

# THE RAYMOND CARVER REVIEW

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Issue 4

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# THE RAYMOND CARVER REVIEW

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Issue Four, an **open topics issue**, features four peer reviewed essays: Josef Benson's "Ralph Whiteman as White Construction in 'Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?'" explores issues of white hetero-masculinity and victimology; Katarina Polonsky considers how issues of masculinity and domestic space affect the central characters in "Neighbors" and "Collectors"; Joseph Kappes examines how an early Carver story, "Bicycles, Muscles, and Cigaretts," employs deferred narratives of knowledge and identity; and Molly Fuller compares Carver's original and Gordon Lish's edited versions of "Why Don't You Dance?" to examine the effects following the disruption of the author's "intention and narrative thrust." *RCR* editor Robert Miltner offers reviews of recent publications in Carver studies: *The Poetry of Raymond Carver: Against the Current* by Sandra Lee Kleppe; *The Visual Poetics of Raymond Carver* by Ayala Amir; *Critical Insights: Raymond Carver*, edited by James Plath, Editor; *Not Far From Here: The Paris Symposium on Raymond Carver* edited by Vasiliki Fachard and Robert Miltner; and *Carver Across the Curriculum: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Teaching the Fiction and Poetry of Raymond Carver* edited by Paul Benedict Grant and Katherine Ashley.

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## **Introduction**

Co-editor Visiliki Fachard and I are delighted to bring out the fourth number of *The Raymond Carver Review*, a general topics issue, to readers. We thank the excellent members of our editorial board who have generously served as readers so that we can maintain the caliber of writing that only peer-reviewed journals are able to provide. We work on this journal, often with conflicting academic schedules and competing deadlines and projects, so that this scholarly journal devoted to the study of Raymond Carver, a gem among American writers, can be published. Journals such as ours are often uncompensated labors of scholarly commitment, digital productions that have no commercial value in the marketplace, but are of immense value to an international community of writers and readers who believe in the value of solid scholarship performed by all of us, to use Carver's phrase, in support of his contributions to the greater world of literature. We would be remiss not to express our appreciation for the patience of our readers, but we believe that the result, as evident in this, our fourth issue, has been worth the wait.

This issue contains a number of beginning and emerging scholars, more than we have published in previous issues. We believe that the future of Carver studies is in the hands—and keyboards—of intellectuals whose commitment to scholarship, particularly as it relates to the writing of Raymond Carver, contributes to the growing body of Carver scholarship. What we see, and celebrate, in this issue returns to one of the original goals of *The Raymond Carver Review*: to provide opportunities for new and emerging Carver

scholars to share their work with general and academic readers, as so many of us have done in years past, so as to reinvigorate Carver studies and support new contributions to this growing field of study. Two of the contributors are enrolled in PhD literature programs, Joseph Kappes at Syracuse University (where Raymond Carver and Tess Gallagher taught) and Molly Fuller at Kent State University; one, Katarina Polonsky, is a free-lance editor and independent scholar with a BA from Nottingham University with additional studies at Ca' Foscari University in Venice. Yet we also have a piece from Josef Benson, Assistant Professor from University of Wisconsin Parkside who previously contributed, when he was a PhD student, to *The Raymond Carver Review 2*, the special issue on Carver and Feminism. From an editorial and scholarly standpoint, we are delighted to be publishing new, emerging and established Carver scholars in this issue. This issue also includes a review of five recent books, both edited collections and single authored texts, each with a distinct focus that extends Carver studies in new and exciting directions.

This issue opens with Josef Benson's "Ralph Whiteman as White Construct in "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" which examines the title story from Carver's breakout story collection through a lens of racial construction. Benson argues that Ralph Wyman reconfigures his wounded white hetero-masculinity by assuming the role of victim; he triggers his victimhood by homosocially confessing his wife's sexual betrayal to a group of men. His violent encounter with the black mugger solidifies Ralph's new masculine configuration by coupling his heterosexual victimhood with racial victimhood. Ralph's contact with a construct of what Toni Morrison calls American Africanism contradistinctively aids in constructing Ralph's single conscious mask of white male

supremacy. His submissive sexual position at the end of the story symbolizes the transformation and his delusive new masculine self.

Katarina Polonsky's "Masculinity and the Domestic Space: Reconsidering 'Neighbors' and 'Collectors'" calls for a re-evaluation of Carver's so-called "hopeless world" in two of his early short stories, "Neighbours" (1970) and "Collectors" (1972), challenging the prevailing view that, like most pre-*Cathedral* stories, they are highly pessimistic. Focusing on his frequent representation of males who are reduced to inactivity and trapped inside a hostile and alienating domestic space, Polonsky suggests that a more nuanced reading can point to possibilities for the survival and growth of the characters in these stories. Although it is undeniable that several Carver characters are victims of inertia and existential isolation, the "Neighbors" and "Collectors" contain, nevertheless, several *signs* pointing to a potential recovery and affirmation of self; optimism, in other words, is not limited to the post-*Cathedral* stories.

"'I'd just like to get to the bottom of this': Deferred Narratives of Knowledge and Identity in 'Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarets'" by Joseph Kappes offers a close reading that examines the narrative structure as well as the complex dynamics of power and control in this overlooked classic. The essay develops an interpretation of the tale that is less stable and less affirmative than other critics have previously suggested. As the story progresses, Kappes argues, repeated shifts in narrative focus create a sense of irresolution and a pattern of deferred narrative; with each narrative skip, Carver reveals a more visceral and less consciously controlled layer of character motivation, moving the story naturally from the superficial to the intimate, and from the knowable to the unknowable.

While much of the previous discussion regarding Gordon Lish's editing of Carver's stories have focused on the chronology or on stylistic analysis of that editing, Molly Fuller, from a stance as both a scholar and creative writer, considers how Lish's editing altered what seems to be the intended arc of Carver's stories; "Intentionality and Narrative Thrust in the *Beginners* Version of 'Why Don't You Dance?'" explores the impact of artistic and aesthetic disruption. For a writer such as Carver, who was dedicated to craft, to dialogue as forward momentum, to carefully selected and placed details, to rendering a distilled version of reality, it is important to analyze so marked an influence on narrative style as that of Lish, who redirected the meaning of entire stories. The central focus of Fuller's essay is that Lish's minimalist aesthetic was imposed on Carver's vision of what fiction should be. By analyzing the two versions of "Why Don't You Dance?"—Lish's edited version and Carver's original—Fuller shows how important changes in narrative and dialogue from the unedited to edited version affect both the narrative thrust and the intention Carver had for the story.

