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Labors of Love and Loss: Radical Acts of Human, Plant, and Nonhuman Mothering

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“How can there be so many mothers in the world but so little sense of what it might be to become one?”

— Rachel Cusk, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*

“Empirically speaking, we are made of star stuff. Why aren't we talking more about that?”

— Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*

As we begin to pick up the scattered pieces of our lives upended by a global pandemic, there is still little clarity about what comes next; and yet it has been laid perfectly bare that mothering is both essential and chronically undervalued. For the two editors of this special issue, we are among millions who are raising kin (human and nonhuman alike) in the Anthropocene. Who both worry desperately for what the future will look like, and who practice love and care in the face of crisis, extinction, contamination, aggression, and more. We are interested in taking seriously mothering and other forms of caregiving as radical acts of ecosurvival, and so we invited human animal collaborators to this special issue to help us collectively think through the ways in which love, intimacy, mothering, caregiving, and/or kinmaking are practices of resistance, solidarity, or world-making. The response to our invitation – in both scope and depth – was immense. Scholars and poets and artists everywhere have already been imagining – and witnessing – a new world being born and broadened to allow new stories of survival and kinship to take hold.

By now it is abundantly clear that the global politics of motherhood, reproductive justice, and bodily autonomy are up for grabs, if ever they were not. In May 2021, China changed its national family planning policy, lifting the number of children married couples could legally have from two to three, after only ending its decades old one-child policy in 2016. In the summer of 2022, the United States Supreme Court overturned the 50-year legal precedent that federally protected every woman's right to an abortion, a decision that felt dystopian for a majority of women across the U.S. and beyond. The court ruling prompted backlash from

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leaders around the world including Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand, who released a statement that proudly highlighted that New Zealand had recently decriminalized abortion in 2020 and that all women should have this basic health right – except many New Zealanders did not realize that abortion had been, until very recently in NZ, listed in their 1961 Crimes Act. Suddenly and again, women, mothers, and activists everywhere were starkly reminded that women’s bodies are broadly legislated and controlled historically and currently by States (governed mostly by men).

And in a parallel yet mostly unnoticed moment, as waves of COVID vaccines and boosters were rolled out and mandated across the world, the nonhuman animal bodies and lives – mice, rats, pigs, ferrets, hamsters, rabbits and nonhuman primates – needed to make human survival of a rampant virus possible, were disappeared. There were thousands of vaccines in various stages of clinical development beginning in early 2020 (and continuing to today) in dozens of countries, and although the data of the actual number of nonhuman animals needed to create the vaccine are murky, we can get a sense of the scale by glancing at Germany’s well-documented data (available via the European Union’s animal testing database). During the first year and a half of the pandemic, a total of 4,893 projects with a sum of 7,723,428 laboratory animals were authorized in Germany alone (Schwedhelm et al., 2022), although a relatively small percentage of this number were specifically used for vaccine trials (between February 1, 2020 and July 27, 2021, 61,389 animals were approved for research projects related to SARS-CoV-2 in Germany). It is reasoned that this number is low comparatively because the pace of vaccine development was so quick that many animal trials were skipped, a development that offers hope to nonhuman animal rights activists who have argued that animals’ subjects are not nearly as essential to vaccine development as scientists claim. This slice of data about vaccine trials – although hopeful in some regards – suggests that, cumulatively, hundreds of thousands if not millions of animals were used to help create the vaccines that enhanced the chances of surviving COVID-19 for millions of human animals. So, not only were nonhuman bodies and lives depended on for our human survival, but the very reproduction of these nonhuman animals was regulated and controlled, and mice mothers, rat mothers, rabbit mothers were asked do more birth work and care work; more “essential labor” as a result (Garbes, 2022).

