**Care Ethics and Engaging Intersectional Difference through the Body**

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Abstract

This article suggests that one means for empathetically and imaginatively engaging the intersectional differences of otherness to find commonality while still honoring, recognizing, and celebrating those differences is found in the notion of embodied care—the framing of feminist care ethics in terms of its physical elements. Because embodiment remains a common denominator among humans despite the strength of intersectional differences, the body is an important means of connectivity and thus a basis for at least partial understanding between embodied beings. However, this is a humble commonality born out of responsiveness and listening because the body is also the site of inscribed differences. Authentic care is always responsive and thus respectful of the one cared for. Framing care as performed bodily actions is an effort to capture a corporal basis for morality that has the potential to help us negotiate powerful narratives of socially constructed otherness in order to engage identity-based injustice without silencing the voices and experiences of difference and dissent. Care is described as a performance of the body/self, and how such performances of the body can spark understanding across intersectional differences. The article suggests dramaturgical exercises for developing skills of caring for unfamiliar others.

“The ethics of care implies being open to the ‘other’; it thus attributes an important place to communication, interpretation and dialogue. In contrast to the tradition of abstract and instrumental reasoning, a type of rationality in which the pursuit of knowledge goes hand in hand with a pursuit of control, it appeals for the restitution of sensory knowledge, symbolized by the unity of hand, head and heart.”—Selma Sevenhuijsen

Despite the unprecedented quantity of information made available through contemporary communication technologies, motivating people to actively care for unfamiliar others remains a vexing social, political, and theoretical problem. Those who inhabit different identities than our own—whether claimed or imposed—require greater time and effort to appreciate, making the motivation to act on their behalf challenging. Furthermore, the particularism of interpersonal knowledge is not advocated or facilitated by traditional moral systems. The real and perceived barriers to understanding unfamiliar others have fomented discrimination, distrust, and violence. The emergence of intersectional analysis has demonstrated the complexity of identity/ies with the implication that superficial categories of naming are inadequate to capture multivariate experiences of self, including intertwined experiences of marginalization. Because care ethics valorizes relationality, it is theoretically well positioned to address intersectional issues in the liminal spaces between individuals and identities. This article suggests that one means for empathetically and imaginatively engaging the intersectional differences of otherness to find commonality while still honoring, recognizing, and celebrating those differences is found in the notion of *embodied care*—the framing of feminist care ethics in terms of its physical elements. Because embodiment remains a common denominator among humans despite the strength of intersectional differences, the body is an important means of connectivity and thus a basis for at least partial understanding between embodied beings. However, this is a humble commonality born out of responsiveness and listening because the body is also the site of inscribed differences. Authentic care is always responsive and thus respectful of the one cared for. Framing care as performed bodily actions is an effort to capture a corporal basis for morality that has the potential to help us negotiate powerful narratives of socially constructed otherness to confront identity-based injustice without silencing the voices and experiences of difference and dissent.

The analysis presented in this article begins with a foray into ontology which suggests that as relationally established selves, humans can be conceived as caring corporeal beings rather than the traditional atomistic abstract agents of traditional political theory. Given this understanding of human ontology, care is described as a performance of the body/self, and how such performances of the body can spark understanding across constructed intersectional divides. The conclusion suggests the use of dramaturgical exercises as one method for engaging the body’s potential in relational ethical development. Diversity is far too important in the contemporary world for it to be a peripheral concern in ethics, and this article endeavors to demonstrate how inclusionary potential is central to care ethics. In particular, race has only occasionally entered the scholarly conversation about care theory. In 2004, Vanessa Siddle Walker and John R. Snarey edited the landmark work *Race-ing Moral Formation: African American Perspectives on Care and Justice*. The volume offers a number of crucial insights regarding the intellectual deficits of leaving critical race theory out of conversations regarding the relative merits of justice and care including the more collective notion of care found in the African-American community[[1]](#endnote-1) and a more malleable understanding of the demarcation between care and justice employed in the African-American tradition.[[2]](#endnote-2) Perhaps of particular significance to this project are the many voices in *Race-ing Moral Formation* that use critical race theory to challenge the approach of “color blindness” found in systems of justice (and some forms of principle-based caring). The performative approach to care advocated in this article emphasizes the particularism and responsiveness of care such that “color blindness” is an anachronism of traditional moral approaches and not an objective of care. Integrating a critical race lens with an embodied and performed care theory is crucial for a robust political approach to morality.