Following the four peer-reviewed essays, I offer, in "Recent Publications in Carver Studies," a review that highlights five recent books of note: two single authored texts and three edited collections. Sandra Lee Kleppe's *The Poetry of Raymond Carver: Against the Current* is the first book length study of the poetry, and as such it opens up a new direction in Carver studies. Kleppe explores Carver's use of intertextuality, autopoetics, and self-referentiality, as well as devoting a section to the intersection of literature and medicine in his poetry. Ayala Amir's *The Visual Poetics of Raymond Carver* is a bold and innovative examination of Carver's short stories through the critical lens of photography, focusing on movement, frame and character, symbolism, and vision.

Her book, the first book to offer a critical study through the lens of another artistic field of study, opens the way for other scholars to seek additional critical lenses, such as cinematic or dramatic studies of Carver's work. *Critical Insights: Raymond Carver*, edited by James Plath, is a book primarily designed for students and readers to engage in critical study of Carver's work. Following a brief section on biography and influence, the heart of the book are significant sections on critical contexts and critical readings; the cogent and diverse essays, from established and emerging Carver scholars, make this one of the best general reference books of Carver to date. *Not Far From Here: The Paris Symposium on Raymond Carver*, edited by Vasiliki Fachard and Robert Miltner (the author of this piece), is comprised of papers presented at a symposium sponsored by the International Raymond Carver Society; with only one American represented, and with contributors from Canada, Spain, Switzerland, Italy, and several from France, this is the most international collection of essays to be published in Carver studies. Paul Benedict Grant and Katherine Ashley, editors of *Carver Across the Curriculum: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Teaching the Fiction and Poetry of Raymond Carver*, have produced a book devoted to the practice and pedagogy of teaching of Carver's work. The interdisciplinary range is impressive, and includes music, medicine, humor, gender, food, performance, film, translation, ESL, cinema, and creative writing; such vibrant and varied approaches make a strong argument for the wide popularity of Carver's writing.

Robert Miltner and Vasiliki Fachard

Co-editors, *The Raymond Carver Review*



## **Ralph Whiteman as White Construction in “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?”**

*Josef Benson, University of Wisconsin Parkside*

### **Introduction**

Critics such as Charles E. May and Kirk Nessel mark Raymond Carver’s titular story in his first collection “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” as a harbinger. May considers it a “precursor to the stories in *Cathedral* because it is richer in background information and authorial guidance and because the story is more forgiving than the other stories in the collection” (43). Nessel suggests that the protagonist Ralph “is precursor to a new strain of character in Carver’s canon, anticipating characters who, in rare instances . . . come close to celebrating these struggles, finding comfort in the small, good things of their lives and consolation in the face of an incomprehensible, unfair, brutal world” (311). Ralph Wyman represents one of several white protagonists found in Raymond Carver’s short stories whose whiteness is underscored by the presence of the other, be it black men in the case of “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” and “Vitamins,” a blind man in “Cathedral,” or a Hispanic maid in “Gazebo.” In this sense “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” signifies not necessarily a precursor to more redemptive work but rather extant socially constructed hierarchies that privilege able bodied, white, heterosexual males present in much of Carver’s work.

In Carver’s short story “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” Ralph Wyman, or Ralph *Whiteman*, reconfigures his wounded white hetero-masculinity by assuming the

role of heterosexual white male victim. Ralph triggers his victimhood by homosocially confessing his wife's sexual betrayal and his concomitant sexual inadequacy to a group of men. His homosocial confession allows him to inhabit the role of persecuted monolithic white heterosexual male without having to relinquish privilege or power or betray his possible sexual borderland. His violent encounter with the black mugger solidifies Ralph's new masculine configuration by coupling his heterosexual victimhood with racial victimhood. Ralph's contact with a construct of what Toni Morrison calls American Africanism contradistinctively aids in constructing Ralph's single conscious mask of white male supremacy. His submissive sexual position at the end of the story symbolizes the transformation and his delusive new masculine self. A reading such as this aligns with Whiteness Studies, or Critical White Studies, scholars such as Noel Ignatiev, Steve Martinot, Toni Morrison, George Lipsitz, *et alia*, who for the last two decades or so have attempted to expose whiteness and white privilege as a social construct that draws its primary power from its perceived invisibility.

### **Wounded White Hetero-masculinity**

The "arduous" yet "rewarding" privileged life of a heterosexual able-bodied white man promised to Ralph Wyman by his father, "principal of Jefferson Elementary School and trumpet soloist in the Weaverville Elks Club Auxiliary Band" (Carver 227), is abruptly thwarted when Ralph finds out with certainty that "his wife had once betrayed him with a man named Mitchell Anderson" (230). The very first thing Ralph does upon verifying his suspicions is check the color of his skin: "Then suddenly he knew . . . For a minute he could only stare dumbly at his hands" (238). Carver signifies Ralph Wyman's whiteness

by his lack of racial signifiers, i.e. we know that Wyman is white because as Toni Morrison says of most white characters in U.S. fiction “nobody says so” (Morrison 72). Steve Martinot notes, “whites are not born white. There is no inherency to being white. They are given their whiteness by the white supremacist society into which they are born” (14). Martinot further points out, “‘race’ names a system of socio-political relations in which whites define themselves with respect to others they define as ‘non-white’ for that purpose. Because whites are the definers, ‘race’ is inseparable from white supremacy. That is, ‘race’ as a concept is inseparable from the white hierarchical domination that constructs it” (19). Just as race is constructed as an oppositional term, so is heteronormative masculinity, i.e. one is straight because one is not queer and one is masculine because one is not feminine. In both cases, the binaries define who has privilege and who does not. Ralph’s wounded masculinity and subsequent victimhood compel him to invest in these binaries because his victimhood is utterly dependent on the privileging of his white heteronormative identity.

