

Timing Problems: When Care and Violence Converge in Stephen King's Horror Novel *Christine*

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*Judith Butler, Joan Tronto, and Stephen King all hinge human experience on shared ontological vulnerability, but whereas Butler and Tronto use vulnerability to build ethical commitments, King exploits aging, disability, and death to frighten us. King's horror genre is provocative for the imaginative landscape of feminist theory precisely because he uses vulnerability to magnify the anxieties of mass culture. In *Christine*, the characters' shared susceptibility to psychic and physical injury blurs the boundary between care and violence. Like Butler, King depicts our social worlds encrusted with normative violence: the mundane ways that norms police gender, race, class, and disability identities. And like Butler, King makes undecidability a key feature of human identity: the idea that needs and identities are uncertain. Normative violence and undecidability trouble the starting point of Tronto's care theory—attentiveness to needs—because both concepts invest interdependency with ambiguity and conflict. But like Tronto, King recognizes that care-actors must act, even amid ambiguity and even when their actions make care and aggression converge. *Christine's* supernatural plot details the psychic possession of an American teenager, but the novel's more terrifying story is about interdependency and how normative violence is not the antithesis of care, but its dark underbelly.*

I think that part of being a parent
is trying to kill your kids.
—Stephen King, *Christine*

When Arnie Cunningham mutters this line in *Christine*, he captures the teenage angst found in many Stephen King novels, but he also tells us something about the risks entrenched in care ethics. When we care for someone, we attend not only to their present needs, but also to what we anticipate their future needs to be. As a

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future-oriented practice, caring requires us to ask—*who will this person be and how can I prepare them for this future?* Particularly for people who care for children, the care we provide shapes who they will become. And here enters Arnie's criticism. Arnie's parents Michael and Regina prioritize academic success because they want him to go to college; they judge suspiciously the trappings of high school: sex, cars, and rock n' roll. But for Arnie, buying an old car promises a new identity, which he thinks his parents want to kill.

Arnie's accusation unsettles the relationship among care, violence, and vulnerability that has emerged from two areas of feminist theory: Joan Tronto's care theory and Judith Butler's ethical writings. Tronto makes conflict central to care theory, yet also maintains that appropriate attentiveness can minimize conflict (Tronto 1993, 143; 2001, 72; see also Engster 2004, 117; Khader 2011; Held 2015, 20). Tronto defines care as "everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so we can live in it as well as possible" (Fisher and Tronto 1991, 40; Tronto 1993, 103)—a definition that is now "classic" to care ethics (Engster and Hamington 2015, 5). Tronto theorizes five phases of care, the defining feature of which is "taking other's needs as the starting point for what must be done" (Tronto 1993, 105). Tronto argues that violence can result when this starting point breaks down, making care absent or deficient (Tronto 1995, 146). In *Caring Democracy*, she suggests that care and violence inhabit opposite ends of a spectrum (Tronto 2013). Tronto thus suggests that good caregivers interpret needs well enough to avoid or resolve conflict without recourse to violence (Tronto 1993, 128; Kittay 1999; Khader 2011).

Although Judith Butler avoids the language of care, she has developed a relational account of ethics mired in ambiguity and struggle (Butler 2004, 24).¹ According to Butler, "There is no overcoming ambivalence in love, since we are always at risk of destroying what we are most attached to and vulnerable to being destroyed by those on whom we are most dependent" (Butler 2014). Butler's concept of normative violence uncovers how gendered norms police identities, making violence a constitutive risk of caring relationships (Butler 1999; Mills 2007). Accordingly, "To be a body is to be exposed to social crafting" (Butler 2011, 382). When we care, we craft people according to their needs and sociocultural norms. Butler's and Tronto's theories of relationality turn on different axes (norms versus needs), yet they both make human vulnerability the foundation for a more nonviolent democracy (Butler 2004; Tronto 2013).

King's horror novel *Christine*, which details Arnie's psychic possession by a 1958 Plymouth Fury, challenges the idea that the recognition of vulnerability promotes ethical relations; instead, King shows how vulnerability strains human relationships—often to the point of violence. Although some critics consider his books literary junk food (Bloom 2007), his horror genre is provocative for the imaginative landscape of feminist theory precisely because he uses vulnerability to magnify anxieties of mass culture (King 1981/2011, 5; Magistrale 1988; 2010). Like Butler and Tronto, King understands vulnerability as a universal ontological condition: all humans are subject to illness, injury, disability, and death (King 1981/2011, 5; Butler 2004; Mackenzie,

Rogers, and Dodds 2014; Tronto 2013).² But rather than theorize abstract ethical obligations, King uses vulnerability to frighten us.