The crux of the argument here is that a performative understanding of care ethics can be an important tool for engaging intersectional differences of identity including race, class, gender, and sexual orientation with the aim of ameliorating identity-based injustice. In particular, if care is understood as a form of somaesthetics or a technique for cognitive and physical self-development, then moral education becomes a process or a method of iterative and imaginative practice rather than a matter of learning rules or rubrics of normative analysis. This conclusion is founded on a number of assumptions. One assumption is the primacy of care as a moral framework that captures the human condition. That human condition is characterized by a relational ontology—the fundamental fact of our interconnected existence that is responsible for our identity and the home for the values that make up morality. A second assumption is that embodiment matters. Our bodies make our relational world possible and thus knowing and administering care possible. The moral significance of caring is based on effective and thoughtful contextually driven action. Our bodies capture ways of caring that we are not always conscious of unless we make an effort to attend to them, and even then “our bodies know more than they can tell.”[[3]](#endnote-3) These are significant assumptions that push care into a radical trajectory as a theory of being and knowing rather than simply a normative theory of ethical action.[[4]](#endnote-4)

**Care As Embodied Performance**

In what follows, an argument for why a performative theory of care suggests a paradigm shift in how we teach ethics. Given the assumptions above, ethics is to be found in our relationships but our relationships are an extension of who we are. A relational ontology means that I cannot disentangle my identity from the complex web of relationships I have had throughout my life. My identity is not equivalent to those relationships but it is not entirely separate from them either. As Athena Athanasiou describes, “If we make, unmake, and remake ourselves, such makings only occur with and through others.”[[5]](#endnote-5) If my identity and morality is found in my relational context, then it is in attending to my relationships that I can seek to improve my interactions and interconnections with others. Caring, then, is an art of living. The canvas is our relational, embodied selves. Like any artist, we must attend to, and hone our skills. Judith Butler describes identity as an iterative dynamic: “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.”[[6]](#endnote-6) However, it is not just a simple choice of will but an iterative *dynamic*: confronted and interwoven with others and the disciplining forces of society. In this vein, Allison Weir describes humans as having “transformative identities” that produce and mediate relationships between individual and collective identities.[[7]](#endnote-7) The claim here is that a similar dynamic exists for our moral identity. Our ethical selves are a performative and thus iterative response to our embodied and contextual circumstance. As Butler describes, “Morality is neither a symptom of its social conditions nor a site of transcendence of them, but rather is essential to the determination of agency and the possibility of hope.”[[8]](#endnote-8) Without using the language of care, Butler is pointing to an expansive notion of morality that breaks with the Western tradition. She claims that “the capacity to make and justify moral judgments does not exhaust the sphere of ethics and is not coextensive with ethical obligation or ethical relationality.”[[9]](#endnote-9) In the myriad of choices that we make, we negotiate a moral identity rooted in our contextual environment including our relationships. It is a performance of our mind/bodies that we are both the actor and audience for through our dual role as subject and object.

In another approach to identity formation, Richard Shusterman’s concept of somaesthetics endeavors to recapture the theme of philosophy as a vehicle of self-improvement found among ancient philosophers. “Somaesthetics can be provisionally defined as the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning. It is therefore also devoted to the knowledge, discourses, and disciplines that structure such somatic care or can improve it.”[[10]](#endnote-10) Shusterman has an expansive vision for philosophy that integrates the language of self-development and the aesthetic of the self. Both Butler and Shusterman ground their theories of identity in a form of performativity. However, neither Butler nor Shusterman ground morality in the relationality of care.

It is my contention that performativity offers a framework of analysis to care ethics that engages the embodied nature of caring, its relational ontology, and its ongoing role in identity formation. Furthermore, as metaphor, performance entails the implication that caring skills can be exercised and honed, just as actors improve their skills. If the body is the repository of caring knowledge, then performance is the expression of that caring.[[11]](#endnote-11) Performances of care not only create the potential for skill and habit development that make subsequent care more possible, caring actions serve as a feedback loop to shape moral identity.

Framing care as an embodied performance has a number of implications: 1) *Bodily Skill Engagement.* The complex muscle activity engaged in caring—posture, facial expressions, tones, touch, motion—are a skill set. As with riding a bike or swimming, the skill set requires practice for better proficiency. Each iteration of care, like each ride of the bike, is different, and yet, an occasion for developing the skill. Eventually, the skill set is habituated and requires less and less attending to. I learn to respond with care less awkwardly. 2) *Caring Enactment Witnessed by Others.*Caring actions are performed in the physical world and are thus visible to others. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out, the nuances of other bodies are forefronted in my perceptual field.[[12]](#endnote-12) Our attention immediately centers on the presence of another embodied being over inanimate objects presented to us. As such, we are particularly attentive to others both consciously and unconsciously. Not all embodied actions are interpreted at the level of narrative—although they can be. Our bodies capture nuances of other bodies without always attending to them. Thus, if a person engages in a caring performance, we may or may not attend to the caring consciously, but our body’s senses note the actions as caring. Such witnessing makes proliferation possible. Caring that is modeled and implicitly or explicitly reinforced, increases the potential for further caring. Moral folk wisdom supports this idea with notions such as “pass it forward” and “what comes around goes around.” 3) *Caring Enactment Witnessed by Ourselves.*Each iteration of care means time and effort devoted to caring. The accumulation of such experiences provides more imaginative material for reflection and identity formation. The more I witness myself caring and construct a narrative of myself as a caring person, the more likely I am to risk of myself in another caring encounter. We can find aspects of this notion of self-instantiation through repeated performativity in Judith Butler’s notion of “iteration” and John Dewey’s concept of “habit.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