As feminist theorists have painstakingly noted over the years, mothering is perpetually ignored and devalued in both scholarship and western culture. And as ecofeminists such as Carol Adams have shown, the similarities between the treatment of women/minoritized others and nonhuman animals highlight the ways in which human liberation is intertwined with the care and recognition of nonhuman suffering. There are important connections between environmental justice and reproductive justice including, especially, a commitment to identifying and addressing the points of intersection between systemic inequality and the struggle to protect or create a healthy, flourishing world for humans and nonhumans alike. Women’s bodies have always been sites of contested agency. Both in public and in private, politico-legal structures and cultural norms have favored control over autonomy, especially when it comes to choices around reproduction. So in some ways, the developments in the United States and the erosion of the legal right to abortion are neither overly surprising nor do they deviate from the central tenets of patriarchy. But what can be learned by examining attempts to control reproduction and the devaluing of mothers and mothering as practices that reveal and reflect something very particular about the Capitalocene?



By now, the Anthropocene is a well-known, if not universally accepted, way of describing the current ecological moment as one fundamentally shaped by human activities. The idea is that humans have so thoroughly impacted the earth that the effects of human actions will be clearly visible in the geologic record. The concept of the Anthropocene is thus both a warning and a critique: from mass extinction to rising global temperatures, humans are to blame and if we do not change our ways quickly, all that will remain of our follies will be a record of our destruction, etched onto the earth's surface. While many scientists, philosophers, policy-makers, and researchers use the term Anthropocene metaphorically, some geologists reject the proposal that the Anthropocene should be officially elevated to the rank of geological epoch. And for many thinkers who are less motivated by the discipline-specific debates regarding geologic eras, there is a troubling universalism to the Anthropocene that diminishes its utility as a philosophical, if not scientific idea. *Which* humans are responsible for rising sea levels, unrelenting drought, longer and fiercer wildfire seasons, or the collapse of insect populations? As environmental justice advocates have made very clear, those who are most impacted by climate change and environmental degradation are emphatically not those who are most responsible. The Capitalocene terminology, then, offers a way of understanding human impact on the earth without flattening human experience into a universal claim of "human nature." Proposed by Moore (2017), among others, this term "highlights capitalism as a history in which islands of commodity production and exchange operate within oceans of Cheap— or potentially Cheap— Natures" (p. 606). To call this moment the Capitalocene is to honor the intersections of capitalism and the inequality it foments with environmental degradation. It also centers the ways in which the twin pillars of settler colonialism and patriarchy are responsible for an ideology of accumulation that got us into this mess in the first place: a sense of entitlement to make use of other beings, bodies, and land in whatever way necessary to secure growth and the selfish accumulation of capital.

Motherhood is not an automatic corrective to the harms of the Capitalocene, but in the ways in which mothering and caregiving have been perennially undervalued within capitalism (and patriarchy), these entangled, affective, embodied practices offer a rich site for resistance to capitalism's "praxis of cheapening the lives and work of many humans and most non-human natures" (Moore, 2017, p. 601). Suzanne Simard's coinage of the term "mother tree" describes the ways in which rich care and interconnectedness lie at the heart of a community's survival. A mother tree, Simard discovered, is one who shares resources with their own and other species in order to strengthen the overall health of the forest (The Mother Tree Project, 2022). One of the remarkable things about mother trees is their seeming altruism; they share resources to ensure the forest's health, even when they would individually benefit more from hoarding those resources. Let's not go too far down the path of equating motherhood with altruism, for that is an ideal long celebrated in patriarchal views of motherhood (and femininity) and is surely a trap for many human mothers. Rather, mother trees provide a glimpse of how raising kin is, at its heart, an ecological practice where survival depends on interconnectivity.

Donna Haraway (2016) notes that "*kin* is a wild category that all sorts of people do their best to domesticate," but that thinking about kinship beyond "genealogical and biogenetic family troubles important matters, like to whom one is actually responsible" (p. 2). This question of responsibility - to whom and under what conditions one is responsible - is one that aligns with existing discourses and conceptualizations of motherhood. Mothers are understood to be