Literary critics have explored several cultural anxieties in *Christine*—white-supremacist homophobic violence (Madden 2007); adolescent coming of age (Collings 1986; Davis 1994); technological betrayal (Magistrale 1988; Sears 2011)—but they pay less attention to the ways in which caring relationships magnify anxieties about vulnerability. Vulnerability is scary because it signals disability and death—conditions that terrify lots of people (Shildrick 2000; Hirschberger, Florian, and Mikulincer 2005; Hirschmann 2013; Kafer 2013). The question becomes, how do we care for people we love while we know “that *anything* can go disastrously wrong, at *any time*”? (King 1981/2011, xii; original emphasis). Especially because King’s fiction situates caring relationships amid contexts of normative violence, he scares us by detailing how care goes wrong.

When Tronto and Butler point to wrongheaded responses to vulnerability, they have in mind the rise of neoliberalism—and both take specific aim at George W. Bush, the war on terror, and the market—relatively easy targets to lambast for committing violence (Butler 2003; Tronto 2013). But King has a different target in mind: you (King 2010). As King’s fiction and life demonstrate (he was nearly killed when hit by a van in June 1999), “the good fabric of things sometimes has a way of unraveling with shocking suddenness” (King 2008, xxi). In *Christine*, King shows us how care is a fallible practice enmeshed with our anxieties about the future. The distinction between preserving a life and destroying it is not always clear. For Arnie Cunningham, normative violence is not the antithesis of care but its dark underbelly.

VIOLENT TIMES AT LIBERTYVILLE HIGH

One reason why caring for people feels scary is because the constant unfolding of time makes life uncertain and, indeed, time inspired King to write *Christine*. As he pulled into his driveway, he thought of an odometer that ran backward and a car that “would get ‘younger’ instead of older” (King 2015). When care theorists consider the problem of time, they examine how our needs change across the course of life (Phillips 2007) or how neoliberal markets devalue care by prioritizing efficiency (Tronto 2013). *Christine* shows that the time in which we care is also significant; every time and place is affected by norms, many of which operate violently.

Christine is set in the small town of Libertyville in 1978 but looks back to 1958; as such, it was part of a larger trend in popular culture (think *American Graffiti* and *Grease*) that drew upon American nostalgia for the 1950s to think about contemporary life (DeWitt 2010). We see this nostalgia in Arnie’s name, taken from two characters in *Happy Days*, itself a nostalgic production (Badley 1987; Grainge 2000). *Christine* links 1958 with blatant patriarchal white supremacy. In 1978, similar norms about hegemonic masculinity marginalize Arnie Cunningham during his adolescence—a time, perhaps, when gendered norms police identity most rigidly (Butler 1999, xix).

Arnie's best friend Dennis Guilder narrates most of *Christine*, and in the prologue, he describes the normative violence that Arnie experienced in high school four years prior in 1978. "Every high school has to have at least two [losers]; it's like a national law" (King 1983/2011, 1); Libertyville's high-school bullies take pleasure in humiliating and torturing Arnie (108). Arnie wears glasses, is too skinny, and has pimples—King's teenage equivalent of disability in contemporary culture (King 1981/2011, 47). By inscribing Arnie with a disability, King marks him as "outside the norm," whose vulnerability is physically exposed (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, 49). Though Dennis lacks Butler's language of normative violence, he knows that even when norms never manifest in physical violence, they still cause harm. For Dennis, "Sometimes [high-school losers] *do* get killed, in every important way except the physical" (King 1983/2011, 2).

High-school society strictly enforces these norms of race, class, and gender—policing anyone like Arnie who fails to conform. Arnie's choices are constrained—jock, druggie, or geek—but there are more choices available to him because he is white and middle-class. Like much of King's work, *Christine* is overwhelmingly white (Magistrale 2010). Blacks in Libertyville surface seldom in the novel; they conjure only athleticism or societal decline (King 1983/2011, 282, 363). King pays more attention to working-class whites, and he depicts these kids and their parents as crude, violent, and racist. Poor white boys in Libertyville are tracked into mechanics, low-wage work, or crime; and perhaps it is this economic marginalization that motivates them to bully Arnie.

King views critically the normative violence of high school and American small towns, but he judges less critically the role of the family. Instead, his nostalgia for 1958 shines brightly in his idealization of the Guilders and their white, middle-class, patriarchal nuclear family (Tronto 2001, 76; Magistrale 2010). Unfortunately, this uncritical gaze leaves the Guilders uninteresting: Dennis's dad, Kenny, is a father-knows-best caricature and Dennis's mom is so vacuous that she remains nameless (Magistrale 2010). In contrast, Arnie's mother Regina rules. She is paternalistic, failing heteronormative femininity and attentive caregiving ensconced in 1950s nostalgia of the nuclear family (Tronto 1993; 2013). Arnie's parents defy patriarchal norms, but to Dennis, his own family looks like the setting of "better" care because it mirrors "traditional" values (Tronto 2001, 67).

