Building resilience: Narratives of care and healing in contemporary fiction

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The *ethics of care* has received ample attention in varied fields in recent years, among them philosophy, nursing, and work studies. Several are the definitions to be found and subjected to scrutiny (Edwards, 2009), for instance, Carol Gilligan's idea of an ethic of care as a "relational ethic" (1993, p. xix) or her formulation of the notion of "ethics of justice and care":

> the ideals of human relationship—the vision that self and other will be treated as of equal worth, that despite differences in power, things will be fair; the vision that everyone will be responded to and included, that no one will be left alone or hurt. These disparate visions in their tension reflect the paradoxical truths of human experience—that we know ourselves as separate insofar as we live in connection with others, and that we experience relationship only insofar as we differentiate other from self. (1993, p. 63)

Virginia Held addresses how those two terms, justice and care, have been strongly gendered male and female, respectively (1993, p. 129, p. 169; 1995, p. 1)[i], while Joan Tronto challenges the sometimes exclusive association of care with women's morality or work –as seen in Gilligan (1993, pp. 125–6). In her definition of care, it implies "a reaching out to something

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other than the self: it is neither self-referring or self-absorbing", and it "implicitly suggests that it will lead to some type of action" (Tronto, 1993, p. 102). She conceives of it as a "universalist moral principle" that advocates for the need to "care for those around one or in one's society" but moves beyond an individual responsibility, for "to be created and sustained, an ethic of care relies upon a political commitment to value care and to reshape institutions to reflect that changed value" (1993, p. 178). Her approach to care or caring is also comprehensive, as her suggestion is to view it "*as a species activity that includes everything 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" (1993, p. 103, italics in the original), therefore rejecting the reduction of care to a dyad –for instance, the recurrent mother-child example– or to human-only interactions. Also, in her view, care is culturally determined and is an ongoing process (1993, p. 103); it is more than an intellectual or character trait: it is the "concern of living, active humans engaged in the processes of everyday living. Care is both a practice and a disposition", while its range is "very broad" (1993, p. 104). This resonates with Held's view that it is both a "cluster of practices" and a "cluster of values" (2006, p. 4). In all these perspectives, then, *relationality* comes across as a key concept, among humans but also linking human and non-human together.

Many of these scholars agree on the personal but also the political dimension of care (Held, 2006, pp. 107–68; Tronto, 1993, pp. 157–80). On both a small and a large scale, it offers a hopeful understanding of "the promise of the ethics of care for dealing with global problems and with efforts to foster international civility" (Held, 2008, p. 49), often connected with its feminist roots and its nature as a morality with universal appeal, in contrast to traditional approaches based on rules, or "political concerns as justice, liberty, or equality" (Held, 1993, p. 169), enforced rather than reached. For Held, "an ethic of care must be taken as seriously as an ethic of justice" (1993, p. 129), and she has often engaged with questions such as: "How does the framework of justice-equality-rights-obligations mesh with the network of care-relatedness-trust?" (1995, p. 2). She has exposed how these can complement each other, as justice is needed in private settings to ensure women are protected from violence or abuse in "the provision of care", while "more care is needed in social arrangements and in public policy decisions" (1995, p. 3). She suggests that a feminist morality can challenge "Western liberal political theories" that make caring peripheral, going beyond the definition of justice as a "moral minimum" and care as dealing with "questions of the good life or of human value over and above the obligatory minimums of justice" (1995, p. 3). She further contends that the ethics of care implicitly carries a critique of liberalism's overlooking of human and social interdependence in any given economy (2006, p. 81). All of these considerations find an echo in several of the contributions in the present special issue. In addition, Held continues: "in thinking about international relations as well as different effects of globalization in political

economy, one can appreciate how the ethics of care may be fruitful for dealing with the issues involved", then cites Tronto's notion of peacekeeping (2008) as a "kind of care work" and the idea that ethics of care is "a promising source of guidance for preventing resorts to violence", as it "encourages states to take responsibility for protecting vulnerable populations and for promoting peaceful resolutions of conflicts" (2008, p. 49). Again, this is an important consideration to frame the discussions of refugee narratives in subsequent articles here included.