One could argue that all moral activity involves the body at some point, but care ethics lends itself to a particular emphasis on embodiment. Much care giving involves the body: feeding, healing, hugging, etc. Communicating a caring disposition has a significant unarticulated and embodied dimension. We can communicate a caring attitude through eye contact, facial expression, voice inflection, posture, and touch. Furthermore, if empathy is crucial to caring, as Slote contends, then the body is the fundamental mode of shared understanding.[[14]](#endnote-14) Powerful distinctions that divide humanity may be socially constructed and inscribed on the body, but there is always a body. Ignoring the body in developing ethical theories based on empathy is ignoring our ontological connection to others. It is that connection for which embodied care attempts to leverage in order to mitigate the oppression imposed upon intersectional otherness. Difference is indeed inscribed on the body and society has imbued those differences with great meaning that in many cases has resulted in oppression and suffering. At the same time the body is also the location of human continuity and connection. Authentic caring—a response to need—has the potential to respect and honor differences while finding continuity and connection.

**Embodied Caring and Intersectionality**

I suggest that bodily performances of care help respond to the “so what?” question posed by Robert S. Chang and Jerome McCristal Culp Jr., in their article “After Intersectionality.” Chang and Culp suggest that intersectionality has not reached its social justice potential, thus “it’s one thing to say that race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation operate symbiotically, cosynthetically, multidimensionally, or interconnectedly. . . . The next step is to be able to prescribe or imagine points of intervention.”[[15]](#endnote-15) It is my contention that embodied care helps shape those points of intervention by providing moral direction without either the rigid categories or abstract calculations of traditional moral approaches.

Kimberle Crenshaw gave a name to an idea that many women of color understood experientially. In 1989, Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality*, but the idea that identity, and particularly identity-based oppression, existed as complex interactions of socially established categories, had circulated for some time. For example, before Crenshaw’s term was available, intersectionality was an important aspect of the Combahee River Collective, a black lesbian feminist organization that was active in Boston from 1974 to 1980. In their often-reprinted statement, they claim,

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the condi­tions of our lives.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Since Crenshaw first used the term, intersectionality has become a focal point of analysis in critical race theory and feminist social theory.

Far too simply stated, intersectionality is a recognition of the complexity of identity. Specifically, no single category of identity—gender, race, class, sexual orientation, ability—is a sufficient analytical frame of existential understanding. Human experience is too complex for easy categorization. This is particularly true in the analysis of social marginalization and oppression. Not only is one’s identity too rich and complex to be captured by a single category, but also multilayered selves are not simply *additive*. One cannot understand the experience of African-American lesbians simply by adding racism to sexism to homophobia. Oppressions interact and impact one another to create unique experiences. Single-identity descriptors of individuals are like telling a single story of a person’s life. Author Chimamanda Adichie describes the reductionist and oppressive danger that can result from only telling a single story about another person:

It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is “*nkali*.” It’s a noun that loosely translates to “to be greater than another.” Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of *nkali*. How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.[[17]](#endnote-17)

The development of the term *intersectionality* was particularly motivated by a need to problematize the single story or category of “woman” in feminist theory as a recognition of the absence of universal women’s experience. As Kathryn T. Gines describes it, intersectionality is an important means as both “a theoretical and a practical framework for analyzing multiplicitous identities and multilayered, interlocking systems of oppression.”[[18]](#endnote-18)

The concept of intersectionality contains a fascinating mixture of deconstructive and constructive elements. On the one hand, intersectionality is distinctively *postmodern* in the manner it challenges categories of understanding and the explanatory potential of these categories. Accordingly, no single category can be essentialized as paradigmatic of oppression. For example, Crenshaw claims that contemporary feminists misappropriate the meaning of Sojourner Truth’s famous “Ain’t I a Woman” speech by overlooking the race and class context from which the words were uttered. She writes, “Feminists thus ignore how their own race functions to mitigate some aspects of sexism and moreover, how it often privileges them over and contributes to the domination of other women.”[[19]](#endnote-19) On the other hand, intersectionality also seeks a *constructive* analysis in exploring the shared structures (if not experiences) of oppression among different identity positions. As Patricia Hill Collins notes, “Crenshaw [in her analysis of violence against poor immigrant women] saw knowledge and hierarchical power relations as co-constituted—the very frameworks that shaped understandings of violence against women simultaneously influenced both the violence itself s well as organizational responses to it.”[[20]](#endnote-20) The desire of intersectional theorists to both deconstruct and reconstruct knowledge of identity-based marginalization has led in part to some of the ambiguity and misunderstanding surrounding intersectionality and feminist criticism as well. Care theory shares a postmodern character with intersectionality, particularly in the performative approach described here given the alluding of ethics, identity, and knowledge formation.

Caring performances can come in many forms. Some caring performances exhibit a great depth of care while others are more routinized activities. Authentic acts of hospitality, for example, are performances of care that make others feel welcome, often including tending to needs of the body. The “Hello, how are you?” of someone encountering a customer in a retail establishment is a relative low degree of caring. Any conversation has the potential to engage greater depth of care, but higher levels of particularity are commensurate with greater depth of care.[[21]](#endnote-21) Particular information shared can lead to greater understanding. The needs of particular embodied beings can be attended to by particular others, what Mora Gatens describes as “an unavoidable (and welcome) consequence of constructing an *embodied* ethics that ethics would no longer pretend to be universal.”[[22]](#endnote-22) Embodiment, the physicality of the body in the world, is one form of particularity, so much so, that it is intertwined with our identity. Intersectional identities represent a depth of corporeal particularity. Accordingly, an abstract and universal “color blind” approach in care theory is impossible once the reality of the body is incorporated.

