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Caring Space-Time Travel Through Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Poetry ferments space-time travel. Engaging with poetry can disrupt the drumbeat of neoliberal temporal demands by providing a mindful opportunity for intimate connections with people we do not know. Sitting with a poet's words can represent a pause that takes us out of one time and shifts us to another. A poem may connect the reader with people who have passed from this earth, suggesting that caring moral imagination is not circumscribed to the living. This article explores selections from Janice N. Harrington's collection, The Hands of Strangers: Poems from the Nursing Home. Harrington's poems delve into the physical intimacy of care workers and the cared-for, which is otherwise reserved for our society's private sphere of family settings, thereby extending the concept of poetry of witness to a small, intimate, albeit institutionalized setting that, at its core, exists to provide care to others. Specific poems are interrogated for their implications for the reader's experience of space-time travel, including strengthening the skills of the caring imagination beyond the experience of the words. Poetry allows the reader to travel back to a witnessed event, engaging with shifts in time and space within the parameters of the poem while helping us develop our imaginative skills to continue witnessing experiences and enhance our ability to care in the present and future. The caring imagination required to engage with the poetry of witness is not a static capacity. Instead, through poetry, our imaginative skills can be further cultivated to help us empathetically space-time travel.

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Bedchecks”

How quiet they breathe, the little children in their cradles.

—Walt Whitman, “The Sleepers”

3:00 a.m.
Hunched small beneath cotton blankets, curled behind metal
guards they sleep at last. The barber sleeps and dreams of nicks
and razors.
The bus driver sleeps and the cow-hipped bearer of thirteen
children sleep. The porter sleeps in the room with the birth
defect. The Huntington’s chorea sleeps on her padded floor.
The teacher, the painter of greeting cards, the one-legged vert,
all sleep.
The farm widow dreams of silos and seven gaunt and skinny cows
swallowing seven sleep and fatted cows.
The woman beaten for years by her husband finally sleeps.
The dementia sleeps and wakes, sleeps and listens for a ship,
hearing its sails and querulous gulls.
But it is only the chattering of our laundry carts, the scuff of us
crepe soles moving from room to room as we go and slowly
go—handmaids, vestals, novices—-into the ward to bless each
sleeper in turn.
O *“how quiet they breathe, the little children in their cradles,”* how easily they
dream and prefer dreaming.
Let nothing disturb them, not the bedpan, not the shifting sheet,
not our steps, not our mumbled talk, not the towels folded
and unfolded, not the soap, not the running water, not pills
toppling into a paper cup, not the water pitcher or its melting
ice,
not the traffic on L street, not the dawn coming through wards of
light—the dawn coming through concussions of light beneath a
wounded sky.
Let them sleep.

—Janice Harrington

So begins Harrington's book, *The Hands of Strangers: Poems from the Nursing Home*, in which she details the experiences of caregivers and care-receivers alike. In "Bedchecks," we witness the staff making middle-of-the-night rounds through the residents' rooms, each space populated by patients in need. We learn of torturous pasts, such as that of the "woman beaten for years by her husband," and we learn of difficult presents, including dementia, Huntington's chorea, and a missing limb. In each case, the vulnerability is apparent. Senior adults are "Hunched small" and compared to children through the line from Whitman's poem, "The Sleepers," quoted after the title and repeated within the poem. We know that their greatest wellbeing is not in the consciousness of day but in an escape to dreams at night: "how easily they dream and prefer dreaming." Yet even in that dream space, some residents are still at risk, needing metal guards on their beds to protect them from falling. These images assist readers' space-time travel to the past, where, by engaging the imagination, they experience the residents' need for care in the present moment. Readers also share in the delivery of care offered by the staff, wishing along with the speaker to "let them sleep," a repeated phrase that suggests how deeply the poem's caregiver-speaker wants peace for their charges even as they cannot always ensure that peace. The many duties performed by the staff risk waking the residents from their slumber, and yet the reader understands that such actions are also in service of care. We return to this poem later for a more detailed consideration of how its formal construction contributes to caring space-time travel.

