Natality, Care, Art:
A Three-Fold Response to Posthumanism's Figuration of the Political

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Abstract

This thesis reflects on the limits of the frame of communication, adopted by posthumanist thinkers like Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett, for addressing the challenge of a more-than-human politics. It explores how Hannah Arendt's political thought, brought into dialogue with feminist and artistic meditations on care, can suggest a more productive approach to this question. While taking as its point of departure posthumanism's intuition that ecology compels us to rethink the political itself, the thesis argues that to bring this promise to full fruition requires taking a deeper look at the human and the political as sites of transformative practice. Departing from other approaches that look to Arendt to address questions of ecology, Section I locates the interest of her work in the thinking of natality she develops in *The Human Condition*. I discuss how the scene of politics conceived in terms of the drama of birth offers a compelling alternative to Bruno Latour's "Parliament of Things." Section II proposes that revisiting posthumanism for its concern with the human opens up a conceptual space that can make a more significant contribution to the political challenges it identifies than its more overt attempts at theorizing a 'politics of things'. I discuss the political significance of care and boredom – two competing proposals for an adequate human attunement to the environment – as they have been articulated by posthumanist thinkers María Puig de la Bellacasa and Timothy Morton, respectively. The investigation into care allows me to address some of the limits of an Arendtian concept of the political. A feminist concept of care can contribute to a fuller picture of the natal scene of politics and augment its relevance to a posthumanist project of counting with nonhumans that cannot act and speak. Section III looks to contemporary art, and Amie Siegel's video *Provenance* (2013) in particular, to problematize care as a concrete doing that organizes relations between human and nonhuman. The work allows me to further flesh out the contours of a political concept of care.

Résumé

Ce mémoire considère les limites du cadre communicationnel pour penser une politique au-delà de l'humain comme l'envisagent les posthumanistes Bruno Latour et Jane Bennett. Il explore comment la pensée politique de Hannah Arendt, mise en dialogue avec des méditations féministes et artistiques sur le « care », nous permet de développer une approche plus fondamentale sur ce sujet. Prenant comme point de départ l'intuition posthumaniste selon laquelle l'écologie nous oblige à repenser la nature du politique, le mémoire soutient que pour mener à bien cette promesse, il nous faut porter un regard plus profond sur l'humain et le politique comme sites de pratiques transformatrices. Dans la section I, je m'éloigne d'autres approches qui se tournent vers Arendt pour aborder des questions d'écologie afin de faire valoir la pertinence de sa réflexion sur la natalité développée dans la *Condition de l'homme moderne*. J'explique comment la scène politique conçue comme une naissance offre une alternative probante au « Parlement des choses » de Bruno Latour. Dans la section II, je soutiens que revisiter le posthumanisme pour sa préoccupation avec l'humain ouvre un espace conceptuel qui peut contribuer de manière plus significative à son projet politique que ses tentatives plus manifestes de théoriser une « politique des choses ». Je me penche sur la signification politique du « care » et de l'ennui, deux formes d'orientation affective de l'humain envers l'environnement théorisée respectivement par les posthumanistes María Puig de la Bellacasa et Timothy Morton. La réflexion sur le « care » nous permet d'aborder certaines des limites de la conception arendtienne du politique. En particulier, un concept féministe du « care » nous permet de faire une esquisse plus complète de la scène natale de la politique qui la rend également plus pertinence pour une politique posthumaniste impliquant les non-humains, qui ne peuvent ni agir ni parler. La section III se penche sur l'art contemporain, en particulier l'œuvre vidéo *Provenance* (2013) de l'artiste Amie Siegel, pour problématiser le « care » comme pratique concrète qui organise les relations entre l'humain et le non-humain. Cette œuvre nous permet de préciser davantage les contours d'un concept politique du « care ».

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Introduction

The Parliamentary Scene

In the penultimate chapter of *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), after having recounted the ways in which so-called 'small agencies' (worms, electricity, stem cells) can make 'big things' happen, the political theorist Jane Bennett considers how ecology might compel us to rethink politics. She suggests that elucidating how to "extend" political participation to nonhumans is the "hard question" posed by the present ecological moment.[1] She tentatively proposes to consider the following:

> What is the difference between an ecosystem and a political system? Are they analogs? Two names for the same system at different scales? What is the difference between an actant and a political actor? Is there a clear difference? Does an action count as political by virtue of its having taken place "in" a public? Are there nonhuman members of a public?[2]

Bennett takes up John Dewey and Jacques Rancière to construct an approach that goes beyond their anthropocentric concerns. Using Dewey's model of a public emerging as the concerted response to a problem and the objection posed to it by Rancière's thinking of dissonance, she outlines the dual task of a political ecology of things: to establish a "true reciprocity" between the different participants of a collective, without relegating nonhuman materialities to the role of environment, context, constraint or tool, and without simply reaffirming the fundamental dependence of humans on their surroundings; and to multiply the "modes of communication" between them to allow ontologically distinct entities to meet, translate and flesh out their modes of existence.[3]

1 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 106 and 94.
2 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 96.
3 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 104.

This thesis reflects on the limits of the frame of communication for addressing the challenge of a more-than-human politics as envisioned by posthumanism, defined here as the critique of the foundational assumptions of humanism. In particular, it explores how Hannah Arendt's political thought – specifically, her concept of natality – brought into dialogue with feminist and artistic meditations on care, can perhaps suggest a more productive approach to this question. While taking as its point of departure posthumanism's intuition that ecology compels us to rethink the political itself, it argues that to make good on this promise requires taking a deeper look at the human and the political as sites of transformative practice.

Bennett finds a promising, if elusive, model in sociologist Bruno Latour's figuration of a "parliament of things," a "hybrid [forum]" that Latour argues can accommodate humans and nonhumans and support a politics understood as "the progressive composition of the common world."[4] Latour argues that "how to fuse together humans and non-humans" in such a forum is the most urgent concern for us today.[5] Bennett approvingly notes that, in Latour's parliament, political action is framed as "the call-and-response between 'propositions', which do not have decisionistic power but a lending of weight, an incentive toward, a pressure in the direction of one trajectory of action rather than another."[6] Invoking the parliamentary scene, Latour explains, is simply about ratifying in public what is already happening on the ground where the human and nonhuman realms are entangled in imbroglios and hybrid networks. It is about "expressing what already

4 Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How To Bring The Sciences Into Democracy*, translated by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2004), 18.
5 Bruno Latour, "From Multiculturalism to Multinaturalism: What Rules of Method for the New Socio-Scientific Experiments?" *Nature and Culture* 6, 1 (2011): 5.
6 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 103.

exists informally, within an arena where all representatives are gathered, whatever the origin of the represented."[7]

While seemingly openly inclusive, however, the figuration of the parliament leaves intact the problem of how to count with entities that cannot be heard or do not fit without transforming the rituals and institutions of the political itself. Bennett herself admits that Latour's model may be unable to address the problem of communication that arises when a gathering includes nonlinguistic entities. To what extent, then, is the parliament a "hybrid" forum and how can it express the way in which things are, we might say, "intrinsically political in their own thingy way"?[8] In her recent engagement with these issues, the feminist STS scholar María Puig de la Bellacasa observes that the historical collective to which Latour appeals to represent the "liberation" of objects and the constitution of a "parliament of things," in which they become issues of debate, is the Third Estate (*tiers état*), a constituency of land-owning men who fought the French Revolution but from which were notoriously excluded both women and people of color. Latour "mobilizes a fleshy and politically charged collective such as the objectified serf in order to make the *ding* revolution, while forgetting that the actual serfs never got 'free citizenship', and how this precious status continues to be a tool for their exclusion."[9] Puig de la Bellacasa suggests that the "parliament of things" reproduces the plot. "Without becoming affected by those yet not necessarily in the issue," she writes, "we end up with a purified Cosmopolitics, a leveling of concerns…",[10] an erasure of those ontological

[7] Bruno Latour, "Outline of a parliament of things," *Ecologie & politique* 56, 1 (2018): 47-64.
[8] María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 45.
[9] Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 50.
[10] Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 47.

differences which Latour himself seems to want to acknowledge when he calls for the "end of Nature" as an overarching unified, objective, and socially transcendent order.[11]

Puig de la Bellacasa attributes these shortcomings to Latour's reluctance to historicize. Memories of extended networks of domination are dismissed as "a human-centered obsession of ready-made political spheres."[12] Latour has long been invested in promoting a mode of description that gives primacy to what is directly given in experience, by following the actors themselves, in order to avoid simplistic articulations of the world that bifurcate the webs of relatedness of which it is composed, prematurely unifying and stabilizing it.[13] Puig de la Bellacasa rightly suggests that this leads him to confuse reliance on ready-made explanations with the important work of discerning still-existing power imbalances and unevenly incurred vulnerabilities. But the issue with Latour's proposal seems to be of a different kind still. Rather than being insufficiently historical, it appears to be improperly speculative, appealing precisely to those ready-made political spheres that his own commitment to proceeding without presuppositions appears to condemn. If political ecology requires us to give up on the fiction of the traditional two-house division of political subjects and apolitical nature, Latour remains curiously reluctant to transform in a more far-reaching way the nature of the political itself. As he himself admits, with a parliamentary framework, we naturally come to a strange impasse: "Will we have to go so

11 Latour, *Politics of Nature,* 25.
12 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 50.
13 This is the contribution made by Latour's Actor-Network Theory, which is not so much a theory as "a method, and mostly a negative one at that" (p. 142) that simply states, "When your informants mix up organization, hardware, psychology, and politics in one sentence, don't break it down first into neat little pots; try to follow the link they make among those elements…" (p. 141). The same idea is reiterated later when he writes that, "ANT's lessons will be only negative because clearing the way is what we are after so that the social could be deployed enough to be assembled again." (p. 200) C.f. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

far as to give nonhumans voting rights?"[14] There is an interesting tension, then, between posthumanism's metaphysical project and its political commitments. It is simultaneously willing to attend to the way matter manifests subtle and varied modes of causation and reluctant to think beyond the conventional scene of politics.

