

## *Articles*

### **Caring for Limits: Organisational and Creative Practices in Sex Worker's Opera**

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#### **Trigger Warning**

While the author takes care to avoid graphic or gratuitous details of traumatic events, this article contains mention of violence against sex workers and issues around pregnancy that some readers may wish to avoid.

#### **Abstract**

This paper suggests that, when not treated as inconvenient obstacles, limits carry the potential to unlock socially engaged performance practices that nurture solidarity, trust and respect. An 'ethic of care' (Tronto) that includes attentiveness to limits is proposed as an integral component of socially engaged performance practice that is intended to meet both the needs of those within projects and the external need for activist critiques.

Drawing on research with Sex Worker's Opera (SWO), a grassroots community musical theatre project, the author investigates the ways in which caring relations can be established and developed in response to limits—that is, refusals or inability to do certain things or participate in certain ways. Reacting against the cultural and political tendency to speak over, or for, sex workers (See Bell; Mac and Smith), SWO reclaims space for sex workers to tell their stories on their own terms and to share experiences and perspectives with other sex workers, allies, and the public, thereby amplifying marginalised voices. But, for members of a community stereotyped, stigmatised, and subject to inaccurate and reductive portrayals, the space to say 'No' when telling their stories is vital. The preservation of individual and collective limits in SWO is therefore a marker of a radical ethical and political practice—one that involves telling stories that come from the margins without further marginalising the people to whom those stories belong.

Focusing on the experiences of SWO members as the 'cared-for' group (Noddings) and working with the themes of 'self-representation' and 'access to participation', the author highlights examples of practice that evidence care for limits. These appear at the organisational level, throughout the devising process, and within the performance itself. Overall, practices of caring for limits are shown to connect small-scale interrelations with larger-scale activist visions for a more just future.

## Introduction

It's family. I think Sex Worker's Opera was probably the first time I've actually felt a family within theatre, because the care factor was first and foremost. (Sex Worker's Opera member)

Founded in 2014 by queer sex worker activists and allies in the LGBTQ+ community, Sex Worker's Opera (SWO)<sup>1</sup> was founded by Siobhán Knox, Alex Etchart, and members of their Experimental Experience Collective in 2013. Established, led, created, performed, and directed by queer sex worker activists and allies in the LGBTQI+ community, SWO is a grassroots musical theatre project reacting against the cultural and political tendency to speak over, or for, sex workers (see Bell; Mac and Smith). SWO reclaims space for sex workers to tell their stories on their own terms and to share experiences and perspectives with other sex workers, allies, and the public. The performance complements the international work of sex worker-led activist groups by advocating for decriminalisation and an end to stigma.

Within this context, the 'care factor' can be seen as a set of organisational and creative practices rooted in an 'ethic of care' (Tronto). A case study of SWO provides an opportunity to unpack the ways in which caring relations might be established and developed in response to limits: refusals or inability to do certain things or participate in certain ways. For members of a community stereotyped, stigmatised, and subject to inaccurate and reductive portrayals, the space to say 'No' when telling their stories is vital. The preservation of individual and collective limits within SWO is a marker of a radical ethical and political practice—one that involves telling stories from the margins without further marginalising the people to whom those stories belong.

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1 'Sex Worker's Opera' refers to both the project and the performance. To avoid confusion, I use the acronym 'SWO' for the project and the italicised title *Sex Worker's Opera* for the performance.

2 All of the quotes in this article come from listening sessions carried out as part of my PhD research in 2019 and 2020. They are anonymised and have been approved for use by the people they belong to.

Drawing from my research on and experience participating in SWO, this paper demonstrates that an ethic of care that focuses attention on limits within the organisation, the devising process, and the performance itself can enable a socially engaged performance practice that is aesthetically innovative, radically representative, *and* politically robust. Encompassing both theatrical and musical elements of artistic practice, my interdisciplinary approach enhances the breadth of this analysis, resulting in a more holistic impression of SWO. Notably, this article focuses on caring relations that position SWO members as the ‘cared-for’ group (Noddings, ‘The caring relation’ 772). Further investigation into the wider networks of caring relations surrounding SWO—extending to the directors, audience members, and community members more broadly—is warranted.