As embodied beings, our care practices are limited by physical restrictions, even when we work collectively. We can only feed, listen to, touch, or support a finite number of people. The people we care for, whether close to us or strangers we hardly know, have lived lives different from our own. The best care, therefore, comes after humble inquiry to understand their context better. Nevertheless, at some point, our imagination must step in to connect what we know and what we don't know. Imagination extends our ability to connect and care for others through evidence-based speculations. These imaginative flights are not simply mental exercises but are firmly rooted in the merged mind/ body. Visceral reactions are part of the imaginative connection. Knowing and feeling the needs of unfamiliar others can motivate caring action. The imagination can traverse time and space to create linkages if we have the skill and willingness to do so.

Poetry ferments space-time travel. It is an imagination provocateur. Engaging with poetry–not just reading the words but inhabiting the meanings and feelings they elicit even when they are uncomfortable or complex–can disrupt the drumbeat of today's temporal demands by providing a mindful opportunity for intimate connections with people we do not know. Sitting with a poet's words can represent a pause that takes us out of one time and perspective and shifts us to another. Poetry reminds us how interconnected we are so much that we can feel with others from different times and places.

Poems can become a form of witnessing that engages a deep sense of presence and awareness. In particular, "poetry of witness" addresses specific events, such as wars or disasters. However, this genre of poetry can also address people's everyday trials and tribulations, allowing the reader to draw meaning and themes beyond history's familiar names and moments. Carolyn Forché, who writes extensively about the poetry of witness, describes it as "an event and a trace of an event" (Forché, 1993, 33). The event has occurred, and we cannot participate in it; however, we can experience the trace of the event as mediated and curated by the poet. Accordingly, poems are uniquely situated in relationships of care that may include the poet, reader, and subject(s) of the verses. The poem as an event also changes the original experience as it refracts the phenomenon for the poet and the reader, providing different types of care for each in an exercise of empathetic imagination.

This article explores selections from Harrington's collection, *The Hands of Strangers: Poems from the Nursing Home* to demonstrate how poetry can facilitate space-time travel in the interest of care. Harrington is a storyteller and poet who worked at one point in a nursing home and wanted to tell the stories of the people she met. Her poems delve into the physical intimacy of care workers and the cared-for, which is otherwise reserved for our society's private sphere of family settings. These poems are interrogated for their implications for space-time travel, including strengthening the skills of the caring imagination. Although poetry can be enjoyed as an art form, it has the potential to alter us affectively. The caring imagination needed for engaging poetry of witness is not a static capacity. Instead, our imaginative skills can be further developed through poetry to help us empathetically space-time travel.

The journey of this article begins with an exploration of care theory with an emphasis on its aesthetic, embodied, imaginative, and processual characteristics. Then, through a close reading of specific poems, we analyze the implications for caring knowledge, connection, and action to establish the epistemic value of poetic care. In the conclusion, we suggest that caring is a poetic praxis. Through poetry, we face our shared mortality and vulnerability. In discussing the value of poetry in education, Sara K. MacKenzie offers a holistic approach to praxis:

> It is within vulnerability where we might enter in spaces of praxis where mind/body/soul exist in relationship, connected, thus allowing for an embodied relationship with experience and knowing possibilities (MacKenzie, 2013, np).

In this manner, the conclusion regards caring as fundamentally aesthetic such that poetry does not just illuminate or motivate caring, but rather, care practices are poetic.

Care Theory

One of the significant trends among those who theorize about care has been to expand the scope of discussion beyond thinking about care as only a moral philosophy of norms to interrogating

ethical dilemmas. Given its feminist character, care theory will never be too far removed from ethical or political implications. Still, theorists are stretching their wings to address epistemological, ontological, and aesthetic concerns. Therefore, although "care ethics" is the legacy name for the field, it is more aptly described in general terms as "care theory," given that its implications extend beyond the normal boundaries of philosophical ethics. Because of this expansive context, there can be discussions of the relationship between care and poetry. For example, Professor of Applied Theatre James Thompson, a leading figure in developing contemporary care aesthetics, chose to open *Care Aesthetics: for Artful Care and Careful Art* with a selection from Roger Robinson's poem, "Grace." The poem celebrates the caring practice of a nurse yet, more importantly, exemplifies the relationship between everyday care practices and aesthetics that he wished to interrogate. Thompson writes,

> Care Aesthetics is inspired by individuals and relationships where acts of repair do not necessarily solve past injustices or pain, but at least start the processes of creating new networks of embodied relationships that might provide a bulwark against further injury (Thompson, 2023, 3).