Reframing the Hard Question

This thesis holds onto posthumanism's aspiration to rethink the political itself in light of ecology, but instead of a possible "extension" of political participation to nonhumans, it proposes to return to the human subject. More specifically, it proposes to return to the subject as a site of work and transformation, the subject in her capacity to be formed, practiced, rehearsed and prepared. I explore how the possibility of "becoming affected" by others, to again borrow Puig de la Bellacasa's expression, can serve as the basis for acquiring new habits of relating and assembling, for negotiating and constituting new forms of collectives. Moreover, I show that such a concern with the human and its phenomenological modes of being and encounter is in fact implicitly already an important undercurrent of posthumanism. Interestingly, this orientation also finds some echo in recent scholarship in the environmental humanities. The anthropologist Ghassan Hage, for instance, argues that the generative principle underlying the ecological crisis is a mode of inhabiting the world. What he calls "generalized domestication" is a structure of polarization that seeks to discipline and dominate. While Hage does attend to the impact and role of capitalism, he identifies this structure with processes that lie "outside of what the logic of capitalist accumulation can explain by itself."[15] He focuses specifically on

[14] Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 60.
[15] Ghassan Hage, *Is Racism an Environmental Threat* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 15.

perception, affectivity and subjectivation, describing generalized domestication as a "phenomenologically understood mode of being." This structure

> can also be referred to as a mode of enmeshment, a mode of inhabitance, and a mode of deploying oneself in the world. These are all aimed at highlighting a mode of relating. It is, however, a mode of relating to the world that, in the process of relating, creates the very world it is relating to.[16]

This mode of being is determined by a socio-cultural horizon historically tied to modernity and colonialism, and, as Hage suggests, it manifests itself in the ways we see, relate and deploy ourselves in our environments. In a similar vein, cultural theorist Macarena Gómez-Barris develops the notion of an "extractive view" that divides nature from culture, land into private property, or ecology from the vernacular instead of perceiving local terrains as "sources of knowledge, vitality, and livability."[17] She clarifies that renewing our perception requires adopting a perspective that does not simply represent a structure of visibility. "It instead refers to an enlivened sense of the relationships that inhabit autonomous and uncharted spaces within capitalism and those that exist between the tracking of colonial and disciplinary power."[18] This way of framing the issue of environmental degradation, in terms of a phenomenologically conceived mode of being, usefully conveys the need and importance of discovering new modes of being, inhabitance and enmeshment with human and nonhuman others.

Crucially, this also suggests the limits of framing the political challenge of ecology in terms of the problem of communication and the constitution of a more "vascularized collective," to borrow another evocative image from Latour.[19] This is to treat encounters

16 Hage, *Is Racism an Environmental Threat*, 82-83.
17 Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 2.
18 Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone*, 1.
19 Cited in Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 104.

as between static entities, whereas what seems significant about rethinking our relations with nonhuman others is at least in part the possibility of transforming what we mean by the human and, accordingly, the political. Can we think beyond the space of appearances of politics that leaves those involved unchanged? Can we conceive the productivity of encounters between distinct entities beyond the logic of exchange? To focus on communication is to attend to encounters chiefly for the occasion they create for translating and fleshing out different modes of existence. If translation is self-consciously imperfect, it is also always an effort in the disclosure or elucidation of another's essence. Yet encounters can also be productive for the possibility they create for being touched and affected by the other. Some encounters allow us to stray afield of ourselves, to no longer be, do, or think as we do, to give up certain attachments and to acquire new habits.

Translation, Jacques Derrida writes, is to "[approach] as closely as possible while refusing at the last moment to threaten or to reduce, to consume or to consummate, leaving the other body intact but not without causing the other to appear – on the very brink of this refusal or withdrawal – and after having aroused or excited a desire for the idiom…". He adds, "one language licks another, like a flame or a caress." Translation is a relation of surface rather than of depth. Derrida invokes the metaphor of the caress to intensify the sense that translation entails at the most basic level an impossibility or an imperfect graspability, which is why, as he writes, it is always "experimentation."[20] Further exploiting the metaphor of touch, however, Luce Irigaray attends instead to another dimension of generativity in the meeting of two entities. She writes of the "fecundity" of the caress, which she defines as a revitalized exchange made possible in the encounter

[20] Jacques Derrida, "What Is a "Relevant" Translation?," translated by Lawrence Venuti, *Critical Inquiry* 27, 2 (2001): 175.

between two lovers, an exchange that is really a "creativity" more accurately understood as "the regeneration of one by the other."[21] This sense of the caress as regenerative comes closer to what Maurice Merleau-Ponty, elaborating on the specificity of touch, describes as "reversibility," the idea that we cannot touch without being simultaneously touched.[22] The distinction is important. It attends to the possibility that the outcome of a relation may neither be the "efficacy of appropriation" nor the "promise of enhanced contact with "reality," as Puig de la Bellacasa writes of touch, but rather "an invitation to participate in its ongoing redoing and to be redone in the process."[23] Here I attempt to rethink the terrain of politics by focusing on this promise of transformation, in a threefold response to posthumanism's figuration of the political.

Natality, Care, Art

If Bennett turns to Dewey and Rancière to address the question of reciprocity in communication, I take up Arendt to critically reflect on the possibility of reciprocity in transformation. The first section of the thesis, "The Scene of Natality: An Arendtian Response to Latour," proposes to read the concept of natality she develops in *The Human Condition* (1958) and her insight that political action is akin to a rebirth as an alternative to Latour's scene of the parliament. In this effort, I depart from recent attempts that have sought to recover from Arendt resources for addressing questions of ecology. Indeed, drawing on Arendt's work for environmental purposes involves treading on delicate ground. Arendt is undoubtedly preoccupied by the impact of consumerism and modern

[21] Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, translated by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 26.
[22] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, translated by Alfonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 154.
[23] Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 117.

technology on nature, providing timely critiques of both, which has led some to read her work as potentially informing a green politics.[24] She writes, notably in *The Human Condition*, of the dangers of "acting into nature," which, unlike simply observing, taking material from or imitating it, risks "[carrying] irreversibility and human unpredictability into the natural realm."[25] In an essay titled "Home to Roost" (1975) written in the year of her death, she condemns the association of progress with a consumer culture that "went on at the expense of the world we live in, and… the objects with their built-in obsolescence, which we no longer use but abuse, misuse, and throw away." She also sees in the "recent sudden awakening to the threats to our environment" an indication, or "a first ray of hope," of a slow but growing awareness, on the part of some, of their obligations towards nature.[26]

Encouraged by these remarks, Kerry Whiteside for instance argues that the picture Arendt paints of a perpetually growing society "[converges] with the sensibility of ecological political movements" and "could deepen critiques of overconsumption."[27] In particular, he suggests that Arendt supplies a more profound diagnosis of the root cause of environmental degradation, writing that, "Unlike most Greens, Arendt does not rest satisfied with the observation that economic growth is the unquestionable value of every nation in today's world. She sees our emphasis on growth as the result of a characteristically modern reduction of all values to the value of life itself."[28] However, as

[24] Paul Ott, "World and Earth: Hannah Arendt and the Human Relationship to Nature," *Ethics Place and Environment* 12, 1(2009): 1-16; Anne Chapman, "The Ways That Nature Matters: The World and the Earth in the Thought of Hannah Arendt," *Environmental Values* 16, 4 (2007): 433-445; Bronislaw Szerszynski, "Technology, performance and life itself: Hannah Arendt and the fate of nature," *Sociological Review* (2003): 203-217; Kerry Whiteside, "Hannah Arendt and Ecological Politics," *Environmental Ethics* 16 (1994): 339-358.
[25] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 238.
[26] The relevance of these passages to Arendt's reflections on the environment is suggested by Smith (2006). Hannah Arendt, "Home to Roost," *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 262.
[27] Whiteside, "Hannah Arendt and Ecological Politics," 339.
[28] Whiteside, "Hannah Arendt and Ecological Politics," 348.

Mick Smith rightly observes in a recent essay that surveys some of these arguments, from an Arendtian perspective the most serious issue is "the increasing social, political, and technical distance between humanity and the world we inhabit, that is, what Arendt refers to as 'our world-alienation'."[29] Building on this argument, Marianne Constable likewise clarifies that Arendt's critique of consumerism speaks to her concern with the annihilation of "objects of the world," which are different from the earthly things that environmentalists seek to protect.[30] Constable in fact shows that Arendt's account of the human need for a "durable world" usefully illuminates the contemporary appeal (and danger) of sustainability efforts. Sustainability "injects into our relations with the earth a blurring of the distinction between nature and artifice," showing it to be yet another effort at mastery and control that translates a human aspiration to fix into place an otherwise unpredictable future.[31]

My engagement with Arendt departs in orientation from these approaches. I identify the interest of her work to be her insight that the political has to do with "the beginning of something new."[32] Political action is a work of renewal and invention; it is the process by which we give life to the new. In a straightforward way, this makes Arendt's work very compelling for the project of political ecology if we assume it to require a radical change in our mode of enmeshment with nonhumans and humans alike.[33] But what this section explores more specifically is how she accounts for this process in terms of the phenomenon

[29] Mick Smith, "Environmental Risks and Ethical Responsibilities: Arendt, Beck, and the Politics of Acting into Nature," *Environmental Ethics* 28, 3 (2006): 229.
[30] Marianne Constable, "The Rhetoric of Sustainability: Human, All-too-Human," *HA: The Journal of the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities at Bard College* 1 (2012): 157.
[31] Constable, "The Rhetoric of Sustainability, 164.
[32] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 234.
[33] Hage (2017) argues that "generalized domestication" is in fact at work in both environmental degradation and racism. In connecting these two issues, he proposes that anti-racist and ecological struggles are intrinsically related.

of natality. Political action is like a "second birth" and Arendt proposes that the "full experience" of this birth constitutes the scene of politics.[34] If Latour offers us the scene of the parliament, Arendt enjoins us to imagine the scene of politics as a scene of natality. Throughout this thesis, I stay with this image and explore its many implications. At a basic level, birth implies both beginning and givenness. We are born *as beginners* and *to begin* but also *into a community* and *to others* who prepare a beginning for us. A new beginning, like the birth of a child, forces those around it to reorganize their lives. While Arendt focuses predominantly on the former aspect, I show that she is attentive to the latter as well.

The section provides a phenomenologically expanded and critical reading of the concept of natality that goes beyond Arendt's focus. In this way, I try to counter a tendency common to approaches that look to her work for a politics of environment, which is to uncritically absorb her conception of action.[35] This is what Smith, whom I cite above, ultimately does, proposing to read Arendt for a conception of "action as a politics of nature" without attending to her characterizations of *animal laborans* and the related distinction between biological (*zoe*) and political life (*bios*) that in fact limit what she counts as political. Smith writes, "if nature has become merely another encounter with the human, and if nature's reactions become part of and party to the unpredictable chain of events that follow human interventions, then nature too might be said to have become an integral aspect of that "space of appearances" that, for Arendt (1958, 199), characterizes politics."[36] Here, Smith not only forgets that Arendt's conception of politics is bound up with spatial

[34] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 247 and 176.
[35] For instance, Whiteside (1994, 339) conjectures that, "perhaps it is Arendt's praise of strictly political action that puts off ecological thinkers. She denigrates any politics that takes its concerns from the private household, and ecological politics (from *oikos,* household, and *logia,* discourse) seems to do precisely that. Nonetheless, her conception of the human condition could deepen critiques of overconsumption current in the literature of ecological political movements."
[36] Smith, "Environmental Risks and Ethical Responsibilities," 233.

metaphors (the "space of appearances" and "the city and its walls"); he also fails to address the fact that the space of politics is a space "where men [sic] exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly."[37] Indeed, it is not "brute physical appearance" that is endowed with political significance but appearance through "acting and speaking," which necessarily excludes all things nonhuman. My argument is that we can find the resources to displace this restrictive conception of action by exploiting more fully Arendt's thinking of natality. In particular, I suggest that natality implies a concept of care that Arendt never develops. A concept of care furnishes an underdeveloped aspect of natality that can augment the relevance of this political concept to the project of counting with nonhuman entities that cannot act and speak.

