

Kelly Dombroski, *Caring for Life: A Postdevelopment Politics of Infant Hygiene*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2024. ISBN: 9780816679850 (cloth); ISBN: 9781517901608 (paper); ISBN: 9781452970783 (ebook)

How practices emerge, endure, or might be altered has been of key interest to scholars concerned with sustainability and social change (for example, Shove et al. 2012). I have always been curious as to how questions of power, privilege, convenience, time, education, affordability, infrastructural support, and cultural context shape everyday sustainability practices, as people concerned for wellbeing of people and planet work to mitigate their environmental impacts (Mee et al. 2014; Palmer et al. 2015; Williams et al. 2024). Yet how do such practices emerge, survive, and proliferate? How might new practices be learnt and what is needed to support them?

Reflections on such complex questions are at the heart of this book which is in conversation with scholars from post-development, feminist geographies, community economies, environmental geography, feminist political ecology, and science and technology studies. At the centre of *Caring for Life* is the concept *weisheng*, translated literally to mean “guarding life” in English (p.6-7), and the practices and traditional knowledge of *baniao*, which Dombroski describes as “holding babies out to urinate rather than leaving them to do so in a nappy” (p.5). As Dombroski notes, personal and domestic hygiene practices are not often the focus of academic work. However, due to the resource consumption involved in how hygiene is practiced, understanding the origins of taken-for-granted practices which are far from universal, might offer insight into how they might transition to something else. In *Caring for Life* Dombroski reminds us that this work is already in process as diverse embodied hygiene practices informed by different cosmologies, ontologies, and epistemologies endure despite the dominance of Western hygiene practices. Whilst the minority world is reliant upon the intensive use of water to support dominant hygiene practices, Dombroski seeks to destabilise the assumption that such practices are superior, instead uncovering a multiplicity of practices which sustain life. This book provides an ethnographically rich empirical and personal account of how collectives are participating in these diverse hygiene practices in China, Australia, and Aotearoa New Zealand. It charts how

these practices have “survived and thrived” despite globalisation and the power of multinational corporations, in order to reflect upon how social change occurs more broadly.

Chapter 1 lays the foundations for the overall focus of the book, providing an understanding of the concepts of hygiene multiplicity, post-development, and assemblage thinking. Vital to this, is an understanding of multiplicity and exploration of place-based hygiene assemblages, that is “the materialities, socialities, and spatialities of hygiene that we see gathered in particular places at particular times” (p.7). The chapter troubles particular assumptions around personal and domestic hygiene practices, providing the example of handwashing in Tibet, amongst others, to establish that even a taken-for-granted hygiene practice such as handwashing cannot be assumed to always be helpful for health. Thus, Dombroski establishes that practices which contribute to health need to be understood in context. Whilst participation in hygiene practices is universal, they are diversely comprised, practiced, understood, and experienced.

The chapters throughout the book are punctuated by various “interludes” which provide further detailed insight into Dombroski’s lived experiences as a parent and researcher. They are both autobiographical and strongly grounded in extensive fieldwork. Chapter 2 provides an in-depth account of hygiene assemblages and practices of *baniao*, or assisted infant toileting in Xining, China. It provides a “thick description” of the habits, routines, materialities, temporalities, cultural beliefs, practices, and histories around *baniao* and breastfeeding. Chapter 3 provides historical depth and understandings of the history of hygiene in China, charting “trajectories of health and hygiene”, how they interact, how they shift, their shadows, their frictions, and awkward engagements. Dombroski outlines the different understandings of the body and how Chinese traditional medicine begins to integrate Western biomedicine at the same time as challenging it. Two key takeaways from this chapter stand out. Firstly, in tracing the historical trajectories there is not a single story, but rather multiplicity. By reading for a single story, Dombroski asserts we might miss the existence of other realities. In this case, it is the enduring concept of *weisheng* in Chinese-style hygiene practices which is revealed in the writing of Nie Yuntai, described as a “reformist”, “Christian and a wealthy industrialist...who supported hygienic modernity in the post-Manchurian plague era” (p. 90). Nie Yuntai’s writings are explored in the work of historian Sean Hsianglin Lei. Dombroski draws upon Lei’s work to understand the role played by Nei Yuntai in

configuring Chinese-style hygiene. She explains that whilst Nie initially advocated for Western-style hygiene practices he later:

concluded that the obsessive pursuit of “modern hygiene” was a sort of save-yourself-first individualism that could only be implemented by those with the material conditions to do so: the very wealthy. (p.90)

