

Received: 7 November 2022 Accepted: 9 October 2022

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/joe.v2i1.2861>

Imagining More-Than-Human Care: From Multispecies Mothering to Caring Relations in *Finding the Mother Tree*

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Abstract

*In the Western imaginary, care has long been pictured as a distinctly human activity—an activity undertaken primarily by women—and the paradigmatic image of caregiving has been that of a mother tending to her child. Increasingly, though, both the matricentricity and the anthropocentricity of care are being scrutinized as scholars advocate for more egalitarian and, in a few cases, more ecological conceptions of care. Examples of more-than-human care have been sparse, however, which hampers our collective capacity to imagine care beyond the human. Thus, in this essay I look for imaginative resources in forest ecologist Suzanne Simard's (2021) New York Times bestselling book *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*. This encounter reveals two connected concepts—multispecies mothering and caring relations—and opens onto an ecological ethic of care rooted in a commitment to care for caring relations, to sustain the conditions of possibility for the care that we all need to survive and flourish.*

Keywords: *Ethics of Care; Mothering; Multispecies Studies; Suzanne Simard; Finding the Mother Tree*

Reading in the Forest

Packing for a field trip to Cook Forest in October 2021, I tucked a single book into my knapsack for evening reading. Even before it was published in May, I had been eager to dig into Suzanne Simard's (2021) *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*. A forest ecologist at the University of British Columbia, Simard came to scientific fame in 1997 after publishing an article in *Nature* demonstrating that trees belonging to different species—in the study, the relationship between paper birch (*Betula papyrifera*) and Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) is examined—share carbon via underground fungal networks that link trees within forests (Simard et al., 1997). In large, bold lettering on the issue's cover, *Nature* described Simard's discovery as the “Wood-Wide Web.” As this catchy neologism suggests, Simard's research invites us to rethink how we see forests. Rather than thinking of forests as collections of distinct individuals competing for scarce resources, her research suggests, we ought to think of them as assemblages of interconnected, interdependent beings.

I was visiting Cook Forest to understand how people are caring for the ancient eastern hemlocks (*Tsuga canadensis*) for which, alongside the towering eastern white pines (*Pinus strobus*), the public park is known (see Cook, 1997). I was and remain curious about what forms ecological care assumes when one more-than-human species is imperiled by another.

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Such is the case with the eastern hemlock, which is threatened by the hemlock woolly adelgid (*Adelges tsugae*). The adelgid was accidentally introduced into the eastern United States from Asia in the early 1950s and has since spread throughout the eastern hemlock's native range (see Foster, 2014). Beloved by different people for different reasons—aesthetic, historical, ecological, and economic—the eastern hemlock's potential loss has sparked myriad caring practices (Barnett, 2022), from the application of chemical insecticides to the release of predatory beetles to the planting of hemlock seedlings. After long days spent wandering around Cook Forest with some of the people who have devoted their professional and personal lives to caring for these endangered trees, I returned to the cabin I had rented and read *Finding the Mother Tree*. I thought the book might shed some light on why and how people care for forests.

To be sure, reading Simard's book did help me understand why we should care for our forests. But *Finding the Mother Tree* also helped me grasp more than that. As Simard puts it in the introductory chapter, entitled "Connections," "This is not a book about how we can save the trees. This is a book about how the trees might save us" (2021, p. 6). And, to a remarkable extent, it is a book about how trees care for one another and the broader ecological communities in which they dwell. It is a book, in other words, about the kinds of care that arboreal beings—in conjunction with other more-than-human beings—enact. "Our modern societies," Simard argues, "have made the assumption that trees don't have the same capacities as humans. They don't have nurturing instincts. They don't cure one another, don't administer care" (p. 277). At its core, *Finding the Mother Trees* is a rebuke of these assumptions and an invitation to think otherwise.