Marian’s infidelity at once compromises Ralph’s “dominant fiction of patriarchy and phallic privilege” (Silverman 42). He is the cuckold, the fool, and immediately wonders whether his children are really his. Ralph asks Marian, “Did he come in you? Did you let him come in you when you were having a go at it?” (Carver 238). Instead of beating Marian like he did the morning she came home after being with Mitchel Anderson, Ralph assumes the role of white male heterosexual victim in order to ultimately recoup his position of power. Ralph’s sense of victimhood is similar to those whom David Savran describes as “white, heterosexual, working- and lower-middle-class men who believe themselves to be the victims of the scant economic and social progress

made in the U.S. over the past thirty years by African Americans, women, and other racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities. Trading places, rhetorically at least, with the people they loathe, they imagine themselves . . . the new persecuted minority” (128). Possibly furthering Ralph’s insecure masculine footing is the fact that his wife “was offered a post as a French and English instructor at the junior college at the edge of town, and Ralph had stayed on at the high school” (Carver 230). Perhaps Ralph feels insecure about his wife teaching at a higher level. By inhabiting the role of white male heterosexual victim, Ralph “simultaneously [embraces] and [disavows] the role of victim” (Savran 128). Victimhood serves the monolith of privilege by protesting its fragmentation.

### **Homosocial Suicide and Sexual Borderlands**

Ralph’s first act under the guise of victimhood is to go out drinking, demonstrating self-pity and power since he knows that Marian will not repeat her infraction by leaving for the night. Once Ralph leaves his wife and kids and ventures out into the night, he solidifies his victimhood by committing homosocial suicide. Michael S. Kimmel notes, “Masculinity is a *homosocial* enactment. We test ourselves, perform heroic feats, take enormous risks all because we want other men to grant us our manhood” (187). In Ralph’s case, he wants other men to know that his wife has betrayed him so that he can claim victimhood and maintain his position as patriarch. Not long after he leaves home, “He remembered a man he saw once sitting on a curb in Arcata, an old man with a growth of beard and a brown wool cap who just sat there with his arms between his legs. And then Ralph thought: Marian! Dorothea! Robert! It was impossible” (Carver 240).

Ralph's alternatives to victimhood, including beating Marian or leaving, may lead to his estrangement from his family, a predicament he likens to a homeless man.

The sequence of scenes in which Ralph executes his homosocial suicide occurs in markedly male spaces, including the men's room and a poker game:

Ralph looked around for the toilet . . . Inside, in line behind three other men, he found himself staring at opened thighs and vulva drawn on the wall over a pocket-comb machine. Beneath was scrawled EAT ME, and lower down someone had added Betty M. Eats It . . . His life had changed, he was willing to understand.

Were there other men . . . who could look at one event in their lives and perceive in it the tiny makings of the catastrophe that thereafter set their lives on a different course? (243)

The men's room represents a male space in which Ralph musters up the strength to assume the role of victim in front of other men. Betty, a sexualized and dehumanized female construct scrawled on the wall, functions as a reminder and stand-in for Marian that although most masculine spaces exist homosocially or devoid of women, "Women become a kind of currency that men use to improve their ranking on the masculine social scale" (Kimmel 186). In other words, women, especially white women, always already figure into a hetero-homosocial equation as dehumanized spoil and status symbol with the power also to emasculate men, a power simultaneously responsible for misogyny and in Ralph's case feigned victimhood

Ralph then exchanges one male space for another. After he leaves the men's room he notices some men playing cards and "Suddenly he knew that nothing could save him but to be in the same room with the card players" (Carver 244). For Ralph, the male ritual

of poker represents a perfect space in which to commit homosocial suicide, a sort of symbolic death of his masculine self so that he can reconfigure it as victim and eventually reclaim it. Ralph establishes his place at the table by nodding after “The dealer said gently, still not looking up, ‘Low ball or five card. Table stakes, five-dollar limit on raises’” (245). Ralph’s fluency in the arcane language legitimizes his place at the table “as if there were a code to be uncovered” (239). Only after proving that he belongs in the male space does Ralph sabotage himself. Without warning he says, “My wife played around with another guy two years ago. I found out tonight” (246). Ralph’s admission primes him for victimhood and allows him to return home and reassume his role as patriarch. His confession of his wife’s betrayal is the last bit of dialogue Ralph has with the men before he leaves the bar.

Ralph’s admission to his wife’s infidelity functions as both a means to victimhood and a denial of his sexual borderlands. Gloria Anzaldúa describes a borderland as a “vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants . . . the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer” (3). Ralph Wyman is quite possibly a queer character in the closet, unable or unwilling to reveal his sexual borderland and risk his position of heteronormative power. Carver notes that perhaps the greatest single influence on Ralph’s life was “Dr. Maxwell . . . a handsome, graceful man in his early forties, with exquisite manners and with just the trace of the South in his voice. He had been educated at Vanderbilt, had studied in Europe . . . Almost overnight, Ralph would later say, he decided on teaching as a career” (228). On two separate occasions during Ralph’s night out the text suggests possible homosexual encounters.

The first centers on Ralph's queer subject position regarding the card dealer. Ralph fixates on the dealer: "The dealer was a large man; he wore a white shirt, open at the collar, the sleeves rolled back once to expose forearms thick with black curling hair. Ralph drew a long breath" (245). The combined description of Dr. Maxwell as "handsome" and that what Ralph notices about the dealer mostly is his black curling hair evocative of pubic hair suggests Ralph's queer subject position. Further, the dealer says to Ralph, "You really want some action, we can go to my place when we finish here" (246). The last thing Ralph thinks about before he is accosted by the black man is Dr. Maxwell, and once again he describes him as handsome: "He thought how Dr. Maxwell would handle a thing like this, and he reached into the sack as he walked, broke the seal on the little bottle and stopped in a doorway to take a long drink and thought Dr. Maxwell would sit handsomely at the water's edge" (247). The problem is that Ralph's masculine reconfiguration necessitates that he not be queer. Playing the role of victim only works to Ralph's advantage if he maintains his white heteronormative subject position because anything less than that would undermine his privilege and likely cost him his family.