Arnie's deviance is set against Dennis's all-American masculinity: Dennis was an All-Conference swimmer, captain of the football and baseball teams, and Arnie's only friend. Yet Dennis's masculinity cycles a nameless stream of cheerleader girlfriends through his car's backseat while the prettiest girl in high school falls in love with Arnie. Dennis was a "big guy" at high school, but four years later, he knows this status "doesn't mean donkeyshit" (King 1983/2011, 1). Arnie is interesting *because* he is an outcast. Lonely people, like Arnie, "can always think of something neat to do on rainy days" (3). In hindsight, Dennis sees how Arnie's resistance to Libertyville's normative violence made him interesting, but in 1978, he under-estimated how normative violence felt, or how much Arnie did to resist it.

ENGINE TROUBLE

After the prologue, *Christine* begins again, but now in 1978, as Arnie and Dennis spot the car for sale on their way home from their summer jobs. Arnie buys the car from Roland D. LeBay—a hateful, racist, ex-Army man whose back injury signifies physical and moral decay. At first, when Arnie fixes the car, he too improves, losing his acne and attracting the new girl in school. But the more time he spends with the car, the more LeBay’s hateful spirit takes over his identity. Roland is an anagram of Arnold, and the interchangeability of letters represents the instability of Arnie’s identity. This instability complicates the starting point of Tronto’s care theory—being attentive to others’ needs—because needs are never settled. As care-actors, we must choose which needs to nurture or ignore; and the dominant norms of our times likely affects how we make these decisions.

Arnie’s supernatural identity struggle captures Butler’s concept of undecidability, a “non-sovereign account of agency” in which the self fails to perceive fully her motivations or her actions’ potential consequences (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, x). Undecidability animates Dennis’s pervasive anxiety about growing up. He doesn’t call it undecidability; instead, he calls it a problem of *engines*.

Engines. That’s something else about being a teenager. There are all these engines, and somehow you end up with the ignition keys to some of them and you start them up but you don’t know what the fuck they are or what they’re supposed to do They give you the keys and some clues and they say, Start it up, see what it will do, and sometimes what it does is pull you along into a life that’s really good and fulfilling, and sometimes what it does is pull you right down the highway to hell and leave you all mangled and bleeding on the roadside. (King 1983/2011, 87)

Dennis links undecidability to time, as we constantly move toward an unknowable future, and also to vulnerability, as he imagines a good life in opposition to one “mangled and bleeding.” Undecidability makes interdependency scary because time and death are interlinked—themes that I take up in more detail later.

For now, I want to discuss a problem of engines that Dennis fails to appreciate: how undecidability troubles interdependency. Our dependence is both the foundation of and a problem for caring relationships. Butler summarizes the problem like this: “If I seek to preserve your life, it is not only because it is in my self-interest to do so, or because I have wagered that it will bring about better consequences for me. It is because I am already tied to you in a social bond without which this ‘I’ cannot be thought” (Butler 2014). Tronto understands this about interdependency, although with less ambivalence. In *Caring Democracy*, she makes two ontological points: all humans are in relationships and all humans are “vulnerable and fragile” (Tronto 2013, 3). Though Tronto discusses how upper-middle-class parents fear that their children won’t get enough attention or a place at an elite university (Tronto 2002), these fears look superficial alongside Dennis’s vision of blood and destruction. Yes, Arnie’s parents want him to get into a good

university; they engage in Tronto's vision of "competitive caring" in which their care is judged by how well Arnie succeeds over others (Tronto 2013, 101). But as Arnie's behavior becomes more erratic, his parents begin to fear for their shared survival.

But here is where normative violence enters again. The shared survival of Arnie's family is linked to their interdependent needs and also to the norms to which they subscribe. Consider the verbs that Tronto uses to define care: "everything we do to *maintain*, *continue*, and *repair* our 'world'" (Tronto 1993, 103). Similarly, Butler argues, "we are interdependent beings whose pleasure and suffering depend from the start on a *sustained* social world, a *sustaining* environment" (Butler 2013, 4). The world that sustains Dennis, Regina, and Michael is the same world that marginalizes Arnie. His deviant masculinity bolsters Dennis's high-school-jock privilege. Though Arnie's parents don't condone Arnie's bullies, they benefit from them as the bullying makes Arnie an acquiescent child. Moreover, Regina and Michael's idealization of college is built on stigmas of the working class and helps explain why they dismiss Arnie's love of mechanics. How they interpret Arnie's needs is filtered by who they think he should be and the norms they think he should sustain.

BREAKDOWNS

These problems of interdependency surface once Arnie agrees to buy the car from LeBay (despite Dennis's protests) and Dennis drives him home. As they enter, a loathsome tranquility suffuses Arnie's house, which is indicative of the emotional stew of Arnie's life. Regina is working on "one of an endless series of goofy jigsaw puzzles," Michael is playing the recorder, and Dennis smells the "fairly rank" odor of a "good old kelp quiche" (King 1983/2011, 24). The argument that ensues reveals how people make demands on one another to maintain predictable identity and, when people change unexpectedly, relational breakdowns result.