The second section prolongs this conversation. "Ecological Attunements: From Boredom to Care" revisits posthumanism for its concern with the human subject, bringing into close proximity the concepts of boredom (ennui) and care as they have been developed by Timothy Morton and María Puig de la Bellacasa, respectively. I read them as competing proposals for theorizing an adequate ecological attunement – understood here as an orientation to and affective awareness of the environment – and discuss how they gesture at different ideals of more-than-human community. I also attend to the way in which care as a political concept can help us imagine a "politics of commitment" that would also be a "politics of generating difference," as Puig de la Bellacasa writes, working against the assumption that intimacy, proximity and involvement are necessarily reflective of sameness.[38] Implicitly, this section also shows that a preoccupation with the human has always been present within posthumanist discourse, against common perception.

[37] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 198-199.
[38] Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 72.

Accordingly, in raising the issue of the human to posthumanism, as this thesis does, we are not entirely displacing its concerns and do not burden a philosophical enterprise with questions that it did not mean to address in the first place. In fact, as I attempt to show, revisiting posthumanism for its concern with the human subject opens up a conceptual space that can make a more significant contribution to the political challenges it identifies than its more overt attempts at theorizing a so-called 'politics of things.'

Recent years have seen a proliferation of artworks bringing into view various practices of everyday care, including repair, maintenance, restoration, conservation as well as forms of bodily care. These works often problematize these practices in ways that bring out aporias and ambiguities that challenge received understandings of what and where care is. The third and final section, titled "Art of Care," takes a close look at one particular artwork, which, while not directly attuned to questions of ecology, shows with particular vividness the way in which care creates and sustains intricate relations between human and nonhuman. In her forty-minute video *Provenance* from 2013, the New-York-based artist Amie Siegel reconstitutes the recent trajectory and changing ownership of a collection of furniture pieces, showing the various symbolic and material transformations they undergo in the process. The video exposes the reality of objects continuously in transit and severed from the scenes of everyday life, revealing their "lonely diaspora," as one critic notes.[39] In her own writing, the artist describes the process by which "[objects] are gathered but for a moment before they are assembled and then re-absorbed into different gatherings… subject to motivations of profit, speculation, theft, exploitation, the whims of fashion, taste, pedagogy, pathologies of the encyclopedic, of completion as well as profound and

[39] Lynn Hershman Lesson, "Amie Siegel," *BOMB* 126 (Winter 2013–14): 40.

inexplicable attachment."[40] *Provenance* suggests a complex problematic of decontextualization, homelessness and movement of objects. I discuss the work as troubling the distinction between neglect and care, use and restoration, ruin and preservation, and as intimating the possibility of care in everyday use. It was in fact this work that spurred many of the reflections that inform the direction of this thesis. *Provenance*, I suggest, can not only help us flesh out what care as a political concept could be, but also enriches our understanding of the critical work done by art by intimating possible affinities between the practice of art and the practice of care.

This thesis is a set of essays that explore from different perspectives the implications of foregrounding the transformative potential of relations between humans and nonhumans in carrying forward the project of a posthumanist politics. While the sections succeed each other in relative independence, they also exhibit a distinct sociality. To borrow an image from Fred Moten, they "rub up against one another in a mutual overstepping of bounds to indicate common effort as well as differential approach."[41] They mutually inflect each other, supply precisions, foreground limitations and problematize their respective assumptions.

[40] Amie Siegel, "Circuit: *Provenance*," *Auctioneers Who Made Art History*, edited by Dirk Boll (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2014), 172.
[41] Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), xxi.

Section I. The Natality Scene: An Arendtian Response to Latour

Arendt rejected the title of political philosopher, as Margaret Canovan notes, because she thought that political philosophers since the Greeks had overlooked the fundamental condition of politics, which is that it goes on in a plurality where each can act and start something new.[42] The outcomes of such interaction are both contingent and unpredictable, "matters of practical politics, subject to the agreement of many; they can never lie in theoretical considerations or the opinion of one person."[43] This leads Arendt to define the political as the "beginning of something new."[44] Bypassing questions of rituals and institutions of democracy, she argues that the "space of appearance" that organizes politics rises directly out of acting together, the "sharing of words and deeds."[45] Its peculiarity is that it does not survive the movement that brings it into being, unlike the physical spaces that we build.

In this section, I read Arendt's insight that the political has to do with beginning anew through the lens of what she calls "natality," a category often overlooked as a central component of her political theory.[46] As Anne O'Byrne observes, the concept is made to do a lot of work in many contexts and its treatment is often fragmented.[47] This section makes a case for its centrality specifically to Arendt's understanding of political action. It builds on sparse but pregnant elaborations of her proposal that natality is "the central category of political… thought" and that "[political] action as beginning corresponds to the fact of

[42] Margaret Canovan, "Introduction," in *The Human Condition*, vii-vv (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), viii-ix.
[43] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 5.
[44] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 9.
[45] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 197.
[46] A few exceptions include Rosalyn Diprose and Ziarek Ewa Ponowska (2018); Anne O'Byrne (2010); Peg Birmingham (2006); Seyla Benhabib (2000); Patricia Bowen-Moore (1989).
[47] Anne O'Byrne, *Natality and Finitude* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010).

birth."[48] It proposes, more specifically, to read the thinking of natality she develops in *The Human Condition* (1958) as an extended argument for conceiving of a political action that would be the equivalent of a birth. Despite insisting on conceptually distinguishing political natality from natural birth, Arendt is exceptionally attentive to what is phenomenologically specific about the event of birth and this, I suggest, inflects in a particular way her understanding of the political as the process of giving life to the new.

Indeed, Arendt will often conflate very different ideas in her analysis of action. Within the broad horizon of a politics understood as the beginning of something new, she will alternate between two more specific accounts, namely, action as the "sharing of words and deeds" and action as a "disclosure" of the agent. Not only do we communicate with one another, but in doing so we also express ourselves and come to light as unique individuals. "Most words and deeds," Arendt contends, "are about some worldly objective reality in addition to being a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent."[49] Speech in particular holds a privileged status in her philosophy because she understands it to be uniquely endowed with this capacity to reveal "the *who* one is," the speaker as a unique and distinct person. Arendt goes so far as to conjecture that action "becomes relevant only through the spoken word in which [the agent] identifies himself [sic] as the actor, announcing what he [sic] does, has done, and intends to do."[50] Importantly, correlative with these differently inflected conceptions of action – what we could call communicative and expressive action, respectively – are two distinct accounts of politics, namely, politics as the collective process of deliberation that aims at common understanding and politics as

[48] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 9.
[49] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 183.
[50] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 179.

the recognition of the uniqueness of the self by others that enables one's self-actualization.[51] This section pushes against both of these accounts.[52] As I argue, Arendt's insistence on thinking action through the lens of natality and the drama of birth suggests that these readings do not quite capture the conceptual issues that she has in mind. Beyond communication and expression, action as birth also intimates a politics as the collective process of becoming and transformation. It is the latter, in turn, that can provide a framework for a posthumanist politics, provided we explore more fully than Arendt herself does the productive implications of a thinking of natality for reimagining the scene of politics.

Beginning Anew

Shortly after its publication, Arendt described *The Human Condition* as an exercise in clarification intended "to separate action conceptually from other human activities with which it is usually confounded, such as labor and work."[53] Although the distinctions she draws have been questioned and disputed, the book is most straightforwardly organized according to the phenomenological analysis it provides of these three forms of activity, each of which corresponds to one of the "basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man [sic]".[54] Labor corresponds to the biological life of the human. Life must be renewed, sustained and nurtured, and labor is the activity geared to the care of the body and of its environment. Work corresponds to the "unnaturalness" of human existence, the

[51] These models are discussed in Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves, *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* (London: Routledge, 1994).
[52] We should also note that Arendt's perspective on the revelatory work of language is far from clear. While she says that disclosure of subjectivity in speech is an "inevitability," she also admits that more often than not speech fails to truthfully disclose. In one particularly telling passage, she compares the manifestation of the *who* in speech to the "notoriously unreliable manifestation of ancient oracles." (183-82)
[53] In her correspondence with the Rockefeller Foundation. Quoted by Canovan (1958, ix).
[54] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.

artificial world of objects that is built on the earth. It produces the world of things that provide stability and durability to human existence and without which earth would not be a "reliable home."[55] Action corresponds to human plurality, the fact that we live collectively as individually distinct and unique persons, without the intermediary of objects.

Arendt is particularly attentive to the distinct temporalities that these activities exhibit. To the extent that it answers to the needs always renewed of the body, labor is marked by repetition. It is "caught up in the cyclical movement of the body's life process, has neither a beginning nor an end." Work, as a process of making and fabrication, is characterized by instrumentality and is determined by the categories of means and end. Accordingly, the mark of work is "to have a definite beginning and a definite, predictable end." Action is unlike both labor and work to the extent that it makes possible new beginnings whose outcomes can never been predicted in advance. Arendt writes, "Action, though it may have a definite beginning, never… has a predictable end."[56] She adds, "The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable."[57] While we must be critical of Arendt's characterization of labor as fated to cyclicality, of interest here is her suggestion that action gives rise to the realm of the political by virtue of initiating the new and the unexpected.

Political is what interferes with the cyclicality of biological life that constantly reproduces as well as with the linearity of individual human life, or its fatality, the fact that

[55] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 167.
[56] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 144.
[57] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 178.

we must die. Arendt calls this the "reliable law of a life spent between birth and death" or the life of man "running toward death". Action is an "interruption" of both cyclical and linear time, opening the possibility for novelty and, therefore, history and remembrance. It disrupts the inevitable flow of time, interfering with apparently inexorable processes and setting off society on different paths. It also endows us with a sense of renewal and possibility, which comes with the knowledge that the present is not simply the culmination of the past. Action is what "saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin…"[58]. Arendt's insight is that a meaningful life requires a relation to time as fecund, where the future can be imagined as different rather as simply doomed to the endless repetition of the same.

This notion of time as fecund provides one of the many contexts in which Arendt invokes the notion of natality to endow it with political significance. More than a biological event or the result of natural processes, natality, the fact that we are born into existence as unique and unrepeatable individuals, is a testament to and guarantee of the fact that new beginnings can be expected, that "the unexpected can be expected" as Arendt writes. The sense of possibility that permeates every aspect of life comes to us from the "fact of natality," in other words, "the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born."[59] Patricia Bowen-Moore writes in this regard that Arendt sees in the experience of birth "the human capacity to relate to one's own potentiality for beginning, that is to say, the capacity to *be* in a vital relation to one's birth

[58] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 247.
[59] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 247.

as an event of novelty and unprecedented potentiality for the new."[60] Our birth, in this sense, holds the potential for the new which political action actualizes.