A *New York Times* bestseller, *Finding the Mother Tree* tells several interlinked stories. Simard braids tales from her childhood in the forests her family logged; stories about her transition from professional forester to academic researcher; chronicles of her experience as a scientist, wife, mother, lesbian, cancer survivor, public figure; and thrilling accounts of her scientific discoveries. Among the ecological insights described in *Finding the Mother Tree*, a handful are particularly pertinent to this essay—namely, that trees share resources with one another via mycorrhizal networks; that trees recognize and support their kin; and that the biggest, oldest trees in forests assist not just their kin but the ecological community more generally. And although Simard has, with her collaborators, described each of these discoveries in peer-reviewed publications, she shares these insights with lay readers in *Finding the Mother Tree*. Less constrained by the conventions of scientific writing, in this popular book Simard describes these ecological processes in the relatively familiar terms of mothering and caring.

Who Cares?

Living beings need care to survive and flourish. The first example that comes to mind is of beings so utterly dependent that they require constant care and attention if they are to make it from one day to the next—namely, human infants. But it is not just infants who demand care. Of course, sick, frail, disabled, and elderly people also need to be cared for in their own ways, each according to the peculiarities of their circumstances. Still, it is not just the very young and the very old, the very sick and the very frail, who require the care of others. Rather, throughout our lives, we all need to be cared for by others. We may not be equally needy, but we are equal in that we are all needy (Kittay, 2020). To live, and certainly to live well, we need care.



The “we” in the statement “we need care” is necessarily a capacious “we.” The fact of dependency does not cease where one species ends and others begin. Living beings *of all kinds* need care to survive and flourish. This is easy to grasp if we reflect upon those animals and plants with whom we share our homes and yards. The beans growing in my raised garden beds and the cat snoring by my feet as I write these words each have needs that me and my partner must meet. At the very least, we are obliged to provide nutrients and water to both the beans and the cat. Beyond our homes and yards, however, needs do not wither away. Instead, they multiply. Recall, for example, the endangered eastern hemlocks at Cook Forest. Without insecticidal treatments and other forms of care, those magnificent sylvan elders would surely perish and take with them the unique ecosystem that eastern hemlocks generate (see Ellison & Baiser, 2014). Needs, and the care that meets those needs, abound in the contact zones where species meet.

When we reflect on the diverse caring activities necessary to meet the needs of human and more-than-human beings alike, who do we imagine engaging in the work of caregiving? Taking the scholarly literature on the “ethics of care,” where discussions of care have been most robust, as our barometer, the simplest answer is that we imagine a human being engaging in caring activities. Without diminishing their contributions to our understanding of care, it is worth noting that most foundational books in this area of inquiry—including Milton Mayeroff’s (1971) *On Caring*, Nel Noddings’s (1984) *Caring: A Feminist Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, and Joan Tronto’s (1993) *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*—all quietly presume a human agent, thus reinforcing the idea that care is a distinctly human activity. In one of the most widely cited definitions of care, for example, Berenice Fisher and Tronto contend that care is “*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*” (1990, p. 40, emphasis in original). Read within the broader context of Fisher and Tronto’s essay, the “we” and the “our” in their definition refer to human beings (cf. de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 161).

But it is not just any human being that we typically imagine as the agent of care; in the Western imaginary, caregiving is also gendered feminine. Indeed, the paradigmatic image of the caregiver has been that of a human mother tending to her own human child (e.g., Noddings, 1984). Looking beyond this paradigmatic case, though, care ethicists have been quick—and right—to point out that caring has historically been seen as “women’s work” in most cultures (e.g., Tronto, 2013). This is not to say that care ethicists wish to maintain this deep-seated division of labor; to the contrary, a great many are keen to develop more egalitarian methods of caring (e.g., Held, 2006; Kittay, 2020; MacGregor, 2006; Malatino, 2020; Merchant, 1996; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; The Care Collective, 2020; Tronto, 2013). Still, even as care ethicists acknowledge that caring work can and should fall on all our shoulders, most remain tied to an anthropocentric image of caregiving.