Regina and Michael depend on Arnie to be successful, not only because they care for him, but also because they need his success to help redeem past and present injuries. For Regina, getting Arnie out of Libertyville and into college is the only way she imagines a better future for her son, a desire shaped by her own difficult childhood and patriarchal father. Meanwhile, Arnie's rebellion coincides with his father's failed bid to become the chair of the history department. King doesn't idealize Regina and Michael as he does Dennis's parents, which, for me, makes them better cases for exploring care conflicts.

When Arnie mentions that he bought a car, Regina knocks over her puzzle—the sign that things are about to fall apart. "You're kidding," Michael says, and Dennis's stomach starts to churn—a sickening side effect of interdependency. Dennis wants to leave, but Regina draws him into the argument and makes him share in the responsibility of caring for Arnie. Regina tells Arnie that he should have consulted them first, but Arnie balks at this suggestion. "*Consult* you! . . . I've consulted you on every

damn thing I've ever done! Everything was a committee meeting, and if it was something I didn't want to do, I got outvoted two to one!" (26).

But why does the car trigger such parental backlash? Dennis interprets it as Regina losing tight control over her family, thus fitting Tronto's understanding of paternalism, in which care-givers "come to accept their own account . . . as definitive" (Tronto 1995, 145). "She simply wanted to crush the rebellion under her heel, quickly and completely" (King 1983/2011, 30). But while Dennis notices Regina and Michael's "rising anger," he also sees their "surprise [and] uneasiness" (25). Regina's surprise exposes how her son's identity and desires escape her grasp. What Dennis calls a "raw power-struggle" (27), Butler could call a breakdown: "The 'I' finds that, in the presence of an other, it is breaking down. It does not know itself; perhaps it never will" (Butler 2003, 69). King calls it "disestablishment; that things are in the unmaking" (King 1981/2011, 8). Elsewhere, Butler describes the same feeling as dispossession:

[We] are dispossessed of ourselves by virtue of some kind of contact with another, by virtue of being moved and even surprised or disconcerted by that encounter with alterity . . . we sometimes no longer know precisely who we are, or by what we are driven One can be dispossessed in grief or in passion—unable to find oneself. (Butler 2013, 3–4)

Like Dennis's description of engines, Butler understands how we are *driven* into our identities in ways that escape our control. In one afternoon, the car alters how Regina sees her son, his future, and her relationship to him. The money that he will spend on the car is money set aside for college. As Arnie's identity shifts, so too does Regina's sense of self, providing a glimpse of care as "conflict-laden, intense, gritty, and fleshy" (Cooper 2007, 257).

The scene also demonstrates Dennis's undecidability, as he waffles over the car, Arnie's parents, and his relationship to Arnie. Despite his misgivings about the car, Dennis defends Arnie's choice, rationalizing that he and Arnie are morally sworn together as teenagers against adults. His feelings about Michael and Regina also shift, as he describes the Cunninghams as his "second family," but then confides that he "had never completely trusted" Regina (King 1983/2011, 27). Rather than dismiss Dennis (and King) as an inconsistent narrator (Hendrix 2013), these vacillations reveal how caring deeply about another person coexists with ambivalence.

Care theorists give prescriptions to guide ideal caring practices that are missing from this scene—care should be attentive, unselfish, anti-paternalist, and enabling (Tronto 1993; Kittay 1999; Engster 2004; Khader 2011). But I find the scene compelling because it exposes how care *feels*—intense, gritty, and scary: Regina afraid of the unexpected path that Arnie's decision portends; Dennis wavering on his loyalties; and Michael stupefied. They are dispossessed, no longer controlled by "self-sufficient forms of deliberation" (Butler 2013, 4). Rating the quality of their care as "good" or "bad" seems less important than noticing how this scene changes our conception of the timing of care practices. When Tronto theorizes care, she articulates five phases, including "caring about," "taking care of," "care-giving," "care-

receiving,” and “caring-with” (Tronto 2013). But in a matter of minutes for the Cunninghams, the person they imagined their son to be changes. Though we might theorize care as a series of phases in order to understand its complexity, this conceptualization may also mask the ways in which caring decisions and practices are experienced simultaneously.

This scene also helps specify how normative violence operates. Though Butler rejects Catherine Mills’s contention that all norms operate violently all the time (Mills 2007), she sidesteps specifying which norms operate violently and under what conditions. Libertyville High and the Cunninghams show two distinct operations of normative violence. High-school bullies practice *malignant* normative violence: they harm Arnie intentionally. In contrast, Dennis, Regina, and Michael exercise *benevolent* normative violence—or what we might call *coercive care*: they aim to craft Arnie in a way that they think is good for him. Likewise, Sara Ahmed argues that the “desire for the child’s happiness is far from indifferent” (Ahmed 2010, 42). How Regina and Michael imagine Arnie’s happiness is filtered through their own set of norms and privileges.

