

Care as the engine of empathy



"Capitalism runs on scarcity, and I think care promotes abundance."

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As told to Resham Mantri, 2333 words.

Two Conversations with writer Angela Garbes and writer / Director of Asian Arts Initiative, Anne Ishii

On December 4th I visited the [Asian Arts Initiative](#) in Philadelphia and interacted with their CARE exhibit. The write-up on the AAI website said this about the exhibit:

Premised on the radical notion that everyday life is a social movement, we look at the invisibilized labor of 'natural' caregivers, the joyful innovations of communities of care. We will explore how the principles of inclusion and equity we are so good at instilling in young people can be translated into exploitative institutional systems which prioritize productivity over care.

In the community fair on Saturday, children crafted at a table, people danced with local hip hop dance instructors, there were books for sale, older women weaving things in one corner, it was warmth personified. Towards the end of the fair, I was able to sit in the intimate audience space at AAI listening to the below conversation between Angela Garbes and Anne Ishii, the excerpts included here are things I am still sitting with. Things I cannot shake.

I identify as a mother, because of my particular birthing and child-rearing journey. When I read modern writing about motherhood, I'm often left wanting to read more about the connections between caregiving for children and caregiving in other contexts. I want the experience of motherhood to connect me to other parents, yes, but also to other humans who know deeply the value and pleasure of caregiving beyond only the role of motherhood.

This experience of "making heavy the experience" of caring for a person, as Anne mentions below, nurses can have it, death doulas can have it, artists can have it, community activists can have it. In my 40s, I know that you do not have to be a mother to have this experience of heavy and pleasurable care-giving.

I know this through my experiences being present for the deaths of my father and my grandmother. I know this through my relationships with people, both with children and without, who consistently lean into the experience of care within communities.

It is through these relationships with heavy and serious caregivers, that I truly learn the way to, as Anne mentions, "make heavy the pleasure". To make utterly essential the work of finding pleasure for myself. Of giving pleasure to others. Because there can be no long-term care-giving without sustained and serious pleasure seeking.

These conversations felt a lot like a community fair, full of play, experimentation, few conclusions or declarations, more questions and opportunities to try things on.

SATURDAY represents excerpts of a conversation between Anne Ishii and Angela Garbes at Asian Arts Initiative on December 4th, including explorations of Angela's most recent book *Essential Labor-Mothering as Social Change*.

SUNDAY represents pieces of a conversation at Anne Ishii's home in Philadelphia the next day, where Anne and Angela elaborated with me on tried and true models of care within community and how care can be the engine of empathy.

— Resham Mantri

SATURDAY

Anne Ishii: Let's talk about pleasure. That's another aspect of how mothering, or child care giving, is discussed. Where it has to be divorced from pleasure...

Angela Garbes: I would die if there was no pleasure. I was thrown off when I first had my first child that this reminds me so much more of romantic love than I thought and there's a feeling of "is this creepy?," but i don't think so because on a hormonal level the same oxytocin release that you feel when you are breastfeeding when you experience letdown is the same hormone that is released when you orgasm. So that's just a biological fact. You know, still having boundaries, obviously, but also perhaps not seeing motherhood as self-sacrificing body denial.

This book [*Essential Labor*] was to me very much a pandemic book, though it's not specifically about the pandemic—but the first four months of the pandemic I was home with my children. We didn't go anywhere besides outside in our house. I had this feeling that care work is killing me, I've flattened my life, I'm nothing but a caregiver. The pleasure that I used to take in caregiving seemed to really just be draining from my life. So part of this book was writing the pleasure back into it. What does it feel like to let go of all of the stress and if we were to be present in our caregiving in our bodies? It's actually very fun, it's very sensual it's...

AI: It's ecstatic.

I came up with this metaphor the other day.

My friend has fitness hula hoops, basically hula hoops for middle-aged women like us. She had two, one was bigger and heavier and one was smaller and lighter. And she's like "It's great exercise, you can just kind of do it while you're watching tv." So I picked up the smaller one thinking it was going to be easier and then I was spinning it and she's like "Oh, no, no, the heavier one is easier."

And I was like, "What?" But she was totally right—the light one was almost impossible and for me. There's something there about balance, obviously, like it's about finding equilibrium—but there's something about giving those aspects that we think need to be lighter, more weight. What happens if we actually switch the balance dynamic around?

With pleasure especially I've been fixated on this idea of actually the heavier the pleasure the easier the work becomes. I say this to caregivers and people with high responsibilities for people, for humans. That actually self-care, I hate that phrase, has to be heavy or you cannot perform your job. The hula hoop has to be big, and, yeah, the hula hoop in this metaphor is something like pleasure, sensuality, something like "fuck everybody, I'm spending time alone," all of that stuff.

AG: Audre Lorde said something like, *self-care is an act of warfare, political warfare*, right? It's not some light thing. I read her a lot when i was writing this book. The third chapter is all about mothering as erotic labor but erotic in the Audre Lorde sense. Audre Lorde said "For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing." Something about getting in touch with how deeply you can feel.

AI: There was an article by Ariel Levy in the *New Yorker* many years ago about Italy and Mamas and the culture of worshipping mothers and how it's a false positive. You think that that means that women are respected, but in

fact it's actually kind of creating this sort of false sense of respect for just motherhood, specifically.