This anthropocentric vision of care is not the only vision of care, however. For instance, many Indigenous cultures understand that care flows from human and more-than-human sources in a relational web strengthened by reciprocal responsibilities. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, the Potawatomi botanist and author Robin Wall Kimmerer conjures such a vision in a chapter entitled “Allegiance to Gratitude.” Kimmerer explains:

Each person, human or no, is bound to every other [person, human or no,] in a reciprocal relationship. Just as all beings have a duty to me, I have a duty to them. If

an animal gives its life to feed me, I am in turn bound to support its life. If I receive a stream's gift of pure water, then I am responsible for returning a gift in kind. (2013, p. 115)

Central to Kimmerer's point, and to the larger worldview from which it springs, is the idea that more-than-human others care for humans in all sorts of ways and that humans in turn have an obligation to care for the animals, plants, and wider land communities that furnish us with a livable world.

In many ways, the notion that human and more-than-human beings can and should care for one another unsettles Western philosophy's anthropocentric biases. By conceptually separating humans from "nature," and by endowing humans alone with the capacities needed to meaningfully respond to the joys and struggles of earthly coexistence, Western philosophers have made it hard for many of us to appreciate how *care flows from, through, and to all living beings and the earth itself*. As a result, many humans fail to notice not only that we are cared for and sustained by our earthly kin but also how, in ways at once mundane and extraordinary, our fellow travelers are busy taking care of one another, too. As María Puig de la Bellacasa—one of the only care ethicists who has taken more-than-human agency seriously thus far—reminds us in *Matters of Care*, "humans are not the only ones caring *for* the earth and its beings—we are *in* relations of mutual care." Which, de la Bellacasa explains, means that we will need to exercise our imaginations to "consider the many ways in which nonhuman agencies are taking care of many human *and nonhuman* needs" (2017, p. 161).

Finding the Mother Tree spurs just this sort of imaginative consideration.

Multispecies Mothering

Though well aware of the professional risks, in *Finding the Mother Tree*—as well as in her public talks and lectures, some of which have been viewed millions of times online (e.g., Simard, 2016)—Simard embraces a kind of anthropomorphism. That is, she describes more-than-human beings and their activities using words that have traditionally been reserved for human beings and their deeds. In the natural sciences, anthropomorphism is usually approached with suspicion or outright hostility, and for good reason: describing one being or way of being in terms typically used for another, critics argue, we run a risk not only of obscuring what is different, and perhaps unique, about the former but also about the latter. On the other hand, though, anthropomorphism may foment a sense of connection across difference. As political theorist Jane Bennett speculates in *Vibrant Matter*, "maybe it is worth running the risks associated with anthropomorphizing [...] because it, oddly enough, works against anthropocentrism: a chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a nonhuman 'environment'" (2010, p. 120). In some cases, in other words, anthropomorphism may call us into common cause with our more-than-human kin.

Indeed, it is through the language of familial kinship that Simard most often and most memorably describes the trees at the heart of her book. In the introduction, for example, Simard characterizes the trees in one of her studies this way: "The old trees *nurture* the young ones and *provide* them food and water, just as we do with our own children." And then, a few lines later: "These old trees are *mothering* their children" (2021, p. 5, emphasis mine). Elsewhere, she calls the younger trees "youngsters" and "kids" (p. 218). Sometimes she describes the older trees not as "mothers" but, rather, as "elders" (p. 228) or "parents" (p.



224). Together, the young and old trees come to be known in the book as “relatives” and as “kin” (p. 259). By extension, Simard invites readers to view trees as they might see any (extended) family—as a collection of interconnected, interdependent beings who, on balance, help one another in good times and bad.

