

Care as practice: constructing a new paradigm

by James Marsh

Care - the provision of what is necessary for the health, welfare, maintenance, and protection of someone or something... (Oxford Languages, 2024)

In this piece I will explore care, specifically how new understandings seek to surpass conventional reductionist framings and therefore change how it is approached. My analysis and conclusions owe much to the research and partnership I was lucky enough to take part in with Guaches y Guarichas in May of this year, a radical social organisation who are leading lights in the reconceptualisation of what care means in the specific context of Bogota. They carry out many functions that are overtly caring, notably with the area's deaf community. At first glance, their work aligns with the conventional definition of care, as a service that is provided to those in need.

After visiting Humedal La Vaca, where much of Guaches y Guarichas' efforts are focused, I wrote a short journal entry reflecting on my experience. It aims to explore the significance of physical place in the enactment of care, but in hindsight I think it speaks almost exactly to what is wrong with contemporary perceptions.

“It's amazing and unsettling how you can experience the same place, the same moment, completely differently to your fellow person. We were constantly warned of the danger we faced visiting Corabastos and Humedal La Vaca. We walked through the streets accompanied by our welcome committee-cum-escort, and the sense of nervous energy soon dissipated to be replaced by an almost tranquil air. Vigilance gave way to idle chatter, possible thanks to the tireless efforts and courage of those who welcomed us to their barrio. To say we felt anything other than safe would be a lie, but that is a far cry from the reality of that place. Entering the humedal was almost surreal, a green paradise nestled between violence and fear, state jurisdiction and informality. A complete overturning of all that stood on the other side of one chain-link fence, but to us it felt a continuation. Whilst we knew the violence and the beauty went hand in hand, in that moment we could not feel this reality. Our 'expedition', for this is what it felt like, was designed to ensure safety, which we were unendingly grateful for, highlighting the privilege through which we can't help but experience space. The stories of Santi and Jose perfectly demonstrate what it actually means to live in such a place, to be a part of it, and it of you. And if we can't experience this constant danger, can we truly talk about the care and love that simultaneously works to heal those who live here.” (Marsh, 2024)

The implicit conclusion I drew from differential experiences of space is that care is dichotomous, with a disparity between experiencing and witnessing it – which derives from seeing care as a service. My assumption was that I was not a recipient of care (because I was not in need), but that I was observing those who were. La Vaca represented a sanctuary for the people of Amparo, a space for them to receive care in contrast to the realities of the neighbourhood. The feeling of safety I experienced even outside the humedal meant that I was not in need of the care that was provided either side of the boundary, relegating me to merely an observer. This fits neatly into the definition I started with and contemporary understandings of care more generally; it's a remedy, it's conditional

and is only supplied to those who 'need' it. It also served to distinguish me from what I was witnessing; as researchers in such a context we were encouraged to engage with our positionality, to recognise how we are situated socially, culturally, spiritually etc and how our sense of self influenced our experience of every moment. As such, the constant awareness of my otherness separated me from those ostensibly receiving Guaches y Guarichas' care. Neatly fitting into the ethical research framework, I lapsed into the care as service (and myself as witness) mindset.

I felt this visit instilled a division; our presence within the community and the humedal by its nature delineated us from our hosts.

This interpretation is a fundamental misreading of the transformational approach to care work that Guaches y Guarichas are enacting. By grounding the essence of care in the remedy of 'danger' (Ibid., 2024), I implicitly framed it as 'the provision of what is necessary' (Oxford Languages, 2024), a measurable service, as opposed to something more ontological. A way of life. What Guaches y Guarichas are doing is redefining care, as it relates to other people, as a practice, creating a holistic care paradigm. Care is about the way you interact with someone or something, as opposed to the service that is provided. Indeed, the establishment of La Vaca as a sanctuary (along with the definition I presented at the start) is the result of care, it is not the care itself.

I started by mentioning the wonderful work Guaches y Guarichas are doing with Amparo's deaf community, which in reality is a perfect example of how care as practice surpasses a mere action. Care runs through everything they do, from their programmes bringing communities closer to their wetlands, to centering Latin American and indigenous schools of thought within their ideology, to building awareness and a profound inclusion of deaf community members that surpasses traditional considerations. Every action is inherently geared towards providing, nurturing and loving the community, as evidenced by the slogan 'El barrio te escucha', depicted in Figure 1. Murals are a widespread means of expression and articulating community identity through art. Recognising the deaf community in this manner is a message of deep support, including them in a fundamental element of cultural creation. By exceeding the usual considerations of 'inclusivity' (recognising diversity and inclusivity needs without pathologising identity categories) the care being provided surpasses the paradigm of 'health, welfare, maintenance and protection' (Ibid., 2024).



Figure 1. 'El Barrio te escucha' mural, with the Guaches y Guarichas team. Credit: Alejandro Martinez.

This is a manifestation of care as practice, which serves to negate any perceived divisions between the observers and recipients of care. The holistic paradigm which Guaches y Guarichas embody sees care as all-encompassing and not prescriptive. The care that they give is aimed at everyone they come into contact with, albeit it manifests differently for different people. Because it is not a specific service, but a way of living in the world, the care they give is personalised and specific to each individual according to what it is they need. This is how Guaches y Guarichas included us within the care that characterises their relationship with La Vaca. This demonstrates the role of place (particularly natural space) in aiding the expression care. A space is universal for those in it, whilst an individual's experience within may vary what's without is the same. This allows for the coalescence of disparate care needs within one context, with in this case the humedal providing the means through which heterogenous needs can be met simultaneously. This is because care cannot be boiled down to a single specific provision, and so an action or an area can cater to multiple needs without having to manifest multiple forms. This speaks to the power of place to transcend boundaries between people, which is exactly what happened within La Vaca. When I spoke of experiencing 'the same moment, completely differently' (marsh, 2024), I did so with the mindset of care as service, which arbitrarily constructs divisions. In actual fact, the time we all shared represented the tearing down of the barriers between provider, recipient and observer.

Because this is the other element of a holistic care paradigm, that it is multidirectional. Everyone involved fulfils the role of both givers and receivers of care, as everyone is contributing to the upholding of the ethos of care as practice (as opposed to service). It becomes something more than remedial, it characterises the relationships between all members of a community and as such extends to encompass the community. From here, notions of salud colectiva, sentipensar, cuidado de la vida, territorio and much more (all warranting their own sections within this glossary) relate to this paradigm of care, which is genuinely transformatory from the care as a service mindset.

Rereading my journal, it's abundantly clear that we were the recipients of care through the same means as the people of Amparo. The care Guaches y Guarichas provide enables them to exist within and move through their social and physical environment, while avoiding as much as possible the dangers and misfortunes that can lie in wait. This was exactly how the care we received manifested. My expectation was that the care they provide was confined to the humedal, that entering it would bring forth some inexorable wave of love and security. I felt disheartened when this didn't happen, but in reality we were already feeling this, through the immense efforts to welcome and enable us to move through Amparo safely.

Born from an innovative understanding of what true care means, the efforts of Guaches y Guarichas is testament to how new approaches to care promise to revolutionise how it is practiced.

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