Christine also suggests that people bear different levels of responsibility for promoting malignant or benevolent normative violence. Once Arnie restores Christine, LeBay comes back from the grave to kill Arnie’s enemies. The first to die are high-school bullies. Christine’s kill list suggests that the least innocent are those guilty of malignant normative violence, but neither can we escape culpability by our benign desires.

TIMING PROBLEMS

Christine is able to kill Arnie’s enemies because she subverts time and vulnerability. The car runs on backward time, symbolized by her backward-running odometer. This subversion of time makes the car invulnerable: she always regains her former shape—no matter what damage she sustains. But for *Christine*’s human characters, time moves forward, as Dennis’s repeated ruminations on his last year of high school remind us. As subjects who live in time (Butler 2001, 27), we face an undecidable future while living in an unsettled present, both of which complicate care.

Take, for example, Tronto’s first phase of care—attentiveness—in which we reflect on the person’s needs and desires in order to determine the kind of care we offer. *Christine* raises this question for care: from what standpoint in time do we judge a person’s needs and identity? Needs as they are now? Or the person’s needs as they may be in the future? *Christine* plays with these different standpoints in time from the earliest scene in which Arnie spots the car. Arnie’s fascination with the car perplexes Dennis, but their different perceptions of the car are differences of time. Dennis sees the car’s brokenness as she is *now* in LeBay’s yard: cracked windscreen, rust, twisted bumper, and flat tire. Her seat stuffing is “bleeding out” and her door opens “with a scream” (King 1983/2001, 8). Yet, Arnie tells Dennis, “She could be fixed up. She could . . . she could be tough” (9). Arnie judges Christine from the future, which he

connects to his experience as a high-school outcast. To survive in an inhospitable world, Arnie looks to the future in which his life “could be” different. He and Christine *could be* tough—they *could be* beautiful. The undecidability of time fortifies him.

Likewise, Dennis and Regina judge Arnie’s needs from different points in time. Dennis cares for Arnie in his present state: he teaches Arnie to swim, tries to make him eat healthy foods, and gets him a summer job. These caring tasks aim to make Arnie more intelligible to his present time and place. Regina, who Michael suggests has a lot in common with her son, judges Arnie’s needs and desires according to who he *could be*. She sees his academic success (“top five percent on his Stanford-Binet”) and sees its significance for who he *will be* (college-bound) (4). She is forward-looking—just like Arnie. Therefore, when she sees the car, she sees teenage fatality—a grim future prospect (274). The question is not who perceives Arnie’s needs best or who has sufficient time to consider his needs, but rather, from what time of Arnie’s life do they perceive his needs?

Time, and how it shapes caring practices, is something that Arnie discusses with his dad. After their first argument, Michael tries to mend the harm it caused. By this point, Arnie has restored Christine to her original condition and she is parked in the Cunninghams’ driveway. King begins the scene noting the effects of time on Michael. “He seemed to have aged, to have gone grey and haggard around the edges” (267). Michael apologizes to his son and tries to explain Regina’s behavior—also by plotting her in time. “Your mother is going through the change of life,” Michael said quietly. “It’s been extremely difficult for her” (268). Arnie is first startled and then “alarmed,” scared by the effects of time on his mother. Michael’s rapprochement with his son thus begins with him disclosing how time has made his wife vulnerable, and he uses this vulnerability to ease his son’s anger.

Michael and Arnie then discuss the difficulty of caring amid uncertainty; their conversation reveals how people cannot set aside their norms or values when interpreting needs. Michael begins the dialogue:

“You’re her only child, and the way she is now, all she can see is that she wants things to be right for you, no matter what the cost.”

“She wants things her way. And that isn’t anything new. She’s *always* wanted things her way.”

“That she thinks the right thing for you is whatever she thinks the right thing is goes without saying,” Michael said. “But what makes you think you are so different? Or better?” (268–69)

Notice how time runs through their conversation. Michael refers to Regina as she is *now*—going through menopause, which symbolizes her relationship to time, vulnerability, and change. Arnie refuses to see his mother in a specific time—she “always” demands her way; she never changes. But Michael interprets this streak in Regina charitably as well. She always wants the right thing for her son; detaching fully her “right” vision from her own values is impossible. That is one of the many dilemmas of caring relationships, Michael explains, that none of us can escape.