An example of caring practices that can lead to richer understanding of intersectional experience can be found in Maria Lugones’s notion of “playful world traveling.” Lugones recognizes that those in marginalized identities are required to understand mainstream experience for their own survival. Employing residence metaphors, Lugones describes the marginalized as learning to be “at home” among the privileged in order to acquire the resources to survive. Such playful world traveling is done out of necessity, but Lugones also claims that this traveling “can also be willfully exercised . . . by those who are at ease in the mainstream.”[[23]](#endnote-23) In other words, there is hope for the privileged in expanding their understanding ultimately their caring performances. Lugones make an important distinction between agnostic travelers who have assimilationist attitudes and travel to conquer versus those who travel with an open and loving attitude. Lugones characterizes playful world traveling as having the kind of playfulness that implies a dynamic “*openness to surprise*,” which she suggests offers,

a particular metaphysical attitude that does not expect the world to be neatly packaged, ruly. Rules may fail to explain what we are doing. We are not self-important, we are not fixed in particular constructions of ourselves, which is part of saying that we are *open to self-construction.*[[24]](#endnote-24)

Analogously, this distinction can be seen in the difference between authentic responsive care and a paternalistic form of care. The type of care described in care theory begins with a humility for the other—so much so, that such an encounter can change our self-understanding, our self-construction. Note how Lugones moves quickly from the playful loving encounter to its implications for identity construction. This is the potential of embodied, performative care. For Lugones, playfulness is a function of the imagination that is given permission to explore and take risks in a non-systematized fashion. The “worlds” Lugones describes are actual societies and she even advocates learning the language of those societies. Caring performances imply an element of playfulness in risking oneself to respond thoughtfully to other’s needs. Lugones advocates rich inquiries into the context and experience of others—their world. However, to travel is to take risk. We risk having our perceptions challenged, but perhaps more importantly, we risk the possibility of caring. The knowledge gained from humbly responding to the other can result in what can be described as “disruptive” knowledge. Such knowledge pulls us out of our routines and compels us to act on behalf of the other. Imaginative world traveling can take place any number of ways, but its richest form arises out of physical proximity with others. Direct transactions or experiences that enliven a sense of context and particularity—including the power dynamics that Lugones is sensitive to—can best be achieved through meeting others on their turf. There is still a role for literature and the arts in contributing to understanding and the diminishing of otherness, but there is no substitute for the direct experience of other embodied beings.

**Engaging the Body in Moral Education**

To summarize the arguments thus far, humans are ontologically caring corporal beings who express their morality through performative acts. Embodiment creates the potential for understanding and empathy that underlie caring. Furthermore, embodiment can provide the basis for intersectional caring across socially constructed divisions—something much needed in a world divided by misunderstanding and prejudice leading to injustice and oppression.

If the above claims are taken seriously, then the implication for moral education is a need to actively engage embodiment in preparing for effective membership in a cosmopolitan society. Diversity is a strength and a challenge of our social existence that is not going away. Complex entanglements of race, class, gender and other aspects of identity can be found in virtually all social and political issues from reproductive rights to health care policy. To effectively address these issues, members of a society require highly developed empathetic and caring skills to acquire knowledge of unfamiliar others. The body has been ignored for far too long as a means of acquiring better understanding of others.

Specifically, I suggest that a form of *dramaturgical training* may be an important tool for developing the skills necessary for intersectional caring.[[25]](#endnote-25) For example, reflective character acting is an opportunity to playfully inhabit the lives and situations of others that can facilitate the development of imaginative resources. In this case, character acting is defined as more than memorizing lines and recitation but rather entails adopting the back story and personality of a character and then responding to others and circumstances in a consistent personal narrative. Such dramaturgical explorations are undertaken with explicit intentions to understand others in a spirit of empathy.[[26]](#endnote-26) That is not to say that students will not fall into the trap of portraying identity stereotypes, but those become moments of attention and analysis regarding origin and effect with the hope of creating further understanding and empathy. This reflective character training is not to develop great actors, but to allow individuals to embody the particularities of otherness through a corporeal experience. Keeping in mind that care theory is rooted in particularity, dramaturgical training is attuned to physical subtleties and comportment. Such training provides opportunities for reflection given that the objective is not a performance for the benefit of others, but personal and internal growth by exercising skills and contemplating their significance. The focus is the impact on the actors rather than any spectators. Embodiment makes the reflection and performance possible. Elin Diamond, for example, applies a feminist lens to traditional dramaturgical theory to suggest that the body is “paradoxically available for *both* analysis and identification.”[[27]](#endnote-27)