This understanding of the need of interconnection or interdependence to repair or better personal, social, political, or environmental contexts recalls the notion of *resilience*, not merely as an individual response to adversity or crisis –being a fluid state that can dynamically grow or decline depending on the individual and their ecosystem, the prerequisite of which is adversity that can turn to trauma (Rushton & Mealer, 2024, p. 135)– but as a notion based on the construction of networks or systems, of a "dynamic interplay of individual cellular, physiologic, and psychological factors, as well as social, environmental, community and societal conditions" (2024, p. 135), which calls for a critical approach to how the concept has been used in current contexts of crisis (Fraile-Marcos, 2020). For instance, in pioneering ecology studies, resilience has been defined as the ability of a *system* to thrive (Holling, 1973, p. 17), implying the existence of different nodes in interconnection, whereas in psychological studies, the resilience of individuals has been linked to "the quality of social and physical ecologies that surround them" (Ungar, 2012, p. 1). This has led to the proposal of different conceptions of the term, such as "psycho-social resilience" or "socio-ecological resilience", which highlight the interdependence of social and ecological systems (Fraile-Marcos, 2020, p. 3).

More specifically, in the field of health care, individual resilience has been a common demand imposed on care professionals, who are often encouraged to deal with their suffering or sadness on their own (Rushton, 2024a, p. 1). Yet in recent years a shift has happened, encouraging feelings not to be hidden or suppressed, but acknowledged and addressed holistically and communally (2024a, p. 4). Not only that, but scholarship has developed theories and practices that lead to the idea that "[u]nderstanding the suffering of another demands that we enter into that individual's experience and engage in the dynamic process of learning to be with it, understand it, and potentially give meaning to it" (2024a, p. 5). Building on prior work on neurobiological, psychological, and social ecological resilience, Rushton and Mealer provide a definition of clinician resilience and the role that important aspects such as joy, hope, honesty, or social support have for its development (2024, p. 140, p. 142, p. 145). Rushton, moreover, provides the notion of "moral resilience" as the "capacity of an individual to sustain or restore their integrity in response to moral adversity" (2024b, p. 163), based on qualities such as integrity, buoyancy, moral efficacy, self-regulation and self-stewardship (2024b, p. 166).

Thus, a comprehensive working definition of resilience will need to acknowledge this relational quality: it is the "process of harnessing biological, psychological, structural, environmental and cultural resources to sustain well-being" (Rushton & Mealer, 2024, p. 141), always addressing how individuals are affected by their ecosystems –including "social, political, legal and economic issues" (2024, p. 144)– as well as how the ecosystems experience resilience. Many of these issues are at the core of the representation of resilience in the literary and cultural artefacts analysed here.

In turn, this relational conception of resilience, as well as the recognition of grief and pain in oneself or others, connects with Judith Butler's idea of *vulnerability* (2004). Whether speaking of a common or universal form of vulnerability "characteristic of human life by virtue of our embodiment (which entails […] a fundamental sociality)" –engaging with the concept of affective agency and affective vulnerability present in the following articles– or of a "situational" one that "renders some humans more at risk than others" (Mills, 2015, pp. 47–48) –addressed in the many representations of gendered and colonial violence herein contained– highlighting interdependence can challenge "liberal conceptions" and establish the basis of "sociality, justice or politics, manifested […] in an ethics of care or based on a theory of recognition" (Petherbridge, 2016, p. 591). Vulnerability, then, opens us "to being affected and affecting in both positive and negative ways, which can take diverse forms in different social situations (for example, bodily, psychological, economic, emotional, and legal vulnerabilities)" (Gilson, 2011, p. 310). One of these forms, very much connected to the ethics of care, is that of situational vulnerability, contexts in which humans or ecosystems are particularly exposed to harm and dependent on a caring approach. Human life, in fact, is defined by states of dependency. Eva Kittay highlights how we start and conclude in a state of dependent vulnerability, first as infants, then as frail adults (1999, p. 1) –there is only "the fiction of our independence" (1999, p. xiii)– while she explains that the dependency relation "is a moral one arising out of a claim of vulnerability on the part of the dependent, on the one hand, and of the special positioning of the dependency worker to meet the need, on the other" (1999, p. 35), exposing the relational nature of dependency or care work. This dependency is still recurrently associated with women's work (Kittay, 1999, pp. 1–2), often more precarious (Zafra, 2019, p. 32) or even unpaid (Kittay, 1999, pp. ix–x), as well as with those jobs frequently performed by racialised subjects (carer, nanny, etc.). In addition, it includes the (intersectional) experiences of motherhood, whether biological or not (Borham-Puyal, 2020, 2023a, 2023b; Collins, 1995; Miller, 2021), or those of otherised subjects in an ableist and ageist society, which rejects the unproductivity or non-conformity of the disabled or ageing body. The ethics of care, therefore, challenges a utilitarian approach to the individual, as well as the focus of resilience on productivity and normativity.