In this section, we explore some aspects of care theory that lend it to engaging poetry as a vehicle for space-time travel and care forays, including that caring is a process of improvement and knowledge work that is embodied, affective, and imaginative.

Caring is a process of improvement. When we care for someone, we endeavor to improve their lives, yet because we are all connected, we improve our own lives while honing our care skills. As writer Elissa Strauss describes, "Many [care ethicists] told me that they believe it [care] can lead to substantial growth when accompanied with self-awareness and curiosity" (Strauss, 2024, np). It is common among theorists to cite the relational ontology that underpins care thinking: we exist in a web of relationships. What is less common is to understand care in the context of a process metaphysics. Like everything else in the universe, humans are in process, moving through time and space ever-changing. This position resists the modernist tendency to categorize and label the elements of existence in a manner that connotes a static posture. Care, like the agents involved in it, is not static. Therefore, care cannot be easily inscribed as present/not present or good/bad. Care is a nonbinary concept that exists within nuance and gradations and is constantly changing and adapting to the needs of the people involved. Given such a process metaphysics, if one seeks to be moral and caring, they seek to enhance the skills of caring well. Skills or habits are adaptable, allowing for the improvisational nature of care in an ever-changing environment.

One necessary skill of caring is knowledge acquisition. Vital for caring well is a better understanding of the situation and how to help. Thus, humble inquiry is a skill of seeking knowledge through listening and learning, which can lead to better care. Poetry imparts

knowledge by inviting readers to learn about the experiences, and often the needs, of others. In "Bedchecks," readers learn about the night routine in the nursing home, including the residents' conditions and the caregivers' activities and concerns. The poem provides details from which readers begin to understand what effective care in that situation can look like.

Better caring, however, is not just a cognitive activity. Caring is also improved in many circumstances through affective connection, another caring skill. Empathy and emotion can lead to better information and motivation to act as well as resonate with the one cared for as affecting support. Empathy must be balanced by knowledge lest it becomes too driven by personal experience and yet imaginatively expansive so as not to be parochial in only finding connections to friends and family. Again, poetry is one way to develop the ability to connect with others. Although the subject matter in Harrington's poems of witness provides information, the tone and imagery impact how the reader feels and engages their senses. Immersing themselves in the poem's time, place, and scenario, therefore, becomes an embodied experience for the readers. They feel empathy for the nursing home residents and, in some cases, for the workers who care for them.

Furthermore, the skill of responsive action is crucial for improving care. Care cannot simply be a disposition. Although attitude can foster an openness to care, it must be actualized in the physical world. Reading poetry is itself a care-related action. It is "an iterative opportunity to hone epistemic habits that can contribute to propagating and improving care (Hamington and Rosenow, 2019, 44). The practice of acquiring knowledge and developing empathy through poetry can lead to better caring habits.

Care is an embodied activity of corporeal beings who are always in the process of becoming. Within the context of academic investigation, it is easy to forget that everything we know about care is grounded in the body. Physical and emotional care provides succor and buoyancy from life's beginning to life's end. Food, shelter, and companionship meet essential parts of baseline needs that create the possibility for humans to engage in all of their other activities. We become acutely aware of the indispensability of care in times of deprivation in disaster or war, as well as when society abandons people as manifested in homelessness or forced migration. Indeed, abandonment is the absence of bodies to care for one another. Care is experienced through the body in its delivery and reception, and as previously noted, poetry contributes to this embodied experience.

Therefore, the emphasis on the embodiment of care should not minimize the role of imagination in caring. Both connecting and responding to others require imaginative speculation. Our bodies can fuel our imagination as we use them as baselines for speculating and understanding the experiences of others. Sarah Zager employs Jewish philosophy and theology to confront the bias against abstraction among care theorists. She argues that care thinkers' warranted wariness of universal moral principles, a hallmark of Western thinking, has

led to minimizing attention on caring for abstract subjects: "This critique of universality often comes hand in hand with the critique of abstraction, and the two terms are often assumed to be almost synonymous" (Zager, 2022, 78). Zager uses the example of care for her frozen embryos as not fitting into the extant care theory literature. A vital part of her argument is the role of imagination: "Not only do I have to imagine what it would be like to go through the experience of bringing the other I am currently imagining into an independently embodied form of particularity, which may or may not be marked by a genetic connection between the two of us, I also have to imagine a version of myself who does not yet exist in an embodied sense" (Zager, 2022, 79-80). Recently, some care ethicists have explored post-humanist caring (Defalco, 2020; Bozalek, 2017), another area in which imagination plays a vital role. The point of these examples is to shine a light on the imaginative dimension of care. The mind/body skill of imaginative connecting to unfamiliar others for the purpose of caring resonates strongly with the poetic imagination.