What I describe as reflective character acting is an extension of established dramaturgical approaches such as those of Constantin Stanislavski, known as “The System,” or later with the work of Lee Strasberg, known as “The Method,” which have been enormously influential in contemporary drama. Actors take up the psychological disposition of their characters, developing a depth of understanding that allows them to confront varied circumstances and “stay in character.” Philosopher Paul Woodruff, explicitly describes the educational potential of method acting:

In modern theater, since Stanislavsky, preparation for performance may itself be educational. You will explore the larger context for your character, imagining, if necessary, a background story not supplied in the text. That is good practice for working out ways to understand other people in real life, a laboratory for empathy. Then as you perform your scene, you will learn to be sensitive to the emotion you are trying to elicit from others. Performers may develop multiple sympathies much more deeply than we do when we merely watch.[[28]](#endnote-28)

Acting is fundamentally an embodied and imaginative endeavor, which holistically exercises capacities necessary for caring. The affective experience of the actor engages empathy and understanding that are crucial for moral development. As actor Susan Sarandon describes, “At the root of acting and activism is imagination. I’ve always had the ability to imagine being in someone else’s shoes.”[[29]](#endnote-29) Actors must embody characters in such a way that may reshape their ethical sensibilities.

Liberation, feminist, and postcolonial theorists as well as activists have identified the personal and political potential of acting. For example, Brazilian theatre director, drama theorist, and political activist Augusto Boal who is best known for his development of the “theatre of the oppressed,” attempts to traverse the actor/spectator divide through his notion of the “spect-actor.”[[30]](#endnote-30) As the name suggests, the spect-actor both creates/performs but is also observes and reflects. Embodiment makes spect-acting possible. Boal declares, “The first word of the theatrical vocabulary is the human body.”[[31]](#endnote-31) He subsequently describes the stages for transforming the spectator into an actor (from the passive to the active) as including exercises for “knowing the body” and “making the body expressive.”[[32]](#endnote-32) Boal’s emphasis is on thoughtful performance rather than passive emotional connection. The spect-actor retains agency and becomes in sympathy with the characters rather than swept away by their emotive force. What is particularly useful in Boal’s work for what I am calling reflective character acting that can contribute to caring development is his inclusive sense of dramatic participation. He is not trying to create award-winning acting performances. Boal is provoking people to act and think. For example, in one exercise Boal describes how embodiment confronted gender and oppression:

In Sweden, a young girl of 18 showed as a representation of oppression a woman lying on her back, legs apart, with a man on top of her, in the most conventional love-making position. I asked the spect-actors to make the *Ideal Image*. A man approached and reversed the positions: the woman on top, the man underneath. But the young woman protested and made her own image: man and woman sitting facing each other, their legs intertwined; this was her representation of two human beings, of two “subjects”,” two free people, making love.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Philip Auslander suggests that the above exercise reveals how ideologies are expressed through habitual routines, or what Butler might refer to as iterations, but physical alternatives can be explored as well.[[34]](#endnote-34) Ann Elizabeth Armstrong observes the resonance between Boal’s work and that of feminism when it comes to conceptualizing embodiment: “The body is a critical site in both TO [Theatre of the Oppressed] and feminism through which to explore identity politics, locating experience within the particularities of physical and social contradictions.”[[35]](#endnote-35) Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed and his other dramaturgical endeavors presume that the thoughtful embodiment of others and their context has the power to fire imaginative understanding and create common cause across race and class divides.

The social oppressions imposed upon intersectional differences require new tools and methods to engage in deeper understanding between disparate individuals. We can never possess the knowledge of what it is to be another person, but the hope of society is that we have adequate imaginative capacity to capture a glimpse, an inkling, a small piece of another’s experience in order to find a personal connection and perhaps make common cause or what bell hooks refers to as a “commonality of feeling.”[[36]](#endnote-36) What I propose in reflective character acting is a melding of Boal’s concern for political inclusion and action with Stanislavski’s emphasis on character to formulate a process of moral development is personal and political, engaging the depths of our embodied selves.

Shifting the moral landscape to include a relational corporeal identity and its caring ability implies rethinking how we view moral education and development. Rules and consequences still have their place, but the morality that can help us navigate the rich diversity of contemporary society extends from embodied care. Athletes hone their skills through practice and feedback on performance. Actors use repetition of performance under the watchful gaze and tutelage of experienced performers to improve their abilities. Teachers become more comfortable and skilled at their craft through repeated classroom opportunities—sometimes employing the helpful suggestions of peers or through video observation. These specific professions are important and contribute to society, but how much more important are ethical abilities and specifically caring? Feminist education theorist D. Kay Johnston emphasizes the importance of attending to others. Moral education is in part learning to listen and understand others. Johnston explicitly claims that we must “develop our imaginations so that we can imagine other people’s experiences. This is done through art, music, and literature . . . it also is done by listening to what others say.”[[37]](#endnote-37) Reflective character acting incorporates Johnston’s aesthetic claim and her relational claim. It is an opportunity to “listen” to an other, the character, with the depth necessary to portray them. Practicing our whole-body skills of understanding others through performances of reflective character acting can begin to equip our empathetic imaginations and bodies for the actual performances of care needed when we confront unfamiliar others. Because embodied care reframes morality around ontology and epistemology through an iterative process of performance, dramaturgical training to confront intersectional distance is warranted.