World or Subject

A question that arises in a context where to act is to begin anew is *towards what* or *for the sake of what* the potentiality of new beginnings is to be viewed. Arendt's work has occasionally been framed as providing a welcomed alternative to a subject-centered politics informed by the work of Michel Foucault. Linda Zerilli, most notably, argues that it is the contingency of the world, rather than the instability of the subject, that is foregrounded in Arendt's writings on freedom and power.[61] Unlike Foucault, whose critique of the a priori subject of phenomenology simply leads him "into [the subject-centered frame's] negative space," Arendt emphasizes world-building and thus provides a definitive way of escape from the narrow question of self-transformation.[62] Action sets things into motion and it is the world that takes up the effects, not nature or the earth as such but the man-made world of artifacts and the affairs that go on among those who inhabit it.

Without denying that action should be viewed from a perspective where the potentiality of beginnings is directed toward the world rather than toward the isolated self, it is unclear that these processes (subjective and worldly transformation) are as unambiguously demarcated by Arendt as Zerilli makes them appear to be. It is even less clear that Arendt conceives them to be incompatible. Much in fact suggests that she is concerned with the transformation of the subject, especially if we understand the thinking

[60] Patricia Bowen-Moore, *Hannah Arendt's Philosophy of Natality* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 2.
[61] Linda M. G. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abys of Freedom* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 14.
[62] Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abys of Freedom*, 15.

of natality she develops throughout *The Human Condition* not only as an account of the fecundity of time but also as an extended argument for conceiving of political action itself as a birth.[63] Arendt makes explicit statements in this direction. Most notably, she describes the capacity to begin anew as a "rebirth" or "second birth," a collective process that is "not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself [sic]."[64] Rather than seeing Arendt as liberating us from the question of the subject then, I suggest that she helps greatly complexify and nuance it. Interestingly, this then indicates another productive line of contrast between Arendt and Foucault, where they provide different accounts of the political process of subject transformation. Of relevance here is Foucault's late work on the hermeneutics of the subject and, more specifically, his discussion of what he calls "practice of the self." Because it can illuminate what is distinctive to natality as a political concept of transformation, I consider it briefly before turning to Arendt to explore in more depth her idea of political action as rebirth. Of particular interest is the way Foucault describes the subject like an artist sculpting herself into being and aiming at maximal control and discipline. Natality departs from this Foucauldian account of transformation in both of these respects.

Foucault and the Practice of the Self

It is customary to speak of a late Foucault. In "The Subject and Power," an essay written two years prior to his death, Foucault reconsiders the trajectory of his entire work, claiming that his goal has been not to analyze power, but "to create a history of the different

[63] It should be noted here that Zerilli does not once mention natality in her discussion of Arendt.
[64] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 177.

modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects."[65] In the final stage of this history, after having considered the subject in its relation to knowledge and disciplinary power, Foucault turns his attention to those procedures by which the subject constitutes herself as subject. What he calls "practice of the self" is based on an extensive reading of the Greek notion of *epimelea heautou*, literally "care of the self," whose origin Foucault traces specifically to some of the Socratic dialogues found in Plato. The obligation to care for the self as Foucault recovers it from Plato takes the specific form of "an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being."[66] Whether formative – having to do with the acquisition of new knowledge – or reformative – having to do with renouncing old habits –, it always has as a "criterion" a "nature" or a mode of being.[67] Foucault suggests that the expression *epimeleia heautou* had a particularly powerful meaning for the Greeks: "It does not mean simply being interested in oneself, nor does it mean having a certain tendency to self-attachment or self-fascination… [rather] it describes a sort of work, an activity; it implies attention, knowledge, technique."[68] Care of the self is at once a duty and a technique, a responsibility and a set of carefully worked out ways of behaving by which the subject gradually perfects herself, like a work of art.[69]

[65] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 326.
[66] Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," *Ethics* (1984): 282.
[67] Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France, 1981-1982*, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2005), 95.
[68] Michel Foucault, "On the genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984*, Vol. 1, edited by Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 1997), 359-60.
[69] This dual dimension of the care of the self is underscored in Johanna Oksala, *Foucault on Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 161.

Foucault discusses the "practice of the self" in terms of a notion of "conversion" specific to Hellenistic and Roman culture. He refers, in particular, to the Stoic idea of conversion, [*se*] *convertere ad se*, which he distinguishes from both the Platonic notion of *epistrophe* – a turning away from appearances and toward oneself that is connected to the doctrine of recollection – and from the Christian notion of *metanoia* – the austere process of self-renunciation or asceticism that is followed by rebirth.[70] Foucault explains that, "In the Hellenistic and Roman culture of the self, conversion gets us to move from that which does not depend on us to that which does. What is involved… is liberation within this axis of immanence, *a liberation from what we do not control so as finally to arrive at what we can control*" [emphasis added]. Not a liberation from the body, as in the Christian conception of *metanoia*, but "the establishment of a complete, perfect, and adequate relationship of self to self," the kind of conversion Foucault finds in *hepimelea heautou* is also achieved through "exercise, practice, and training; *askesis*" rather than through recollection as in Plato.[71]

Foucault insists that the sense of a turn to the self that is found in *hepimelea heautou* is not an emphasis on the withdrawal of the subject onto itself at the expense of collective life. It is not, he writes, "a requirement of solitude, but a real social practice," an "intensifier of social relations."[72] Foucault suggests that we can identify in *hepimelea heautou* a positive sense for the care of self and the turn to the self that it denotes. It is neither a superficial exaltation of the self nor a melancholic response to the impossibility of

[70] An illuminating discussion of these distinctions is provided in Amy Allen, "Power and the Subject," *A Companion to Foucault*, First Edition, edited by Christopher Falzon, Timothy O'Leary and Jana Sawicki (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2013).
[71] Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 210.
[72] Cited in Frédéric Gros, "Course Context," *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France, 1981-1982*, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2005), 537.

collective life, but a starting point for collective life. In other words, care of the self does not separate us from the world, and neither is it a halting of our activities. It is not a "withdrawal or retirement" (*anakhoresis*) from human society in order to establish oneself in sovereign solitude, but consists rather in standing back from the activities in which one is engaged while still pursuing them, so as to maintain the distance between oneself and one's actions that constitutes a vital state of vigilance. Foucault speaks of it as a "reversal" rather than a separation; the subject prepares herself, through preliminary exercises and practices, to be a subject of action for the events of the world.[73]

Despite its worldly character, however, *hepimelea heautou* remains a relatively individualized practice of conversion of the self. Foucault specifies elsewhere, "One can comport oneself towards oneself in the role of a technician, of a craftsman, of an artist, who from time to time stops working, examines what he is doing, reminds himself of the rules of the art, and compares these rules with what he has achieved so far."[74] Arendtian natality is different in both of these respects, emphasizing plurality and unpredictability rather than individuality and discipline. The Arendtian subject is not the product of an author who stands back from time to time to take a distant perspective and evaluate the progress of her work; she is a progeny, the uncertain outcome of a birth to others. Plural initiatives give rise to unpredictable consequences and we can never "arrive at what we can control," to again borrow Foucault's expression. For Arendt, uncertainty is the price to pay for the possibility of genuine renewal and change. To recall a distinction drawn earlier, action, unlike work, is such that processes are started whose outcome is unpredictable, so that

[73] Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 192.
[74] Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, edited by Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), 166.

uncertainty becomes the key character of human affairs.[75] Moreover, with natality, transformation is not only subjective (contra Zerilli) but, more importantly, intersubjective, warranting the question, Who makes whom in birth? This is where I take Arendt to be most original and most vulnerable.

Arendt and Natality

In natality, the presence of others is required for the emergence of a self. We are always born to others, in a kind of passive inactivity before those who give birth to us. To understand oneself as acting and beginning something new is also to understand oneself as the progeny of others who have prepared themselves and the world to receive us. Birth as a fact of being epitomizes the basic, ontological vulnerability and interdependence that characterizes human existence. Arendt is attentive to this peculiarity, noting that our coming to life in action is a birth to and with others rather than the doing of an author:

> Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. In other words, the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer. Somebody began it and is its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely, its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author.[76]

Just like the event of our birth is not quite ours to shape and mold, a unique existence is never merely the work of an author. It is sustained, witnessed, attended to, remembered and endlessly recounted by others who continue and transform it in ways we can never foresee and control. As Arendt writes in a later work, *The Life of the Mind* (1971), "To be alive means to live in a world that preceded one's own arrival and will survive one's own departure."[77] Action implies a world that does not belong to me so much as I belong to it

[75] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 232.
[76] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 182.
[77] Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harvest Book, 1971), 20.

because "we are of the world and not merely in it."[78] In this common world, every initiative is already conditioned by others, every action already an interaction and collaboration with someone who was already there, preceding me. To the extent that the actor "always moves among and in relation to other actor beings, he is never merely a 'doer' but always and at the same time a sufferer."[79] Seen through the lens of natality, action comprises both a beginning and a givenness. We are born *as beginners* and *to begin* but also *into a community* and *to others* who prepare a beginning for us.

Arendt gestures more than once at this double principle inherent in natality and perhaps most clearly when she writes that the setting of a new beginning through action "always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt. Together they start a new process which eventually emerges as *the unique life story of the newcomer*, *affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he* [sic] *comes into contact*."[80] [emphasis added] In this important passage, however, Arendt goes one step further. She not only suggests that the process of beginning something new corresponds to our birth as individuals; she also conveys the sense in which this birth is in fact communal or reciprocal. It "[affects] uniquely the life stories" of all those involved. In this sense, Arendt's account of action captures something quite specific to the event of birth, namely, the reciprocity of making.