Time complicates care theorists' emphasis on caregivers' ability to judge the needs, desires, and identities of the cared-for as the main way to ensure good care. The more time Arnie spends driving Christine, the more LeBay's ghost possesses his body. The undecidability of Arnie's identity is reflected when he drives through Libertyville as the streets fluctuate between 1978 and 1958. King's supernatural flair raises important questions for care theory: in what time am I located? I am both my past, my present, and I will age into someone else. This co-location in time means that my needs, desires, and identity are never final. Just as the streets of Libertyville blur before Arnie's eyes, so too do I waver, coming in and out of clarity.

Butler's relational ethics helps us understand this scene, too, as she interprets the demand for a stable identity as a kind of normative violence. For Butler, there is a "certain ethical violence that demands that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require that others do the same" (Butler 2003, 27). Butler's answer to this problem makes time the solution. She suggests that we cultivate "a certain patience for others that *suspends* the demand that they be selfsame at every moment," and that we "*suspend* judgment in order to apprehend the other" (27, 30; emphasis added). Suspension is problematic as care-actors cannot suspend judgment indefinitely. Attentiveness is only the first of five phases of care and is insufficient if unmoored from actual practices of care (Tronto 2013, 48). The novel suggests the same, as the people who love Arnie must act or stand by helplessly in Christine's deadly wake.

DISABLED DREAMS

This complexity of time magnifies our vulnerability, and both Butler and Tronto suggest that ethical thinking should begin with the recognition of human vulnerability. Neither theorist, however, delves deeply into disability. In an ableist culture, the recognition of vulnerability can never be an innocent beginning, as it invites ableist fears of uncertainty. Calling for more recognition of vulnerability may inadvertently amplify disability anxieties. According to Nancy Hirschmann, the "fear of the disabled is fear of oneself, a fear of what might happen to one's own body" (Hirschmann 2013, 142). Alison Kafer argues that our future imaginary is "shot through with anxiety about disability" (Kafer 2013, 29). Indeed, Christine is disablement and death on wheels. But whereas Hirschmann and Kafer imagine this fear as focused primarily on the self, *Christine* shows how interdependency magnifies our vulnerability and anxiety.

When Dennis has a nightmare in the chapter "Bad Dreams," his scream wakes up his family. In the nightmare, Dennis is back at LeBay's garage, standing before Christine, his feet

nailed to the cracked pavement of the driveway . . . Christine lunges at me, her grille snarling like an open mouth full of chrome teeth, her headlights glaring—

I screamed myself awake in the dead darkness of two in the morning, the sound of my own voice scaring me, the hurried, running thud of bare feet coming down the hall scaring me even worse Down the hall, Ellie cried out, “What was that?” in her own terror. (King 1983/2001, 89–90)

Dennis’s terror is relational: his fear heightens as he hears footsteps, and his parents and sister Ellie all run to his room, panicked. Dennis’s mother shares her son’s terror, but reflects it differently. “I was scared,’ she said, and then uttered a shaky little laugh. ‘I guess you don’t know what scared is until one of your kids screams in the dark’” (91). Dennis’s fourteen-year-old sister responds, “Ugh, gross, don’t talk about it” (91). Ellie senses that this recognition of vulnerability—this terrifying grittiness—is uninhabitable for people who love one another.

When Hirschmann explains ableist anxiety, she uses “automobile collisions” to symbolize the “sudden, rapid, and dramatic change in people’s bodily configuration and ability” (142). Almost twenty years before he was hit by a van, King described a similar “worst case” fear of car accidents in *Danse Macabre* in which disability is a fate worse than death (King 1981/2011, 99). As Kafer argues, “in these imaginings, disability too often serves as the agreed-upon limit of our projected futures,” becoming “the future with no future” (Kafer 2013, 27, 33). This fear of disability is another version of dispossession: whether it is you or I who acquires a disability, we will be dispossessed of our prior identities.

Importantly, both Dennis and Arnie acquire a disability during the novel. During a football game, Dennis is tackled by three defensive players, and breaks both legs and injures his back. The doctor tells Dennis that he will never play football again and he will limp for the rest of his life. Dennis seems unperturbed by this loss of hegemonic masculinity, remarking that he is grateful to be alive. Arnie loses his pimples—his outward sign of disfigurement—but he hurts his back when he pushes Christine until she (magically) regains her original shape. Arnie’s disability is the sign of LeBay’s possession; like LeBay, Arnie begins wearing a back brace.

The vulnerability of each character signals different responses. Dennis spends two months in the hospital and, here, he begins to inhabit Arnie’s prior world: alone, disabled, and, finally, capable of thinking about something other than the latest cheerleader. He begins to understand vulnerability in the same way that Tronto and Butler presume will lead to ethical relationality. Arnie’s relationship to vulnerability is more complex. Because he was bullied, he already has a better understanding of vulnerability than Dennis. Even if vulnerability offers a more ethical perspective, it’s not enough to offset the daily aggressions Arnie experiences.