By describing trees in such familiar terms, Simard suggests that trees themselves receive as well as give care. This notion is nowhere more apparent than those places in *Finding the Mother Tree* where Simard characterizes relations between old and young trees as relations between mothers and their children. Though feminist care ethicists like Sara Ruddick (1980, 1995) define mothering as a practice that can be undertaken by humans of any gender, Simard implies through her anthropomorphizing that trees can perform maternal labors, too. That trees can *be* mothers. In a subsequent chapter, Simard shares the story of how she came to this recognition. There, she writes: “The old trees were the mothers of the forest [...] Well, mother *and* father trees, since each Douglas-fir tree has male pollen cones and female seed cones. But . . . it felt like mothering to me. With the elders tending the young” (2021, p. 228). To tend is to turn one’s mental and physical attention to the other, to pay heed as well as to respond to the other’s needs. In the forest, Simard notes, the biggest, oldest trees do just this, tending to the needs of those around them, sharing information and resources alike, especially but not exclusively with their kin.

This maternal labor of “tending to the young” connects human people to tree people, a phrase and concept Simard adopts from the Aboriginal people of the Pacific Northwest (2021, p. 294). Indeed, throughout *Finding the Mother Tree*, Simard likens trees’ maternal labor to that of humans. Analogies between different kinds of care abound. “The spires of the wrinkled old firs,” Simard writes, “stretched skyward, sheltering the rest. The way my mother and father, grandmothers and grandfathers protected me. Goodness knows, I’d needed as much care as a seedling” (p. 8). Sheltering and protecting are rhetorically and practically linked through the ways each activity—or, rather, set of activities—is cast as a way of nourishing young people, tree and human alike, into the future. Looking backwards in time, Simard recognizes similarities between the care that her parents and grandparents provided to her as a young person and the care that trees provide their young. But she also articulates a link to her own work as a mother. At one point, she explains that her own caring activities mirror those of the mother trees, who are, she writes, “as central to the lives of the smaller trees as I was to Hannah and Nava’s well-being” (p. 230). However different we may be, human people and tree people share in the labor of caring. Care, Simard suggests, is *our* common cause.

Highlighting this shared labor, Simard characterizes a range of arboreal activities as fundamentally akin to, if not identical to, human caring activities. To take one example, Simard explains how older trees on the verge of death often transmit information and resources to the trees around them via seed dispersal and underground fungal networks. Early in the book, Simard characterizes the relationship in these terms:

When Mother Trees—the majestic hubs at the center of forest communication, protection, and sentience—die, they pass their wisdom to their kin, generation after generation, sharing the knowledge of what helps and harms, who is friend or foe, and how to adapt and survive in an ever-changing landscape. It’s what all parents do. (2021, p. 5)

Here, Simard gestures to modes of care that go well beyond meeting immediate needs. The work of care, as she describes it here, involves taking a proleptic stance, anticipating future needs and acting in the present to prepare for them. Just as human parents might tell stories imbued with practical and moral lessons, Simard maintains that tree parents pass their wisdom genetically and otherwise. Far from “simply” providing the nutrients young trees need, arboreal elders give their young the resources—the “knowledge,” the “wisdom”—they *will* need to flourish in years to come. It is a kind of pro-visionary care that reaches ahead to uncertain times (see van Dooren, 2019).

Crucially, Simard does more than just unpack how mother trees care for their own offspring. She also characterizes them as what we might call “multispecies mothers,” a phrase that underscores both that mothering is practiced by human and more-than-human beings alike and how mothering’s effects reach beyond their offspring. Mothers tend to their own kin, to be sure, but also beings who take quite different forms and lead rather diverse lives. At one point Simard describes a Douglas fir, for example, as “a scaffold for biodiversity, fueling the cycles of the forest.” This singular Douglas fir, as Simard explains, cares for multitudes of forest animals and plants by “providing shade for the young trees below,” “shedding seed evolved over centuries,” “stretching its prodigious limbs where songbirds roosted and nested” and where “wolf lichens and mistletoes found crevices in which to root,” and “letting—needing—squirrels to run up and down its trunk in search of cones to store in middens for later meals” (p. 74). Simard’s verbs are telling: this Douglas fir *provides*, *sheds*, *stretches*, and *lets*. It cares for different beings and ways of being in different ways, helping each to survive and thrive in its own way.