The work of Omi Osun Joni L. Jones is particularly instructive for thinking about alternative approaches to learning about ethics, identity, and intersectionality through performativity. A renowned performer, Jones is also an associate professor of theater and dance and of African Diaspora studies at New York University. One of her courses is “Performance, Feminism, and Social Change,” which she describes as “an exploration of the ways that engaged performance and feminist practice generate space for social change. The course builds on the basic principle that social transformation requires individual awareness, and that awareness necessitates a rigorous examination of race, gender, class, and sexuality. . . . Students will develop tools for productive self-reflexity, will understand the role of positionality in collaborating across identity markers, and will acquire writing and performance skills that employ jazz sensibilities.” [[38]](#endnote-38) Jones encourages her students to explore stereotypes through dramatic performance even when they are potentially offensive to better reflect on their meaning. Jones claims, “If students are not permitted to explore the stereotype, they are less likely to see the ways in which the stereotype is an extension of self-identity, a way of protecting the self from a ‘bad’ world.”[[39]](#endnote-39) Such embodied explorations are a route to better understanding, which is a prerequisite for caring action. Taking a performative approach to care seriously to confront identity-based injustice means engaging the body in moral education.

**Challenges**

A performative approach to care theory represents a radical departure from the Western moral tradition and is rightfully viewed with suspicion. Furthermore, it is not even a conventional way of looking at care ethics, thus bringing further scrutiny. Applying a performative approach to caring to intersectional identity differences raises the stakes even further and given the pattern of hidden discrimination within seemingly neutral theories, requires additional justification. Therefore, issues of privilege and epistemic humility as well as practicality will be addressed in this concluding section.

One concern for a theory that employs the notion of a moral imagination is the limitation of that imagination. The opportunity for error in imagining the plight of others seems overwhelming to the point that such mistakes can cause great harm and reinforce oppressive social positions. Elizabeth Spelman makes the distinction between really seeing someone and imagining them: “If I only rely on my imagination to think about you and your world, I’ll never come to know you and it. And because imagining who you are is really a much easier thing for me to do than find out who you are . . . I may persist in making you an object simply of my imagination even though you are sitting right next to me.”[[40]](#endnote-40) Spelman is, of course, correct if imagination is defined as a creative function with no humility before the subject and no ongoing method for correction. As a moral ideal, care must aspire to more. Caring involves a fundamental respect for the other realized through deep listening and engagement as described in Noddings’s notion of engrossment.[[41]](#endnote-41) One must be humble before the other in a manner reflected in authentic listening. Three decades ago, Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spellman described a deep concern over well-intentioned feminist forays into cultural difference that ultimately led to new forms of silencing and marginalizing. They did not frame a pathway through this challenge by using care language, but they did use the language of friendship: “From within friendship you [white/Anglo women] may be moved by friendship to undergo the very difficult task of understanding the text of our cultures by understanding our lives in our communities.”[[42]](#endnote-42) Lugones and Spellman go on to explicitly call upon epistemic humility: “This learning calls for circumspection, for questioning of yourselves and your roles in your own culture. . . . It demands recognition that you do not have the authority of knowledge; it requires coming to the task without ready-made theories to frame our lives.”[[43]](#endnote-43) Caring as described by Noddings and others has deep abiding responsiveness to the other “with special regard for the particular person in a concrete situation.”[[44]](#endnote-44)

Another way to address this epistemic humility is the tension between unity and alienation. Care resists the otherness of alienation. However, caring does not aim for a unification that elides difference. An act of caring requires a differentiated other to focus particularist attention upon. Imagination is always tempered by reality. This is particularly true in the framework of a performative theory of care where choosing to care is an act of self-creation as well as an act of relational integrity that negotiates the liminal space between romanticized solidarity and atomistic individualism. Athena Athanasiou in a dialogue with Judith Butler describes a middle ground: “The point [of self-poetics] is not to institute new forms of intelligibility that become the basis of self-recognition. But neither is the point to celebrate unintelligibility as its won goal. The point, rather, is to move forward, awkwardly, with others, in a movement that demands both courage and critical practices, a form of relating to norms and to others that does not ‘settle’ into a new regime.”[[45]](#endnote-45) One response to the significant concerns of critical race theorists regarding knowledge of oppressed people is to avoid the dichotomous trap of the polar positions of the “known” and the “unknown.” Anything approaching the complete knowledge of the other is impossible. In this regard, Dawn Rae Davis calls for “a new commitment by which the ability of *not knowing* reconstitutes the *will to know* so that a feminist beholding of the Other woman is a witnessing of the *impossibility* of her appearance in the text of anything demarcated as knowability.”[[46]](#endnote-46) Yet Davis, like Lugones and Spellman, does not give up on the value of intersectional inquiry. She offers hope in the form of epistemic humility. Davis declares that her proposal “is not that of giving up on knowing”[[47]](#endnote-47) but to engage with not knowing. Such inquiry is self-reflexive regarding the politics of care in the given circumstance. Audrey Thompson makes a similar point in regard to overcoming narratives of colorblindness. Thompson suggests that intersectional caring involves both caring for the particular other and attending to relational power dynamics: “To truly see White, Black, and Brown relations in a raced and racist society—both as they are and as they might be—we must care enough to abandon our willed ignorance and political blindness.”[[48]](#endnote-48) No matter how humble and thoughtful our attempts to imagine the plight of an other is, it will still be wrong. The potential pitfall does not mean that we should not try, because the potential benefits are too great. However, dramaturgical exercises of reflective character acting have to be undertaken with attentive intentionality to foster a spirit of empathetic understanding, rather than simply replaying stereotypes of behavior. The important step is to make a sincere enough effort to foster enough understanding to help repair our world and empower one another.