Reading or experiencing a poem is an imaginative process with temporal and spatial dimensions. Our embodied minds encounter a poem whose author is absent, perhaps long dead. The poem's subject can be anything, including people from distant lands, unfamiliar contexts, or different eras. The artistry of poetry does not prescribe what a poem addresses; however, a poem can often initiate space-time travel that causes an affective connection. An emotional reality might be created that causes us to care across time and space for a real or fictional other.

Our embodied encounter with a poem colors the narrative meaning, and we often come away from a poem with new knowledge and an affective connection prompting care. Sometimes, that experience stimulates a moral epiphany (a caring epiphany) that we carry into our subsequent life encounters.

Poetry, Space-Time Travel, and Care in

The Hands of Strangers: Poems from the Nursing Home

Returning now to "Bedchecks," consider how this poem engages the reader's imagination, contributes to their knowledge, and motivates them to strengthen their caring capacities through the empathy they experience. Readers encounter other human beings in a range of challenging and vulnerable situations as residents in the nursing home. The care-receivers in this poem rely on their caregivers not only for their comfort but for their survival. Again, the opening quotation from Whitman's poem and the repetition of "how quiet they breathe, the little children in their cradles," emphasizes that these senior adults are as needful, dependent, and fragile as young children in their cradles.

Several poetic techniques contribute to the empathy readers feel toward the residents' condition. First, the imagery in the poem collapses the distance between the reader in the present and the poem's scenario in the past, developing physical connections between the reader and

the people in the poem. By engaging the reader's sight, sense of touch, and hearing, the imagery makes real what might otherwise be perceived as fiction or even as a true story too far removed from the reader's life to resonate. In this way, imagery helps the reader build knowledge, seeing people "Hunched small beneath cotton blankets," lying on the "padded floor," and dreaming of "silos and seven gaunt and skinny cows swallowing seven sleep and fatted cows" while also experiencing a tactile connection with the blankets and padded floor. Readers hear the workers as they move through space with "the chattering of our laundry carts, the scuff of our crepe soles moving from room to room" while the residents sleep.

Harrington utilizes metonymic descriptions of the residents to suggest how easily people can be reduced to their greatest need or most notable condition. The speaker in the poem, a caregiver, does not refer to people by name but instead as "the birth defect, The Huntington's chorea, The dementia," suggesting a separation between the care-receivers and caregivers. This separation is formally enacted by the division of the poem into two parts, the first focused on the residents and the second describing the intrusion of the workers. True, the speaker wants to let the residents sleep, even proclaiming this wish as an admonition to other caregivers on that shift. That desire resists but does not ultimately reconcile, the separation between caregivers and care-receivers. However, it produces empathy in the reader toward workers who begin to see the residents as defined by specific conditions over time.

The difficult working conditions and tasks undertaken each night that Harrington describes erode some of the employees' capacity to empathize with those in their charge. Simultaneously, the resistance readers feel to reducing human beings to their physical or mental condition, such as Huntington's chorea or dementia, signals the self-reflective reader to avoid such minimizing of people when encountering someone who needs care. This new knowledge and the drive to genuinely see and respond to the needs of those requiring care help readers prepare to encounter others with what Nel Noddings names as "engrossment" or "receptive attention" to the other: "I receive the other into myself, and I see and feel with the other" (Noddings, 2013, 30). Noddings recognizes that this state of attention is limited and does not suggest ownership of another person's perspective, nor is it equivalent to the engrossment of a love relationship (Noddings, 2010, 31). For Noddings, engrossment often leads to motivational displacement whereby the person caring temporarily takes on the burdens of the one cared for (Noddings, 2013, 30), which is what we commonly refer to as empathy.