At times in *Finding the Mother Tree*, Simard includes herself—and, by extension, humans more generally—among the beneficiaries of the caring activities of mother trees. In some instances, she describes this care as acute. In one story, Simard is hiking with a friend and colleague named Jean. When they encounter a grizzly bear mother and cubs, both women scramble up into Douglas firs. The trees, in Simard’s telling, provided safe haven, giving her and her friend a place to shelter safely—if not also comfortably—away from the bears. “The trees had saved us,” she writes (2021, p. 76). In yet other instances, Simard characterizes the trees’ care in more diffuse terms. Early in the book, for example, she shares stories about her family’s reliance on the trees they logged for their livelihood. She tells, too, of the many “products” that trees provide us. And on many occasions, she emphasizes the world-building and life-sustaining work that trees perform each time they transform carbon dioxide into oxygen, letting us and all the other breathing beings live another moment, another day. Trees are truly “multispecies mothers.”

But they do not care alone. None of us do.

Caring Relations

Focusing on how individuals and species compete with one another, Simard contends, obscures the many and diverse ways that individuals and species cooperate to ensure the mutual survival and flourishing of ecological communities. One of the central lessons of *Finding the Mother Tree* indeed seems to be that dwelling on competition without seeing how living beings work together leaves us with a treacherously lopsided conception of earthly coexistence—one that encourages us to ignore or downplay the extent to which, in so far as any of us acts, we act in concert with, and with the support of, others. Thus, even as Simard



accentuates and celebrates the caring work—the mothering—performed by the trees in her studies, she never loses sight of the ways in which the work of multispecies mothers is made possible by what we might call “caring relations,” gatherings of beings and ways of being who collaboratively compose the conditions under which particular lives can be nurtured into the future.

In addition to the mother trees themselves, other living beings—namely, fungi—are crucial participants in the caring relations Simard studies and describes. Whereas she characterizes the former in anthropomorphic terms, however, she evokes the latter through networking metaphors. To see the differences, let us return to a sentence quoted earlier and then broaden our view to consider the longer passage in which it appears. In the introduction, Simard writes:

The old trees nurture the young ones and provide them food and water just as [humans] do with our own children. It is enough to make one pause, take a deep breath, and contemplate the social nature of the forest and how this is critical for evolution. The fungal network appears to wire the trees for fitness. (2021, p. 5)

The shift in verbs is telling. Whereas sylvan elders *nurture* and *provide*, fungi *wire*. Whereas “the old trees” act in ways comparable to human mothers, “the fungal network” functions as infrastructural support, connecting those who give and receive care in the forest. That is, the fungal network—the “wiring”—supports and enables care by forging the material links needed to transmit information and resources. Without these links, the mother trees could not care for their young or their ecological communities. The wiring both gives rise to and sustains “the social nature of the forest,” making it a place wherein more-than-human beings can support one another.

Infrastructure is vital yet usually hidden from view—think of the pipelines that invisibly connect your kitchen faucet to your city’s water treatment system—or made to recede into the background of daily life—think of the wireless internet networks that many of us now take for granted. Like the wi-fi networks that link us into the world-wide web, the fungal networks that link trees and other plants into the “wood-wide web” are ubiquitous yet mostly concealed from view. They are out of sight, out of mind. And so, part of Simard’s challenge in introducing readers to the vital role of fungal networks is to visualize them—to reveal them in such a way that readers can more fully appreciate how they undergird and facilitate caring relations in the forest.

