In my new book project, “Critical Care,” I hope to bring disability studies and Victorian literature together by focusing on an area of feminist/disability studies theory known as ‘ethics of care.’ I want to show how ethics of care can work as a literary-critical methodology. It is my contention that ethics of care describes a kind of culture we already find in Victorian fiction, and therefore gives us powerful new tools to describe how that culture works.

Ethics of care describes a situation in which carers and cared-fors are interdependent beings, and that is precisely what the Victorian novel depicts: small communities of mutual care, in which nursing occurs mainly at home. Victorians often came to the novel from intensive personal experience of caregiving, and they were often keenly insightful about the disastrous turns that care relations can take, as well as passionately hopeful about the social relations that might be fostered if characters could achieve a real community of care.

In my book project, I plan to stress two aspects of the theory that I find particularly exciting for literary criticism. First, ethics of care focuses on social relations instead of diagnosis. Thus ethics of care is largely indifferent to what theorists call the “medical model” in which a disability is a flaw that needs to be fixed. Instead, it explores the quality of the interactions between the carer and cared-for, regardless of whatever impairment might have necessitated the nursing in the first place. And in those interactions, disabled persons are crucial, not just minor characters or comic relief. Second, ethics of care regards care as an action rather than a feeling. Caring is a performance – which means that anyone can do it, anyone can give and take care, regardless of gender, status, or role. We can see how the tenderest, most intense relations between people may occur between people of the same sex, unrelated individuals, communities; we can get away from traditional familial and marital roles, and look at the feelings enacted between people who have chosen to affiliate with each other. Both these ideas conduce towards a radically newly egalitarian idea of how to read a novel.

My previous book, Romance’s Rival, is just being published now (its official publication date is February 2) so I am only beginning to outline what “Critical Care” would look like. I plan, however, to begin with a theoretical introduction outlining ethics of care, followed by chapters on Charlotte Yonge, Henry James, Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot. I will end with an epilogue discussing whether ‘ethics of care’ can work as a model for academia. How, I ask, might we reform our writing, teaching, service work, editing, reviewing, and interviewing according to principles of care? Can we use an ethics of care to help make a more humane and responsible experience for those of us in this profession? “Critical Care” thus ends by turning its lens back onto our own academic community, exploring our own relational responsibilities.

For each of my Victorian authors, I juxtapose an early novel written out of idealistic dreams of a harmonious care community, with a later novel that offers a critical perspective on care gone awry. Thus for instance I discuss the tender care between Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester in Jane Eyre, contrasting it with Lucy Snowe’s difficult emotional dissidence when she becomes a teacher in Villette. Similarly, the ardent and loving society that forms around Ralph Touchett’s deathbed in Henry James’s The Portrait of a Lady gets rewritten as the scandalously greedy, corrupt, conspiracy around Milly Theale’s deathbed in The Wings of the Dove, and George
Eliot’s famous early faith in sympathy is seriously challenged when feeling renders Daniel Deronda incapable of action and he must turn to the active performance of care instead. In my Dickens section, I will end with his last published novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, in which predatory, vicious characters must be retrained through the acts of mutual care afforded by traumatic injury and chronic suffering. I am not yet sure which early novel I will use, but one possible contender is *Dombey and Son*, a novel in which a self-centered, iron-willed man refuses the lessons of care because they come from the wrong individual. This novel reveals the performativity of care, for its point is that loving care can come from anyone, whether male or female – whether related or unrelated – a lesson that Mr. Dombey has to learn very painfully indeed.

My readings of Yonge, Eliot, Brontë, Dickens, and James work to sensitize readers to the centrality of disabled characters. In these novels, the dying, crippled, and immobilized are the key to the social world. After all, Charlie, Mordecai, Jenny Wren, and Milly Theale catalyze the emotional work of the novel, moving the able-bodied characters from dangerous situations (lethal apathy, predatory exploitation) into mutual nurturance. It is easy to assume that Victorian novels are mired in retrograde gender and sexual assumptions, but “Critical Care” hopes to show that communal, affiliative, and same-sex loving relations pervade the genre of the Victorian novel. Through ethics of care, we can look at caring outside the traditional marital dyad, instead seeing how caring bonds unite multitudes.

