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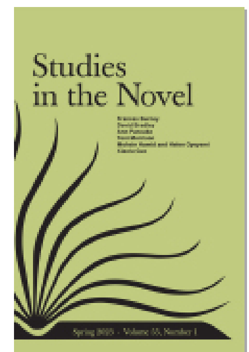
Communities of Care: The Social Ethics of Victorian Fiction by Talia Schaffer (review)



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O'Key investigates. The fascinating analysis of the opening of Sebald's *Austerlitz*, for example, dwells on a representation in order to make a claim about the relationship between the presence of animals and the form of the writing. This is something that most good literary animal studies scholarship does, even if, as O'Key observes, scholars do not always use the term "form." The most provocative way to use O'Key's ideas here might be to investigate the creaturely forms of texts that are not about, that perhaps do not even include, representations of animals. O'Key uses one such example in Richard Powers's *The Overstory*, but again his analysis is—perhaps unavoidably—focused on the representation of forests and trees. This is not a critique of method or argumentation, since *Creaturely Forms* does indeed, as I have said, bring fresh modes of interpretation to bear on its subjects of analysis. It is rather a question about, first, the separability of representation and form, and, second, about whether it is productive to propose such a separation. It seems to me that the presence of representations that might be seen as "animal interruptions" in the linearity of prose is always a formal strategy that, even momentarily, renders the text "creaturely."

Creaturely Forms in Contemporary Literature ultimately argues for the significance of literary texts as imaginations of a creaturely futurity, and as offering modes of reconciliation and ways of holding on to hope. It will find a readership among scholars across the environmental humanities, animal studies, and postcolonial studies—all fields that are urgently concerned with ideas of futurity on a fragile planet. As O'Key observes: "The stakes are too high for us to shy away from articulating the connections between human and nonhuman oppression" (163), and his work offers original ways of exploring these connections in the writing of authors who consistently place the creaturely at the center of their work.

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SCHAFFER, TALIA. *Communities of Care: The Social Ethics of Victorian Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. 296 pp. $45.00 hardcover; $45.00 e-book.

Readers of Talia Schaffer's *Communities of Care: The Social Ethics of Victorian Fiction* will appreciate this new approach to a familiar feature of nineteenth-century novels, where characters are often defined by the kind of care they provide or need. From the attentive angels and private citizens to a host of hypocritical administrators, negligent government agents, and greedy factory owners, real and fictional Victorians have taught us about the power and privileges associated with care relationships. *Jane Eyre*'s Miss Temple listens to Jane's story and feeds her seed cake; Wemmick delights his Aged Parent with roasted sausages and the nightly blast of "The Stinger." But what, exactly, does it mean to care? Schaffer challenges us to "[t]hink of care as a practice—a difficult, often unpleasant, almost always underpaid, sometimes ineffective practice" (1). More pointedly, Schaffer asserts that "care is an action, not a feeling," that caring and caregiving "can intertwine and produce each other, [but] they can also remain separate" (5). This distinction is key to appreciating the "relational structures" of care communities in Victorian novels and in our own world (20). While dyadic care

relationships (seed cakes and sausages) are part of the story Schaffer tells, it is her focus on networks, groups, and systems that help us appreciate care as a thing we do, as an attempt to "meet[] another's needs" (35).

Schaffer grounds her study in feminist care ethics and Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere, defining care communities as private social connections with potentially public-facing consequences. The five structural qualities necessary for such communities to function and, ideally, to thrive include: performativity, discursivity, affiliation, egalitarianism, and temporality. Schaffer cautions that "[t]hese qualities don't all have equal status." They "operate differently in different care communities," but they represent key features that all care communities possess (49). Performativity and temporality function together, as the act of giving (performing) care over time may eventually inspire feelings of care. The experience of illness and debility is bound in time, often slowing down the pace of one's day and requiring the caregiver to adjust their actions according to the rhythms of this new routine. Discursivity intersects with egalitarianism, as communication (active listening and telling) between carer and cared-for facilitates the negotiation of what is needed and how best to accomplish that goal. The fifth quality, affiliation, refers to the voluntary (even if paid) participation in the care community. Together, these five qualities provide a rubric for identifying and assessing how care communities are formed, function, fail, or are simply good enough (21).