To begin, I elaborate upon the foundational ‘ethic of care’ framework and its application in the field of socially engaged performance and subsequently explore the article’s key themes: self-representation and access to participation. First, I highlight the significance of limits with regards to self-representation in SWO. I identify some of the caring practices that have emerged in response to these, ensuring that members can self-represent safely. Spotlighting an autobiographical piece from the performance of *Sex Worker’s Opera* (titled ‘Monkey in a Circus’), I illustrate the ways in which caring relations are fundamental to artistic practice involving self-representation, protecting the limits set by individual performers. Secondly, I examine the ways in which the limits of access to participation including socio-economic realities and individual traumas have demanded certain organisational stances. Another piece from *Sex Worker’s Opera* titled ‘Strip for the Dead’ is explored here (this can be considered as a piece of performance art within the production); analysis of this piece highlights the sensitivity with which one member’s emotional and psychological limits were worked with, rather than against, to address a difficult topic. Overall, I propose that an ethic of care that supports the setting of and responding to limits is integral to socially-engaged performance practice with an activist agenda.

## Care Ethics and Socially Engaged Performance

Feminist scholars have been developing frameworks for an ethic of care since the 1980s, emphasising relationality as an integral component (Noddings, *Caring*; Tronto; Held). While there are notable differences between their theoretical approaches, scholars agree on certain defining features of caring relations. For example, Virginia Held states that ‘the values of trust, solidarity, mutual concern, [and] empathetic responsiveness have priority’ (15). Held’s notion of ‘empathetic responsiveness’ in particular signifies overlap with Joan Tronto’s understanding of care as comprising ‘attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness’ (127). Meanwhile, Nel Noddings highlights the need for carers to be both ‘attentive’ and ‘receptive’, investing in an understanding of the ‘expressed needs of the cared-for, not simply the needs assumed’ (‘The caring relation’ 772). Taken together, these definitions offer a critical lens through which to consider care as a moral issue, the often-unequal distribution of power within caring relations and society more broadly, and the possibility of interdependence as a source of mutual and collective good.

There is also consensus among those writing on this topic that ‘care’ is used in the sense of ‘caring for’ (an active engagement) rather than ‘caring about’—a preference or a disposition (Held 30). Held contends that ‘in practices of care, relationships are cultivated, needs are responded to, and sensitivity is demonstrated’ (15-16). The care in question is therefore evidenced in practice, rather than feelings; it is this link to practice that bolsters the applicability of care ethics within the field of socially-engaged performance. Accordingly, the past decade has seen a surge in the number of scholars and practitioners looking to care ethics in order to better reflect on the caring relations and the quality of care present within the creative and organisational work that occurs between ‘facilitators’ and ‘participants’.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I use this language for clarity and consistency in reference to work in the fields of socially engaged performance and community arts. When referring to SWO, I apply the labels that are used within the project: ‘directors’ and ‘members’.

When each are done well, recent work in this area encourages readers to see care as performance and performance as care (Stuart Fisher 4). This connection is decidedly political—for example, James Thompson states that ‘care practices need attention to their aesthetics, and community-based arts programmes need an understanding of care, if either is to make claims to be contributing to social justice’ (215). Thinking about care-full performance practice with marginalised communities, it is clear that the political need for certain stories to be heard should not take precedence over the needs of those who have lived them.

Crucially, Amanda Stuart Fisher raises a red flag around socially-engaged ‘performance practices that are *uncaring* [...] practices that instrumentalise participation or that inadvertently predetermine or enforce certain narratives of change and transformation upon unsuspecting communities’ (3; emphasis in original). Demands for attentiveness and responsiveness to participants’ expressed needs present a challenge to the problematic practice of imposing social development agendas onto marginalised communities without meaningful consultation, participatory planning, or contextual understanding, touting the inflated assumption that art will improve either the people or their situation. This approach is encapsulated by the metaphor of ‘parachuting in’ which, as Sophie Hope illustrates, frequently perpetuates, rather than alleviates, the social problems that these communities face (Hope 219).

