

Beyond the Binary: The intersection of care, identity and integration **

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Abstract: The giving, receiving and exchange of care in a grassroots, independent, Zagreb-based engaged-art organization, becomes a symbol of subversion, standing up against the very cultural and structural violence that de facto divides people and assigns them their different roles: care-giver (volunteers, locals, benefactor) and care-receiver (asylum seeker, refugee, Majority World foreigner, beneficiary). Within the organization, care is part of the community-building process but also part of the arsenal to redefine relations beyond the binary. The paper seeks to explore the interception of care, identity and integration by considering care's impact on questions of empowerment and well-being. In this organization, care is a fundamental part of its identity and community-building, helping to redefine the understanding of concepts such as integration. The research draws on the author's ongoing ethnographic with the Živi Atelje Dajht-Kralj art organization based in Zagreb, Croatia.

Key words: mutual accompaniment, identity, care, integration, art organization

Biography: Cyrille Cartier is a PhD student at the University of Zadar Doctoral School of Humanities, interdisciplinary field with the mentorship of Prof.dr.sc. Senka Božić-Vrbančić. She has lived in several countries and worked in the field of journalism and education with a focus on gender-related issues. She is one of the co-founders of Živi Atelje Dajht-Kralj, (Živi Atelje DK) an independent, interdisciplinary, non-governmental and non-profit organization that uses art for exploration of identity, healing and community-building. She is project coordinator of the No Borders projects including the Integration of Art-Art of Integration project and the Women to Women collective.

Let me begin with a scene, an anecdote:

We sit at a table in silence. Several days have passed since the news of the earthquake in Turkey and Syria. One of our friends lost her cousin, her cousin's husband and their three children. We all get up to hug her. We share in the special food she made for the occasion. It is a tradition from home accompanying death, she says.

We feel the weight of the grieving. Add the distance.

One more friend gets a call from her mother asking her to reach out to distant family in another part of Europe who also lost a relative. "Don't send a message, call them," her mother insists. For our friend, to call would be overwhelming. She doesn't want to call. Hearing the cries, the pain, brings more pain and there is enough pain here.

We support her choice.

As a community, we embrace when we are face to face, and share stories; exchange translated text messages when we are apart. We attenuate fears. We fuel hope to heal more. Again, we hug.

Our circle of care...

Care is expressed through mutual accompaniment. It is a means of individual and collective empowerment.

The emphasis is on mutuality, an attempt at living by values of solidarity, horizontal participation, and equality while keeping check on power relations and privilege (Watkins 2019).

Balancing between care-giving, care-receiving and self-care, is what helps us uphold those values. The imbalance is dangerous. It can exacerbate the inequality and power hierarchy, and uphold the structural injustices.

At this junction of history in a conservative context, this way of understanding individual identity and this way of being as a collective, is at the core, subversive.

Perhaps now is the time to introduce myself as a PhD student who is also co-founder of Živi Atelje DK, (Living Atelier DK), an independent, interdisciplinary, non-governmental and non-profit organization that uses art for exploration of identity, healing and community-building since 2015.

For the PhD I am using critical autoethnography and collaborative autoethnography to focus on Živi Atelje DK cooperative that works on community-building with diverse people through artistic practices, mutual accompaniment and reinterpreting identity. I also explore concepts of integration, horizontal participation, power, care, tolerance, belonging and othering, and my positionality as an educator, researcher, activist, and NGO member.

Throughout this text, when I use “we,” I am referring to the organization, and in the context of the research, I am identifying with the political ways and practice of the NGO. The interplay of the “I” as researcher and “we” as the Živi Atelje DK community is constantly intermingling.

Coincidentally, during the year we were founded thousands of people on the move poured through Croatia. They were met with trepidation, fear or outright violence. However, this mainstream public reaction was offset with ample acts of kindness and open arms.

We got engaged and contributed by opening our space and starting the art project entitled No Borders: Integration of Art-Art of Integration.

In the spring of 2016, borders officially closed. Many were stuck here. We decided to focus our outreach on women who were less mobile than men, the appointed caregivers of the family. The Women to Women collective we initiated brings together women who want to make a home in Croatia with women who already have a home in Croatia.