Both Arthur F. Bethea and Nessel allude to Ralph's fear of sexuality. Bethea notes, "[Ralph] . . . [retreats] from the complexities inherent in his . . . sexuality" (133). Nessel contends, "Ralph's fear of the uncontrollably feminine arises with sporadic intensity during his nightmarish descent into hell" (308). Further, if we were to compare Ralph to the narrator in "Cathedral," a story again that critics think "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" anticipates, perhaps we could draw the distinction between Ralph's reluctance to explore his latent homosexuality and the narrator in "Cathedral's" subtle willingness to do so. As Chris J. Bullock suggests about the story "Cathedral," "Before

the drawing, the designing of an alternative masculinity, can begin, the narrator must change his isolation orientation by finding . . . his connection to his inner life . . . For the drawing itself one more thing is required: a relation to the feminine” (343). Ultimately, while the narrator of “Cathedral” succeeds in creating an alternative masculinity marked by, at the very least, a relaxing of masculine normativity, Ralph’s goal is to clear an alternative path back to his normative masculine position by way of victimhood, a path necessitating normative masculine rigidity. The fear of sexuality that both Bethea and Nessel notice perhaps is not so much Ralph’s fear of his wife’s sexuality as much as it is Ralph’s fear of *his own* sexual borderlands. The distinct difference in the two protagonists in “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” and “Cathedral” further undermines the notion that the stories represent thematic continuity.

### **American Africanism and Double Consciousness**

The final catalyst for Ralph’s transformation from patriarch to victim back to patriarch occurs when Ralph is mugged by a black man:

A small Negro in a leather jacket stepped out in front of him and said, ‘Just a minute there, man.’ . . . Before Ralph could run the Negro hit him hard in the stomach, and when Ralph groaned and tried to fall, the man hit him in the nose with his open hand, knocking him back against the wall, where he sat down with one leg turned under him and was learning how to raise himself up when the Negro slapped him on the cheek and knocked him sprawling onto the pavement.

(247-48)



Ralph's encounter with the black man denotes a case of constructed American Africanism, a "carefully invented, Africanist presence" (Morrison 6). Ralph emerges from this encounter as a fully reconstructed white male heterosexual victim. Violent contact with a construct of American Africanism more fully defines Ralph's sense of victimhood and concomitant entitlement, for "Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself not as enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny" (Morrison 52). Applying Toni Morrison's "project . . . to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served" (90), allows one to highlight the effect of the mugging not so much in terms of racial stereotypes but on Ralph himself, the white male heterosexual victim. Vanessa Hall on the other hand believes about the racialized encounter in the story that, "Blackness here—criminal and menacing—physically interferes with Ralph's attempt to reconstruct his whiteness" (96). Hall's reading is dangerously close to aligning with the myth of the black rapist, the belief that black men are inherently hypersexual and bent on rape. Angela Y. Davis, one of the first theorists to historically contextualize the myth of the black rapist not long after the abolishment of slavery, argues, "lynchings, reserved during slavery for the white abolitionists, were proving to be a valuable political weapon. Before lynching could be consolidated as a popularly accepted institution, however, its savagery and its horrors had to be convincingly justified. These were the circumstances which spawned the myth of the Black rapist" (185). Hall contends, "If whiteness is measured by intellect, restraint of

appetites, and planning for the future, then blackness is measured by an absence of restraint and by excessive appetites, particularly sexual ones” (95). Hall evokes this stereotype by suggesting that Ralph’s whiteness equates impotence and that his violent clash with the black man somehow results in Ralph being able to have sex with his wife. She notes,

Ralph’s flirtation with blackness seems to result in his succumbing to some of the desires he has rigidly repressed—a positive outcome, the ending of the story indicates. ‘Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?’ thereby effects a critique of the more restrictive effects of whiteness, showing particular concern with sexuality and its relationship with masculinity, but it can only do this by invoking a male other who is a repository for all of the suppressed desires Ralph has denied himself. Flirting with blackness can be beneficial for white men, though Carver’s invocation of black criminality (signified by the mugger) signifies the clearly undesirable end of the stereotypes he draws on. (Hall 96)

Ralph’s contact with the black man, rather than a critique of whiteness or an instantiation of black hypersexuality, aids in *establishing* Ralph’s whiteness and contributing to his role as persecuted heterosexual white male that allows him to maintain his position of power. Ralph’s entire life has been predicated on his whiteness, from his “handsomely pale and slender girl” (Carver 228) to his feelings of disgust due to “the squalor and open lust he saw in Mexico” (229). Ralph’s contact with the black man binarily casts Ralph as the true American, the victim, and gives him the moral high ground on which to return home triumphant. Toni Morrison asserts that whiteness in the U.S. has always hypocritically assumed a squalid racial other:

The flight from the Old World to the New is generally seen to be a flight from oppression and limitation to freedom and possibility. Although, in fact, the escape was sometimes an escape from license—from a society perceived to be unacceptably permissive, ungodly, and undisciplined—for those fleeing for reasons other than religious ones, constraint and limitation impelled the journey.

(34)

Indeed, Ralph's mugging does not infuse him with sexuality but rather infuses him with whiteness and privilege and the hubris to return home armed with both a tacit denial of his sexual borderland and a constructed whiteness that purports to be a single monolithic consciousness opposed to one that is fragmented or doubled. W.E.B. Du Bois observes, "One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self" (8-9). It seems appropriate that on Ralph's transformative night he "[comes] to Second Street, the part of town people called 'Two Street' . . . He had been down here once, six years ago, to a secondhand shop to finger through the dusty shelves of old books. There was a liquor store across the street" (Carver 241). His white male heterosexual victimhood requires oppositional proximity. In order to construct his role as monolithic white male hetero-victim he must set himself in opposition to that which is not monolithic, in this case the fragmented consciousness of a racial other.

Ralph's limited transformation at the end of the story accounts for his sexually submissive position. Once again, just before a key moment in the story, Ralph takes note

of his skin: “He stood naked on the tiles before getting into the water. He gathered in his fingers the slack flesh over his ribs. He studied his face again in the clouded mirror. He started in fear when Marian called his name” (251). Ralph’s evolution from patriarch to victim back to patriarch is not without risk. Perhaps his new role as victim will not result in the status quo. Perhaps he will not be able to perform sexually in his new role.