Empathy is a fraught concept as it is often limited by the privilege and subject position of those involved. Accordingly, empathy must be attuned by knowledge (Hamington, 2024, 40) and humility. Vrinda Dalmiya suggests relational humility as pertinent to epistemic and empathic connection: "Relational humility crucially comprises this double movement of epistemically decentering oneself while centering the epistemic agency of others" (Dalmiya, 2016, 119). A poetic encounter can be a powerful way to decenter oneself, as when Harrington

describes the bus driver, porter, teacher, or the woman beaten for years. They are lying in this ward and not me ... but it could be me. Empathy allows for a touch of ambiguity between me and the other.

The tone in this poem also contributes to the reader's feelings of empathy toward residents and workers. Harrington constructs a reverential tone through the apostrophe "O" in the second stanza and the repetition of "Let" as the speaker pronounces a deep desire to let the sleeping stay sleeping because that condition affords them the least amount of suffering. The lists in that stanza also reveal the many disruptions that risk waking people and suggest the likelihood that the actions of the workers will awaken some residents. The residents need to have their bedpans cleaned, their water refilled, and their pills dispensed. These actions provide care. The speaker's concern for their charges and the recognition that sleep is a release from suffering combines with these necessary duties to demonstrate a more holistic approach to care.

Finally, "Bedchecks" exemplifies the space-time travel made possible through poetry. Readers become fully immersed in a scenario from the past but experience it as the present. They also experience a further disruption of linear time by stepping even farther back into the residents' histories through the depiction of their dreams. The continued emphasis on sleep in the poem functions metaphorically as a reminder that death is not far off for these residents, and that it, too, will be a kind of respite from suffering. This acknowledgment of death becomes another disruption to linear time even as the events of the poem progress from a beginning to a middle to an end. The combination of linear and non-linear time recalls J. Retallack's statement in Poethical Wager that "Everything in mass culture is designed to deliver space-time in a continuous drone. One writes poetry and essays to disrupt that fatal momentum" (Retallack, 2004, 5). Harrington's poem clearly participates in this disruption and, in so doing, assists readers in stepping outside of the drone and focusing on the needs of the people in the poem, strengthening the capacity to care as they read and reread.

One reason poems in The Hands of Strangers are so effective at providing opportunities for caring space-time travel is that they are poems of witness, and many are written using the lyric form. Traditionally, poetry of witness is written by people who have undergone trauma, violence, and/or humiliation, often on a large scale, or they are written by someone else who witnessed those occurrences. Readers move through space-time to encounter these difficult experiences, inform their understanding, and increase their caring capacities.

Of course, writing about the suffering of others involves the risk of appropriation. In "Ears on the Floor: Poetry of Witness in a Post-Truth Era" (2016), K. R. Miller acknowledges this concern and notes that Carolyn Forche not only recognizes it but responds to it. Miller writes that Forche "wrote about the act of witness as 'problematic,' saying that 'even if one has witnessed atrocity, one cannot necessarily speak about it, let alone for it.' The lyric mode can all-too-easily appropriate suffering" (Miller, 2016, np). Miller continues, considering the

importance of testimonies of atrocities: "But witness nonetheless seems necessary within a society that muffles such testimonies. Language can become, Forche says, not just representation but 'evidence that something occurred'" (Miller, 2016, np). The Hands of Strangers offers such evidence.

Harrington's poems, or testimonies, are based on her own experience working in a county home, and the scope is much narrower than in many poems of witness. The specific scenarios she depicts, however, include people's daily fears, humiliation, and suffering, as well as the dependence on others who, at times, abuse their power and inflict trauma. The reality of physical and emotional pain, the risk of injury, and the threat of violence and victimization pervades the collection and informs each individual poem regardless of its specific topic.

Lyric poems impact space-time travel because they allow the collapse of the time between the reader's present and the poem's present. In Time and Timelessness in Victorian Poetry, Irmtraud Huber explains, "the lyric mode of mediation is characterised by a singular temporal structure, in which the lyric present not only parallels the present of reading but is identical with it. Moreover, in a lyrically mediated text, the distinctions between the speaker, addressee, and audience become unstable, enabling a potential doubling of roles, speaker/audience or addressee/audience" (Huber, 2023, 237). The lyric assists readers not only in space-time travel because the poem's present and the time of the poem's reading become "identical," but in immersing readers in the experiences, feelings, and needs of a poem's speaker. In "Bedchecks," the doubling of the reader's role and the speaker's role assists the reader in learning the concerns, challenges, and empathy of the nightshift caregiver, who is also the poem's speaker.