In a chapter titled “Hand Fallers,” which juxtaposes modern industrial logging practices with those of her ancestors, who felled small numbers of trees with their hands, Simard describes her first encounter with the fungal networks to which she now devotes her attention. After an uncle’s beagle fell into the pit of an outhouse at her family’s vacation spot on Mabel Lake, Simard’s uncle, father, and grandfather sprang into action to rescue the dog. “Jiggs was paddling in the slop,” she recalls, “baying louder when he saw us, too far down in the pit to be reached through the narrow hole” (2021, p. 27). Attempting to retrieve Jiggs, the adults began digging around the pit, the hole growing wider and deeper as their shovels and pickaxes sliced through the dense loam. Even before the digging has begun, fungi are on the scene: “Before any ground was broken,” Simard remembers, “Grampa cleared away the mushrooms. Boletes, *Amanitas*, morels.” Those were tucked away for later consumption. As the top layer of soil gave way, Simard caught a glimpse of “brilliant-yellow and snow-white fungal threads” running through the soil (p. 28). Her grandfather “chopped into the cake of rhizomes” (p.

30). And then, still deeper, the men confronted “an army of roots [. . .] threaded with an even denser thicket of fungi” (p. 30). Finally, his fur “splotted and clotted with toilet paper,” Jiggs emerged from the hole (p. 31). Reflecting on this “adventure,” Simard notes that “it opened up a whole new world” for her, a “world of roots and minerals and rocks,” of “fungi, bugs, and worms,” of “water and nutrients and carbon” (pp. 31-32).

Throughout *Finding the Mother Tree*, Simard similarly introduces readers to the invisible networks beneath the forest floor. One day while coring Douglas firs and looking for a type of mycorrhizal fungus named *Rhizopogon*, which commonly coats Douglas fir roots, for instance, Simard discovered a web of interconnected roots and fungi. So, she began to trace the network.

One root tip was especially welcoming, and I gently tugged it, like pulling a stray thread in a hem. A seedling a hand’s length away shuddered slightly. I pulled again, harder, and the seedling leaned back in resistance. I looked at my old tree, then at the little seedling in the shadows. The fungus was *linking the old tree and the seedling*. (2021, pp. 220-221).

The imagery here is powerful. A tree’s roots certainly connect the plant to the soil, to nutrients in the earth, to underground streams of water. But, as Simard reveals in this passage, a tree’s roots—thanks to the intermediary, the mycorrhizae (literally, fungal roots)—also “link” it to other trees. Pulling at other fungus-coated roots, Simard reveals an underground relational web. “With each unearthing,” she explains, “the framework unfolded—this old tree was connected to every one of the younger trees regenerated around it” (p. 221). Rather than atomistic individuals cohabiting a place, Simard began to see the trees as materially connected to one another. While tracing these connections, it became clear not just that trees care for one another, but that they can do so only to the extent that they are first bound up with others—fungi, for instance—who make their caring possible.

On the one hand, Simard’s shift from anthropomorphism to networking and infrastructural metaphors suggests that, unlike trees, fungi and other connecting organisms do not so much undertake the work of care themselves as they facilitate the care work of others. To say that mycorrhizae “wire” the forest risks obscuring the vitality of the fungi and, thus, the ways in which the fungal threads may themselves be said to engage in caring activities. And yet, on the other hand, to interpret the networking and infrastructural metaphors in this way is to presume in advance that networks and infrastructures are themselves always inert, passive, non-living. While such an interpretation aligns with commonsense understandings of both networks and infrastructures, might it also be possible to imagine confederations of living beings and non-living things cooperating to generate and sustain the conditions of earthly coexistence? Might we imagine animate and even intelligent infrastructures?

Remarkably, Simard contends that caring relations (such as those that are established and maintained by fungal networks) embody a kind of intelligence, a kind of smarts enlivened by more-than-human symbioses. Here she is, a few pages later, marveling at the fungal links she uncovered:

I pulled out a pencil and notebook. I made a map: Mother Trees, saplings, seedlings. Lines sketched between them. Emerging from my drawing was a pattern like a neural



network, like the neurons in our brains, with some nodes more highly linked than others.