Finally, a word about practicality. Who can afford the time and effort to engage in dramaturgical training to develop their caring moral identity? Is this another activity available only to the privileged to assuage their superficial guilt? It is certainly possible for this to be a marginalized approach, but if the arguments are convincing and gain momentum, there exists a number of trends to suggest that a dramaturgical pedagogy for relational ethics is feasible and compelling. In particular, I will cite the emphasis on pedagogies of engagement and the valorization of emotional intelligence.

The value of education for transferring propositional knowledge is diminishing. The advent of digital online repositories of information is changing the nature of education. Although some foundational education in facts is still needed, formal education is shifting to an emphasis on critical thinking, skill development, and contextualization. If morality is understood to be a practice of the body rather than memorizing rules or learning a moral calculus then actively engaging students in these practices is an appropriate role for educators. One example of such a program is Roots of Empathy, which introduces a parent and child into a kindergarten through eighth grade classroom as guest educators with a curriculum designed for students to attend to and interact with the embodied relationship. The organization describes its program as “an evidence-based classroom program that has shown significant effect in reducing levels of aggression among school children while raising social/emotional competence and increasing empathy.”[[49]](#endnote-49) The program emphasizes moral imagination, empathy, and emotional literacy. As founder Mary Gordon describes, “Our program’s approach speaks to the affective, or caring side of children’s development.”[[50]](#endnote-50) To date, over 450,000 students have experienced the Roots of Empathy program in Canada, the United States, and Europe. It is not a far stretch from the Roots of Empathy program to a program in performative care. Randall T. G. Hill claims, “What is becoming more apparent is the need for a performative turn in the classrooms of several disciplines. . . . performative exercises help [students] both to understand and to demonstrate their understanding in ways that traditional essays and examinations cannot.”[[51]](#endnote-51) A dramaturgical approach to teaching care as a technique for confronting identity-based injustice can be a practical and engaging way to have students learn about ethics.

In addition to the possibility of engaging care through dramaturgical exercises in academic institutions, the trend toward valuing social and emotional intelligence in public institutions could lead to dramaturgical training of care. A small but growing voice of theorists is calling for greater emphasis on care in business decision making as well as in corporate culture.[[52]](#endnote-52) The same is true in political theory where a number of scholars are taking care theory seriously in rethinking institutions, policies, and practices.[[53]](#endnote-53) Role-playing and case study analysis are common approaches in business and government training exercises. Many public institutions already have programs to combat racism and sexism. Using dramaturgical approaches to build a culture of care that engages intersectional differences to confront social injustice in a public organization is on the same trajectory. For both academic and public institutions the practicality of teaching care through acting exercises is not as big of an obstacle as is the will to do so. The failure of traditional moral approaches to mitigate much of identity-based oppression demands new ways of developing the skills to care for unfamiliar others.

Notes

1. . Audrey Thompson, “Caring and Colortalk: Childhood Innocence in White and Black” in *Race-ing Moral Formation: African American Perspectives on Care and Justice*, ed. Vanessa Siddle Walker and John R. Snarey (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . Vanessa Siddle Walker and John R. Snarey, “Primary Values in Developing Virtues of African-American Ethics,” in *Race-ing Moral Formation: African American Perspectives on Care and Justic*e, ed. Vanessa Siddle Walker and John R. Snarey (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), 150. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . Maurice Hamington, “The Will to Care: Performance, Expectation, and Imagination,” *Hypatia*, 25, no. 3 (Summer 2010) 675–95. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . Athena Athanasiou, “The Sociality of Self-Poetics,” in *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 69. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . Allison Weir, *Identities and Freedom: Feminist Theory Between Power and Connection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. . Ibid., 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. . Richard Shusterman, “Somaesthetics and Care of the Self: The Case of Foucault,” *Monist* 83, no. 4 (2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. . Given space limitations, this article does not offer an epistemology of embodied care. For a discussion of embodied knowledge and habits of care, please see Maurice Hamington, *Embodied Care: Jane Addams, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Feminist Ethics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. . Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, XXXX), 92.1962 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. . Butler’s notion of “iteration” and Dewey’s concept of “habit” are nuanced frameworks for identity, the full exploration of which is beyond the scope of this article. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 187, 245n8. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1922), 13–94. For an excellent comparative feminist analysis of the two approaches as gender construction, see “Reconfiguring Gender with John Dewey: Habit, Bodies, and Cultural Change,” *Hypatia* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 23–42. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. . Michael Slote, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy* (New York: Routlege, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. . Robert S. Chang and Jerome McCristal Culp, “After Intersectionality,” *University of Missouri-Kansas City Law Review*, 71:485–491, 490. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. . Barbara Smith, Demita Frazier, and Beverly Smith, “Combahee River Collective Statement” (1980), http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.htm. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. . Chimamanda Adichie, “The Danger of A Single Story,” TED Talk (July 2009),