Caoimhe McAvinchey offers a brighter picture of socially-engaged arts practice that foregrounds care and, by extension, makes a genuine contribution to struggles for social justice. She uncovers the caring practices central to the women’s theatre company Clean Break and highlights the ways in which these practices support the group’s ‘commitment to equality and justice’ (123). McAvinchey suggests that when an ethic of care permeates socially engaged arts practice there is scope for raising critical awareness of intersecting oppressions while, through ‘responsive and interconnected practices’, compensating for the ‘care deficit in society’ (*ibid.*). As McAvinchey summarises, ‘[f]or

Clean Break, theatre is both the medium to address social injustices experienced by criminalised women and the means to make a direct intervention in the individual lives of women they work with' (133).

The twofold nature of Clean Break's ethical and political agenda, as described by McAvinchey, is similar to that which permeates SWO, connecting internal caring practices with performances that outwardly critique harmful policies, state violence and intersecting oppressions. These facets of practice operate in tandem, and, as Thompson argues, only when care is present in the interior workings of the group can the performance itself constitute a genuine contribution to social justice. Other aspects of SWO signify a deviation from practices identified as problematic in the literature. In particular, the fact that sex workers and allies founded SWO, not a 'professional artist' with little attachment to or prior investment in the community, indicates a sharp departure from the phenomenon of the parachutist-practitioner, revealing instead a model of community leadership grounded in mutual concern and trust.

In the following sections on self-representation and access to participation, I paint a picture of SWO—the organisation, the creative process, and the performance. In focusing on members' needs and the ways in which the project has worked to meet them, it becomes apparent that these needs often manifest as limits. Therefore, I argue that an ethic of care that accounts for limits is essential to any socially engaged performance practice that claims to advance a social justice agenda.

### **Self-representation**

Writing on representation, poet and sex worker Amber Dawn describes a 'triangle of subjugation', whereby 'one point silences sex workers, the second disseminates inaccurate stories told by outsiders, and the third maintains environments of fear during the rare times we [sex workers] are asked for our stories' (19). Dawn's triangle depicts the representational violence and stigma that sex workers routinely face.

Countering this trend, SWO carves out a safer space where sex workers' voices are listened to, providing an alternative to the 'environments of fear' experienced elsewhere.

Applying a framework of care ethics, self-representation is an area of creative practice that requires attentiveness, responsibility, responsiveness, trust, and solidarity (Tronto 127; Held 15). In contrast to the 'triangle of subjugation' (Dawn 19) that keeps sex workers silent, self-representation is a way for sex workers to open up 'pathways for dialogue—a dialogue that is controlled by the very people it's about' (Ducharme 25). Within SWO, self-representation can therefore be seen as a partial antidote to the onslaught of dehumanising and fragmenting representations of sex workers. In 'caring about' (Held 30) the ramifications of sex worker misrepresentation, SWO demonstrates a commitment to tackling stigma.

In practice, though, self-representation also demands a great deal of 'caring for' (*ibid.*). Real-life implications of stigma include, for instance, lost job opportunities, damaged family relationships, loss of child custody, increased risk of violence, and mistreatment when accessing health services. As such, many sex workers decide not to disclose information about their work to others; they place limits on how open they are about their status as sex workers. Although some SWO members are happy to live and appear in public as 'out' sex workers, others are unable or do not want to. Hence, it continues to be essential that SWO is attentive and responsive to these limits, catering to the need for anonymity and enhanced safety—particularly in public performance contexts.