Nevertheless, Ralph returns to Marian disguised as a victim, an insulted white man, a white man’s white man. Carver writes,

He tensed at her fingers, and then he let go a little. It was easier to let go a little. Her hand moved over his hip and over his stomach and she was pressing her body over his now and moving over him and back and forth over him. He held himself, he later considered, as long as he could. And then he turned to her. He turned and he was still turning, marveling at the impossible changes he felt moving over him. (251)

Even though Marian pressing her body over Ralph’s and moving back and forth evokes an image of Marian as the sexual aggressor, there is no indication that Ralph has really changed that much. His victimhood has allowed him an alternative path to white male supremacy less perilous than one of violence or anomic masculinity that would surely lead to the loss of his family and his role as patriarch.

As Bullock finds, “many of his [Carver’s] heroes are concerned with dilemmas of masculine identity” (343). Of these heroes, many of them are involved in the “isolation of the masculine ego, its pushing away of relationship with others and with other parts of the psyche” (343). This notion of pushing away is another way of saying that some of Carver’s protagonists deny any sort of psychological fragmentation that may undermine

their claim to political whiteness. As Robert Miltner points out, Raymond Carver often presents “the stereotypical masculine persona of his formative years during the 1950s: a young man given to drinking, working blue-collar jobs, hunting and fishing, posing as the ‘tough guy’ engaged in the reckless, destructive behavior that dominated the first half of his life, the alcoholic ‘Bad Raymond’ days that preceded his sobriety” (55). This sort of fundamental hegemonic U.S. American hypermasculinity depends on the denial of a fragmented consciousness, or as Bullock puts it, “any visitor [who] may be a potential assailant . . . [or] particularly intense threat” (343). By the end of “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” Ralph has rebuilt his white heteronormative masculinity by assuming the role of victim catalyzed by his homosocial suicide and his encounter with a construct of American Africanism. His disguise as white male heterosexual victim also serves as a denial of his possible sexual borderlands and fragmented consciousness. For as Toni Morrison notes, “images of blackness can be evil and protective, rebellious and forgiving, fearful and desirable—all of the self-contradictory features of the self. Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable” (59). If W.E.B Du Bois and Gloria Anzaldúa define otherness by pointing to its internal fragmentation in a world where normativity is constructed binarily and then privileged, then one can define white male heteronormativity as the internal false denial of double consciousness and sexual borderlands. Despite Ralph’s deep masculine insecurities and new role as victim, he emerges at the end of the story with his whiteness and his heteronormative privilege and power completely intact.

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**Masculinity and the Domestic Space: Reconsidering  
“Neighbors” and “Collectors”**

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Ever since the traditional paradigms of masculinity—man as the breadwinner and in control of the public sphere—became increasingly challenged by women liberating themselves from the domestic sphere (Kimmel 271), that sphere has become, often, a site of trauma for masculinity. This shift in American culture, which triggered the phenomenon of disenfranchised males, also finds an echo in Raymond Carver’s work, especially in “Fever,” a story in which a wife, Eileen, has left her husband, Carlyle, and two children in order to pursue her dream of becoming an artist. At first devastated by her absence, Carlyle gradually learns to cope with the enormous domestic and parental demands incumbent on a single parent and emerges from this trial strengthened by the suffering he has gone through.

Not all of Carver’s housebound male protagonists are victims of feminist wives, however. The male characters in “They’re Not Your Husband,” “Viewfinder,” “What Is It?,” “What Do You Do in San Francisco?,” “Collectors,” or “Preservation” (to cite only a few) have succumbed to physical and psychological inertia because they are jobless, alcoholic, or simply shiftless. Such narratives, in which the male is no longer the breadwinner and is often confined to the home, are said to depict “catastrophic [male] failure” (Meyer 22), “wounded masculinity” (Weber 87), male misogyny (Eigartaigh 51), or existential isolation. The overtones of failure and catastrophe in these judgments appeared to be substantiated by Carver’s own claims that his post-drinking *Cathedral* stories were more optimistic than his earlier texts. Gendered interpretations have



corroborated these verdicts, generally reappraising his representations of women while discrediting the male characters of Carver's early stories.

This essay seeks to revisit this harsh view of Carver's males as prisoners of a crippling, emasculating domestic environment; it argues that, occasionally, as in "Collectors" (1970) and "Neighbors" (1972), Carver believes in the possibility of their survival and even growth within the domestic space. Unlike "Fever," in which the growth achieved by Carlyle is manifest, in the above stories it is only hinted at; neither of our two pre-*Cathedral* stories shows the protagonists in a better position at the end than at the beginning. But both narratives contain *signs* that point to a slight shift these male characters have undergone or to an impact the events of the story have had on them, making change imminent.

In his theory of home territories, John Porteous explains how the domestic territory connects with our selfhood and constitutes our psychic territorial core (384). When the home's spatial boundaries are stimulated or actively defended, there is an inextricable psychological "awakening and assertion of identity" (386).

In "Collectors," the jobless first-person narrator is trapped inside his home: "I lay on the sofa and listened to the rain. Now and then I'd lift up and look through the curtain for the mailman . . . You can't be too careful if you're out of work" (Carver *Where I'm Calling From* 90). A salesman named Aubrey Bell knocks on his door asking if he is Mr. Slater. The protagonist does not get up, nor does he answer the question. The salesman asks if Mrs. Slater is home, claiming that she has "won something." The narrator replies that "Mrs. Slater doesn't live here." (90). Bell asks again if the answering voice is Mr. Slater; ignoring the question a second time, the narrator gets up from the sofa and opens the door.

Mrs. Slater has won a “free vacuuming and carpet shampoo” (92) that Bell proceeds to test on the carpet but also on other domestic objects such as bed and pillows. While he is vacuuming, a letter is dropped in the mailbox. The narrator “twice started toward the letter” but Bell “seemed to anticipate me, cut me off . . .” (95). At the end of the story Bell picks up the letter, which is for a Mr. Slater, folds it in half, pockets it, and asks the narrator: “You want to see it? . . . You don’t believe me?” to which the narrator answers that “it just seems strange” (96).

