



Lise Tovesdatter Skou

***GESTURES OF CARE
BECOMING A WARRIOR***

Essay by Mille Breyen Hauschildt

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GESTURES OF CARE BECOMING A WARRIOR

Text by Mille Breyen Hauschildt
ON POETICS OF MAINTENANCE

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

DESTITUENT BODIES?
by Lise Tovesdatter Skou

January 13 – March 10, 2024
Shown at Galleri Image
Vestergade 29
8000 Aarhus C
Denmark

And the symposium

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN FULLY HUMAN?

Director of Galleri Image:
Beate Cegielska

Translation and additional editing:
Asta Nyssönen

Exhibition documentation images:
Mikkel Kaldal

Graphic Design:
Lasse Krog Møller

Print:
Narayana Press

Kindly supported by



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ON POETICS OF MAINTENANCE

Mille Breyen Hauschildt

This short text is interested in the word maintenance. The text emanates from my ongoing PhD project, which examines maintenance – not just as endless and tiresome devalued work performed by the least privileged bodies – but also as a mode or trope relevant to literary and aesthetic analysis. If we have no language for repetitive and sometimes boring maintenance, if maintenance always recedes into the background and is made invisible, how can we, in a gentle way, inhabit a broken globe that is in need of the language of maintenance more than ever?

Holding hands

The term maintenance consists of two separate temporal levels, which are also considered by the British researcher of Psychosocial Studies Lisa Baraitser (b. 1967). She refers to them as the vertical and the horizontal mode¹ respectively, which is a division I will stick with and develop further.

The horizontal mode of maintenance is about keeping something going: to preserve, to prevent decay, to keep something the same, at the same level, or to let it continue to be as it is. I think of this mode as a practical condition that is about using your hands and which

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1 Baraitser, Lisa. "Touching Time: Maintenance, Endurance, Care". I Psychosocial Imaginaries: Perspectives on Temporality, Subjectivities and Activism. London, UNITED KINGDOM: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2015. 28

involves materialities: buckets, hoovers, clothesline, tools, wombs, nursing breasts, baby bottles, nappies, washcloths, and ovens.

The second mode is vertical and has to do with maintenance as we understand it in the context of the phrase ‘to maintain an argument’. I understand this vertical mode as a historicised or ideological dimension compared to the horizontal mode’s pragmatic nature. The vertical mode is about ‘holding up’, insisting, holding on, repeating an argument, and in my understanding is closely connected to a feminist reading of maintenance. As when I, through the novelists Ursula K. Le Guin and Virginia Woolf, link maintenance to storytelling and thereby also canonization – more specifically how women are continually/ continuously written out of history unless we constantly make an active effort to keep them in.

Maintenance is thus both a temporal trope that sticks to women and makes women’s lives, writings, and achievements invisible, but can also be thematized as active intellectual work that must be done in order to maintain women’s place in literary history or history in general. The vertical mode represents both the course of history and this insistent effort required to keep a marginalized idea, thinking or a marginalized work alive. The American feminist theorist Donna Haraway (b. 1944) presents a similar idea by exploring the necessity of maintaining focus on difficult ideas with her term ‘staying with the trouble’; to remember history, read pamphlets, and make yourself familiar with stories that may not be like your own.² At the same time, it may be appropriate to read this mode in a decolonial perspective, as when the French feminist thinker Françoise Vergès (b. 1952) emphasises that we as Europeans need to remember and dwell on our colonial past if we want a better future, as this colonial past is so closely linked to the way we prey on the planet, on the global south, and on women.³ One could also say that telling ‘the other story’ is demanding and insistent work that must be done actively and

2 Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the trouble: making kin in the Chthulucene*. Experimental futures: technological lives, scientific arts, anthropological voices. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

3 Federici, Silvia. *Revolution at point zero: housework, reproduction, and feminist struggle*. Oakland, CA : Brooklyn, NY : London: PM Press ; Common Notions : Autonomedia, 2012; Ruido, María. “Just Do It! Bodies and Images of Women in the New Division of Labor” (2011); Vergès, Françoise. “Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender - Journal #100”, 2019.

consistently because we have to tell stories that differ from dominant narratives, which requires us to refrain from making use of the automated script.