Moreover, Dennis’s new understanding of vulnerability doesn’t lessen his anxiety. Instead, this new awareness of mortality escalates his fear, as he finally begins to realize that Arnie might die. Though *Christine* gives us multiple readings of disability, it sees death narrowly, as a grim, miserable ending. Interdependency intensifies the fear of death. For Dennis, acknowledging shared vulnerability doesn’t clarify ethical responses; it makes care and violence converge.

COLLISION COURSE

In a reply to Catherine Mills, Butler asks questions fit for Arnie Cunningham, “How does one live the violence of one’s formation? In what sense can it be redirected, if it can?” (Butler 2007, 185). High-school peers have bullied, ridiculed, and beaten Arnie. He is an “injured and rageful subject”; Butler gives him two options. He can struggle actively “with and against aggression,” or he can adopt a moral vengeance that turns “aggression into virtue” (Butler 2007, 186). Christine makes the choice for Arnie, turning aggression into virtue and enemies into roadkill. Powered by LeBay’s ghost, Christine kills Libertyville High’s bullies and any others who suspect her guilt. Though Arnie is dismayed at the possibility of his complicity with murder, he depends on the car to make him into something new—anyone other than the beaten and bullied Libertyville loser.

In the face of this aggression, Butler argues that people like Arnie bear increased responsibility to act against violence. “Indeed, it may be that precisely because—or rather, when—someone is formed in violence, the responsibility not to repeat the violence of one’s formation is all the more pressing and important” (Butler 2007, 181). This is an individualistic account of responsibility, however, that King’s novel troubles. Before Christine possesses his spirit, Arnie resists repeating the violence of Libertyville. But there is a price to pay for resistance. Arnie is “small and tired and whipped . . . solitary and vulnerable” (King 1983/2001, 73). Making him responsible for resisting this violence—for finding a way to reiterate the norms by which he suffers in some new creative nonviolent way—seems to compound the weight that drags him down. Perhaps the temporality of the iteration of norms plays a role here—if Arnie could survive Libertyville, he could go on to subvert hegemonic masculinity in the future. But can he do so in his present time? When he is whipped and solitary?

Arnie’s violent crafting has witnesses, and they, even more so than Arnie, bear the responsibility of “effecting shifts in [the] iteration [of violent norms]” (Butler 2007, 185). Dennis, Regina, and Michael decide to fight against Arnie’s victimization. Here, Tronto’s account of care theory adds crucial dimensions to Butler’s ethical thinking, precisely because Tronto emphasizes the action-oriented aspect of care in the third and fifth phases of care-giving: that care must be an action that we do with others (Tronto 2013, 35). In this need to take action, care theorists confront the possibility of acting aggressively.

When Dennis, and Arnie’s parents, accept the need to act aggressively to protect Arnie, they blur the lines between care and violence. In *Precarious Life*, Butler describes violence as

a touch of the worst order, a way a primary human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, a way in which life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another. (Butler 2004, 29)

But this is exactly how *caring* feels for Arnie’s parents. Regina and Michael are given over to Arnie’s identity struggle: they agonize over their past parenting decisions;

they fight to reach out to Arnie; they are lost in grief. King's descriptions of their quiet turmoil are far more terrifying than Christine's bloody rampages.

Amid this terror, Dennis devises a plan to lure Christine to a garage where he can destroy it. He warns Michael to stay indoors while Arnie and Regina take a road trip to Penn State in the family sedan. Christine always waits for Arnie to leave town before she commences her destruction. But Dennis's scheme fails to go as planned. When the car comes after Dennis, Michael's dead body is in the passenger seat; the car somehow lured him into its body and then suffocated him with carbon monoxide. Christine nearly kills Dennis, but Dennis destroys it. But it is a hollow victory. LeBay's spirit flees from the car and attacks Arnie. The result is a fatal crash on the interstate, killing both Arnie and Regina. An onlooker describes seeing three people struggling in the car, as if their last redeeming death wish was to resist LeBay's takeover.

Jonathan Davis argues that Arnie died because he was morally weak, but perhaps he died because the people who loved him acted separately (Davis 1994). To confront the complexities of care, Tronto has added the fifth phase of caring-with. We must "surrender the 'model of man' as a robust, autonomous, self-contained actor" and become "willing to take on caring responsibilities and to discuss the resolution of these problems" (Tronto 2013, 164). Dennis, and Arnie's parents, tried to redirect the violence of Arnie's life, but in different and solitary ways. As Dennis waits for Christine, he acknowledges that his chauvinism—his need to be Arnie's lone savior—might undermine his plan. Would they have succeeded if they followed Tronto's fifth phase of care—to *care with* in democratic solidarity? Dennis was reluctant to share his plan of attack with Arnie's parents, in large part because it would have required him to explain that Christine could drive herself. Though not as contentious as ghosts, some familial disagreements seem almost as difficult to reconcile. Caring-with might be the answer, but it might be harder than we imagine.