As Lisa Guenther argues, the event of birth dramatically blurs the already uncertain distinction between giving and receiving. "Given and being given intermingle," she notes, "to the point where it is difficult to say who is more profoundly receptive, the parent or the

[78] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 22.
[79] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 190.
[80] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 184.

child."[81] Bowen-Moore likewise reports that if the community of others constitutes a child's first experience of the world, the child's unique and distinctive identity also shapes the identity of the community.[82] While some languages downplay this ambivalence – we say, for instance, "to give birth" or "donner naissance" – both Guenther and Bowen-Moore point to the difficulty of determining who makes whom and who gives to whom in the act of "giving" birth. For Guenther, a birth is a gift from the other in two senses. In the first, more straightforward sense, we receive ourselves from those who give birth to us and who have made our existence possible. In a second sense, the emergence of a child also "demands a responsibility that it also makes possible, simply by showing its face." One receives from the other even one's own capacity to give. Generosity arises only as a response to an other who make this generosity possible.[83]

Arendt is especially attentive to the mutuality of this making in birth in her description of action. In fact, it is difficult to fully grasp what she means by action as the beginning of something new without attending to this dynamic of making and being made. As noted earlier, Arendt writes that action overcomes both the "natural rule of cyclical movement" and the "reliable rule of life spent between life and death," which is the "life span of man running toward death." Like the arrival of a child that we anticipate but always experience as surprising and unsettling, it "interrupts the inexorable automatic course of daily life" and "looks like a miracle… the infinite improbability which occurs regularly."[84] While one is always born to others who anticipate one's birth, a birth always produces an

[81] Lisa Guenther, *The Gift of the Other: Lévinas and the Politics of Reproduction* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 3.
[82] Bowen-Moore, *Hannah Arendt's Philosophy of Natality*, 18.
[83] Guenther, *The Gift of the Other*, 2.
[84] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 246.

interruption, transforming the world in which it begins in ways that are always unexpected. Nothing conveys so powerfully the sense of novelty inherent in beginnings as the birth of a child, someone expected who defies all expectations. Both in the anticipatory moments preceding a birth as well as in those following it, we reorganize our lives and change our very ways of being. A newborn has the power to change everything and everyone around them: we tiptoe around newborns, in awe of their fragility, careful not to wake them, wondering what they may feel. As Arendt conveys it, we are all "newcomers who are born into the world as strangers."[85]

Yet the drama of birth also puts pressure on Arendt' account of the interruptive temporality of political action. It brings to mind instead a scene animated by the slower rhythms of gestation, a more progressive and thoroughly embodied transition that begins well before the sudden and eruptive beginning marked by the event of birth itself. Arendt's neglect of this more archaic beginning is perhaps surprising given her otherwise attentive account of the mutuality of making in birth, but it certainly finds echo in a more general cultural misconception of women's lived experience of pregnancy. As Marion Iris Young writes,

> For others the birth of an infant may be only a beginning, but for the birthing women it is a conclusion as well. It signals the close of a process she has been undergoing for nine months, the leaving of this unique body she has moved through, always surprising her a bit in its boundary changes and inner kicks. Especially if this is her first child, she experiences the birth as a transition to a new self that she may both desire and fear. She fears a loss of identity, as though on the other side of the birth she herself became a transformed person, such that she would "never be the same again".[86]

Young relates the neglect of this more durative and embodied dimension of birthing to a male bias in medicine's concept of health, which is equated with "the body in a steady

[85] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 9.
[86] Marion Iris Young, *On Female Embodiment: "Throwing Like A Girl" and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 55.

state."[87] Arendt's own disregard for the body and her infamously negative account of women's reproductive labor might be reflective of this bias as well.

Here, we appear to reach the limits of the Arendtian model of action as birth. Indeed, Arendt insists on distinguishing political natality from actual birth by describing action as a "second birth" marked by "a willingness to act and speak" and in which we "confirm and take upon ourselves" the fact of our original birth to "begin a story of one's own."[88] While she grants that we are not the sole authors of our lives, she also insists that the beginning of the political is brought about "on our own initiative," an initiative she describes like an ontological principle of unrest, motivated by nothing other than the intuition we have for new possibilities.[89] She writes:

> This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity, like labor, and it is not prompted by utility, like work. It may be stimulated by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join, but it is never conditioned by them; its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative. To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin… to set something into motion…[90]

Arendt further writes that the space of appearance of politics is such that it calls upon everyone to show an "original courage,"[91] which manifests in one's willingness to leave one's safe shelter and expose one's self to others, in one's "consenting to act and speak" and readiness to "risk disclosure."[92] Many feminist critics have rightly noted on this basis that, despite endowing birth with political significance, Arendt gravely misjudges the extent of the passivity with which we are born to others.[93] Adriana Cavarero goes so far as

87 Young, *On Female Embodiment*, 58.
88 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 186.
89 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 184.
90 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 177.
91 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 186.
92 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 15-6.
93 On this topic, Adriana Cavarero (1995; 2000) and Lisa Guenther (2006).

to say that Arendt "does not highlight the concept of birth as a coming from the mother's womb, but accepts the Greek meaning of birth as a coming from nothing."[94] While I endorse a less boldly critical reading of Arendtian natality in this section, attempting to show that Arendt is in fact attentive to and invested in the dynamic of mutual making that is distinctly manifested in the event of birth, I also acknowledge the limits of her vision of the scene of politics as a scene of natality. Interestingly, Peg Birmingham observes that Arendt's initial engagement with the concept of natality, in her doctoral dissertation on St. Augustine, shows a much less ambivalent commitment on these matters and a more sustained attention to the full complexity of the dynamic of birth, one that she seems to have partially relinquished by the time she wrote *The Human Condition*.[95]

While this exceeds the scope of the present discussion, we may want to consider whether, in this particular respect, a Foucauldian framework – with its focus on *practice* (as exercise or preparation) rather than *action* (as interruption) – might not in the last instance provide a promising counterpoint to Arendt's account of the process by which the new comes into being. When Foucault speaks of *hepimelea heautou* as a practice, he intends to highlight the way in which, for the Greeks, care of the self was understood as a *preliminary* or *preparatory* exercise – a form of rehearsal of the self –, one that occurred in the interstices of social and personal life where conducts were not directly tied to the protocols of educational or juridical institutions. Indeed, Foucault explains that care for the self appears to have first acquired the weight of an obligation or responsibility in the context of an acknowledged "institutional gap" where the quality of pedagogy was in

[94] Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, translated by Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio and Aine O'Healy (New York: Routledge, 1995), 6.
[95] Peg Birmingham, "The An-Archic Event of Natality and the "Right to Have Rights"," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 74, 3 (2007): 763-776.

question.[96] The philosophical discourse on the importance of taking care of oneself, he suggests, finds its typical expression in those Platonic texts where Socrates also criticizes the family milieu and the educational system for providing faulty or inadequate training for the formation of good future rulers who can govern properly. Foucault calls this the "pedagogy problem" in Greek society.[97] It is in this context that the practical and moral imperative to care for the self becomes salient for the ruling elite in Greek society. I detail these aspects here and only briefly to show that we find in Foucault a clear concern for the *political* importance of activities of preparation, which he understands to be essential to questions of practical politics and government. What Foucault points to is perhaps the forgotten advantage of practice to the Arendtian model of natality.

An Undeveloped Concept of Care

The problematic outcome of Arendt's neglect of passivity is that it ultimately renders her account of political action restrictive, more so than her concept of natality, which comprises a dual principle of beginning and givenness, would in fact suggest. This raises the question of whether developing more fully the productive implications for politics of a thinking of natality might not allow us to mitigate the exclusion of those, for instance, who cannot make themselves heard or seen (who cannot begin "on [their] own initiative") as well as augment the relevance of Arendt's work to a posthumanist project of counting with nonhuman entities. This would more specifically require further developing the dimension of givenness (of what is *already there*, making the world *ready* for action to

[96] Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 87.
[97] Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 44.

resume) implied by a concept of natality. Could a political concept of care take us in this direction?

Arendt is suspicious of the role of emotions and affects in politics. They may greatly intensify and enrich our lives, but to the extent that they can be experienced only in privacy and intimacy, this intensification always comes at the expense of the assurance we get from others, who bear witness to what we publicly share in words and deeds, of the reality of the world and ourselves.[98] Arendt is particularly critical of love, which "by reason of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others." Love either begins in unity or tends towards unification and cannot therefore sustain the plurality that is the condition of politics. It is "unworldly… not only apolitical but antipolitical."[99] But if Arendt is reluctant to develop a political concept of love, there is an undeveloped concept of care already implicit in the drama of natality that animates her scene of politics. As Julia Kristeva writes in her recent contribution to this scholarship, this would be "a *caring* that is not a relentlessness of will, the last example of the will to power, but which preserves nonetheless this miracle of rebirth." Kristeva further notes, "Arendt was far from that. And yet so close, too."[100] If action conceived as a birth requires the presence of others who give life to each other, then a certain form of orientation and affective openness to the other must already be assumed.

The next section implicitly prolongs this conversation, proposing to think of care, both a form of attention and a labor, as an orientation towards the other that is committed and involved while also productive of novelty and differences. Interestingly, this

98 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50.
99 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 242.
100 Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative*, translated by Frank Collins (Toronto, Buffalo and London: The Toronto University Press, 2001), 88.

inaugurates a new dialogue between a feminist politics of care and Arendtian scholarship, one that both shows care to be more than the repetitive labor of sustaining, maintaining and repairing that many feminist care theorists[101] conceive it to be; and one that affirms the need for a feminist perspective on natality that would bring to full fruition Arendt's own intuition that only the "full experience" of the capacity we have to be born and reborn to others can adequately capture the scene of a politics conceived as the beginning of something new.

Section II. Ecological Attunements: From Boredom to Care

Posthumanism has been predominantly concerned with non- or not-quite-human entities. Its particular intervention has been to shift the focus from the human experience of things to the things themselves. In this effort, Jane Bennett intentionally brackets the human subject as a site of intervention, writing in *Vibrant Matter* (2010) that attention is "less on the enhancement to human relational capacities resulting from affective catalysts and more on the catalyst itself as it exists in nonhuman bodies."[102] Deploring this eclipse of the human, some critics have argued that new materialists and speculative realists, forming the two main strands of posthumanism, have essentially given up on reforming the human subject, treating it like a "static, black-boxed, and moribund concept."[103] Yet posthumanism has also produced reflections on the implications, for human modes of

[101] In what is a well-known and widely accepted definition of care, Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto write: "On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a *species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible*. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web." In Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 103.
[102] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xii.
[103] Mark Hansen, *Feed-Forward: On the Future Of Twenty-First-Century Media* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 18.

attention and engagement, of accounting for human-independent entities.[104] At least within a certain conversation within posthumanism – where affectively animated concepts like worry, concern, care and boredom have proliferated – the conceptual challenge of ecology has been partly understood in terms of critical attunement and affective openness in the human subject. Even proponents of object-oriented ontology, who have insisted on granting entities a withdrawn existence independent from human cognitive capture, have contributed to this conversation. Timothy Morton, for instance, proposes in *Dark Ecology* (2016) that we cultivate boredom or ennui, clarifying that, "in ennui, I am not totally turning my back on… the ecological world… Ennui is… the correct ecological attunement."[105] This proposal, whose political significance I discuss below, suggests the need to reconsider and nuance the argument according to which the human subject has been eclipsed from posthumanism's project.

In this section, I revisit posthumanism for its concern with the human. I focus specifically on the interventions made by the concepts of boredom (ennui) and care, which I read as competing proposals for conceptualizing a possible "ecological attunement," understood as an orientation to and affective awareness of the environment. I identify the interest of these proposals to lie in the different ideals of community to which they implicitly appeal. Bringing them in close proximity allows us not only to flesh out what is phenomenologically specific to these affective states, but also to envision plurality itself as a reality that admits different kinds and degrees of relationality, some pluralities being

[104] I find Jane Bennett's insistence on noting the disavowed presence, among object-oriented ontologists, of a concern with relationality (as "manifest withdrawal") quite productive in this respect. C.f. Jane Bennett, "Systems and Things: A Response to Graham Harman and Timothy Morton," *New Literary History*, 43(2): 2012, 225-233.