At our safe space, every week since 2016, we come together, doing art and sharing as individual women, not just as mothers, wives, daughters. We organize workshops, gatherings, exhibitions related to various art forms including ceramics, glass, needle arts, photography, food, dance, gong fu tea, and public engaged art. Soon we started parties. Joy was needed. Music, dance and, of course, food, making food together. These were the first, intuitive, steps in accompaniment.

Mutual Accompaniment with/through Care

Mary Watkins, in her book “Mutual Accompaniment and the Creation of the Commons,” calls this ecopsychosocial accompaniment; an interlacing of the psychological with the social and the environment. No separating, no prioritizing one over the other.

Accompaniment is, as Watkins expands, an “offering of human connection, sociocultural understanding, and action on political and cultural levels against oppression and for liberation.” (2019)

For us, over the years, awareness, understanding and practice of accompaniment grew and developed.

In the beginning, it was predictable: “Care givers” were typically Croatian women with more privilege in terms, at least, of mobility and knowledge of the lay of the land and language, if not financial. “Care receivers” were the recent arrivals, who did not speak the language, and were obviously limited in terms of movement and rights.

In the mainstream narrative the distinction is still prevalent: care-giver is local, volunteer, donor, benefactor and acts in opposition to the care-receiver: refugee, Majority World foreigner, beneficiary, migrant—or similar category.

Even if superficially benevolent, this begs reexamination as the actions stemming from it may simply be ones of further humiliation and/or control, in a system that reflects inherent cultural and structural violence, in a system that does not care. (Chatzidakis et al. 2020)

Though, for us, as for many others, the encounters of those fresh beginnings were meaningful and genuine, they were of a different depth compared to those encounters that have had time to mature.

Two points are key, relative to accompaniment, as a way of being in the world: The recognition of our interconnection and interdependence, as well as the recognition of the transformative aspect on ourselves, our relations, our environment, and the possibilities for the future for all.

The interconnection of people through their social relations, transforms the identity.

Identity

Amin Maalouf conceptualizes identity as a dynamic assemblage of components, the collective identities such as nationality, gender, religion, and one's specific experiences, and the stories one carries that shape us. Our identity transforms as we live in the world (Horton 2014, Maalouf 2001, Woodward 1997).

Identity is the combination and constant tension, in a pull and push dynamic, of the parts of ourselves that link us to greater collectives, and the parts related to our being as individuals. As social creatures, we navigate the relation in order not to be abandoned, in order to be accepted, to belong. (Maté 2022)

When individuals with several affiliations are asked to identify themselves, they are expected to choose sides based solely or mainly on “loyalties”: “It presupposes that “deep down inside” everyone there is just one affiliation that really matters, a kind of “fundamental truth” about each individual, an “essence” determined once and for all at birth, never to change thereafter.” (Maalouf 2001, 2)

The order and importance of our components change depending on context. This is visible in times of conflict, for example, when certain components get the spotlight while shadowing the rest.

No two individuals can have the same assemblage/collection or order of those components of their identity. Somewhat paradoxically, the more ways we find to connect to others—the more allegiances we have—the more unique our identity becomes. (Maalouf 2001)

The point to be emphasized is not merely the uniqueness but, rather, this idea that change is the constant. Transformation is the common denominator. Through our encounters we are all in continuous transformation.

“We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others. As contamination changes world-making projects, mutual worlds—and new directions—may emerge. Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option.” (Tsing 2017, 27)

The idea of purity is a fascinating one: the lure of purity, purity of white, of a white dress, for a wedding or a funeral. It calls for bleaching, for constant washing, an aggression.

But if we can agree with what Tsing writes—that contamination is everywhere—then by implication, the purity of culture, of national or collective identity, is a false and toxic myth.

In the context of growing conservative and nationalist tendencies, garnering support on the basis of “purity” by inducing fear, hate, and exclusion, what becomes of the utmost importance is emphasizing dynamic identity.

If people can better grasp the idea of an ever-evolving identity of individuals then, by extension, they can create different kinds of communities. They can develop connections with each other regardless, or rather, based on the diverse components of collective identities.

Visualized, those communities resemble the structure of tensegrity. Tensegrity, a term coined by R. Buckminster Fuller, is a relational structure held together, and shaped by, the continuous tension between the parts.