Harrington's poem "Balance" offers another instance of how this poetic form, when used as a poem of witness, collapses the geographic, temporal, and experiential distance between readers and the people in the poem.

"Balance"

In the night, we listened for breath,
nostrils flared for the sting of urine, or worse.
We shoved laundry carts draped with linen,
gowns, and towels, passing the sleepers by,
stepping into the rooms and beside the beds
of dreams with disloyal bladders.

If their sheets were wet, we changed them,
washing their flanks with tepid water, adding
lotion or not, sprinkling their haunches with talc
or not, relieved if only one sheet were soiled.
We rolled the body from side to side, changing

one half of the bed, then the other, tightening
the half sheet and spreading the absorbing paper
square backed with blue plastic.

If they lay in soil, if their beds were soaked,
we hoisted them into a chair or slanted them
on a mattress seam to wait, to tremble, to catch
their breath at each uncertain move, unsteady
and fearful. Braced against indifferent bodies,
they whimpered "I'm sorry, I'm sorry,"
or tied their arms about our waists and held on. (Harrington, 2011, 12)

Here, the reader once again enters a different space, or terrain, from their own physical locality as they encounter sleeping residents with the nighttime caregivers making the rounds. In this case, poem's subject is focused specifically on people who need to have their clothes and bedding changed during the night because they have wet and/or soiled themselves.

The reader also time travels into the poem's scenario; however, this poem is already in the past tense, so the way in which the lyric's present is identical with the reading present is slightly different. In this poem, the reader's present maps onto the speaker's reflection on a past experience that has been repeated night after night. The reader enters the speaker's present only to be moved into memory, demonstrating Huber's point that "the lyric condenses time in the moment of reception. Time in the lyric does not unfold in succession, but folds into layers" (Huber, 2023, 237).

The role of reader and speaker are once again doubled. In "Balance," the doubling reveals the distance that the night staff have created between themselves and those they care for as they clean their charges and change their bedding. The residents are referred to as "sleepers" or "the body" rather than anything more humanizing. Furthermore, the speaker describes herself and her coworkers as the "indifferent" bodies that the residents must lean against for balance. Initial auditory, olfactory, tactile, kinesthetic, and visual images help the reader understand why the staff might create such distance. Workers listen to see if people are still alive and breathing, and they have "nostrils flared for the sting of urine, or worse," to determine what substances they might have to clean up. They push carts filled with soiled gowns and towels. The distance suggests an element of self-protection for the caregivers.

Nevertheless, even as readers empathize with the workers, the indifference also creates a second response from the reader, the desire for more effective care. Later imagery is again visual, olfactory, tactile, kinesthetic, and auditory. The poem depicts people asleep in their own urine and/or feces, frightened and unbalanced when they are awakened for cleaning, and apologizing as they literally hold onto the workers who are assisting them with indifference.

The residents' needs clearly extend beyond having their clothes and beds changed, beyond the application of lotion and talc "or not." Truly attending to their needs demands that the indifference be surmounted to allow for gentle touch, kind comments, and recognition of personhood. While the speaker suggests that not all staff are as caring in their actions, she also recognizes this shortcoming and emphasizes the vulnerability of the residents. The actions in the poem are not presented as models but as the difficult reality of the situation that results in lesser care. Speaker and reader witness this reality together.

Readers recognize the need for better care in part because of the doubling previously discussed, but another important reason is Harrington's use of the first-person plural pronoun, "we." Eileen Sperry explains in "'Now Let Us Sport Us While We May': First Person Plural and the Lyric Voice."

> When the poem invokes an 'I', implicitly or explicitly, the reader must choose to whom that 'I' belongs. But what happens when the poem raises the question not just of a singular speaker, but of some kind of communal identity – when the work includes not just an 'I', but a 'we'? If first person singular deictics allow readers to recognise the binary nature of the lyrical voice, then the first-person plural allows that dialectic to be productively sustained. The lyric 'we' creates a voice that refuses the choice between 'I's, insisting instead on a multivalent identity that is both removed and present, self and other simultaneously (Sperry, 2019, 204).

Readers become implicated in the "we" of the speaker and coworkers. They become part of the community within the poem, seeing from the speaker's point of view and also recognizing the needs of the residents. They can thus witness the gap in care, desire to correct it, and envision a better, more compassionate scenario, all of which enhances their capacity for caring through the experience of the poem.