Beginning with nursing and the rise of professional medical care, Schaffer's first chapter argues that Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and Charles Dickens demonstrate how ill and disabled bodies needing and receiving care are responses to the historical moment when "professionalization, institutionalization, uniformity, and state-sponsored caregiving" begin to replace servants, family members, friends, and neighbors (86). The texts in this chapter depict a nostalgia for the kinds of impromptu networks that form when someone falls on hard times or becomes ill. Schaffer shifts to professional care in her next chapter on "Global Migrant Care and Emotional Labor in *Villette*." As we see "the dismay many Victorians experienced regarding the emergence of paid care," we also recognize "the forms of labor on which this new regime was built" (88). The burden of this type of care falls on women who make their living as teachers, governesses, or companions. The dangers of commodifying emotional labor and learning to care without caring take their toll on the carer, whose sense of self gets lost or erased within and because of the work. Schaffer contrasts these dangers with George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* in the next chapter, where we see care more fully as "a practice we are all already enmeshed in" (21). For Eliot, care is "an action-based, performance of deeds" on which a nation might be built (118). This act of care contrasts with the sympathy typically associated with Eliot's novels. Thus, while *Villette* imagines a world "devoid of personal caregiving," *Daniel Deronda* "imagines an idealistic future in which caring solves all problems." "Neither extreme," Schaffer notes, "is healthy or viable" (139).

The final two chapters signal "a turn in the use of care—and a turn in this book—from intradiegetic character relations to an abstract metalevel" (141). By shifting the focus from relationships among characters within novels to the relationship between text and reader and among authors, Schaffer invites us to consider care beyond Victorian fiction. In James's *The Wings of the Dove* "care diffuses into style," as silence and deception permeate the (mostly paid) care communities in the novel and draw the reader into the story (146). Charlotte Yonge's style operates in terms of intertextuality, which Schaffer describes as "composite fiction" (186). *The Heir of Redclyffe* depicts idealized care communities, a "family dynamic that is highly permeable and inclusive," and draws on the plots and characters from novels that have come before (171). Schaffer describes Yonge's work as "cooperative writing" that

requires a "collaborative attitude" (168). This compelling argument demands a different form of attention and engagement by the reader of Schaffer's own text, as it pushes us outside of the narrative and thematic understanding of care we have been tracing, asking us to consider "community as the condition of writing" (186).

Schaffer ends with a heartfelt demonstration of the ways that care theory and "care readings" can shape our approach to scholarship, teaching, and academic service. The humility with which Schaffer concludes her study is an invitation to join a scholarly and professional community informed by care. When Schaffer shares how care community thinking applies to teaching, I found myself consulting her work as if it were a professional guide, reflecting on the ways that I run my own classes as an effort to "meet another's needs." At a time in our history when a global pandemic and demands for racial justice have transformed our personal and professional relationships, pulling into clearer focus our ethical responsibilities, Schaffer's work offers a way to feel, to reflect, and to act with care.

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SORENSEN, ELI PARK. *Postcolonial Realism and the Concept of the Political*. New York: Routledge, 2021. 204 pp. $160.00 hardback; $48.95 paperback; $48.95 e-book.

Eli Park Sorensen opens his new book, *Postcolonial Realism and the Concept of the Political* (2021), with the damning assessment that postcolonial studies emerged at an historical moment in which the "specifically political" in much of the West had become "anachronistic, irrelevant, dangerous, [and] politically incorrect" (4). As he elaborates in the book's first chapter, the enfeebled political horizon surrounding the rise of postcolonial literary studies—which, in Sorensen's view, the field has not vigorously challenged—meant that the radical political ambitions of a genre such as literary realism were either ignored in toto or dismissed as literary mouthpieces for a reified and politically defunct nationalism. Within the field, the failure of the political aspirations of nationalism led invariably to the conclusion that realism too was a thoroughly compromised genre. At best, this twin disillusionment with nationalism and realism was dispelled by postcolonial studies by recourse to "textual strategies of dismantling, subverting, disconnecting, and deconstructing" (7) and an avowal of tropes of plurality, hybridity, parody, carnival, and pastiche. Sorensen attributes the field's "anti-realist" impulse to its tendency to conflate the critique of representation with what Neil Lazarus calls postcolonialism's "struggle against representation itself." Lazarus's formulation signals how the critique of both colonialist (mis-)representation and the nationalist evasion of internal difference gradually devolved within the field into a blanket suspicion of *any* kind of representational practice, be it political or literary. As the latest counter-point to this field-wide equation of radical politics with *anti*-realism, Sorensen's book argues that postcolonial studies had actually failed to appreciate the political nuance of realist literature and even goes as far as to suggest that this deep-seated trend has inadvertently ensured the field's "exclusion of an engagement with the specifically political" (15).

In his attempt to rescue literary realism from its marginalization within postcolonial studies, Sorensen traces its political impulse back to Lukács's account of the form's heyday