Mutual accompaniment, this balance of our interactions and interdependencies, is what creates this fluid, dynamic whole.

From a young age we are taught to embrace linearity, presented as progress, and to fear instability—almost by implication, to fear change.

As Tsing writes, “Precarity is the condition of being vulnerable to others. (...) Thinking through precarity changes social analysis. (...) Indeterminacy, the unplanned nature of time, is frightening, but thinking through precarity makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible.” (2017, 20)

In other words, we are all vulnerable in various and continuous ways. If we embrace the idea of the normalcy of precarity and ever-transforming and transformative identity, this might lessen the fear. We could improve our way of being, belonging and caring— together. We'd embody mutual accompaniment as integration.

Integration

Another anecdote to share: Two local friends commented to each other how another friend who was born in another country had integrated very well because she speaks very good Croatian with a Zagreb accent. She also has some of the mannerisms to match.

Though their comment was meant as a compliment, and was well-intended, the implications of their words are actually scary and dangerous.

As if to say that a person well integrated is someone you cannot distinguish in any way. As if it is about mimicry, fitting in order not to stand out. As if to say: 'Look like us, be like us, speak like us and then you are successfully integrated.'

In their engrained linearity of benevolence they imply purity and omit their own assumptions about what integration is, how it is done and who is involved in the process. They don't think about what their friend had to give up or compromise in order to be "well integrated." They don't think that their comment places the 'I', opposite or even against the 'other.'

"As long as conceptualisations of integration as a two-way process reinforce a boundary between 'people who integrate' and 'people who do not integrate', they are unfit to avoid the problems of one-wayness which they intended to overcome in the first place." (Klarenbeek 2021, 902)

Usually the onus or responsibility of integration is assumed to be on the person who is new, the newcomer, the one who has "recently" arrived. "They" need to integrate into "us."

It is not just a question of semantics. Even the word 'inclusion' is not satisfactory as it implies exclusion, implies that whatever someone is being included into is already established.

At our art organization, with years, our intuitive practice matured to the now formulated practice we continue to explore: Integration as a process involving everyone in the creation of an ever-evolving community, using art as a tool to bring people together through mutual accompaniment.

We also do outreach and engage with the public through traveling exhibitions and interactive workshops; through cooperation with other organizations like the Centar za kazalište potlačenih POKAZ (Center for Theater of the Oppressed) and artists, such as ceramicists Lidia Boševski and Anja Slapničar, and with selma banich, by making of the banner for Women's Night March in 2020 and, with both her and Marijana Hamersak, in the making of the Passage, a commemorative eco-printed embroidered collage of portraits of people who died, some killed, on their journey to pursue a better life.

Together, we rage and we love. Let us here “integrate” a phenomenon of Care that we started with: Each one gives care, each receives care, each needs to do self-care in order to be able to give and receive.

Care, mundane

We share in the long-distance good news, a birth, a document granted; in the long-distance bad news, a death, an illness; and in the local and immediate, a birthday, menstrual cramps, the death of a pet, dancing, depression, and cooking, crying, laughing together. We celebrate and we mourn. We are involved in the day-to-day of each of our lives.

The practice of care through mutual accompaniment has the possibility of playing the role of a great equalizer. Although giving and receiving care involves compassionate intentions, framed in hierarchical power relations and enacted without reflection, such interactions can reinforce power differentials and inequality, and become their own opposite—toxic and uncaring (Chatzidakis 2020, Halifax 2018, Watkins 2019).

If the circle of care—giving care, receiving care, doing self-care—is not balanced, then it affects everyone: the individual, the community and the environment.

The imbalance of the circle of care manifests in the individual as burnout, stress, loss of confidence, depression, or dependency, and results in the community as inequality, inflexibility, short term material gain for long-term loss of membership, loss of collective feeling, and exclusion.

Tensegrity becomes rigid to a breaking point or loosened into inexistence.

A lot has been said about the giving and receiving components of the care triangle. In many ways, self-care has never been easier: The plethora of options from spa retreats, tailor-made health plans, individualized phone applications that measure health-related metrics, while supposedly putting the individual at centerstage, masks the inherent expectation on the individual to stay fit, maintain youth and resilience as a productive member of society. These efforts deter our attention from structural problems and long-term response to those problems.