This exchange of words is also strange for the reader, who does not know who Mr. and Mrs. Slater are or what the letter’s contents are. Moreover, the reader is mystified by Bell’s intrusive and covetous ways: he promises that he “will see to it [the letter]” as he leaves the narrator’s premises. The protagonist never confirms that he is Mr. Slater, but neither does he ever deny it. The numerous enigmas about the Slaters lead one to suspect that this story has something to do with the protagonist’s identity—an identity whose decipherment is made all the more difficult by Slater’s joblessness, indolence on the sofa, and by his isolation from the outside world. As if to reinforce his image of submission and disenfranchisement, his feminine foil, Mrs. Slater, has a name because she *has* shown agency: she “doesn’t live here” anymore and is, therefore, tellingly described as “a winner” (91). If the letter represents the symbolic “delivery” of the narrator’s identity—an identity that is still embryonic—his hesitation in picking it up suggests that he is not yet ready to assume his selfhood but that he may, with Bell’s help, be waking from his torpor and sensing the first stirrings of self-assertion.

Bell’s trespassing stirs Slater’s territorial instincts. Bell’s name itself alludes to his “noisy” disturbance of the narrator’s passivity (Boxer and Phillips 85). Furthermore, insofar as the name “Bell” also evokes a device used to give a signal and warning, vaguely echoing the opening sounds of a (boxing) match, it suggests that the impending

conflict will involve a specifically *masculine* retort. Later, Bell's reference to Rilke living in castles recalls the psychological connection between habitat and identity. The charged allusion to a figure who was familiar with the psychic virtues of the home territory suggests that the narrator will, like Rilke, also reclaim selfhood in his "castle."<sup>1</sup>

Bell's symbolic act of filling the "vacuum" of the protagonist's *already* hollow life with a free "vacuum" resonates with spiritual overtones. His humor, his quiet "churchly voice," his religious invocation, and the halo-like "ring around his scalp" (92)—also reminiscent of a monk's tonsure—depict him as a redemptive figure capable of *cleansing* the protagonist, or at least of shaking him out of his lethargy. This is also suggested syntactically by his hypnotic description of Bell's movements: "back and forth, back and forth over the worn carpet . . . his sweeping and his sweeping . . ." (95). Bell resuscitates the narrator's figurative domestic grave as he removes from it bits of dead matter ("the dusty stuff" [94]). Bell's monastic charitableness is also highlighted by his indifference to remuneration. He goes "about his business" regardless of Slater's warning that he won't be able to pay him for the vacuum cleaner or his work: "You know I can't pay anything, I said. I couldn't pay you a dollar if my life depended on it. You're going to have to write me off as a dead loss, that's all. You're wasting your time on me, I said" (95).

After Bell "shut[s] off the machine," the sudden silence reinforces the protagonist's newfound tranquility as he calmly puts the "dust, hair and small grainy things" of his former self in the garbage (95). Equally symbolic is a "bottle" containing "a few ounces of green liquid" that Bell also brought along and that he hooks "to a new attachment on his hose." As he moves "slowly over the carpet," Slater releases "little streams of emerald" liquid and works up "patches of foam" (95). The emerald stone is said to have had healing qualities for the ancient Romans, who believed that "the very

soul of an individual was restored when they wore emerald jewelry . . . whereas in modern times, it is said to help those who suffer from depression or other mental or emotional disorders.”<sup>2</sup>

Green, the color of fecund nature, also connotes growth and metamorphosis; the narrator is, symbolically, undergoing a regenerative “cleansing” of his old self that contrasts sharply with the intimations of worthlessness (“dead loss”) he felt before Bell sprinkled his green liquid. This also explains his growing ease: “I sat on the chair in the kitchen, *relaxed now*, and watched him work” (emphasis added). At the end, when Bell asks him if he wants the vacuum cleaner or not, Slater answers: “No . . . I guess not. I’m going to be leaving here soon. It would just be in the way” (96). Through his intrusive vacuuming Bell has figuratively sucked up the narrator’s passive identity and provoked him into reclaiming his selfhood. His concluding, epiphanous understanding that the advertised object “would just be in the way” of his pending mobilization suggests the healing of his lethargy and his increasingly enfranchised sense of selfhood.

In both “Collectors” and “Neighbors,” verbal communication is problematic. But instead of accepting what Catherine Jurca maintains is the apparent norm for American suburban males—a sullen state of perpetual isolation (157)—Carver may be giving his male protagonists the possibility of forging alternative, meaningful connections.

Ben Highmore’s theory on the everyday can help us elucidate these alternative connections. He notes that the most commonplace and inconspicuous elements of the everyday can hold bizarre and mysterious possibilities for change and transformation (54). When examined closely, the unnoticed and unobtrusive features, actions, objects and experiences of everyday life can reveal a revolutionary and marvelous power (16). So can, in Carver’s stories, the pregnant silences prevailing in domestic spaces.

According to Kirk Nasset, Carver's men evolve thanks to the influence of another being ("Insularity" 117); collaborating with others frees them from self-absorption. In "Collectors" too, the narrator's casual encounter with a salesman also transmutes into an implicit connection between them that sparks off the narrator's self-fulfilment. There are no quotation marks in the first-person narrative "Collectors," an absence that suggests the protagonist's unfamiliarity with conventional communication: "Another knock, and I said, Who's there? / This is Aubrey Bell, a man said. Are you Mr. Slater?" (90) This uncanny absence of quotation marks highlights the strangeness of some of life's encounters. Moreover, by removing speech marks from this story, Carver embeds the spoken word within the narrative itself. Speech visually and literally becomes part of the background. By deemphasizing speech, the text foregrounds the possibility of other forms of communication.

Bell's eccentric appearance alerts us to his symbolic function in the story and adumbrates the transformative effect of his silent connection with the narrator. Recognizing that he is symbolic, Mathias Keller calls Bell an "angel-of-death," "a nightmare-scenario" (11). An angel indeed, yet Keller misconstrues the type: Carver does not show the narrator dying, nor is Bell explicitly evil. The root of "Aubrey" means "fair ruler" (Freedman 19) and, thus, suggests his virtue. Laughing and grinning, Bell ruptures the narrator's isolation, cleans his home. By encouraging the narrator to work "steadily" with him, Bell functions as a symbolic *angel-of-the-house*, a male figure that can show solidarity and connect with the narrator through the performance of domestic chores.