responsible to their offspring, and under current neoliberal conditions, this responsibility is seen as something to be commodified and idealized, creating what Thornton (2014) identifies as a *mommy economicus* figure. But to hold on to Haraway's notion of kin as a *wild* category suggests a more lush version of motherhood and responsibility. Simard's research demonstrates how mother trees engage in specific kinds of communication and resource-sharing that ensure the health of the ecosystem (or what Simard refers to as the community). In contrast to a solitary mother, responsible to and for her own biological offspring, this is a vision of mothering as a practice that knits together disparate kin in an intertwined system of mutual survival. For humans who care to pay attention, mother trees are not so very unusual, even if much of their wondrous intelligence was routinely ignored or dismissed by scientists trained to see the world through a lens of competition instead of cooperation. Suzanne Simard tells the story of her own struggle to be heard in her (2021) memoir *Finding the Mother Tree* and in this special issue, Barnett lingers on the vision of multispecies mothering that Simard reveals in her research and writing.

To say that multispecies mothering offers a vision for living-otherwise in the Capitalocene is not to suggest that responsibility (to other human and nonhuman kin) is either easy or automatically good. Mothering is messy business full of grief, loss, joy, rage, boredom, and confusion. In challenging times, times of environmental degradation, climate catastrophe, deadly pandemics, and species extinction, mothering can feel especially fraught. And although Donna Haraway reminds us that we are all just compost, the intense soup of feelings – an often-indistinguishable palette of anger and despair and frustration and even radical hope – that is stirred up from very real and very deep feelings of loss while mothering during climate collapse are significant and meaningful and agonizingly hard to reconcile. To “bear witness” or “becoming-witness” to the loss of biodiversity and flora and fauna extinctions – the loss of our kin's offspring and futures – is truly uncharted territory (Rose & van Dooren, 2017), and so as we attempt to grapple, or not, with the grief, resentment, anger, perhaps even boredom, created by the recognition of our deep sense of loss, we take part in an entangled and embodied human burden that leaves us affectively depleted.

We convened this special issue not just as a corrective to the historical silencing of mother-experience(s) in the humanities. The authors in this special issue show how focusing on mothering and other forms of caregiving and kin-making can offer a powerful lens for examining the intimate, embodied, and relational dimensions of human entanglement with the nonhuman world. The included articles do just that: they engage the visceral, the embodied, and the disruptive dimensions of labor and mothering. This is an international group of authors, with contributors from New Zealand, Italy, Canada, and the United States. We might consider the authors' locations in the same way that some wine enthusiasts highlight the *terroir* within which the grapes were grown as an important and unique influence on the final project. But we also suggest that, like the mycelium that link together various species in an ecosystem, the articles in this Special Issue can be read as individual pieces that are nonetheless joined together in the metaphoric sharing of resources. In short, when we read them together, we discover rich, lush, verdant ways of understanding mothering, caregiving and kin-making as guides for how to live-otherwise in the Capitalocene.

Joshua Trey Barnett starts us off with an article that considers how Suzanne Simard's decades spent researching trees offers a lens for understanding multispecies mothering. He reads Suzanne Simard's (2021) book, *Finding the Mother Tree* searching for “imaginative resources”



for developing an ecological conception of care. Simard's book offers a remarkably evocative glimpse of ecological care, made possible by her dogged decades-long commitment to doing scientific research that disrupts taken-for-granted norms and assumptions about trees and their relationships with their own and other species. In contrast to the legacies of human exceptionalism in so much scientific research, Simard's work over the years treats the trees more like companions or community than as resources to be harnessed in the service of human achievement or growth. This way of seeing the natural world also leads Simard to center mothering and caregiving as important and productive practices. Barnett shows how

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 (This special issue, p.18).

What becomes clear in Barnett's reading of Simard is that this centering of care, while important, should not be romanticized as a utopic vision of interspecies harmony. In fact, taking mothering and caring seriously means that we must reckon with the hard questions about who cares, who gets cared for, and how these decisions have no easy answers. As Haraway (2016) remarks, "we are all responsible to and for shaping conditions for multispecies flourishing in the face of terrible histories, and sometimes joyful histories too, but we are not all response-able in the same ways" (p. 29). An ethic of care inspired by Simard's vision of multispecies mothering doesn't turn away from terrible histories, but rather roots in, not waiting for perfect conditions but simply doing the work.