As the COVID-19 pandemic has evinced, the ethics of care has proven especially necessary in the context of illness and precarity, in which notions such as solidarity and

interdependence on a *glocal* scale have found space in news reports and fictional and biographical narratives of the pandemic experience, as seen in subsequent contributions. At this time of crisis, an opportunity to question its management has arisen, with scholars exploring "ethics to provide a care-based concern" in an increasingly utilitarian setting (Branicki, 2020, p. 872), which once again questions the neoliberal understanding of resilience as primarily an individual effort.

Taking all these considerations into account and building on previous work on the subjects of resilience, vulnerability, healing, affect and happiness, this special issue dedicated to the topic hopes to offer a comprehensive approach to a widely-encompassing ethics of care. It aims to explore the complex meanings and representations of care in varied narrative forms, from literary texts to audiovisual media. It addresses diverse understandings of what an ethics of care entails, whether towards oneself, each other, or the environment, and it discusses related concepts such as community, relationality, dependence, precarity, self-awareness, and self-care. In the present context of conflict, with increased exposure to violence, social and financial insecurity, and a rise in mental health concerns, these authors' perspectives prove timely and relevant, while also original in their comprehensive approach.

The first article, Sara Casco Solis's "An Analysis of Happiness and Resilience in Souvankham Thammavongsa's *How to pronounce knife*", discusses a selection of the stories contained in the collection. She explores how this Lao Canadian writer, who was born in a refugee camp in Thailand, portrays different experiences of how refugees take pride in their homeland, striving to preserve their language, roots, and cultural traits in spite of being forced to follow the normative scripts of assimilation and success, gratefulness, and happiness in a new country. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's notion of happiness, Casco-Solis brings to the fore the cruelty implicit in these prescriptive expectations and analyses the sense of nonconformity, dissatisfaction, and alienation experienced by those refugees who are unable to attain future aspirations that could lead to happiness, success, and social integration. Instead, these refugees try to maintain their culture and traditions by speaking their own language, telling stories about their country of origin, and preparing Lao recipes. These acts, which become a deviation from the established directives, enable them to cultivate caring relations among the community of Lao refugees, which constitute forms of relational resilience that become essential to fight against invisibility and cultural assimilation in host countries.

In "Transformative hope towards subversive resilience: The ethical roles of newspaper articles by Indian writers during the Covid-19 outbreak", Jorge Diego Sánchez studies a selection of writings by Indian authors –Arundhati Roy, Anuradha Roy, Prayaag Akbar, and Tishani Doshi– published in newspapers in English during the first wave of the Covid-19 outbreak in India (March 22–May 25, 2020). The article claims they describe the transnational consequences of the Covid-19 outbreak as a plethora of interwoven transformative hopes that dismantle epistemic injustice, and they display the importance of collective and individual

practices of reparatory dissent against regional, national, and international stereotypes of India. Drawing on studies carried out on Hope Theory, the article addresses *transformative hope* not as a positive and simplistic reading of optimistic survival –what Diego Sánchez terms *wonderfulisation*– but rather as an oppositional complaint against political and representational systems of domain articulated on the politics of who is more eligible to survive. It then gathers the sense of struggle that Ahmed recognises to foster a *hope-full* agency that challenges wonderfulised hope. Accordingly, the article reveals the ontological and potential agency in resilience narratives to create transnational epistemologies that confirm that knowledge is incomplete and can be expanded with narratives of subversive resilience that encourage change, assessment, and new knowledges within Epistemologies of the South. Finally, this study vindicates the fact that writing/reading can implement a transnational mutuality that favors alliance, rather than affiliation, and offers ethical and transformative hope towards healing, rather than the resilient ways in which neoliberalism makes use of tragedies such as Covid-19.

Aligning with the same considerations with which this introduction opens, Ana Mª Fraile-Marcos's article explores how, in the context of the Anthropocene, an ethics and politics of care might be reimagined to repair the fractured interdependencies that sustain life, viewing the breakdown of relational systems of care as a central factor underlying the interconnected environmental, political, economic, and demographic crises of our time. Her article "Speculative reworkings of the good life at the end times: Cherie Dimaline's *The marrow thieves* and Rebecca Campbell's *Arboreality*" moreover posits that literature –specifically speculative fiction– is an epistemological medium capable of imagining, enacting, and interrogating alternatives to the dominant paradigms driving ecological and social collapse. As such, literature is a testing ground for rethinking relationality and futurity, for articulating cognitive frameworks that envision not only the survival of life, but also the good life, conceived of as holistic flourishing encompassing both material conditions and non-material well-being. Drawing on Indigenous thought and new materialist theories of relationality and flourishing, it analyses two recent speculative works from Turtle Island/Canada: *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), by Métis author Cherie Dimaline, and *Arboreality* (2022), a short story cycle by settler Canadian writer Rebecca Campbell. Set in near-future contexts of environmental and social collapse brought about by anthropogenic climate change, these texts critique the modernist nature/culture divide foundational to the Anthropocene and offer alternative visions of the "good life" based on relational ontologies, in an ethics of care grounded in reciprocity, interdependence, and regeneration.