Tellingly, the loud "hum of the vacuum" drowns out Bell's small-talk and, thereby, highlights the importance of their non-verbal connection (94). Similarly, Bell's unconnected references to Rilke, Voltaire and W. H. Auden (93) underscore the

disjointedness of the men's verbal exchanges. Instead, their cooperation and bond occur silently, as they work together, exchanging glances and nods (93-94), and by holding pillows, mattresses, filters and scoops.

Towards the story's end, the narrator owns up to the self-enlarging effects of his connection with Bell and describes himself as feeling "relaxed" (95). He also asks his guest, "You want coffee?" (95), an offer that shows him breaking out of his isolation.<sup>3</sup> But Bell, having cleaned the home, has fulfilled his symbolic function and senses that he had "better be off" (96).

In "Neighbors," Bill and Arlene Miller have been asked by the Stones, the couple living across the hall from them, to look after their house while the latter are away. Although described as a "happy couple," the Millers are envious of the Stones, who appear to live "a fuller and brighter life," whereas they feel that they "had been passed by somehow" (Carver, *Where I'm Calling From* 68). When Bill first enters his neighbors' premises, he finds the "air already heavy and . . . vaguely sweet." After tending to the Millers' cat, Kitty, and the plants, he lingers in their apartment, going through their medicine chest and liquor cabinet, and even putting some of Harriet Stone's pills in his pocket and taking "two drinks" from a bottle of Chivas (69). The effect of penetrating into the Stones' intimate space arouses Bill sexually, as it will Arlene when it is her turn to feed Kitty. Bill grows bolder with every visit, rummaging through and even trying on the Stones' clothes—Jim's as well as Harriet's. One day, Arlene tells Bill about "some pictures" she discovered in a drawer; they decide to go back together only to realize that Arlene has left the key inside. The realization that they have been locked out distresses them, but Bill whispers in Arlene's ear, "Don't

worry . . . For God's sake, don't worry." At the end of the story, "they leaned into the door as if against a wind, and braced themselves." (73).

Described as "a salesman" who is always "traveling about the country somewhere in connection with [his] work" (68) and plainly circumventing any domestic emasculation, Jim Stone strikes an enviable contrast to Bill Miller. Looking after the Stones' apartment thus offers Bill psychological stimulation and the prospect of new boundaries (68). As Abigail Bowers notes, the Stones' "fuller and brighter" life renders their home a "Garden of Eden" for Bill: here, he can enact his fantasies and role-play Jim (99). Yet Bowers's conclusion that Arlene and Bill's transgressions bring about a state of "postlapsarian" disenfranchisement overlooks the fact that Carver depicts Bill as being *already* disenfranchised. Accordingly, one can see the act of entering the Stones' "Edenic" apartment as representative of an *enfranchising* return to a "prelapsarian" epoch of male mastery and control. The apartment's exoticism, with its overtones of primeval atmosphere, substantiates this: Bill takes "a deep breath" before entering the "cooler" and "darker" area (72), noticing that "the air [is] already heavy" and "vaguely sweet." The sunburst clock, evoking both time and light, recalls the first dawning of sunlight in Eden, and Bill's memory of Harriet "cradling" it like "an infant" (69) further suggests a temporal return to a site of (re)birth.

Here, Bill is able to reclaim his sense of territorial authority as he moves "slowly through each room . . . considering everything that [falls] under his gaze" (71). In this metaphoric Eden, his senses are reawakened and his consciousness heightened: he "[sees] everything." His bizarre behavior—sniffing and chewing haphazardly in the kitchen, napping and masturbating in the bedroom—reflects a return to primitive drives. Revealingly, his ultimate "rebirth" occurs on his third visit (the number three also connoting symbolic and spiritual significance), when "he shed his own clothes," and

meaningfully “smiled at himself in the mirror” (71), pleased with his new sense of self. Arlene undergoes a similarly empowering experience—for example, taking unusually long in the Stones’ apartment and leaving with the color “high in her cheeks” (73)—but Carver focuses mainly on Bill’s experience. Both Bill and Arlene, therefore, return to a seemingly prelapsarian state, one that dramatizes archetypal gender dynamics:

“Neighbors” suggests the possibility of reclaiming a *masculine* selfhood within the home territory. Thus, while Arlene initially had domestic authority over Bill, these transformations signal his return home as a newly enfranchised man: now, *he* takes her hand, “*he* stood in the kitchen doorway” and “*he* let them into their apartment” (72, emphasis added).

When Arlene “le[aves] the key inside” the Stones’ house (73), her breathing becomes “hard, expectant,” but Bill promptly reassures her by clasping her in his arms and murmuring, “Don’t worry . . . For God’s sake, don’t worry.” This charged, gendered image of Arlene’s vulnerability—symbolized by her labored breathing and by Bill’s protective arms around her—shows that he no longer needs Arlene to take “good care” of him (68). Bill’s protective instinct and authoritative tone seem to illustrate his regained masculinity, at the same time that they recall Eve’s staunch dependence on Adam after their exile. Bill has crossed domestic frontiers and returned to his home with a newfound masculine selfhood.

Whereas in most narratives of twentieth-century male suburbanites the men reject opportunities for change, according to Jurca (16), Carver’s stories offer an alternative vision. His homes are inextricably problematic: each story suggests some form of departure from the domestic space that ultimately complicates the male protagonist’s relationship with his home. Yet it is precisely these explorations that lead the



protagonists towards some form of progress and change, transforming them from passive to active agents within the domestic realm.