One response to this predicament was the introduction of a 50/50 model. Described as 'the secret weapon that would allow people to be involved in a safer way' (SWO director), the 50/50 model relies on the group comprising 50% sex workers and 50% allies. Audiences do not know who falls under which category. Allies, specifically, are prohibited from publicly revealing that they are not sex workers, avoiding a situation whereby audiences can deduce who is a sex worker through a process of elimination. Under the 50/50 model, the project

and the process remain sex worker-led, amplifying sex workers' voices and thus tending to the political imperative of self-representation. Simultaneously, sex worker members are protected from the risks associated with being publicly out.

Furthermore, creative practices that enable varying degrees of self-representation bolster the protective work of the 50/50 model; members might be telling their own story, the story of another member or a story sent into the project by a sex worker unable to participate in-person:<sup>4</sup>

It's a good way to do it and it's a safe way to do it. I like the concept of a sex worker-led group, with who's running it and collecting stories of other sex workers and bringing it in. (SWO member)

Importantly, the 50/50 balance of sex workers and allies extends across the cast and crew. This includes the three directors, unsettling the hierarchical distinctions that might be presumed to exist between 'directors' and 'participants' in socially engaged arts projects, such as artist/community-member, outsider/insider, privileged/marginalised. The 50/50 model indicates that at least one of the directors is embedded in the community, personally invested in the fight for sex workers' rights and acutely aware of the risks attached to this activism. The erosion of the distinctions between 'professional artist' and 'participant', or ally and sex worker, serves to keep sex workers in SWO safe, while also securing 'trust, solidarity, mutual concern, and empathetic responsiveness' (Held 15) among the group. The 50/50 model illuminates an ethic of care within the project's organisational and creative practice that plays an important part in nurturing trust and activist solidarity between members.

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<sup>4</sup> Over 100 stories have been sent into the project by sex workers around the world through SWO's Global Voice initiative. Many of these are available on the project's website (see <<https://sexworkersopera.com/learning/stories>> [accessed 29 October 2021]).

### **Performing Personal Stories: ‘Monkey in a Circus’**

I really think that the Opera can offer a healing space for some sex workers, by either sending their story and seeing it represented by someone else, or in my journey being able to sing to my sorrows. (SWO member)

Though limits around anonymity are respected and sensitively catered to, occasionally members have created autobiographical pieces—explicitly sharing personal stories. Focusing on one such piece, ‘Monkey in a Circus’, I suggest that the music itself, and the act of people making music together, constructs a site of care. Here, care is depicted as a response to limits around the medium through which this member could share her story, and her unwillingness to do so alone. As she recalled, ‘I wasn’t able to talk about it, but I could sing it in the song’ (SWO member).

While this member sings her story of working as a stripper, familial rejection, an abusive relationship, and miscarriage, the audience is exposed to an ‘aesthetics of care’ (Thompson). Standing next to the singer, dancing with her while playing an accompaniment, is the violinist. Behind her is a small chorus of three or four other singers, seated on a podium. There is no narrative reason for the violinist to be stood next to her, making eye contact, or for the chorus to be behind her, yet these creative decisions were described as:

Putting what we believe on stage[...]. It just beautifully showed that this person is telling this story, we want her to have someone there with her, and that doesn’t need any justification really. (SWO director)

Positing that ‘the aesthetic successes and failures of [a] show are not located solely in what takes place on the stage, but in the sensations of mutual reliance and concern between audience and performers, and between performers and their creative support teams’ (Thompson 225-6), Thompson’s concept of an aesthetics of care accounts for this melding of care with performance.

In ‘Monkey in a Circus’, the violinist and the chorus serve as both technical and emotional support, the aesthetic of care created by their presence onstage contrasting strikingly with the isolation and stigma of the autobiographical narrative. At a certain point, responding to a limit that the member performing could not cross, the chorus took on the responsibility of carrying the story, preserving this member’s right not to sing certain parts of it:

Other people learnt it and then started singing along with it [...] Keyly the bit where we say, ‘It miscarried, it miscarried’, because she never wanted to sing that, then became this very beautiful moment of sisterhood and solidarity. I think there’s something very beautiful about a group of sisters and siblings singing that [...] Holding that space because she couldn’t. (SWO director)

The musical and embodied support, or ‘affective solidarity’ (Thompson 225)—seen in the relations with both the violinist and the chorus—therefore enable this member to perform her piece with a community of people caring for her.