The deaths of Arnie, Regina, and Michael make plain why Dennis described the story as a tragedy. Michael and Regina loved Arnie—they loved him in the intense, gritty, and messy way that characterizes care. They also died for Arnie. Julie White uses care theory to remind readers that democracy is filled with moments of loss (White 2015)—and so too is care (Tronto 1995, 148). In response to Butler's question, "Can one work with the violence against certain violent outcomes and thus undergo a shift in the iteration of violence?," *Christine* answers, "Not always and never easily." Sometimes, you are out of time.

CARING PRECARIOUSLY

Christine shows how normative violence converges with care. We always care in a specific time and place; like Libertyville, these locations distribute privilege and marginalization unevenly. And these systems of normative violence infiltrate how we interpret needs. As Sara Ruddick argues, caring for children involves training; training is invested in the inculcation of norms; and many of these norms operate

violently (Ruddick 1995). Because care-actors actively craft identities, they do more than interpret needs: they help shape them. Yet even as care-actors recognize ambivalence and complexity, they *must* act and, sometimes, act aggressively. In all these ways, we blur the spectrum between care and violence.

One worry about this new understanding of care and violence is that, by linking care to normative violence, we risk making invisible *real* violence and *really* bad care practices. Particularly because *Christine* focuses on the harms done to middle-class white boys, is this new conception of care just another way to wring our hands about the already privileged? Perhaps. But I think Arnie's unhappiness exceeds his demographic. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for people aged 10–24 (CDC 2014). These rates are especially high for boys and higher still for Latino and African American young men (CDC 2015), and they are rising for adolescent girls (Bichell 2016). Being queer, gay, lesbian, or questioning raises the risk of suicide for teenagers and young adults (Miniño 2010). Like Ahmed's description of people who refuse to be content with their own marginalization—the feminist killjoy, the unhappy queer, the melancholy migrant—Arnie is the angsty adolescent. Care theorists often use the infant as a model of dependency to debunk the myth of the fully autonomous self, but beginning with the angsty adolescent might help us theorize interdependency as conflict-laden and care as a risky practice.

When we take up these questions, we should confront more fully the relationship between anxiety and interdependency. According to Margrit Shildrick, “The more we believe that we can control our bodies, the greater the anxiety that is generated by the evidence of vulnerability” (Shildrick 2000, 219). For Shildrick, anxiety is a devalued by-product of ableism that fears and loathes disability. But King's novel—and good horror fiction more generally—shows us that anxiety stems equally from our interdependency, not just our illusions of control. I am anxious because I care and because I *know* I lack control. If we are to theorize from these concrete and particular experiences, then what role does anxiety play in care ethics?

More broadly, reconsidering care as a form of normative violence makes us rethink Tronto's call for a more caring democracy. Tronto confronts several potential criticisms of merging care and democracy—one of which is the problem of “needs-interpretation,” which is one way to describe the dilemma facing Arnie's parents and friend Dennis (Tronto 2013, 162). Accordingly, “No caring institution in a democratic society can function well without an explicit locus for the needs-interpretation struggle” (163). Tronto thus suggests that all institutions create a “rhetorical space” in which these struggles can unfold. Yet she leaves unanswered how these struggles are resolved, or how democratic citizens will endure normative violence amid struggle.

Following Butler and Arnie, caring is that odd mix of trying to kill and sustain the people you love. Perhaps this odd mix captures the struggle for democratic citizens. This gritty mix of attachment and destruction makes caring dangerous. Butler sums it up nicely in talking about responsibility, but I think we can gain more traction by importing the language of care:

[Caring] is bound up with an anxiety that remains open, one that does not settle an ambivalence through disavowal, but that gives rise to a certain [caring] practice, itself experimental, that seeks to preserve life better than it destroys it. It is not a principle of nonviolence, but a practice, itself fallible, of trying to attend to the precariousness of life, and not transmuting life into nonlife. (Butler 2007, 190)³

Caring is a fallible practice enmeshed in normative violence and anxiety. The distinction between preserving a life and destroying it is not always clear—and sometimes the distinction fails to exist at all. As long as life is precarious, then so too will be caring.

NOTES

I dedicate this essay, with all my love, to my mom, Peggy Lee Clifford, who died November 8, 2016, after a very brief battle with inflammatory breast cancer. This paper was always about us.

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1. For other ambivalent approaches in care theory, see Cloyes 2002; Sander-Staudt 2006; Petterson 2012; Kelly 2013; Murphy 2015; Simplican 2015.

2. Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds argue that feminist theorists define vulnerability as ontological or special. They position Butler and care theorists within the ontological camp (Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2014).

3. I altered two parts of Butler's original text: I replaced "responsibility" and "ethical" with "caring."

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