One final example from Harrington's book demonstrates how a poem can create affective connection between the reader and the people in the poem, increasing the reader's knowledge, and motivating them to develop more caring habits.

"Molly"

Unlike the others, with her it was never rough
or quick, or half-done, and never,
because it was endless, done with anger
or jaws grinding enough, enough.

It was done carefully, spreading thighs,
lifting the scrotum with its rope
of penis, the leaves of labia eased aside,

a washcloth, slicked with soap,
washing flesh and flank in a tide

of heat
of touch
of water.

This was intimacy,
a shame they couldn't hide, but did it matter?
Handmaid, menial, servant, daughter,
each movement precise, each movement ceremony,
cradling these white-fleshed raku,
each holding its fill of bitter tea.

All the exquisite parts of her work–fingers,
palms, wrists, arms, shoulders—
intent on the motions of cleaning and drying,
the certainty that one day she too will lie waiting
in a county bed seeking compassion
from the hands of strangers (Harrington, 2011, 13).

The unnamed speaker describes the gentle, caring actions of Molly washing the genitalia of the residents as part of their sponge baths. The opening of the poem alerts readers immediately to the residents' vulnerability and the reality that some workers are less careful when performing this same action. Molly stands out because she approaches the bathing by not being "rough / or quick," not leaving the job "half-done," and not performing her task with anger. The speaker and reader witness Molly's role in this intimate action, feel the care with which she attends to the residents, and desire that she continue her work in this way.

Continuing into the poem, readers witness the details of the bathing, with Molly "spreading thighs, / lifting the scrotum with its rope / of penis, the leaves of labia eased aside, / a washcloth slicked with soap, / washing flesh and flank…" in the second stanza. They recognize the vulnerability of the residents who are once again like infants, unable to physically wash themselves and utterly dependent on others to wash them with no choice as to whether that washing occurs gently or roughly. The visual and tactile imagery instills a similar feeling of vulnerability in readers as they immerse themselves in the residents' experiences.

The third stanza emphasizes the intimacy between caregiver and care-receiver and also foregrounds the shame felt by the residents. They are as dependent as infants, yet they are senior adults with their genitalia exposed being washed by an employee. Again, the reader can also imagine feeling shame in that situation.

The poem uses these individual instances of bathing to universalize the human need for care. Whoever a resident might have been in their younger life no longer matters in this moment. Anyone in a nursing home needing to be washed by an employee becomes equally dependent and equally desirous of compassion from their caregivers. By the end of the poem, we learn that Molly's dedication to providing care is partially motivated by this universalizing. We move from the poem's present to Molly's sense of her future, as she believes "that one day she too will lie waiting / in a county bed seeking compassion / from the hands of strangers." Metaphorically, readers of Harrington's poems also become residents and staff in the county home, with the potential to provide compassionate care and in need of care themselves.

Conclusion: Caring as a Poetic Praxis

A practice is an action taken repeatedly. As embodied beings, our practices are actions taken as integrations of mind and body. Caring is one such action. Many care theorists have defined and interrogated care as a practice. In the pioneering work of Virginia Held, care is defined as the integration of values and evolving practices:

> Care is both value and practice. To the ethics of care, care is a value as important as justice and even more fundamental. Its practices incorporate caring values but are in continual need of improvement. Practices of justice also seek to reflect the values of justice but those of care are more essential. No one can survive without care; the same cannot be said of justice (Held, 2011, 184).

Care is a complex practice often involving habits or skills of the mind, including imagination and emotion as well as physical abilities. It can be described as a curated collection of practices. In a similar vein, Joan Tronto claims, "People often forget that every care-practice is nested in another care-practice that is nested in another care-practice which on the most general level means everything we do" (Jounou and Tronto, 2024, 274).

The nuance, however, goes even further than interlocking practices as the enaction of these care practices can entail various characteristics that can enhance or diminish the effectiveness of the care. In other words, how we care is not separate from the objective of caring. The staff and residents in Harrington's poems all have physical needs that others can help provide, but their delivery can be central to how the quality of care is perceived. Harrington's choice of witnessing to care through poetry is not arbitrary. The lens of poetry offers the aesthetic experience in a lyrical register that brings the reader/listener to a shared yet imaginative space/time to connect with others. Writing poetry of witness makes visible the suffering of others. It does not allow the suffering, nor the causes of the suffering, to remain hidden. Reading poetry of witness engages the imagination to create a learning opportunity whereby readers might better understand how to prevent such suffering in the future. We conclude this article by arguing that care is enriched when it is understood as a poetic praxis.