Holy smokes. (2021, p. 228)

By comparing the mycorrhizal network to a neural network, Simard highlights the way that connectivity ensures adaptability. Because trees are connected to one another via fungal networks, they are collectively better off—collectively *smarter* and, thus, better able to shift with changing circumstances. When a tree is threatened, it can communicate with other trees via the fungal network. Or when one tree needs something—water or carbon, for example—that another tree has in abundance, the fungal linkages allow the trees to exchange materials, to support one another. When intact, fungal networks ensure that no tree is forced to stand alone. “Recognizing that forest ecosystems, like societies, have these elements of intelligence,” Simard contends, “helps us leave behind old notions that they are inert, simple, linear, and predictable” (p. 190).

Seeing ecosystems as intelligent networks helps us, in other words, to appreciate their dynamism. It invites us to remember that, when caring relations are allowed to exist, more-than-human beings are rather adept at caring for themselves and others. And that when caring relations are weakened or destroyed, the entire ecosystem starts to fray. Recognizing this, Simard hopes, might move us to care for caring relations.

Caring for Caring Relations

In *Love’s Labor*, the feminist philosopher and care ethicist Eva Feder Kittay calls attention to a dimension of caring relations that too often goes unnoticed or under-appreciated: the need that caregivers themselves have for care. Kittay reminds us that one’s needs do not wither away when one commits oneself to care for another. Caregivers, like everyone else, require care to survive and thrive. Turning to the example of human mothers, Kittay describes the role of the *doula*, a word that tellingly derives from the Greek *δούλα*, meaning “slave” or “bondswoman.” Though the word no longer signifies a relationship between a master and a slave, it retains its emphasis on service: a doula is, by definition, in service to another. But a doula performs a particular kind of service. Unlike a midwife, who delivers infants, and unlike a baby nurse, who cares for infants in the mother’s stead, a doula “assists by caring for the mother as the mother attends to the child” (2020, p. 116). The doula, in other words, cares for the caregiver. The relationship between a doula and a mother is one in which one caregiver sustains the other by giving them the mental and physical support they need to carry out their commitments to care for still others, thus enabling caring relations to continue.

With the image of the doula helping the mother in mind, Kittay asks what it would mean—and what it would take—to organize society in such a way that those who care for others could reasonably expect to be cared for themselves. “Extending the notion of the service performed by the *doula*,” Kittay recommends, “let us use the term *doulia* for an arrangement by which service is passed on so that those who become needy by virtue of tending to those in need can be cared for as well” (2020, p. 116). Transformed into an ethics, *doulia* demands that we not take caregiving for granted—that we not assume that the care we or others need will always be provisioned—and that we, therefore, create and sustain relations in which caregivers and, by extension, care can flourish. Embracing this ethic, Kittay notes, would mean that “the commitment to preserving caring *relations* would be assumed by the society” (p. 117).

Supporting long-term, paid parental leave is just one example of how a society could enact *doulia*. No matter how the principle of *doulia* is engendered, though, the impetus remains on sustaining caring relations.

In *Finding the Mother Tree*, Simard suggests a similar ethic. Deeply attuned to the fact of interdependency, Simard articulates a vision of cross-species care that begins with an acknowledgement that more-than-human beings are already caring for one another, and that—for better and for worse—humans often play a significant role in shaping the conditions under which such multispecies mothering and caring relations manifest and then find themselves sustained—or not. “Ecosystems,” Simard explains, “are so similar to human societies—they’re built on relationships. The stronger those [relationships] are, the more resilient the system” (2021, p. 189). Just as human people depend on each other, so do tree people, fungal people, bird people, and all the rest: people of all sorts need to be able to depend on one another. When we know that others will support us, we feel free to pursue not just survival but also possibilities for flourishing. “Through this cohesion,” Simard notes, “our systems develop into something whole and resilient” (p. 190). Systems are only resilient when they contain the elements needed for self-healing—the elements, the actors, that furnish care for others. If we do not care for the caregivers, Simard suggests, the whole system begins to unravel.