    https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\_adichie\_the\_danger\_of\_a\_single\_story. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. . Kathryn T. Gines, “Black Feminism and Intersectional Analyses: A Defense of Intersectionality,” *Philosophy Today* 55 (2011): 282. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. . Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” in *The Black Feminist Reader*, ed. Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 221. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. . Patricia Hill Collins, “Foreword,” in *Emerging Intersections: Race, Class, and Gender in Theory Policy, and Practice*, ed. Bonnie Thornton Dill and Ruth Enid Zambrana (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), viii. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. . Joan Tronto, “Women and Caring: What Feminist Can Learn About Morality from Care Ethics,” in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (New York: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 181–83. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. . Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. . Maria Lugones, “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling, and Loving Perception,” *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987): 3–19, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. . Ibid., 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. . Although Judith Butler declares that performance “is not primarily theatrical,” what is suggested in this paper regarding reflecting dramaturgical training suggests that a broadened and reformulated sense of theatre, along with dramaturgical theory, has a great deal to offer a notion of performative care. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. . Reflective character acting can be described as an intentional and structured experience in open epistemology that seeks to understand the other without a prescriptive sense of how that other should be. As Aparna Mishra Tarc describes in reference to the analysis of Gayatri Spivak, educational institutions must be wary of the effort to frame the education process as one that knows what is right for others. Aparna Mishra Tarc, “In a Dimension of Height: Ethics in the Education of Others” *Education Theory* 56, no. 3 (2006): 298. Reflective character acting in the spirit of embodied and performative care is to learn a skill or habit in service of better knowing the other rather than a normative ethic for adjudicating moral action. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. . Elin Diamond, “Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism,” in *A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance*, ed. Carol Martin (New York: Routledge, 1996), 129. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. . Paul Woodruff, *The Necessity of Theater: The Art of Watching and Being Watched* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 228. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. . Susan Sarandon, “Susan Sarandon Interview: Speaking Her Mind,” *Reader’s Digest,* August 2002, http://www.rd.com/susan-sarandon/article26717-2.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. . Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. McBride and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 1985), 144–45. For a feminist adaptation of Boal’s work, see Berenice Fisher, “Feminist Acts: Women, Pedagogy, and Theatre of the Oppressed,” in *Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism* ed. Mady Schutzman and Jan Cohen-Cruz (New York: Routledge, 1994), 185–97. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. . Ibid., 125. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. . Ibid., 126. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. . Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-actors*., trans. Adrian Jackson (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. . Philip Auslander, “Boal, Blau, Brecht: The Body,” in *Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism*, ed. Mady Schutzman and Jan Cohen-Cruz (New York: Routledge, 1994), 129. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. . Ann Elizabeth Armstrong, “Negotiating Feminist Identities and Theatre of the Oppressed.” In *A Boal Companion: Dialogues on Theatre and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 178. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. . bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 217. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. . D. Kay Johnson, *Education for a Caring Society: Classroom Relationships and Moral Actions* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006), 68. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. . https://www.utexas.edu/cola/centers/caaas/faculty/jij2555#courses. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. . Jones Joni L. “Teaching in the Borderlands,” In *Teaching Performance Studies*, ed. Nathan Stucky and Cynthia Wimmer (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2002), 183. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. . Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 179–80. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. . Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. . Maria C. Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman, “Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for ‘the Woman’s Voice,’” In *Hypatia Reborn: Essays in Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Azizah y. Al-Hibri and Margaret A. Simons (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 18–33, 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. . Ibid., 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. . Noddings, *Caring*, 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. . Athanasiou, “The Sociality of Self-Poetics,” 68. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. . Dawn Rae Davis, “(Love Is) the Ability of Not Knowing: Feminist Experience of the Impossible in Ethical Singularity,” *Hypatia* 17, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 145–61, 155. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. . Ibid., 157. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. . Audrey Thompson, “Caring and Colortalk: Childhood Innocence in White and Black,” in *Race-ing Moral Formation: African American Perspectives on Care and Justice*, ed. Vanessa Siddle Walker and John R. Snarey (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004): 23–37, 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. . Roots of Empathy. http://www.rootsofempathy.org. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. . Mary Gordon, *Roots of Empathy: Changing the World Child by Child* (New York: The Experiment, 2009), 53. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. . Randall T. G. Hill, “Performance Pedagogy Across the Curriculum,” in *The Future of Performance Studies: Visions and Revisions*, ed. Sheron J. Dailey (Washington, DC: National Communication Association, 1998), 141–44, 143. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. . Maurice Hamingtonand Maureen Sander-Staudt, eds., *Applying Care Ethics to Business*, Issues in Business Ethics Series (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. . See, for example, Joan Tronto, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-53)