I would like to use a Research Enhancement Grant to enable me to attend the Dickens Universe in early August in Santa Cruz, CA, an experience that would substantially help me shape my Dickens chapter. Dickens Universe is an intensive week-long forum focusing on a specific novel by Dickens, which participants study through talks, seminars, symposia, and reading groups. This year’s novel is *Dombey and Son*, coincidentally one of the novels I am considering writing about. Mr. Dombey values family members only insofar as they fit into a traditional patrilineal model (as the novel’s title indicates). Fixated on his wife, he refuses to accept the ministrations of a nurse; obsessed with his son, he overlooks his daughter. But the work of the novel is to produce a loving social circle composed of Florence Dombey (the neglected daughter), the boy’s nurse Polly, Florence’s friend Walter Gay, Walter Gay’s elderly guardians, and other affiliative figures. I’d like to trace how Dickens critiques a masculinist, traditional family/company structure from the point of view of the performative ties that ethics of care allows us to see.

A chance to study *Dombey and Son* in this highly intensive mode would be invaluable. Dickens Universe attracts the top Dickens scholars from all over the country, indeed the world. I attended it once, in 2014, a visit that was quite literally life-changing, for when I saw the reaction that my “Our Mutual Friend” paper received, I decided to extend it into a full book on ethics of care. I therefore owe the inception of this “Critical Care” project to Dickens Universe 2014, and it would be fitting to continue to develop the project at this year’s meeting.

CUNY will pay for my accommodation because we have a membership at Dickens Universe, but it will not pay my airfare or food. I would like to apply for a Research Enhancement Grant to cover those expenses: my flight, my airport shuttles. Based on previous expenditures at Dickens Universe, I anticipate spending perhaps $50 per day on food, for a total of $300 for the 6 days. I would also like to use a Research Enhancement Grant to buy new memory for my computer, which is looking increasingly necessary as I begin a new book project with its new need to accommodate PDFs and images. These funds will substantially help me as I move towards the new book.
Budget justification

1. *Estimated travel costs*
   Airfare from New York to San Jose (Dickens Universe is in nearby Santa Cruz): $400
   Supershuttle between airport and campus: $30 \times 2 = $60
   Uber to New York airport: $30 \times 2 = $60
   Food per day, approximately $50/6 days: $300

   Total: $820

2. *Computer costs*
   New internal hard drive: $350
   Installation fee: $150

   Total: $500

3. Total amount requested from Research Enhancement Grant: $1320
CV

Employment
Professor of English, Queens College, CUNY 1999-present
Graduate Center, CUNY, 2005-present

Education
Ph.D, Cornell University, 1996; MA, Cornell University, 1993; BA with honors, Brown University, 1990

Monographs and Edited Volumes
Literature and Culture at the Fin de Siècle Edited, selected, and annotated 700-pp. teaching anthology Addison-Wesley Longman & Company, 2006
The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000

Selected Recent Publications
Selected Recent Keynote and Invited Lectures

“Romance’s Rivals: Familiar Marriage and Victorian Fiction,” Northwestern University, November 12, 2015


“No Taste for Finery or Parade’: Mrs. Elton, Emma, and Economic Life,” The New School, October 24, 2015

“Community, Craft, and Care in Cranford,” Trinity University, September 24, 2015

“From Sympathy to Care: Relational Ethics and Daniel Deronda”: Princeton University, March 31, 2015

“Disabling Marriage: Communities of Care in Our Mutual Friend”: Harvard University, September 18, 2014


“Critical Care: The Relational Ethics of Reading”: University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign, November 19, 2013

“Making Marriage Work: Victorian Vocationalism and the Suppressive Hypothesis”: Victorian Seminar, Graduate Center, CUNY, November 6, 2013

Professional Service

Co-Editor, WSQ (Women’s Studies Quarterly), 2008-2010
Co-Editor, Dickens Studies Annual, 2006-2008


Co-organizer, Annual Victorian Conference, Graduate Center CUNY, 2008-present
Organizer, “Personhood Conference,” Queens College CUNY, December 2015
Judge, NAVSA Prize for Best Book in Victorian Studies, 2015
Judge, Trollope Prize, 2013
Judge, NVSA Graduate Student Essay Contest, 2012-2013
MLA Executive Committee for Division of Late-19th and 20th-Century English Literature, 2006-2011

Selected Service at CUNY

Admissions Committee, Graduate Center, 2005-2015
Faculty Membership Committee, Graduate Center, 2013-2015
Executive Committee of English Department, Graduate Center, 2007-2008, 2014-2015
Member, Personnel and Budget Committee, Queens College CUNY 2008-2011
Director of Graduate Studies, Queens College CUNY, 2004-2008
Chair, Curriculum Committee, Queens College CUNY 2002-2004