Toward the conclusion of *Finding the Mother Tree*, Simard imagines what this ethic of care might look like in practice, particularly in the practice of forestry. “My hope,” she explains, “is that we might think twice about salvage harvesting the dying Mother Trees, might be compelled to leave a portion behind to take care of the young, not merely their own but those of their neighbors too” (2021, p. 288). Notably, Simard does not advocate that we give up our relation to trees, as if that were possible or desirable, nor does she recommend that we never cut another tree again. Instead, she recommends a more thoughtful, caring approach—an approach that is attuned to the caring relations that enable forests to thrive. Instead of cutting down the biggest, oldest trees because they promise the most income, and rather than “salvage harvesting” old trees that are already in the throes of death in the hopes of recovering what income or resources we can, Simard recommends that we let these sylvan elders be, that we let them continue to care for others. This means leaving fungal networks intact, too, not indiscriminately disturbing the earth. It means doing what we can to encourage forest communities to care for themselves. “The forest,” Simard notes, “is wired for healing in this way, and we can help if we follow her lead” (p. 300).

Our ethical task, then, is not simply to care for particular beings but, rather, to care for caring relations—to consider how ecological communities sustain themselves in good times and bad, and to do what we can to support those beings and ways of being that play a significant role in preserving the health of the land community. Occasionally that will mean becoming more directly involved in the lives of more-than-human others. Sometimes, though, it will mean resisting the urge to meddle, either because ecological systems are capable of self-healing or because we do not know whether our intervention will help or hinder the ecological community’s ability to heal and sustain itself (e.g., see Barnett, 2021). Either way, caring for caring relations demands that we widen our focus from the individual to the collective long enough to ask what conditions specific more-than-human beings and ways of being require to care for themselves and for others.



Conclusion

My aim throughout this essay has been to show how a close reading of *Finding the Mother Tree* reveals two related concepts—multispecies mothers and caring relations—and opens onto an ecological ethic of care rooted in a commitment to caring for the very conditions that enable earth's nurturers to keep on nurturing life into the future. Though in my view a compelling starting point for rethinking the terms of earthly coexistence, the ecological ethics of care implicit in Simard's work remains to be fully fleshed out.

Three questions in particular stand out as worthy of additional consideration. First, on what bases should we make decisions about which caring relations to support? As care ethicists acknowledge, we cannot care for all beings and ways of being. We must make decisions (e.g., see Tronto, 1993). But it is not always clear on what bases we ought to make those decisions. Second, how ought we weigh the relative benefits and risks of caring for some caring relations rather than others? Answering this question, of course, demands that we interrogate who and what stand to gain from any caring act as well as who and what stand to lose. The effects of care are not equally shared. Third, what should we make of the fact that nurturing some caring relations into the future may require doing violence to others? The line between caring and enacting violence can be razor thin (e.g., see de la Bellacasa, 2017; van Dooren, 2014), particularly when one species threatens another's ability to survive and flourish. In such circumstances, casting one's lot with one set of relations may commit one to destroying others.

These are, at any rate, some of the questions that linger as I walk through Cook Forest—a place where the old eastern hemlocks' capacity to care for younger trees is threatened by the hemlock woolly adelgid and, therefore, a place where these questions assume a vital significance. Following Simard's lead, we may take stock of the multispecies mothers who inhabit these woods, ask what conditions those beings need to nurture others, and then seek to sustain those relations that make caring possible. In doing so, though, we ought to be careful not to lose sight of the complexities and complicities inherent in caring. Staying with the trouble in this way should not prevent us from casting our lot with other animals and plants and ecological communities, but it should move us to reflect on the stakes of what we are doing when we opt—even with the best intentions—to influence the conditions of earthly coexistence.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks the guest editors of this special issue, the editorial team at the *Journal of Ecobumanism*, and the anonymous reviewers for their help with this essay.

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