The authors of “Radical Care: Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times,” write that “Self-care is both a solution to and a symptom of the social deficits of late capitalism, (...) a way of preparing individuals for increased productivity in demanding workplaces.” (2020, 2-4)

But reclaiming self-care to empower oneself in order to be able to critically examine and transcend imposed roles and tasks we are expected to fulfill, and to engage in collective care, are all acts of defiance, generative and radical.

As we matured, as I matured, I began to see my own actions of care in a different light.

Another anecdote: As part of our programs, a woman volunteered to drive other women from the reception center to our atelier. She did this every week for many months yet never ventured into the reception center known as Porin.

One day we met in the parking lot of Porin and I encouraged her to come inside with me. We went

to visit several women, chatted at the doorway of their rooms or went inside to say hello. Upon leaving the center, she turned to me with a pained expression on her face and said, "nije mi sve jedno." ("it isn't that it is all the same to me," i.e. "I care") The emotions were difficult for her.

I cared. I cared for her. I cared for the people she had been driving every week. I cared to help her—without her asking for it—I cared to help her break down what I saw as her inhibitions. But, in so doing, I also showed carelessness to all.

The visit resembled a bit of a zoo with a hint of patronization on my part - 'let me show you how it is done and then you can follow.'

She knew her emotional limits and was comfortable only with driving from point A to point B. My actions undermined her space of Self care. My actions denied the women their agency. Now I know, care can become its opposite.

"To accompany, rather than to "treat" or "advise," requires psychic decolonization, becoming mindful of entrenched proclivities to reenact vertical hierarchies based on colonial categories and experiences, including those from experiences of formal education and professionalization." (Watkins 2019)

All these theories affect us in Živi Atelje DK at a very pragmatic level.

Despite the generous donations of time and resources of our members, as an organization, we are caught up in the system of competing for funds from grants.

To illustrate with an example: In a project proposal framework, a woman, a refugee, from a Central Asian country of origin for example, is a vulnerable or marginalized person, a beneficiary. In the reality of our organization, she is at the same time the volunteer, the expert or consultant, the mentor or even project coordinator. Her role is not predetermined according to the aspect of her identity that is most often emphasized in the mainstream narrative—her being a refugee and a woman. She is an active participant in mutual accompaniment.

So what do we do? We peel onions searching for the essence. We work on transparency, unwrapping the context. We set the stage for individual choices to be formulated. It is not about simplifying but about being more thorough, more transparent as part of how to be more inclusive while being aware of the constant of power relations at play. We try to explain, unpack and reveal the inner workings. It implies mindset and actions that are process-oriented and not goal-oriented. (Our multilingual setting requires time, requires each one to take care in how we communicate. When we send messages online to each other, we include a minimum of seven languages. The languages that echoed through the organization in the last nine years (in alphabetical order) are: Arabic, Armenian, "Dobardanski" (an increasingly common term encompassing all languages sharing in the greeting of "dobar dan" or "good day"), English, French, Kurdish, Nepali, Persian, Russian, Spanish, Tigrinya, Turkish, Urdu and Ukrainian.)

We encourage a participatory approach where we, the members, collectively, do the brainstorming, planning, organizing, decision-making and implementation. In this approach the process of including diverse voices takes precedence over expediency.

The participatory approach is a form of care-balance and encouragement of mutual accompaniment throughout all of our activities.

Sara Ahmed writes, "We reassemble ourselves through the ordinary, everyday and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other. This is why when we have to insist, I matter, we matter, we are transforming what matters." (2014)

Because care is so invisible, unrecognized, and undervalued, bringing the limelight to care is in and of itself political.

Dean Spade writes: "To argue that in the context of crisis everyone has something to offer, that we are all valuable and we can work to include us all, is a significant intervention on the disposability most of us are taught to practice toward one another and the passivity we are encouraged to feel about direct engagement to remake the world." (Spade 2020, 145)

Here in Croatia, our way of caring through mutual accompaniment is a way of being that is political.

We confront the structural injustices that preserve the status quo of inequality and oppression, by contesting the mainstream understanding of integration and identity, and by reframing care as a dynamically balanced triangle of giving care, receiving care, and doing self-care, as part of mutual accompaniment.

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