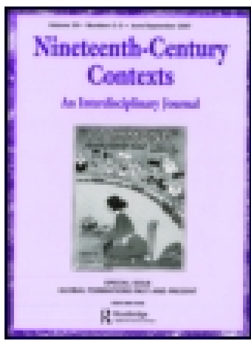

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Check for updates

The double-edged sword: academic pacing in a pandemic

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I felt very uncomfortable the summer when I discovered that my work was relevant. Travis Chi Wing Lau (2020) calls it "the double-edged sword of timeliness." As a Victorianist, I have always felt grateful to escape the stress I imagine my colleagues in political science feel when writing, say, about electoral politics, with research that is constantly racing to keep abreast of changing events. I imagine them running down the street, cameras in hand, desperately trying to keep up. By contrast, I recognize my privilege to be able to move at my own pace as I try to trace subtle, complex relations with the past. If my colleagues are like photojournalists, I am more like a painter who settles down into a comfortable chair in a quiet alcove to compose at leisure.

But now imagine this: What if, from that nook, a flicker of light catches your eye, and as you glance out the window, you glimpse the central term of your own work blinking in neon lights? What if you start seeing it zing back and forth, changing as it goes, too fast to catch up, taking on the shapes of other people's thoughts, skittering down the street? What if you, too, suddenly have to grab your camera and run?

I refer, you see, to care communities. For the past five or six years, I've been writing a book called *Communities of Care: The Social Ethics of Victorian Fiction*, in which I use ethics of care to read Victorian novels in order to figure out how care dynamics work within small social collectives. It is an interdisciplinary project that, frankly, for a long time, made readers dissatisfied. Literary critics liked my use of *Villette* but queried what they assumed was a naïvely essentialist second-wave feminist theory. I had to explain that ethics of care is actually a rigorous theory exploring subjects' interrelationality, now a major field in political and feminist philosophy (Kittay 2015). Meanwhile, feminist philosophers liked the ethics of care, but were baffled about why I would want to address fictional caregivers instead of real ones. I had to explain that because Victorian fiction depicted a culture that depended on amateur home caregiving, it played out the dynamics of group care in exceptionally interesting ways. If ethics of care was my armchair in the alcove, then, it was less comfortable than usual because I had to keep twisting around to justify my half-finished sketches to dubious viewers, but I still retained my seat; I still felt I controlled my choice about when, whether, and how to explain the theory.

Then – the pandemic arrived. Facebook got a care emoji. Amazon allowed people to rate deliveries based on care. Biden proposed a care plan. My daily junk mail announced in big letters that if I bought into telehealth, or spices, or shoes, I'd be doing care. Every

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day, blogs appeared in *Medium*, *Vox*, *LARB*, *Public Books*, proposing care in the classroom, care in academia, activist care, care collectives. The *New Yorker* ran an article on New Yorkers initiating care communities. My colleagues began initiatives and websites advocating for care activism. The MLA posted a report advocating an ethics of care in graduate education (Modern Language Association of America 2021). Universities rebranded themselves as a "Caring Community" (Cornell University 2021) or a "Culture of Care" (Michigan State University 2020). Care communities became the basis of sustained political action in 2020, enshrined by everyone from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to compositionist specialists.[1] Today, as I write these words, in the last three hours I've seen a speaker at a panel on urban planning invoke care as the rationale for reusing abandoned storefronts and read an online review of a new book by a hospice doctor about empathetic care. I'm not seeking this material out; it is everywhere.

It wasn't fun, actually. It made me panic. Lau (2020) asks, "How do we think, let alone theorize, current events as they evolve faster than we can process? How do we, as bodyminds enmeshed in the speed and immediacy of presentness mediated by ever-quickening forms of media, even have the space to do nuanced thinking about that which feels already belated the moment we attempt to write about it?" The habits of a lifetime of academic thought, the structural conditions of academic publishing, and the complexity of an interdisciplinary theoretical project working against two fields' entrenched assumptions, argued for slow and careful work. But everyone was carelessly throwing around the term "care," and that meant that a casual slapdash version was racing around so fast, out of control, it would be unstoppable by the time my book came out. In 2019, people evinced skepticism about care, but in 2020, everyone was gabbling about it as a generic feel-good moniker without a second thought.