In the next article, "Unravelling bad feelings, weaving trans care: Kacen Callender's *Felix ever after*", Isabel González Díaz discusses this young adult novel narrated in the first person that introduces a seventeen-year-old black transgender boy navigating issues of gender, race, class, and family, all intermingled with his experiencing transphobia and longing to find

romantic love, within the framework of Sara Ahmed's works on the cultural politics of emotion and happiness (2004, 2010) and Hil Malatino's reflections on trans care and trans bad feelings (2020, 2022). Her article explores the mixed, distressing feelings represented in the novel, highlighting how the protagonist's journey becomes one of self-discovery, which includes, among other things, his awareness of the importance of caring for himself and also receiving support and care from others. Her discussion follows Ahmed's proposals that feeling better might involve expressing feelings of anger, rage, or shame, and that focusing on how we are moved by emotions often described as negative or destructive can be enabling or creative, which González Díaz contends is Callender's purpose. She also engages with Malatino's suggestion that rage is an orienting affect, together with his notion of "aftercare". His vindication of resilient care webs frames the deeply political side of care that is presented in a novel in which gender, race, and class intersect with the young age of the protagonist. This article ultimately argues that *Felix ever after* reinforces trans affirmability while addressing its antagonism, and that Callender does not disavow bad feelings in their conception of the story, anticipating what Cameron Awkward-Rich calls an "expansive we" (2022).

The next contribution, Mª Jesús Llarena Ascanio's "Politics of refusal and crip willfulness in Y-Dang Troeung's *Landbridge* [*A life in fragments*] and Madeleine Thien's *Dogs at the perimeter*", explores how these authors' creative and theoretical interventions pose questions regarding alternative epistemologies to Eurocentric notions of healing and trauma recovery in the aftermath of mass violence. The article analyses the ways in which both works assemble an archive that enacts the politics of refusal, or crip wilfulness –understood as "a refusal to act in accordance with the system of compulsory able-bodiedness" (Johnson & McRuer, 2014, p. 136). It reads the act of creative resilience in the afterlife of the Cambodian Genocide as what inspires the work of Thien and Troeung, which acknowledges a new *cripistemology* (McRuer, 2018; Puar, 2017) and is foundational in its attempt at decolonizing disability in trauma narratives. Grounded in previous works by Johnson and McRuer, Puar, and O'Brien, Llarena Ascanio's analysis vindicates the contention that refuge(e) subjecthood demands a new onto-epistemology to decolonise dominant resilience stories and make visible a collective disability, or crip wilfulness, taking into account important intersectional concepts such as "race-ability" to explore how refuge(e) life and disability come together in the afterlife of war. With this new turn in trauma studies, the author seeks a physical and psychological alternative to self-adaptation and survival, that is, the refusal of the dominant subaltern resilience. Thus, the purpose of the article's discussion of these works is to analyse the possibility of agency in decolonizing dominant resilience narratives in the afterlife of the Cambodian Genocide, enacting a new space of dissension and agency in crip narratives to contest previous attitudes of assimilative resilience.

Lucía López Serrano's article "Re-storying trauma: Embodied healing and gendered care in Tracey Lindberg's *Birdie*" uses the lens of ethics of care and Indigenous resurgence to

analyse the novel's depiction of the journey of Bernice Meetoos, a Cree woman confronting intergenerational trauma rooted in colonial violence, gendered oppression, and cultural displacement. She argues that Lindberg redefines trauma and healing by grounding them in Cree epistemologies of relationality, nourishment, and communal responsibility. Although her study situates its theoretical framework within feminist care ethics, particularly Carol Gilligan's work, it addresses critiques of its essentialist tendencies and private/public divide, arguing that contemporary care ethics extends beyond domestic spheres, recognizing interdependence and its potential for political transformation. The article warns, however, against imposing Western feminist models of care on Indigenous contexts, which risks erasing ontologies where relationality is foundational. Drawing from Indigenous scholars like Daniel Heath-Justice, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, and Glen Coulthard, this analysis argues that, within Indigenous epistemologies, care is inseparable from land, kinship, and spirituality, requiring a decolonial reorientation of justice and responsibility. Healing is seen to unfold as a ceremonial and communal process rather than an individual therapeutic recovery, grounded, among others, on the Cree concept of "the good life", represented in the novel by an ancestral tree whose survival is entwined with communal healing and environmental stewardship. Finally, the article argues that Lindberg depicts resurgence as active re-kinning: restoring matriarchal, non-nuclear forms of kinship that resist colonial heteropatriarchy, while healing emerges as a political act of decolonial care and relational accountability that strengthens communal sovereignty and cultural continuity.