Ann Garascia's lush article introduces the nineteenth-century plant mother, reconstructing the lives of both the human mothers and their plant children through a critical reading of archival documents. Victorian botany was, as Garascia describes it, "an imperial science," in which botanists uprooted and moved plants around the world in a science devoted to naming, cataloguing, and organizing unruly, exotic, desirable, or inscrutable plants. While Victorian plant mothering reaffirmed colonial narratives of British maternity, Garascia also uncovers examples of what she terms "loving resistance" to such narratives, such as how the creation of a "plant-centered home" made possible "modes of familial intimacy that validate[d] the dignity and agency of plant lives" (This special issue, p.29). She concludes the article with a discussion of the "grief work" that is endemic to (plant) mothering. This grief work in Victorian times offered an opportunity for women to speak the unspeakable. Houseplants could take the place of mourned loved ones and served as "mainstays of Victorian death cultures." By centering the grief work of plant mothers in this way, Garascia helps us see the important ways in which mothering and grieving are inseparable.

The final two articles in the Special Issue engage thorny questions around human and nonhuman kin-making. Anna Perdibon and Alice McSherry carry the theme of plant-mothering into the present day with their auto-ethnographic examination of herbalism, kin-making, and mugwort (*Artemisia Vulgaris*). They offer a view of motherhood that reaches beyond standardized notions of mothering by weaving the stories (folklore and herbal practices) of mugwort with their own experiences of "other-mothering." Eva-Lynn Jagoe's article fits seamlessly with Perdibon and McSherry as she also re-stories motherhood by weaving in insights from quackgrass, a feisty nonhuman collaborator on her family's farm in

British Columbia, Canada. Along the way, we learn that mugwort has been used to regulate menstruation, improve fertility, and as a treatment for epilepsy while quackgrass – also known as devil’s grass – has been described as “the most troublesome perennial weedy grass” in Canada (This special issue, p.56).

In Jagoe’s story, the roots of quackgrass offer a powerful metaphor for family and kin-making. While she might have originally entertained the idea of removing quackgrass from the farmland she bought with a dream of applying regenerative agriculture principles, she soon realizes that quackgrass roots, like the generational roots of family, are difficult, if not impossible, to excise from a landscape. Instead, the family farmers are left to reckon with the tangle, human and nonhuman. As Jagoe learns, “Dynamics of power, of rejection, and of insecure attachment are as persistent as quackgrass. There is no undisturbed soil upon which to start a project as historically, socially, and politically laden as family” (This special issue, p.58). Perdibon and McSherry “dream with mugwort” in their article, a practice through which we are offered a glimpse of mugwort as a collaborator, a guide, and a mother. Along with their own practices of caregiving and kin-making, the authors suggest that paying close attention to the wisdom of plants and herbs can tune us to more fully embracing an intergenerational vision of motherhood. Both articles offer complex, entangled narratives of caring as a multispecies activity – beautiful, uplifting, complicated, and fraught – with each story ending with a heartfelt acknowledgement of the power of love.

The articles included in this Special Issue devoted to *Labors of Love and Loss* do not shy away from the messiness of motherhood. In each of the articles, violent histories haunt the margins of the stories shared. For Barnett and Garascia, colonial and imperial ideals of cultural superiority and control pervade the practices of generations of scientists and collectors. Jagoe’s regenerative agricultural work, a labor of love in many ways, cannot be disentangled from the legacies of settler colonialism in Canada. Conjuring the figure of the witch in their article, Perdibon and McSherry center the ways in which attempts to think, act, heal, and care outside of patriarchal norms have resulted in the subjugation of women’s bodies over centuries. Taken together, these articles offer an expanded view of caregiving, kin-making, and mothering within and against the Capitalocene. What ties them all together is an insistence that mothering and caregiving are *fundamentally* entangled practices, and that the act of caring with and for another being holds open a space of possibility for seeing our own human lives as something more than just human, just here, just now.

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