Simply understood, praxis is a bringing of theory into practice. It originates in ancient ideas regarding the ability of free people to think (theoria), make (poesis), and act (praxis). However, modern theorists have framed praxis as a thick concept with robust explications of the theory/practice relationship. Philosopher Jorge Mario Flores Osorio describes praxis as "a transforming principle [that] transcends the theory-practice contradiction and fosters the definition of interactions between action and reflection" (Flores Osorio, 2009, 14). For Flores Osorio, praxis is a mind/body skill that operates in a relational and processual world: "Praxis implies an infinite cycle of practicing-knowing-transforming, the cycle that builds the unity between knowing and doing" (Flores Osorio, 2009, 15). Similarly, Hans Georg Gadamer develops a notion of praxis that emphasizes caring through sympathetic understanding (Roy and Oludaja, 2009, 259-260). For Gadamer, praxis is not a neutral term. It must entail caring through actions of solidarity (Gadamer, 1989, 190 & 319). This approach to praxis resonates with care theory, particularly the presumed relational ontology. If human nature is relational, then many of our ideas enacted, particularly moral ones, should develop our caring practices.

If praxis is a dynamic approach to considering the relation between thinking and action, aesthetics adds a vital dimension of perception, feeling, and sensuality to the process. Philosopher Christoph Menke observes that all of our actions are a type of praxis, but aesthetic praxis engages a heightened state of awareness. Art makes the ordinary extraordinary. He refers to this as aestheticization: "The process of aestheticization reveals that the practical is, in fact, always in transition into the aesthetic: any totality that constitutes a praxis can become aesthetic when reflects upon itself and is thus set in motion and enlivened" (Menke, 2012, 60). Poetry is an aesthetic praxis, as Menke describes. Poems like Harrington's draw our attention to a moment of the mundane for which our lives are replete. Pulled from everyday practices, we can linger at a particular instant with particular people and circumstances to focus on a feeling, thought, or experience that would typically whirl past us on the trek of neoliberal time. Hunter Hilinski describes, "Aesthetic praxis, arising initially out of the conversation between freedom and necessity, thus becomes the theoretical convergence between dynamic action and human potential; a decisive call to the thoughts that connect individual to neighbor, friend to foe, and past to future" (Hilinski, 2020, 39). Menke and Hilinski illustrate the magic of poetic aesthetic experience. Although a poem draws out particularities–pulling them from one context in what can appear to be a deconstructive fashion- it simultaneously constructs a new connection between the reader, the subject of the poem, and the writer.

Poetic praxis can help us reconnect to others and create a sense of purpose. Educators Sherron Killingsworth Roberts, Nancy A. Brasel, and Patricia A. Crawford describe, "Poetry as a reflective and intentional process can help both the authors of the poetry and the audience of the poems to reach praxis or the process of being moved to action, to affect change, and to

better the next experience." (Killingsworth Roberts, Brasel, and Crawford, 2014, 168). The language of poetic praxis appears to echo the language of care. Is care a poetic praxis?

Instrumentalism is one of the spawns of neoliberalism: seeking to find the practical/transactional value in everything around us. Perhaps one could even accuse our book, Care Ethics and Poetry (Hamington and Rosenow, 2021), of seeking value in poetry to improve care. Instead, maybe in addition to learning from it, we need to be the poetry we wish to create. This is an odd claim, but if all experiences can be aesthetic, we may want to make aesthetic ones as our care practice. Ryan J. Petteway declares, "True poetry is neither a method nor a tool of extraction. It is praxis–illuminating, liberating, transforming, and revolutionary" (Petteway, 2021, 21). For Petteway, poetry's moral and political dimension remains at the forefront. His approach maps onto care theory: "Poetry as praxis can transform 'objects' into 'subjects'—agents of change prepared to transform their reality, to redress the power imbalances that functioned to produce and preserve it as unjust" (Petteway, 2021, 22).

As a poetic praxis, care forefronts the aesthetic–a connective sensitivity across time and space and difference to feel with others.

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