

*Trans Care*; Hil Malatino, University of Minnesota Press, 2020. 90 pages, \$10.00 Paperback

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**Malatino, Hil. (2020). *Trans Care*. The University of Minnesota Press.**

Hil Malatino's (2020) *Trans Care* engages in critical and necessary work to interrogate how we understand what care is and how we care for one another. In the span of 70 pages, Malatino posits an alternative way to conceive what it means to give and receive care and illustrates how care takes place within trans communities while urging us to further this praxis of care.

Malatino begins with the story of his top surgery and the aftercare from the people within his "care web," which many trans people have developed, given how little support we often receive from biological families and society. The first chapter, "Surviving Trans Antagonism," provides the overall trajectory of the book and dives into the political climate that works to erase trans people. Malatino ends the chapter with a relatively simple claim: trans kids deserve to grow up without having to be "already suspicious, already untrusting" or burnt out.

The second chapter, "Beyond Burnout," considers how trans people are stretched thin in a constant cycle of caring for and being cared for, but continue to do so anyway. Malatino further explores the burnout that comes with hypervisibility, even through acts of allyship, and what sort of world might become open to us if we were to abolish gender institutionally and legally. The chapter ends by ruminating on "post-scarcity" in relation to the medical needs of trans people, how we come together for collective survival, and how those methods of survival relate to the concept of care.

The third chapter, “Theorizing Trans Care,” discusses how trans people alter understandings of gender, calling into question the hierarchy and “natural” structure of family dynamics. This disturbs how the labor of care through domesticity within households/families has been centered in previous feminist work. Most importantly, Malatino argues that though we understand care to be labor, we also should avoid understanding care through the neoliberal lens of an “equal exchange.” Care cannot be construed as debt that must be repaid because care cannot be measured, nor should we try to measure it.

In the fourth chapter of “Something Other Than Transcestors: Hirstory Lessons,” Malatino describes how diving into queer and trans archives became another strategy for Malatino to cope with such hostility. However, Malatino also grapples with an ethical duty that comes with caring for trans archives—respecting the lives of the people represented in those archives who we can never truly know, even as we try to tell their stories. He ends by contending that we should not think of the trans people represented in archives as “transcestors” but instead consider how they are deeply connected to our current existence.

The final chapter of the book is “Trans Care Within and Against the Medical-Industrial Complex,” and it considers the ways that medical institutions have historically failed and continue to fail to care for trans people. Malatino argues that if the medical field does not support us, then we must support each other, highlighting how we crowd fund for surgeries and hormone therapy, provide advice on navigating fraught medical situations, and ultimately comfort each other. However, to truly enact care means to focus also on meeting needs collectively and not only individually—particularly when *which* individuals receive care is often rooted in and can perpetuate existing inequities and injustices. Malatino ends the book with a call

to acknowledge what we owe each other: to show up however we can and to care for one another, and that doing so habitually and instinctively will push us to reject a world that does not.

### **Analysis: What Comes Next?**

*Trans Care* is a pivotal work in the rhetoric of health and medicine that complicates our understanding of care work and community. Within our work, we must not uphold exclusionary framings of care, especially to answer the call of this special issue to focus on queer and trans communities. Malatino provides just one path to shifting that mindset.

My own thoughts on what care is and how to enact it have grown significantly. I am familiar, through personal experience as a trans and queer person, that centering biological family when considering care was reductive and, for many of us, not a reality.

However, I had not often considered care outside of domestic spheres. When I thought of care, I thought of my wife caring for me when I broke my toe or taking over doing more of the housework as I worked through a difficult depressive episode. Care for me had been something confined within the domesticity of my home, even if that home does not conform to the heterosexual nuclear family. But care was also when one of my cohort members sent me a Starbucks gift card while I was completing my comprehensive exams. Care was when one of my close friends carried our heavy air conditioners up from our basement because it made my life easier. Care was when a colleague listened to my struggles with motivating myself to do research and invited me to join an academic support group. These were all moments of others showing up for me in small but meaningful ways. This was such an important realization on my end, and I am grateful to Malatino's book for providing that framework.

As I read *Trans Care*, however, I found myself thinking of how we no longer live in the world where this book was written. The political climate Malatino wrote about has been

amplified beyond bathroom bills, becoming bills aimed to force trans people to detransition; threaten to imprison parents and medical professionals who support trans people; criminalize being trans, performing drag, and even simply dressing in a gender nonconforming manner in public spaces; and demand young girls to undergo invasive inspections of their genitalia and disclose personal reproductive health information to participate in sports. The hostility and erasure continues to bear down on trans people, furthering burnout and exhaustion. For many of us, our webs of care have therefore become more fragile, more strained.

Compounding this growing anti-trans cultural shift, and heavily intertwined with its proliferation, is the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. COVID has fundamentally altered how we interact with one another and how we care for each other. Physical contact is no longer just a simple act of comfort but also a potential threat to our health. In this instance, caring for someone sick with COVID inherently puts the caregiver at risk. The public places that Malatino argues care occurs—“the street, the car, the clinic, the community center, the classroom, the nonprofit...” (p. 42)—now feel unsafe, especially as preventative measures are eroded even further.

This does not mean Malatino’s work is no longer applicable—nor does it mean that we have no more ways to show up for each other, as Malatino calls for us to do. While physical care in physical spaces is important, it has never been the only way to care for one another. Malatino even describes how we can provide support outside of just physical care, specifically through connection over social media, and the possibilities that care opens up. However, we cannot, as Malatino emphasizes, allow the individual acts of care for survival to eclipse care as a collective need in the pursuit of a more just society.

So, then, what happens next? What does it look like to enact, as Malatino describes it, the “dual movement wherein we highlight the imperfection and complicity that characterizes contemporary forms of trans care praxis as we push for collective redistribution” (p. 70)? I don’t know. There is no simple answer that anyone can give. However, I hope this special issue and other scholarship on the rhetoric of health and medicine can be part of solving contribute to discussions of the nuanced, messy, and difficult work involved in care.

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Teresa (they/them) is a PhD student in the Writing, Rhetoric, and Cultures department at Michigan State University. Their research centers around professional writing pedagogy, curriculum development, and administration. Their dissertation will be surveying the current landscape of professional writing programs and the Professional and Public Writing program at MSU.