happening in excess of what the world can script. It keeps asking us to remain available to what moves beyond the categories and structures that seek to define us, even as it guides how we tend to each other and the otherwise worlds we dream of.

As Lupine and I step outside, the cold settles around us. Our breath clouds and dissolves in the air. Something in me has already been rearranged by this moment, by the minor insistence that causes me to yield. Out here, the world feels both familiar and slightly off its axis. I am companioned by forces I can name—my dog, the weather—and others I cannot. In a momentum that is not all my own, something feral pulses, loosening the ground beneath my feet.

Notes

My dear friend, Dr. Shun Yin Kiang, crossed over on January 25, 2026. This essay, composed before his passing, is dedicated to him. Shun's writing on literary representations of friendship, animal-human relations, queer theory, postcolonial theory, and twentieth-century British and global anglophone fiction can be found in *The Global South*, *Journal of Global Postcolonial Studies*, *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, and the edited volumes *Victorian Environmental Nightmares* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) and *Creatural Fictions: Human-Animal Relationships in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

[1] Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 260, https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015.

[2] Nathan Snaza, *Tendings: Feminist Esoterisms and the Abolition of Man* (Duke University Press, 2024), 17.

[3] Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Duke University Press, 2007)

[4] Shun Yin Kiang, "Friendship; or, Representing More-Than-Human Subjectivities and Spaces in J. R. Ackerley's *My Dog Tulip*," in *Creatural Fictions: Human-Animal Relationships in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Literature*, ed. David Herman (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 129.

[5] Jina B. Kim, *Care at the End of the World: Dreaming of Infrastructure in Crip-of-Color Writing* (Duke University Press, 2025), 24.

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