

RESEARCH CONNECTION

The costs of care in contemporary poetry by women in Québec

By Dominique Héту, PhD



Why this research is important

This research showcases the importance and significance of literary productions for confronting, exploring, and imagining the costs and ambivalences of care, both as social values and everyday, ordinary sources of tension. The poetry collections bring the ambivalences of care into focus by showing the political and cultural interweaving of caring practices that perpetuate oppressive structures and those that allow healing, hospitality, and solidarity. The collections' shared concerns about embodied suffering and defiance to reclaim space uncover a promising cultural, ethical, and political discourse on vulnerability and disruptive care through poetic work.

What you need to know

This research project examines how ambivalent and problematic care forms trigger different responses in contemporary poetry collections written by women in Québec. The poetic language and strategies found in the collections interrogate care-related (medical, emotional, physical) and patriarchal violence that shapes, disrupts, and haunts the bodies found in poems, bodies in crises that claim hospitality and agency in both hostile and caring worlds.

How the research was conducted

Drawing on and intersecting research in feminist care ethics, vulnerability studies, and comparative literature, this project looked at how poetry complicates and challenges normative discourses on care and reimagines the way power dynamics operate through and impact caring practices. I worked with a corpus of fifteen poetry collections published in Québec between 2016 and 2021 and assessed and compared the similarities and differences between the poetic voices and how they interrogate and problematize ideas of healing, vulnerability, embodied pain, and feminist solidarity and resistance. More broadly, this work mapped current poetic practices in French that respond to and resist forms of oppression.

What the researcher found

It is striking how each collection relies on a double posture of giving and demanding, of shared responsibility and self-protection, highlighting the interconnection between autonomy and dependency and shedding light on the multitudes of care, the latter appearing as an ambivalent constellation of practices, gestures, and power relations. On the one hand, the collections show how these dynamics tend to reinscribe the minoritized subjects in essentialized and naturalized roles of caregivers or receivers subjected to practices that dismiss or deny their needs and agency. On the other hand, the poetic texts offer a critical thinking of care by imagining new relational models through intertextuality, figurative language, and symbolism. Thus, this poetry does not only exemplify or model philosophical or political configurations of care ethics: it contributes its own knowledge to lived experiences of pain and hostility.

How this research can be used

These literary texts address care as a historical and essentialized source of injustice and a radical, transformative category for rethinking subjectivity, vulnerability, and hospitality through form, poetic discourse, and symbolic worlds. The poetry collections shed light on the potential of literature for assessing, processing, and at times pushing back against oppressive care practices and institutions. This research also contributes to discourse at the intersection of cultural studies and feminist care ethics, stressing how a lot remains to be done to address the ubiquitous presence of care critically, and how it is mobilized in and by institutional, national, and cultural discourses. Finally, as a comparative and interdisciplinary project, this work resonates with current humanities and social sciences research on care-related topics, vulnerability, precarity, and power dynamics, including medical humanities, sociology, moral philosophy, and political science.

About the researcher

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Conference Papers

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Keywords

contemporary poetry, feminist care ethics, vulnerability, Québécois literature

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