[105] Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2016), 124-125.

more disjunctive than others. Attending to these possibilities, we break with a tendency, common in discussions on ecology in the wake of Bruno Latour's work, to think squarely in terms of networks. As critics have pointed out, to imagine relations of interdependence in terms of networks betrays a reluctance to attend more closely to the specificities of more-than-human assemblages and to the dynamic relationalities they create and sustain.[106] With boredom and care, we can begin to ask, What are the implications for political ecology of thinking plurality as a bare form of 'with-ness' or 'coexistence' defined by weak (or absent) relationalities? Or, alternatively, as a more strongly relational and involved collective that sustains, beyond their coexistence, the coevolution of its members? While my interest is not primarily in adjudicating between these models, I do understand care to reveal the possibility, implicitly disavowed by a proposal for boredom, that difference can be generated from within relations of close proximity and intimacy. It is such a political concept of care – one that reconciles involvement and difference – that can, in turn, complement the thinking of natality developed by Arendt.

Boredom or Plurality as Coexistence

Object-oriented ontology emerges in part as a response to what its proponents see as a relationalism that has gone too far in the work of Bruno Latour, where reality is reconceived in terms of networks of hybrids, those "objects" that do not fit easily on either side of the modern divide that splits reality into nature and culture. As Graham Harman writes in *Prince of Network* (2009), "it [the network] never frees actors from every witness;

[106] C.f. Alexander Galloway's critique of Latour in his blog post "Theory Hot and Cold" from 2018: http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/theory-hot-and-cold?fbclid=IwAR2f2Yp42XtCNIK5dEaTfUw8ArJRMm1c4YkLxu7AuqbH9R9YHaqRDeGT3R8

indeed, it allows objects to exist only insofar as they have an effect on other objects."[107] Both Harman and Timothy Morton have argued that the political ecology Latour endorses exposes the costs of revealing the interdependency of humans and nonhumans. By locating them on a continuum of bodies and forces, a continuum that avoids conventional dichotomies of life and matter, subjective and objective, Latour also fails to attend to and delineate meaningful distinctions. He makes it impossible, for instance, to think of a (natural) world entirely separate from or uninfluenced by humans. Yet what matters, in Harman and Morton's view, is not how an entity behaves in a system or a network but, rather, how it withdraws from it to live an independent existence. Hence, they argue that we need a philosophy oriented to the object-reality of things, that aspect of their ontology that is separate from their enmeshment in human concerns. In their capacity as objects, entities "exist as autonomous units, but they also exist in conjunction with their qualities, accidents, relations, and moments without being reducible to these. […] They cannot be derived from a single radical root, but neither do they exist as incorruptible elements untransmutable into one another […]."[108]

In his essay "Aesthetics as First Philosophy" (2012), Harman clarifies that despite its apartness or withdrawn existence, every object nevertheless manifests itself to the human, but always only partially as appearance. "The other is there but not fully there," communicating "through proximity, the touching without touching, that has been termed allusion or allure."[109] Epistemological access to objects is thus not impossible, but it is always incomplete and limited to their surface reality or aesthetic dimension. Another

[107] Graham Harman, *Prince of Network: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), 186.
[108] Harman, *Prince of Networks,* 156.
[109] Graham Harman, "Aesthetics as First Philosophy: Lévinas and the Non-Human," *Naked Punch* (2012): http://www.nakedpunch.com/articles/147

object-oriented ontologist, Timothy Morton largely operates with the same basic ontological and epistemological assumptions, but his interest in attending more specifically to contemporary ecological phenomena – in particular, global warming – leads him to describe the manifest withdrawal of things in more visceral terms. As he writes in *Hyperobjects* (2013), nature does not so much seduce by leaving hints here and there of its always only partially disclosed presence; it thoroughly penetrates, surrounds and haunts us. It manifests in the form of an inescapable presence that he describes as a "viscosity," such that "I do not reach out toward [it]," instead, "[it] tunes to me."[110]

More recently, in *Dark Ecology* (2016), Morton turns more directly to the human, arguing that we need to acclimatize to the ways in which things penetrate us. We need to cultivate a form of knowing, "ecognosis," that takes the form of a "letting become more susceptible."[111] Morton identifies boredom, in particular, as the correct affective orientation and mode of tuning in with the environment. Boredom "interrupts my anthropocentric mania to think myself otherwise than being surrounded and permeated with other beings, not to mention made up of them."[112] Despite his general indebtedness to Heidegger, in this particular proposal Morton appeals to the Baudelairian notion of "ennui," which he compares to a mode of engagement akin to the disinterested pleasure characteristic of Kantian aesthetic judgment. What Morton describes, on this basis, as "evacuated enjoyment" is a kind of pleasure bereft of desire, marked at once by

110 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 30 and 28.
111 Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For A Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: The University of Columbia Press, 2016), 123 and 129.
112 Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 125.

indifference regarding the existence of the object it beholds and by an acute awareness of its penetrating presence.[113]

In ennui, however, we are not completely turning away from the world. Morton insists that ennui is not a complete renunciation of the possibility of a communism with nature. In fact, ennui sustains a basic form of being-with that he alternately calls "coexistence" or "symbiotic real."[114] Morton give these somewhat elusive notions more substance and clarifies the forms of community they exemplify in *Humankind* (2017), where he relates the mood of ennui to the nineteenth-century ambulatory phenomenon of flânerie, also documented by Charles Baudelaire. In the essay "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863), Baudelaire describes the flaneur as a wanderer of the city who chronicles the spectacle of the public. The crowd is his home: "The man who loves to lose himself in a crowd enjoys feverish delights that the egoist locked up in himself as in a box, and the slothful man like a mollusk in his shell, will be eternally deprived of." Baudelaire further writes, "It is not given to every man to take a bath of multitude," only the poet, who, for Baudelaire, is undoubtedly a man, can because he has been endowed with a passion for observing and an aversion for the home.[115] He alone is at home existentially when he is not home physically.

The flaneur, however, is a figure *of* the crowd rather than *in* the crowd.[116] In *Paris Spleen* (1857), Baudelaire repeatedly alludes to the distance between the flaneur and the crowd in which he mingles, noting, for instance, that "multitude" and "solitude" are

[113] Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London and New York: Verso, 2017), 154.
[114] Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 6; and Morton, *Humankind*, 53.
[115] Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, translated by Louise Varèse (New York: New Directions Book, 1970), 20.
[116] Keith Tester, "Introduction," *The Flâneur*, edited by Keith Tester (London and New York: Routledge Library Edition, 2014), 3.

identical and interchangeable for the poet-flaneur: "The man who is unable to people his solitude is equally unable to be alone in a bustling crowd."[117] If he seeks to be in the midst of things and people, it is not in order to connect with strangers or for the pleasure of a chance meeting with someone familiar. Flânerie is driven by the spectacle of the public; it requires anonymity and detachment from others as well as their reciprocal indifference. As Walter Benjamin suggests in *The Arcades Project* (1940), the phenomenon Baudelaire describes was directly tied to the existence of spaces of mystery in the city that the poet could observe for inspiration.[118] The pleasure of being in the crowd was intimately tied to the mystery of what lied behind a closed door or an unfamiliar face. In Baudelaire's own words, "The poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being able to… [enter] as he likes into each man's personality."[119] The possibility of transfiguring everything at will nourished his poetic imagination. This is why, as Benjamin argues, the increasing rationalization of the city of Paris at the turn of the twentieth century meant that the Baudelairian flaneur was slowly becoming an anachronism. With the rise of administrative rationality and consumer culture, there remain no spaces of mystery for the flaneur to observe.

Morton's appeal to the flaneur, a figure at once inside and outside of the crowd, engages the human subject as a consumer that does not seek to appropriate, annex or claim but is content with a partially disclosed reality, never fully fleshed out or elucidated; it also suggests the possibility of imagining a different political collective that would be predicated on a more disjunctive and less relational form of plurality. Morton argues that

[117] Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, 20.
[118] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).
[119] Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, 20.

ennui fosters the kind of solidarity that is "cheapest and most readily available" and that corresponds simply to "the fact of living in a biosphere," a "loose connectivity" that is already there and that we do not need to work to create.[120] As he writes, ennui invites us to think of a "politics based simply on allowing something real to impinge on us."[121]

Interestingly, to the extent that the figure of the flaneur was, as Benjamin suggests, a nostalgic expression of a certain loss of mystery and clandestineness associated with the advent of capitalist rationality, Morton's proposal appears to be, at least implicitly, grounded on a similar critique. Yet Benjamin also argues that the challenge to the Baudelairian flaneur was not only its status as a relic in a city that was increasingly subjected to the rules of standardization and order; flânerie was an attempt to fill an emptiness that amounted, in the last instance, to a resignation. "The flaneur only seems to break through this "unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest" by filling the hollow spaces created in him by such isolation, with the borrowed – and fictitious – isolations of strangers." The flaneur is abandoned to the crowd and "[in] this he shares the situation of the commodity".[122] Benjamin thus suggests that in seeking the partially hidden possibilities of Parisian life, the flaneur is not unlike the consumer who is at once compelled and deceived by the promises of consumerism.

Of more importance to the present discussion, however, is Morton's uncritical appeal to the male figure of the flaneur, whose experience (and, as a matter of fact, his hatred of the home) is inevitably conditioned by the possibility of a carefree disposition. While a deeper critique of the male flaneur as a model for theorizing a "correct ecological

120 Morton, *Humankind*, 19, 13 and 18.
121 Morton, *Humankind*, 52.
122 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 58.

attunement" exceeds the scope of this section, I want to suggest that its limitations may be symptomatic of a larger problem having to do with the inadequacy of the framework of object-oriented ontology for addressing questions of ecology. Notably, Morton's discussion of global warming as a phenomenon that "haunts" us without ever fully revealing itself, in all its scope and reality, seems to inadequately describe the more devastating impact of environmental degradation usually incurred by those at the margins of industrialized society. At a minimum, it fails to account for the varying ways in which environmental changes may be experienced as a result of the particularities of place, geography and socio-economic ability. If an orientation towards the object-reality of ecological events is better equipped to describe their phenomenology as it manifests at the center, then the mood of the flaneur in ennui too may reveal itself to be a limited concept for a general ecological attunement. The remainder of this section considers the alternative perspective offered by a proposal for care, which can be read as a feminist counterpoint to ennui and one that further foregrounds the problematic assumptions on which it is grounded.