Etymologically, ‘main’ comes from the Latin ‘manus’, which means hand, and ‘tenance’ comes from ‘tenere’, which means ‘to hold’. Maintenance connotes with its original etymological meaning to ‘hold someone’s hand/ to hold something in the hand’, or ‘cover with your hands’ to ‘maintain things through work using the hand’. The etymology points to the caring aspect of maintenance and to its direction towards other people, things, or organisms. And if it is not already apparent, I will here state that maintenance, in my investigation, like the container in Le Guin’s essay *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1986) is a gendered entity. The container is the womb, the bundle, the child’s carrying bag, and the maintenance work has, in modern Western history, particularly imposed itself on the female body. At the same time, you cannot overlook that this dynamic operates intersectionally. The devaluation of maintenance and the requirement to carry out maintenance work historically does not only stick to the female body, but also to brown, black, and marginalized bodies in general. The less privileged you are as a human being, the more likely you are to be involved in maintenance work. To use the term ‘feminised work’ to describe these kinds of fluid and all-encompassing precarious working conditions to which white housewives have been subjected in the industrialised 20th century home is in many ways a meaningful, as it recognises the socialisation of the Western woman into caring, domestic, and maintenance practices. At the same time, the housewife designation is linked to a culturally, historically, and geographically specific subject, namely the white middle-class woman, while precarious and all-encompassing working conditions have been commonplace for brown and black bodies on a much larger historical and global scale. Today, it is still the least privileged bodies who handle the lion’s share of economically and socially devalued care work on a global level,⁴ and as we in the West get more and more supermarkets, institutions, and workplaces, according to the French political scientist Françoise Vergès, we must

4 Federici, Silvia. *Revolution at point zero: housework, reproduction, and feminist struggle*. Oakland, CA : Brooklyn, NY : London: PM Press ; Common Notions : Autonomedia, 2012; Ruido, María. “Just Do It! Bodies and Images of Women in the New Division of Labor” (2011); Vergès, Françoise. “Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender - Journal #100”, 2019.

remember that they are predominantly cleaned by brown and black women every day.⁵ Maintenance is always racialised as well, so when Mierle Laderman Ukeles asks who will clean up after the revolution, we can fittingly let Vergès’ question ring alongside it: *Who cleans the world?*⁶

The Dismissal

Ursula K. Le Guin rejects the hero, the heroic narratives, and our historiography; the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles rejects the revolutionary ideals, and the masculine artistic genius; and the Italian American thinker Silvia Federici rejects classical Marxism, and its understanding of capitalist relations. All three point to masculine narratives that are so dominant in our Western culture that they completely hide and overshadow those that are caring, invisible, feminine and have to do with maintenance. All three of them also emphasise an urgent need for the latter types of narratives to be given more space and more value. While studying Literary Studies, I have been exposed to theories that valorise revolution or the disruptive, and which consider the potential of art to be in its ability to radically shake up that which has endured. I have diligently learned to argue for a work’s ‘subversive or revolutionary potential’ in my exam assignments. These are (white) theories that come out of the 20th century, out of a time when Nazism was looming and when the retrospective and reactionary posed a threat to a democratic and solidary society. Perhaps it is precisely because this characteristic resonates in contemporary social diagnostics that we continue to find these theoretical perspectives current and urgent. I see the type of thinking outlined above as an important formation and as essential for the development of students’ critical understanding of norms and power. And I would like to emphasize that similarities can easily be found between, for example, the French thinker Rancière’s and Le Guin’s thinking, as Rancière argues that art becomes political, when it creates new narratives that challenge the ruling order, or when fiction invents new structures for what can be said and done: “Art does not

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5 Vergès, Françoise. “Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender - Journal #100”. 2019. Viewed 30 May 2023. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/100/269165/capitalocene-waste-race-and-gender/>.

6 Vergès, Françoise. *A Decolonial Feminism*. London: Pluto Press, 2021. vi

enact politics by reaching the real. It enacts it by inventing fictions that challenge the existing distribution of the real and the fictional”.⁷ A statement from Rancière that recalls Le Guin’s desire to challenge the dominant phallic narratives with her carrier bag fiction. At the same time, the idea outlined above represents art-theoretical thinking that puts events, action, revolution, transcendence, and achievement at the centre. These are ideals that can obviously be characterised as linear temporalities and, following Le Guin, as phallic, heroic, and masculine. At the same time, they are temporalities and ideals that are not harmless since they hierarchise people and political subjects. And not least: overshadow the mode of maintenance and the background-like repetition that makes the world go round. Following Le Guin, one could argue that revolution is a *good story*: it is an isolated event that has a linear plot and a climax. At the same time, the outlined thinking has a gendered and racial aspect, which Federici, Ukeles, and the American author bell hooks all emphasise. The questions remain: Who can walk in the streets? Who will make sure that food is cooked, and children are comforted while the revolution happens? Who will pick up the trash afterwards? The poetics of maintenance is about turning the gaze elsewhere. Not without acknowledging the potential of transgression, but in order to acknowledge the temporalities and narratives that are relegated as insignificant in the shadow of the action and the event; to emphasize their enormous importance, indispensability, and sustainability. This kind of literature and aesthetics – a poetics of maintenance – calls for a different theorising than the usual cultural theory and literary studies that I was brought up with. The poetics of maintenance also contains the possibility of a *politics*: a politics that valorises the time, space, and labour of maintenance.

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7 Rancière, Jacques. “Statement on the occasion of the panel discussion: ‘Artists and Cultural Producers as Political Subjects. Opposition, Intervention, Participation, Emancipation in Times of Neo-liberal Globalisation’, presentation during the conference ‘Klartext! Der Status des Politischen in aktueller Kunst und Kultur’”. Berlin, 14 January 2005: 3