In the next article, "Dehumanist resilience in Tracy Sorensen's *The vitals*", reputed scholar Susie O'Brien discusses Sorensen's 2023 novel, written as part of her PhD in Social Work and the Arts, which narrates the experience of cancer from the perspective of the author's abdominal organs and tumors. The article contends that, less obviously, the novel also represents an intervention into the cultural politics of climate change, informed by Sorensen's many years as a climate activist. The novel can be said to reflect her recognition that climate change, like cancer, represents a challenge to the imagination that is partly attributable to myths of a hierarchical distinction between brain and body and between human and non-human modes of being. It critically highlights habits of belief that draw these hierarchical lines, and it exposes them as conventions that legitimate practices of colonial extraction, including the theft of knowledge from its collectively held place. Moreover, O'Brien argues, the novel invites readers to reflect on place in a way that differs from conventional resilience thinking. Against familiar concepts of infrastructure and community, neither of which adequately describe the situated function of the organs, the novel explores the potential of organization, in the forms of bureaucracy, adaptation, and creativity. Overall, the article reads *The vitals* as an experiment in *dehumanism* that counters myths of humanist mastery with an emphasis on place-based imagination, organization, and laughter.

This special issue closes with an original approach to affective agency and emotional vulnerability and the proposal of what can be termed a (post)feminist ethics of care. Alejandro Sánchez Cabrera's piece "The ethics of neoaustenism: from Jane Austen to Taylor Swift in the age of metamodernism" coins the concept *neoaustenism* as a metamodern and feminist sensibility rooted in the literary legacy of Jane Austen and paradigmatically rearticulated in the songwriting and performance of Taylor Swift. He contends that while other metamodern discourses such as neoromanticism tend to reactivate a predominantly masculine tradition of longing and melancholy, neoaustenism retrieves a specifically feminine grammar shaped by self-reflexivity and relational ethics. Drawing on affect theory and feminist ethics of care, the article argues that neoaustenism offers a distinct response to the contradictions of neoliberal affective life, reframing vulnerability not as passive exposure, but as a shared dynamic resource that enables emotional agency and collective resilience. In contrast to that male-centered genealogy of feeling that leaves little to no room for feminine modes of emotional expression, neoaustenism foregrounds forms of affective self-awareness historically coded as feminine, proposing an alternative lineage of metamodern sentiment anchored in Austen's narrative strategies and imagination. Then, Sánchez Cabrera turns to the case of Swift as a contemporary figure who embodies and reinvents this sensibility through her music and public persona. Through close readings of her lyrics and analysis of her self-reflexive narrative voices, his article shows how Swift performs a (neo)austenian negotiation of vulnerability and relational identity, addressing concerts as a performative ritual that mobilises shared affect and fosters horizontal communities of care. It contends that Swift enacts a politics of care that centers feminine experience and affirms emotional labor, while these collective practices articulate a form of relational resilience that challenges individualistic, neoliberal modes of subjectivity.

According to Michael Basseler, "narrative is perhaps the major cultural and cognitive scheme through which notions of resilience are currently generated" (2019, p. 25). This idea is echoed by Fraile-Marcos, who perceives "the literary representation of resilience as a multifaceted paradigm through which to apprehend contemporary reality and subjectivity" (2023, p. 2), a fact to which this issue's contributions attest. Covering multiple experiences and traditions, and widening the notion of resilience by exposing its necessary interdependence with other concepts such as ableism, affect, community, healing, hope, justice, precarity, relationality, and/or vulnerability, the articles contained herein offer sound critical engagements and open pathways for further analyses. Furthermore, in the current climate of attack on the Humanities, they evince the roles that culture, in general, and literature, in particular, play in the questioning of received ethical practices and the development of a narrative of *empathy*, of placing oneself in the position of the other to understand their pain and suffering, what Rita Felski calls *recognition* (2008), which is, after all, the basis of the notion of care.

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NOTES

ⁱ Her chapter entitled "Justice, utility, and care" (2006, pp. 58–75) provides a useful overview of women in philosophical thought, the challenges feminist philosophy poses to this inherited tradition, and the debates surrounding these two models of ethics.

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