Sometimes I wondered if my demand for precision and clarity regarding care was an overreaction. After all, having endured four years of cruelty, corruption, and suffering under Trump, we certainly needed to call for "care." Who would demur at the thought that we should all be more loving, accommodating, generous to one another? But: that is not care. And slipshod popular misuse can erode the value of a concept. As Arlie Russell Hochschild notes, "if you have an important conversation using muddy ideas, you cannot accomplish your purpose. You won't be understood by others. And you won't be clear to yourself" (Beck 2018). We academics have seen the degradation of important concepts. "Deconstruction" means a particular way of interrogating a concept's claims to wholeness, but it has been reduced to a classy synonym for "demolish." One cannot "deconstruct" a building, and yet that is how people use the term now. Similarly, Hochschild's "emotional labor" names the condition of performing inauthentic emotions as a job requirement, but today it has come to mean managing others' feelings. "Emotional labor" is not the same thing as consoling sobbing students. Hochschild is, understandably, rather saddened by this loss (Tippett 2018).

I believe that care matters. This means that we need to care in the best way we can, in informed, deliberate modes. Let me say it now: care is not about being kind, or pleading with other people to be nicer. Recommending congeniality is not "care." Of course, it is probably a good thing to be nicer, but that isn't what the theory is about. Rather, care is about meeting an other's need.

Care names how we interact, the basis of social interdependency – I meet your need, you respond by meeting mine – I give you something, you thank me; I greet you, I see

you, and you respond with a comparable salutation. Our social life consists of thousands of microcaring acts in constant negotiation, responsiveness, exchange. It is the opposite of the individualist ethos of classic liberalism. Instead of viewing ourselves as independent actors in control of our lives, we need to recognize that we are fundamentally enmeshed with others, and all actions affect the collective web. (Victorianists, of course, have very good authority for this.)

We need to negotiate because sometimes the cared-for may not like the care. This is particularly true when meeting another's need involves giving bad grades, administering painful therapies, or withholding substances that a recipient craves. For care to work well, the cared-for must be able to object, the carer needs to justify the act, and they both have to come to a mutual accommodation. In happier cases, too, the cared-for has to acknowledge the care as appropriate and welcome, so that the carer knows to continue it. The care exchange gets fine-tuned through discourse.

Fluidity is necessary for good care, too. Nobody should be stuck permanently in the roles of either carer or cared-for. Even significantly impaired people can help others, and even busy caregivers need attention. Carers require help in order to avoid depletion, while cared-fors need to feel useful so as to avoid feeling disempowered. In a care community, people also need to be able to move in and out of the group voluntarily, for forcing people into caregiving can be very damaging.

Fundamentally, *care* is an action, whereas *caring* is a feeling. They can exist independently of one another. Paid caregivers can meet a stranger's needs without necessarily loving that person. Conversely, we may adore someone to whom we cannot offer the kind of specialized help they required. Care is performative, for repeatedly performing acts of care usually generates the feeling of caring. Nurses, babysitters, aides, or teachers often come to feel affection for their charges. In short, acting and feeling are intricately knotted together and may produce one another, but they are not the same.

So a care community is not a group of people being as nice to each other as possible. It's a complex group dynamic where members negotiate through dialogue, respect each other as equals, fluidly and frequently shift between caregiving and care-receiving, enter and exit the group at will, and meet each other's needs even if the recipient does not always welcome it. We can witness this dynamic in the small voluntary collectives that populate Victorian fiction: the groups forming around Louisa Musgrove or Esther Summerson or Florence Dombey or Ralph Touchett. Those fictional case studies help us deduce some core structural elements of successful communities of care, to see how certain variables change the dynamic. Studying them might help us improve the way we conduct our own care communities today, particularly in academia.

To be honest, the frequent exhortations to turn the classroom into a care community upset me more than almost any other part of the popular writing on care that I read. These writers shared the inspirational vision of students and instructors jointly participating in mutually supportive social dialogues in which everyone worked together to figure out a fascinating problem. The problem is that, ironically, this vision can actually work against real care. Recall that care means meeting another's need, and one primary need, in this case, is learning. If the class turns into a community of friends, then that culture makes it much harder for an instructor to correct students or explain information. Better care happens when instructors set themselves to intuit and meet students' needs, and vice versa, negotiated through explicit conversations outlining what the other requires.[2]

At any rate, I needed to find a way to say so. And all I had was a book manuscript written in deep academic style. Could I make it accommodate the immediate present? At first I wondered if I should just write a series of blog posts instead of wading in to change the book. But every time I tried to draft one, I choked on the complications, unable to find a brief, breezy way to explain the minutiae of care ethics. Evidently I would have to figure out how to merge this imperative with my academic prose. But I wasn't sure how to make the casual voice of popular writing mesh with the more deliberative tone of professional literary criticism. Would the tone be jarring, for instance, if I cited tweets and blog posts in a scholarly monograph? Alternatively, could I expand my own narrative voice to a wider range to accommodate more heterogeneous sources? Timeliness is, as Lau notes, a two-edged sword. Writing from the middle of the crisis of 2020 might give the book an unusual sense of immediacy now, but it might make the book feel outdated later. *Communities of Care* would be published in the fall of 2021, which meant that reviews would probably appear in 2023, when (I hoped!) the pandemic would be long gone. Would care still be on readers' minds then?