This critique resonates with much of the literature of care in geography which is concerned with how neoliberal care ethics reinforce care as an individual responsibility (Power and Bergan 2019; Tronto 2017; Williams 2020). Whereas, like the Chinese-style hygiene advocated by Nie Yuntai, hygiene, as a form of care, is a collective endeavour. Secondly, this chapter further highlights the power of naming and making visible:

Lei’s gathering and naming of Chinese-style hygiene somehow gives it more solidity, makes it more of a viable option—not just historically but also currently. The very naming of Chinese-style hygiene calls it into being. No longer a vague haunting drifting around the fringes of history, *weisheng* is now given form... (p.94)

From such quotes it is easy to see how this book is not just for those interested in post-development and hygiene practices. It can also be read for instruction on writing and insights into how to weave together historical, ethnographic, and auto-ethnographic work.

Chapter 4 changes locations, shifting gears to explore the various hybrid hygiene assemblages of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand and how groups of practitioners have adopted “*baninao*-like practice[s] of elimination communication” (p.101).¹ This chapter explores how practices have travelled and the collectives that have formed to support, share, experiment, and engage with elimination communication. It is interesting to reflect, as Dombroski does, on how people get involved in these collectives and the extent to which they engage with practices beyond the mainstream (in this case, the mainstream would be the use of disposable nappies). Dombroski notes that some are “part-time” practitioners of

¹ Elimination communication is a form of assisted infant hygiene also known as “nappy-free hygiene, natural infant hygiene” (p.10) or “holding out babies to eliminate their waste” (p.103).

elimination communication rather than having to adopt the practice full time. The collective offers different perspectives, creative troubleshooting, and co-learning for those who participate, but also makes the collective work of individuals more visible. Similar hybrid collectives that support sustainability practices such as gardening groups, homesteading groups, sustainable living groups, and permaculture groups that are connected via social media and have in-person meetups come to mind, prompting reflection upon the role such groups play in supporting the adoption of sustainability practices.

Chapter 5 is a hopeful one, charting how shifts in practices might occur by engaging with other ways of doing hygiene through collectives. The chapter traces “speculative trajectories as much as historical ones” (p.130). Dombroski (p.131) positions history not just comprised of a dominant spectacular force but also as “small and everyday actions that collectively become something powerful enough to cause a swerve in the direction of a trajectory or in the assembling and reassembling of trajectories in place” (p.131). The chapter engages with Latour’s (2004) and other scholars’ work on *learning to be affected*, providing insight into how responding to awkward bodily engagements, new knowledges and mutual learnings might provoke a collective shift in practice. This chapter touches on the tensions around individual versus collective responsibility for care, sustainability, hygiene, etc. drawing on the work of Tronto (2017). Dombroski notes:

In my other research work, I have found that change often begins with small groups of people who assume responsibility to do things differently—not necessarily in the hope of completely changing a system but to work out some of the finer details on how to live differently in place. (p.141)

Tracing examples of such groups and the ways different realities of hygiene have emerged due to collective experiments provides insight into how social change is occurring and might occur. In the concluding chapter, “Guarding Life”, Dombroski reiterates the importance of thinking, and being open to, multiplicity.

Caring for Life is a book about care, hygiene, everyday practice, collective actions, and social change. It is not a singular story or narrative, but one of nuanced complexity. It challenges the singularity of understandings of hygiene and dominant discourses of Western

superiority. It offers a sophisticated insight into the situated, temporal, spatial, and embodied understandings of the ways hygiene is and might be practiced. The book provides an understanding of the functioning of various hybrid collectives and assemblages and the role they play in facilitating change, supporting shifts in knowledge and everyday practice. Like many books out of the community and diverse economies tradition, this is a hopeful book that offers insight into how collectives are already working to address contemporary environmental challenges. The book does not offer a neat ending but rather an openness and hopeful engagement with the possibility of listening to and learning from others in the pluriverse.

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