Care or Plurality as Coevolution

The thinking of care María Puig de la Bellacasa develops in *Matters of Care* (2017) displaces the concerns that underpin Morton's proposal for ennui, where the possibility of ontological apartness is understood to require detachment and passive spectatorship. She proposes that an affective attunement like care can organize a "politics of commitment" that is also a "politics of generating difference."[123] Thinking from a feminist standpoint of neglected agencies and experiences, she argues that care not only allows us to explore the

[123] Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 16 and 72.

possibility of differences emerging from relations of proximity and commitment; more importantly, she suggests that the involved, embodied and embedded relations in closeness that are fostered by care are in fact necessary if the diverseness of the world is at all to be sustained and continued. What is needed, especially as many ecosystems and species are threatened with extinction, is not that we become attuned to existing enmeshments, but that we actively foster them and get further involved in their becoming. In this context, care is not only "[an] acknowledgment of multiplicity," she explains, "but also an effort to actually foster multiplication."[124]

Puig de la Bellacasa's proposal for care also develops as a response to Latour. Unlike Morton, however, she argues that Latour does not go far enough in reconceiving human and nonhuman relations as interconnected. His proposal to redeploy reality as a network, in which actors mutually influence each other in the mode of the more diffuse agency he calls "make-do," does not so much reveal the costs of conceiving nature and culture as interconnected realms as it betrays a failure to acknowledge the full extent of their mutual dependency and vulnerability.[125] The concept of care Puig de la Bellacasa develops is a proposal for further involvement that is both affective and material. It not only has "a strong sense of attachment and commitment to something… the quality of 'care' is to be more easily turned into a verb: to care. One can make oneself concerned, but 'to care' contains a notion of doing that concern lacks."[126] Care is not only a sensibility or affectivity but an ordinary practice. It is a vital form of doing that is materially implicated in sustaining and continuing the life of things. Puig de la Bellacasa aligns herself here with

[124] Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 72.
[125] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 257.
[126] Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 42.

feminist thinking on care, where care is conceived as an involved doing that organizes social relations around dependency and vulnerability. But as I suggest, she also departs from it in a way that makes her work more relevant to an Arendtian framework where the political is associated with beginning anew.

If thinking on care has a long history in western philosophy, the specific understanding that feminists underscore has been marginal to the history of thought, marked as this history is by a longstanding preoccupation with autonomy and an aversion to necessity. As Joan Tronto observes, "for the most part, questions of natality, mortality, and the needs of humans to be cared for as they grow up, live, and die, have not informed the central questions of philosophers."[127] In feminist theories, to value care is to recognize the inevitable interdependency essential to the existence of reliant and vulnerable beings. If early models of care gravitate mostly around the relation between caregiver and care receiver, Sandra Laugier, for instance, makes the case for an "ordinary vulnerability." This can be felt on a daily basis whenever we attempt to embody our subjectivity or explore the different ways of being human, and it confronts us in every situation of loss of ordinary life.[128]

From a feminist standpoint, care is always particularistic, spurred by the expression of a need or simply by the susceptibility of things and people to one's actions or inactions. It cannot, therefore, be subsumed under a universal norm. Care is always a response, springing from a relation rather than from the self. As Fabienne Brugère notes, it "comes neither from me nor from the other."[129] While particularistic, care also has a durative

[127] Joan A. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 3-4.
[128] Sandra Laugier, "The Ethics of Care as a Politics of the Ordinary," *New Literary History* 46, 2 (2015): 217.
[129] Fabienne Brugère, *Le sexe de la sollicitude* (Lormont: Le Bord de l'Eau, 2014), 28.

character. Its temporality is that of continuity and repetition and spans the whole life of an object or a person. Estelle Ferrarese writes that it is activity "riveted to the body's needs" as they reappear periodically.[130] Care is neither a heroic act nor a singular event but an iterable practice that is repeatedly assumed and each time readjusted. Its particularity is that it is a committed doing at once marked by repetition and never quite a habit, responsive instead to the specificities of each new situation.

Feminist theories of care allow that there may be a multitude of appropriate responses in a given situation. Accordingly, caring relations are often described as being marked by conflictual feelings and a sense of incompletion. In Carol Gilligan's work, for instance, life organized around care is presented as fundamentally confused and ambiguous. Amy, the young girl whose discourse Gilligan analyzes in order to bring to light a different moral voice (that of care), often responds "it depends" when asked about the right course of action in a given scenario.[131] While interpreted by conventional psychologists as a sign of indecisiveness, evasiveness and naivety, Gilligan reads it as a resistance to formulaic solutions to complex human problems that indicates moral maturity. Pascale Molinier reiterates this intuition when she writes that,

> In real life, it is difficult to achieve the kind of clarity on which everyone would agree; everything is confused, and we do not share the same visions of what matters. Chaos, confusion, the intertwining of contradictory affects, and the web of obscure feelings form the ordinary fabric of our moral decisions, which are hardly decisions sometimes, vague impressions which persist, waiting their time to be a little better understood and included.[132]

Care assumes a form of incompletion that stems from an acknowledgment of the imperfection of every decision. Caring relations are thus sometimes accompanied by a

130 Estelle Ferrarese, *La fragilité du souci des autres : Adorno et le care* (Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2018), 21.
131 Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1982), 38.
132 Pascale Molinier, *Le travail du care* (Paris: La Dispute, 2013), 93.

certain discomfort with which, Ferrarese suggests, "we simply must make do."[133] Tronto likewise remarks on the implication of care in the making of "as well as possible" worlds.[134] Laugier concludes that care is, in this sense, "a response, which is different from a solution."[135]

If conventional feminist theories of care capitalize on care's implication in maintaining, continuing and repairing the world, Puig de la Bellacasa also importantly locates the political import of care in its transformative potential. This makes her concept of care a particularly useful supplement to an Arendtian framework where the political is understood as the process of giving life to the new. Puig de la Bellacasa speaks of an "imperative of affectedness" in engagements of care. More specifically, she suggests that the value of care is "inseparable from the implication of the carer in a doing that affects her."[136] Appealing to the metaphor of touch to convey this sense of reversibility, she describes the "intratouching circulation of care" as being "constantly 'reciprocate.'"[137] In this sense, webs of care are marked by the dynamics of coevolution rather than by those of mere coexistence. From within caring relations, we grow together and sustains each other in this growth.

As an affect and a doing understood to necessarily change us, care shares some affinities with love. Indeed, Foucault speaks of the "movement of *eros*" to allude to the fact that, in love, we transcend ourselves and become other than who we were.[138] In a more descriptive account, Spinoza also comments on love's transformative effect, discerning

133 Ferrarese, *La fragilité du souci des autres*, 28.
134 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 44.
135 Sandra Laugier, "La vulnérabilité des formes de vie," *Presse de Sciences Po* 57 (2015): 66.
136 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 120.
137 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 122.
138 Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 16.

"the increase of our joy, that is, the increase of our power to act and think" that comes with being in love.[139] Care, however, is less subject to these idealizations that silence the work involved in maintaining it. Care is *both* a joy and a burden. Its etymology suggests a dual meaning of anxious effort and dedication. Moreover, as feminist accounts of care foreground, care is often marked by feelings of confusion and uncertainty, and rather than inspire a sense of increased power and capacity, they are more likely to reveal to us the fragility that defines our embodied and mortal condition.

Care thus challenges us to think the transformative potential of intimate and committed relations in ways that are not reducible to the elating feeling of joy or the empowerment we may experience in love. It enjoins us to ask how we can be transformed from within relations that are infused with the knowledge of our mutual vulnerability, feelings of confusion and ambivalence, and the burden of anxious effort. In particular, how can an affective engagement of care inform our ways of relating and further inflect our capacity to be with and alongside human and nonhuman others? What does it reveal about previously unexamined expectations that can transform our orientation towards the environment, lead to the acquisition of new sensibilities and equip us to better accept unpredictability? While I do not provide answers to these questions here, I raise them to show that care is more than the repetitive labor of sustaining, maintaining and repairing the world. As Puig de la Bellacasa suggests, its significance as a political concept and activity also lies in the imperative it implies for affective openness and transformational potential. It is here that we find a line of dialogue between a feminist politics of care and Arendtian

[139] Quoted by Michael Hardt in "On the Risk of a New Relationality: An Interview with Lauren Berlant and Michael Hardt," by Heather Davis and Paige Sarlin: http://reviewsinculture.com/2012/10/15/on-the-risk-of-a-new-relationality-an-interview-with-lauren-berlant-and-michael-hardt/. Hardt appeals to this Spinozist notion of love to theorize a political concept of love that foregrounds self-transformation.

scholarship, against Arendt's own reductive account of care as labor that is caught up in the cyclicality of the body's life process and thus unable to initiate the new and unexpected. Taken together, care and natality could provide a compelling framework for a posthumanist politics that involves nonhuman others who cannot speak or act.

Section III. Art of Care

If care is a compelling notion with which to supplement a thinking of natality that imagines the scene of politics in terms of the drama of birth, further emphasizing the durative and embodied dimensions of the process of beginning anew; and if, moreover, it can help us conceive of a form of plurality at once strongly relational and committed that is capable of continuing the world's diverseness; care is also subject to idealizations that mask the violence, loss and sacrifice that we often enact in its name. To conjure up just one example, museums vividly illustrate this tension at the heart of care. Vital caretakers of artworks – the word "curation" coming from the Latin *cura* or "cure" – they have, historically, also severed them from the scenes of everyday life, sometimes leading to the loss of their particular cultural meanings and functions as well as of their general significance and power. In this final section, I look to art to critically reflect on the aporias of care, in an attempt to further delineate the possible contours of a political concept of care.

Of relevance to this section is the emergent aesthetic of care in art of the past few years. More specifically, I focus on the work of New-York-based artist Amie Siegel (born 1974), in which care itself is problematized as a concrete doing. Many contemporary artists since the 1960s have enlisted and engaged with concrete practices of care in their work,

but they have done so in different ways and for different critical purposes. For instance, in the interventions she staged from the 1970s to the 1990s, the artist Mierle Lauderman Ukeles publicly performed feminized labors of maintenance to incite reflection on the mechanisms that render them invisible. Another engagement with care is exemplified in the work of artists like Hans Haacke and Newton Harrison, two key figures of the eco-restorationist practices of the 1970s and 1980s, who tasked art with the repair of damaged habitats and ecosystems. If the critical gesture in Ukeles's practice was to help focus on the representation of ignored practices of care; and if, in Haacke and Harrison's work, it involved enlisting care as a pragmatic solution to a problem in the world, such as the pollution of a river or the sterilization of soil induced by industrial farming; the critical gesture in the art of care that I take Siegel's work to exemplify is to turn care itself into a problem by visualizing the ambiguities and tensions it normally hides.

Her major work *Provenance* from 2013, which is the subject of this section, is particularly compelling in this regard. While not attuned to questions of ecology, its relevance to a posthumanist discourse on politics derives instead from its attention to the intricacies of the relations that subsist between humans and the objects that people their everyday lives. The work exposes how care, as one of many involved doings that define our engagement with things, might not be what we think it is or lie where we expect it to be. In particular, it expands our understanding of care beyond the restorationist model, where it is typically associated with the labors of maintenance and repair, proposing instead the possibility of care in everyday use and tear. This is a form of care imbued with the gestures of the everyday that might be said to exemplify what, from a feminist perspective, we might conceive as care's situated and durative rhythms.