In the summer of 2020, as I finalized the book manuscript, the mixed imperatives of urgency and contemplation were so stressful I hardly knew how to revise. I felt the paradox that Kyle C. Kaplan (2020) describes: "scholars have to adjust to the complex timing of making arguments that require slow, indulgent forms of reflection to articulate the need for immediate political action" (1011). Hurry up because the need is immediate, but do it with meticulous slowness. I was accustomed to writing as if I were slowly painting in a secluded alcove, but suddenly I had to introduce something like the flickering electric pulses I glimpsed outside, a digital montage. How could I generate a kind of hybrid style that worked with such very different materials simultaneously, while racing to do it as fast as possible? For every day, the newspapers, the media, the screen, filled with more voices calling out (incorrectly! incorrectly!) about care.

In the summer of 2020, I learned a few things, both about myself and about writing. I realized that I like to write about strange, detailed topics whose alterity challenges me to figure out their internal rules. I could easily spend a lifetime exploring any corner of Victorian life: periodicals, or jewelry, or mid-century domestic realism. But at the same time, I like to know that I can control the interface between that world and our own. I can choose to close the book, or I can decide to think about connections to our own time. 2020 taught me how terrifying it felt to lose that control, to be plunged into a vertiginous ongoing narrative careening onwards. At the same time, I recognized how lucky I was that my loss of professional control was limited to my writing, unlike so many of my students and friends. I could afford to take a chance because I've written enough books that this one could be just for fun. If I screwed up, it wouldn't matter. I was lucky: I had experience, and I could do this. I trained myself to observe those flickering lights, to record them, and learn to respond.

Eventually I developed a different writerly voice. Maybe I could say that I learned to mix iridescent highlights so as to reflect light from certain angles, giving the reader the sense of those electric flickers without fundamentally altering the colors beneath. To be more pragmatic, however, I'd say that my new style involved three things.[3] I inserted plenty of direct addresses to the reader and a lot of personal "I" claims. I cited popular media generously and often. And I added metaphors wherever I had previously had purely conceptual claims. I wrote about reaching hands, arching bridges, swaying

spiderwebs, cracked machines, fisheye lenses, easily visualizable things that were richly imbued with emotional resonances and poetic histories, and I did so while urging the reader directly: See! Understand! Feel it! I didn't change everything. Jonathan Kramnick (2021) describes quoting a source as smoothing a foreign voice into your own prose, when the mingled syntax of one's own and the borrowed language creates a kind of third space (225). That is something like what I aimed to do, mingling the new voice with my own old one, daubing those highlights to cluster particularly thickly at the beginning and end of the volume, while blending them away to disappear in the middle.

I missed having an experience of intellectual haven in the midst of the pandemic; it would have been pleasant to leave the news behind and dive into the rich other world of the Victorians. It would have been reassuring to retain the comforting sense of total control over when and how I chose to share my work. But you can't always choose your own challenges. Sometimes your work becomes relevant in spite of yourself. Sometimes events force you to change your intentions, your style, your intellectual mode. Sometimes you realize you are enmeshed with other speakers, like it or not. It wasn't nice, but who said nice is a good idea? Niceness may be what we want, but it may not be what we need. The pandemic forced me into a different mode, quickly and ruthlessly, and the experience has changed me as a writer. That is, in a way, what care does. It met my need, whether I liked it or not. It enmeshed me in complex negotiations, discursive adjustments, with an other outside myself. And in the process, it showed me that I had a need, that I'd become too comfortable, and it was time to open that window and learn to add the light outside to the page that lies before me.

Notes

1. For a representative sampling of care-related work during the pandemic – in fact, just from late May to August – see Cai (2020), Coyle (2020), Solnit (2020), Taussig (2020), and Tolentino (2020).
2. For a beautiful example, see Myers (2021).
3. In altering my style, I was inspired by Christina Sharpe's affecting, artistic *In the Wake*, Sara Ahmed's poetic focus on particular words, Jose Muñoz's attention to beloved popular culture, and Fred Moten's jazz-inspired brilliant riffs. Without for a moment classing my writing anywhere near theirs, I want to register my gratitude for their visionary work in making a different kind of writing possible for the rest of us.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Talia Schaffer is a professor of English at Queens College CUNY and the Graduate Center CUNY. She is the author of *Communities of Care: The Social Ethics of Victorian Fiction* (2021); *Romance's Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (2016); *Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (2011); and *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (2001), along with several edited volumes and more than 50 articles addressing Victorian familial and marital norms, disability studies, ethical readings, women writers, material culture, popular fiction, and aestheticism.

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