I use Thompson’s term ‘affective solidarity’ because the dependence here equals mutual support, not subjugation, as all those onstage collaborate to share this story:

We were really trying to collaborate all the time but she still had the space, the attention, to connect with me, look at me, and she was really there. It really felt like we were a pillar for each other, a support for each other, we really needed these two legs to try and walk through the song. (SWO violinist)

Nurturing and celebrating the strength of the sex work community is part of the activist work of SWO. The foregrounding of caring relations in the performance—through acts of embodied care, such as hugs, eye contact, or a chorus filling in for the performer to sing the otherwise

unsayable—signifies what Stuart Fisher terms the ‘ethical and political dimension’ of care, ‘disclosing values that determine how we should act in the world and within the limited resources we might have available to us’ (6). Therefore, performances of care in *Sex Worker’s Opera* not only envision a more caring way of relating to sex workers for would-be-allies in audiences, but also highlight the pre-existence of caring relations of solidarity within the sex work community itself, portraying an aspect of sex work that is frequently omitted from mainstream narratives. That these performances of care are often enacted in response to limits, as in the example of ‘Monkey in a Circus’, exhibits a practice of self-representation in socially-engaged performance that has ethical, political, and aesthetic integrity.

### **Access to Participation**

In this next section, I move from thinking about self-representation and focus instead on the organisational and creative practices that facilitate access to participation. I suggest that limits are often expressed through access needs and that, in SWO, these are frequently used as a starting point for ethical and political invigoration. Collectively navigating the things that members might be unable to safely do—such as travelling, taking time off work, or being in unchecked, oppressive spaces—has required a great deal of attentiveness and sensitivity, but has arguably led to a more sustainable, representative practice.

Here, I show that the care taken to ensure access needs and the implicit limits they encompass are met—particularly when they present challenges—demonstrates a genuine commitment to tackling social injustices:

The directors would often be working their arse off to give me the chance to work on the same quality level of other performers, who didn’t need so much effort, language, organising, listening—stuff which is just normal for other people. There had been solutions for me to be part of it. (SWO member)

One of the most significant ways in which the organisational practice has responded to limitations of access has been to pay members for their time and work. This has enabled those without the financial security to take time off work to participate and, therefore, enhanced the representation of the project. Writing on participatory art, François Matarasso highlights existing questions around paying ‘participants’, citing the concern that it might exaggerate power imbalances or create exploitative situations in which the people contributing their stories cannot walk away from the project, even if they no longer want to participate (109-110). To counter this risk, it has always been explicit that SWO members can remove their stories from the performance at any point or opt out of performing something on a certain night with no material consequences to their overall participation.

Certainly, in the worst-case scenario, payment could be instrumentalised to coerce and disempower; however, in the case of SWO, payment is widely regarded as a positive feature of the project. Not only has it made participation possible for less privileged sex workers—those unable to participate without compensation—but it has also acted to affirm members’ value and worth as artists, again like the 50/50 model, blurring the distinction between ‘professional’ and ‘community member’ and thus building solidarity:

I’m gonna say it, it’s fucking nice to get paid... It relieves any of that anxiety to have these conversations about how we value ourselves and our energy. That’s as an artist, that’s as a trans person, that’s as a person of colour[...]. It provided me that space to not even have to worry about not paying my rent that month[...]. It meant that I could come in with my full heart, full energy, being like, ‘What do you need from me? I will give you everything I’ve got’. (SWO member)

By establishing the organisational norm of paying members, the directors responded to the limits expressed and experienced by members as financial access requirements. Next, attending to creative

practice, I depict 'Strip for the Dead' as a response to emotional and psychological limits, illuminating a prioritisation of care for individual members' access needs within the performance.