Amie Siegel's *Provenance* (2013): Work and Context

At an artist talk organized at the Audain Gallery in Vancouver in the winter of 2017, Siegel briefly spoke of her work *Provenance* (2013), a forty-minute-long video that reconstitutes the recent trajectory and changing ownership of a collection of furniture pieces, which were manufactured for the city of Chandigarh, in India, more than half a century ago by the Swiss architects Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret. Commenting on the peculiar reverse chronology that organizes the progression of the film and gives it its title, Siegel explains, "Provenance is the history of any cultural object deemed of cultural value."[140] Like a document detailing the lineage of an artwork's ownership, the video begins with the furniture's most recent locations in wealthy interiors of American and European collectors' homes. It then traces the furniture's journey in reverse chronology, through warehouses, on display at auctions, at a photography session, at a furniture restorer's workshop, on a cargo ship and, finally, back to its putative place of origin in the government buildings of Chandigarh, where it is used for everyday office operations.

The work opens with a series of slow tracking shots of chairs, desks and lamps displayed in the carefully curated interiors of collectors' homes. We are then transported into the minimalist interior of a show room where similar furniture is sparsely arranged. The camera peers into a room in which two chairs sit in close proximity, facing each other. The intimacy of the scene is briefly interrupted by two visitors who wander in and out, exchanging remarks on the designs. The camera is positioned low, just above the ground, and slowly gleans over the glossy surface of the furniture pieces. There are no interviews,

140 Amie Siegel, "Artist Talk," Audain Gallery, Simon Fraser University, 2017: https://www.sfu.ca/galleries/audain-gallery/past1/amiesiegel-quarry.html.

voice-overs, or actors, only the furniture pieces as silent protagonists and the perpetual tracking of the camera. Both the perspective created by the camera pitched low at furniture height and the chronology that goes against the natural progression of time work to partly decenter the human subject in the image frame and to suggest an impersonal viewpoint.

The work unfolds to reveal the journey of the furniture as it moves across the different locations that make up the infrastructure of the art market. Siegel explains that part of the aim of *Provenance* is to expose the reality of objects constantly on the move and to document the "spaces of transience" and "in-between [places]" where they go before being reborn to new owners.[141] In one particularly poignant scene, a chair is conspicuously positioned center-stage in the middle of a barely lit cargo ship container, which comically dramatizes its solitary journey across the ocean. This perspective, which deliberately threads the line between empathy and anthropomorphism, is a defining trait of the video work as a whole. *Provenance* ends in the interiors of Chandigarh's public buildings. Desks, chairs and stools furnish a courtroom, a college library and chemistry lab, and various offices that harbor the typical disorder of the administrative workplace. They serve their utilitarian functions, are sat on, submerged under stacks of paper, and bear the signs of decades of use. As their journey is fully reconstituted, it becomes clear to the viewer that the same objects treated with the care reserved for rare collectibles were retrieved from a place where they are found in very large quantities; some are even stored away, as the video documents, while others are piled up in odd places, all in varying degrees of use, disuse and neglect.

[141] Siegel, "Circuit: *Provenance*," 170.

The context for the making and circulation of the objects helps to illuminate the issues raised by Siegel's artwork. A planned city built on what had been, until the early 1950s, a valley of small rural villages and cultivated fields, Chandigarh became in 1965 the new capital of the province of Punjab (which had lost Lahore to Pakistan after Partition). Besides providing an administrative center for the newly formed provincial government, the founding of the city played an important role in the larger modernization effort in India's postcolonial moment, embodying both the promises and tensions of its vision. A Swiss architect, Le Corbusier was commissioned to design the master plan of the city, designing as much as its sewers. The purpose was to impart a sense of modernity to India and to create a symbol of the spirit and potential of the independent country.[142] To this day, Chandigarh is an incongruity in India's urban planning panorama.[143] In the mid-2000s, the furniture pieces that were designed for the interiors of the city's administrative buildings resurfaced on the art market and appeared in various auction catalogues, commanding record prices. The title of a *New York Times* article from the period, "Avant-garde city of Chandigarh, India, loses overlooked treasure," conveys clearly the cultural reception of the objects as they reappeared on the market, their circulation outside of India variously entangled in tales of rescue and repatriation.[144] As Siegel reports based on conversations with dealers and collectors, the objects were understood to be saved from a

142 C.f. Tom Avermaete and Maristella Casciato (eds.), *Casablanca Chandigarh: A Report on Modernization* (Zurich: Park Books, 2014).

143 C.f. Ravi Kalia, *Chandigarh: The Making of an Indian City* (New Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

144 Amelia Gentleman, "Avant-garde city of Chandigarh, India, loses overlooked treasure," *New York Times*, February 29, 2008: https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/29/world/asia/29iht-letter.1.10571360.html.

state of ruin.[145] While this context is left out of the narrative of *Provenance*, the problems and contradictions it raises are at the very heart of the work.

Beyond the Restorationist Model

In an interview with the artist, the art critic Hal Foster raises questions about the critical work accomplished by *Provenance*. He suggests that, "In the reverse chronology of the film, from the market to Chandigarh, from the beautiful fetish object to the vulnerable furniture that is in disarray, there is a process shown that is so agentless, so ineluctable that it could not be otherwise…"[146] Foster argues that the process shown in reverse problematically conveys the inevitability not only of the fate of the objects but also the viewer and the artist's complicity with the logic of the market. *Provenance*, he concludes, turns into the very tale of redemption that Siegel seeks to critique.

A different reading of the work, I want to suggest, can bring to light its complexity in more nuanced and productive ways. While *Provenance* clearly exposes the ruin and degradation of the furniture in Chandigarh, it also shows varying degrees of use, overuse and neglect. The juxtaposition between East and West does not, in other words, create a simple contrast between care and neglect. More importantly, the work's critical import can be said to lie in its ability to complicate a certain received idea of care. Indeed, *Provenance* also exposed the flaying of the furniture pieces at the hands of restorers and the travesty of their subsequent reselling at record prices in Western auction houses. In one of the video's most provocative sequence of images, a restorer labors over a black sofa, shredding the

[145] Amie Siegel, "Friday Focus Conversation, Amie Siegel: Provenance," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2015: https://www.metmuseum.org/metmedia/video/lectures/amie-siegel-provenance.

[146] Hal Foster, "Friday Focus Conversation, Amie Siegel: Provenance," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2015: https://www.metmuseum.org/metmedia/video/lectures/amie-siegel-provenance.

upholstery and leaving behind only a bare wooden frame. Moments later, we see a stacked pile of similar black sofas in storage on a roof in Chandigarh. The juxtaposition raises questions about what care is and about the nature and desirability of restoration, in particular, as a concrete practice of care. Indeed, Siegel does not show objects in the process of being restored (which means "to return to a former state") but exposes the complete transfiguration they undergo in the name of repair. The "restoration" scene, in fact, reveals the production of aura. The pieces are stripped down and refurbished for the auction; their appeal as collectibles has to be produced because it is not present in the original objects. The paradox, of course, is that modernist design was functionalist; for Le Corbusier, it was inspired precisely by those objects made for the efficiency of the modern office and factory, as well as everyday items for kitchen and workroom use.[147]

Beyond simply complicating a certain idea of care as repair, however, *Provenance* also gestures at the possibility of conceiving everyday use and tear themselves as forms of care. This is the work's most original and profound reflection. In a short but memorable sequence of images that immediately follow the "restoration" scene, the camera lingers for a moment on a large pile of broken sofas disposed on a roof and bathed in sunlight. The camera proceeds laterally with the same tracking movement that animates the work as a whole. The sculptural assemblage of broken furniture is imbued with a kind of dignity and serenity. In this scene, Siegel intimates that there is beauty in use and neglect, in objects fragilized by gentle but continuous use and bearing the marks of the vagaries of time. Even those scenes that show desks and chairs submerged under, and made invisible by, the accumulation of paper that implies human use provide a compelling contrast to the images

147 George H. Marcus, *Le Corbusier: Inside the Machine for Living* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2000), 24.

that appear earlier in the movie showing objects severed from the scenes of the everyday and trapped in networks of circulation. Care, then, might also be about use and tear, while restoration might well be a form of disloyalty, a distortion or falsification. This idea of care as a practice imbued with the gestures of the everyday perhaps even approximates what, from a feminist perspective, we might conceive as care's more situated and durative rhythms.

Finally, that Siegel chose to make an artwork in the form of a provenance document also has interesting implications for the function of the moving image. Attending to the itinerancy and homelessness of the furniture pieces as well as to their material and symbolic transformations, the video becomes itself an expression of concern and an act of care. As the artist explains, to cite her again, "Provenance is the history of any cultural object deemed of cultural value."[148] If Foster reads the reverse chronology of the work to convey a problematic sense of inevitability in their fate, it also supplies a biography and an origin story to objects uprooted, dislocated and dispersed at the hands of collectors and radically transfigured in the process. This raises questions about the ontology of the work of art and the nature of artistic practice. What is the relationship between the process of art making, on the one hand, and the practice of care, on the other? How can speaking of caring images illuminate the critical work done by art?

148 Siegel, "Artist Talk," https://www.sfu.ca/galleries/audain-gallery/past1/amiesiegel-quarry.html.

Conclusion

In Siegel's work, humans are deliberately absented or decentered, yet the objects that are placed center stage imply them as users and caretakers. Humans and the objects that accompany them in the everyday define, involve and depend on each other in various ways. This persistence of the human in an otherwise de-subjectivized image frame supplies a productive final image with which to conclude this thesis. The basic intuition that informed the direction of this thesis was that in order to rethink the political in light of ecology, we need to proceed from within the relations that tie together humans and nonhumans and further explore their transformative potentials. Indeed, what seems significant about rethinking forms of communism with nonhuman others is at least in part the possibility of transforming what we mean by the human and, accordingly, the political.

I proposed to look to Arendt's thinking on natality as a starting point for displacing the frame of communication that informs many of the proposals for a more-than-human-politics as they have been articulated within posthumanist discourse. In particular, I took her to provide reflections towards an expanded scene of politics informed by the dynamics of mutual making that manifest distinctly in the drama of birth. This scene of natality was implicitly shown to provide a useful counterpoint to the scene of the parliament imagined by Latour, one that foregrounds the political import of transformation in community. In the process, I also provided a new reading of Arendt. The concept of natality, I argued, implies a dimension of givenness and, more specifically, an undeveloped concept of care that stands in tension with her own, infamously restrictive, concept of action. On this basis, and by returning to posthumanism to reconsider its engagement with the human subject, I suggested the relevance of a feminist concept of care to a more fully deployed scene of

natality and, more generally, to a posthumanist rethinking of politics. Siegel's work *Provenance* allowed me to further consider what care might be as a concrete doing that animates relations between human and nonhuman. Complex and deliberately complicated, the work, I have argued, gestures beyond the restorationist model of care to intimate the possibility of a practice of care more imbued with the gestures of the everyday.

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