She has this line: "For one thing, a culture in which motherhood is a prerequisite for women who seek a measure of power or respect is not a culture that understands women as fully human." I think about that a lot because that's another way that we pervert this idea of how important the work of caregiving is, by fetishizing biological motherhood.

AG: There's a feminist theorist named Shulamith Firestone who did work in the '70s and '80s and at the time people thought she was a little out there, but she talked about how the only way that women could ever achieve equality is in a future where babies were gestated outside of the womb. Until we are done with biological motherhood we can never have gender equity.

Just just tossing it out there, not saying we have to do that, but it's something that I think about because I feel so strongly about how motherhood and being a mother and caring for people has changed my life for the better, but that's also not for everyone .

Here's a question that I have: We do a lot of like, "Oh, go have date night and go live your life like a person that's single, go live your life as someone who doesn't have children." That's fine you know, parents want that. But as a society is there a policy that we can develop that would encourage single people to live like people with dependents?

I feel like it has to go both ways it can't just be: "You're free because you get to be without your family." What is it to know the pleasure of of caring for someone? What is it to know the pleasure of being invested in someone that you never expected to fall in love with?

AI: I just think of all these queerbo spaces of like, you know, polyamorous communal living as a response where you're right, date night's a little ludicrous, let's all just sort of have wobbly boundaries and live in the sort of openness of breaking the monolith. The reason I'm hesitating to go there is because I don't want to advocate for anything but it is a way that I've seen people responding to just a lot of confusion.

AG: Right now I feel like we should really be free to experiment. All of our systems clearly are not working, we are living in a failed state and so why don't we try things? We might fail but as the kids say, we can fuck around and find out.

AI: You trace a lot of the brokenness of the caregiving system to capitalism because it individualizes us. There's a theory that the reason we went so hard on monotheism is because there was this moment when men realized they can never know if they're the actual father of their children and so creating a religion forces people to obey a singular masculine deity translated into obeying a singular masculine paternal leader.

I think about that a lot because one of my alternative universes of care is it doesn't matter who the parents are. It actually doesn't matter who the father is, it might not even matter who the mother is. And these days in America it *only* matters who the mother is. It only matters whose uterus did the work, right?

So that's just something I'm chewing on.

SUNDAY

Resham Mantri: What are some of the models you are seeing people use to figure out how to get the support and care they need in communities? Either unconventional models or traditional ones.

AI: During the pandemic, AAI became an access center for kids without internet access or adequate parent supervision. So, our gallery turned into a community center, full time childcare community educational access

center during the pandemic. The staff popped together and we asked ourselves, are we willing to take on this challenge in the heat of the viral pandemic that could literally kill us? And everybody was like, "Yes, you have to do it." Because this isn't education anymore, it's harm prevention. I'm thinking of Libraries, botanical gardens, public parks. In all these spaces, the most important thing becomes access. Forget pedagogy.

AG: We have had conversations with my daughter, she's asked about the difference between public and private. And this year, because of the pandemic, Seattle public schools made all school lunch free for everybody. The conversation that we are having is, if it's good enough for anyone in your class, it's good enough for you. And so I think public education and publicly funded programs, participation in them is key. Because if fewer people use them, they lose funding. It's about kind of doubling down our commitments to them. Especially people who have the option to not. I think it's important to make that choice and to really explain that choice.

AI: I think this ties back a little bit to this conversation around changing relationship structure. I think a reason why people get scared of intergenerational homes is because of the nightmare situation, where you can't leave toxic parenting or leave conservative households. Most of us emancipate ourselves because we want to improve our lives. And that's why independence is so great, because you get to do that on your own. And it's an important part of developing as a person. I think when we come back and get back into these communal systems, the most successful version of that is also giving everybody time to go off on their own to do their own thing. So letting everybody have vacation, letting everybody have, maybe their own private space, and maybe that's work for some people.

RM: Many of us find that ability to care for ourselves and have that space by leaving the structures of traditional marriage arrangements. It reminds me of what you said Anne, "You just leave the home and go to your job, and then something else will pop up to take care of the family."

AG: More woman need to leave. I think it's, once you start caring, it is this force that is deeply human, that is natural. Capitalism runs on scarcity, and I think care promotes abundance. And I think that that's the whole thing—people have too much of this mentality of, what is best for my child is what's best for my child. You know what I mean? Like it's a finite resource that I need to hold. Not that it's a thing that actually can keep giving and be beneficial to a lot of people. And that's why I think, I mean, care is really the engine of empathy.

Anne Ishii Recommends:

I'm gonna be basic and recommend timely consumable items:

Welfare/Practice by Lucy Liyou

Essential Labor by Angela Garbes

Long Division by Kiese Laymon

100% Pure Silk in Toronto

Bun Bo Hue from Café Diem

Angela Garbes Recommends:

Salt water (crying, sweating, or jumping in a body of water)

Ma and Me by Putsata Reang

Ctrl by SZA

Dance Church

Staying hydrated

Name

Anne Ishii and Angela Garbes

Vocation

writer / Director of Asian Arts Initiative and writer

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