### **Working with Trauma: 'Strip for the Dead'**

'Strip for the Dead' is a performance art piece that honours the victims of violence against trans sex workers. In *Sex Worker's Opera*, it follows on from a scene called 'Vigil', during which members hold a minute's silence with the audience, commemorating the lives lost to violence within the sex worker community. Despite her desire to participate, one member knew that doing so would transgress the limits of her PTSD:

We spoke about how to honour sex workers who got killed and I realised that's a really, really hard topic for me. I basically had only my way for dealing with it and I had ways where I'd figured out it's not possible for me to do it... So, we had a discussion and they said, 'Hey, is there another way for you to deal with this topic stage-wise?' And I said, 'Yeah, let me think.' I came up with my performance and this had been my solution. (SWO member)

Responding with sensitivity to her stated limit, the directors invited this member to create an alternative to 'Vigil'. 'Strip for the Dead' is a solo striptease set to improvised clarinet accompaniment with electronic effects, during which the performer is tied up by four others. The rope work is initially performed lovingly but becomes increasingly forceful and the performer, now naked, struggles to break free. Eventually she escapes, triumphing over the forces that have come to symbolise stigma and violence, and declares, 'I honour the dead by celebrating life'. Through her performance, this member integrated her embodied experience as a trans sex worker, her immersion in sex worker communities that face disproportionate violence, and her love for shibari, the art of Japanese rope bondage. In the end, 'Strip for

the Dead' enabled this member to be part of the grief ritual of 'Vigil' without triggering her PTSD.

This member's independent vision for the piece was given space to take form and grow, yet she is not alone in the performance. From the four performers who spent hours learning how to tie the ropes properly, to the two sound technicians controlling electronic effects, to the lighting technician responding to mood-changes throughout the scene, and to the clarinetist matching their playing to the choreography, members worked extremely hard and creatively to make the piece as polished as possible, to honour her vision and her needs.

At the beginning I'm doing this striptease... I am stripping for all the sex workers who were killed, not for the audience. And that's my honour... Then colleagues on stage are bonding me and, because I'm fully naked during this moment, it's a really intimate situation... The people who did it to me on stage had been also people where I consent that they are doing this performance with me. I wouldn't have done it with everyone, but to be honest with most of the cast. (SWO member)

Much like in 'Monkey in a Circus', the mutual investment in forging space for representation, as well as the need for careful collaboration to execute what is a technically intricate piece, fosters an affective solidarity. In every component of this creative process, in each person's role within it, there is a deep commitment to care for the person who is putting her story and her body onstage. This care is a priority because of, not despite, the limits on this member's ability to participate in the shared ritual of 'Vigil'.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this article, I have argued that socially engaged performance practice centred on care and, specifically, attentiveness to limits has the capacity to uphold ethical and political ideals, meeting the needs of

members within projects and the external need for activist critiques. I have shown that, in many cases, limits appear as needs and therefore must be responded to accordingly. Shedding light on organisational and creative practices through which caring responses to limits are evident in SWO, I have demonstrated concrete ways in which other socially engaged performance projects might navigate boundaries, impossibilities, and refusals, working with them rather than going against or around them. When they are not treated as inconvenient obstacles, limits carry the potential to unlock an ethical and political practice that nurtures solidarity, trust, and respect both within and beyond individual projects.

This has implications beyond the realm of live performance too. Caring relations continue to be integral to SWO's practice as the group embarks upon a collaborative film-making project, guiding their navigation of this new medium and the distinct challenges it poses to anonymity, ownership, and access to participation. The project's transition from community-led musical theatre to community-led musical film will be a rich and informative area for future research, and thinking about 'limits' will continue to be an intriguing analytical prompt. For now, however, it is apparent that in SWO—as could certainly be adopted by other performance-makers in pursuit of more ethical modes of working—limits present a starting point for a socially engaged performance practice that is as equally committed to social justice within the rehearsal room as on the stage, connecting the small-scale 'care factor' with larger-scale activist visions for a more just future.

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