Going through the neighbors' apartment to satisfy his urge for annexation, Bill rids himself of his identity, "shed[ding] his own clothes and slip[ping] into" Jim Stone's "fuller and brighter" image. Wearing Jim's wing-tip shoes, bermudas and dark suit, Bill narcissistically "smile[s], observing himself in the mirror" (71). In the episode that follows, he puts on women's clothes:<sup>4</sup>

He rummaged through the top drawers until he found a pair of panties and a brassiere. He stepped into the panties and fastened the brassiere, then looked through the closet for an outfit. He put on a black and white checkered skirt and tried to zip it up. He put on a burgundy blouse that buttoned up at the front. (72)

Emulating Harriet's image, Bill's ersatz replacements for his identity work to radically undermine any notion of genuine selfhood. This cross-dressing—performed in a state of mild intoxication—further confuses his identity. Having finished the drink before cross-dressing, Bill is now intoxicated, both physically and aesthetically—and in the process of *losing* his selfhood. The text's syntactical repetition of him putting on Harriet's clothing paints his actions as uncontrolled, which further undermines his efforts. His attempt to zip up the outfit and literally seal the new image of himself confirms the act's inadequacy.

This revelation occurs to Bill when, considering her shoes, he "*understood they would not fit*. For a long time he looked out the living-room window from behind the curtain. Then he returned to the bedroom and put everything away" (72, emphasis added). Bill begins to understand what he will later tell Arlene: "It *is* funny" to step into someone else's shoes "like that" (72). In his final, unsuccessful attempt to step into Harriet's shoes, Bill is reminded of the physical "reality" of his masculinity.

By considering the object of his desire from above and realizing that the image quite literally doesn't fit, Bill is able to re-establish his objectivity, and thus reassess his actions. Moreover, one could see this in a Freudian sense, whereby this distance between himself and the desired object reinstalls his dominant male gaze and reminds him of his masculinity. Bill's ensuing gaze out of the window embodies the last stage of his illumination, an action that shows him familiarizing himself with this new perspective. Later, the text confirms Bill's newly ascendant selfhood through the repeated motif of the Stones' image. The erotic pictures that Arlene finds function as a literal and physical image of the Stones, and thus his illumination is clear when she notably reminds us that now Bill "can see for [himself]" (73): the Stones' image that Bill, in the past, wanted to physically adopt and replace his own identity with has now become a detached and exterior object that he can enjoy *as himself*. No longer masquerading under a false identity, Bill can assume a more genuine selfhood.

With the lack of a "material" attachment to *any* home in "Collectors," and the loss of the Stones' apartment in "Neighbors," how the male protagonists will articulate their future selfhoods remains ambivalent. Nonetheless, Carver's stories offer them the chance to forgo self-pity and move beyond their disenfranchisement by offering them the possibility of pursuing a more genuine and emancipated selfhood.

Carver's men must also learn to connect with others in the domestic space if they are to attain true selfhood. In "Neighbors," Bill Miller's everyday silences, shared with his wife within his home, also lead to a transforming connection. As Nessel notes, Carver dramatizes the Millers' "marriage in the process of diminishing" ("Insularity" 297). As their communication breaks down, we see them speak primarily of discontent: "[Feeling] passed by somehow . . . They talked about it sometimes, mostly in comparison . . . [to] . . . their neighbors" (68). Since their subsequent verbal exchanges

are about the Stones, their personal relationship can be, in a way, understood as “silent.” However, by claiming that their marriage ultimately disintegrates (298), Nessel underestimates silence’s potential.

Through their unspoken yet shared transgressions in the Stones’ apartment, the Millers experience a renewed connection between them, a connection metaphorized by the Stones’ cat, Kitty (69). Cats are silent yet mystical symbols of transformative power and knowledge according to Nicholas Saunders. Evidence of this power can be seen after the first time Bill assumes “cat duty”: after “playing with Kitty,” he touches Arlene’s breasts and suggests that they “go to bed” (69). Later, when Arlene admits she too has “been playing with Kitty,” Bill begins “kissing her on the neck and hair” (73). Kitty strengthens the connection between them: before each sexual encounter with Arlene, Bill is aware of Kitty “moving about,” “appear[ing] at his feet” or “look[ing] at him steadily” (71). Moreover, as a cat, Kitty herself is mute, and thus one is tempted to see her as a silent source of knowledge since she is the sole figure privy to the Millers’ transgressive behaviors. In this way, Kitty literally embodies the power of silence, for all her unspoken insights into their connection.

By the end of the story, the Millers’ transformation is clear. While Nessel’s assertions that the Millers have been dependent on “stimulus from outside influences” are valid, his suggestion that their passion is false seems harsh (297). For as we have seen in the ending, “Neighbors” seems to end on a compelling image of the Millers’ intimacy: “They stayed there. They held each other. They leaned into the door as if against a wind, and braced themselves” (73). This is a clear affirmation of reconnection. The use of the third-person plural pronoun “they” in a series of three emphatic clauses, all of which contain verbs denoting sustenance and support, has the effect of reproducing the sense of the Millers’ solidarity and endurance (73). The act of leaning

into the door *together*, confronting the forces unleashed by their transgression, suggests a forward progression rather than a retreat. Moreover, it is crucial that this final, silent union take place *outside* the Stones' apartment, suggesting that the Millers will return to their own reality to grow and transform together.

In these stories, words fail Carver's protagonists, but the quotidian domestic experience of silence opens up the possibility of alternative connections that can bring transformation and growth. Carver shows the possibility of creating alternative connections through the silences that afflict his characters in their everyday domestic spaces.

In "Collectors" and "Neighbors," Carver places the male protagonists in a domestic situation that compels each to confront and overcome disenfranchisement and to move beyond self-pity and passivity. As they do so, they begin to exert some control over their home territory, an achievement that encourages them to forge new, restorative connections. The protagonists' futures remain undecided in ways that allow for the possibility of change, expansion and growth.

Scholars have viewed the pre-*Cathedral* fictions as narratives of despair, desolation and hopelessness. But these stories do not simply portray the "desperate and hopeless sense of something gone-wrong" (92), as Dean Flower suggests, nor are their protagonists "victims of anguishes they can neither brave nor name" (Saltzman 21). Rather, they often end on epiphanic notes of survival and possible opening up: Carver's early stories *do* adumbrate the faith and possibility that are present in his post-*Cathedral* narratives.

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<sup>1</sup> Invoking the expression “a man’s home is his castle,” Bell may be suggesting that the narrator’s space is, likewise, a *potential* castle.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.jewelnotes.com/emerald-gemstone-meaning-symbolism-healing/>

<sup>3</sup> Communion through food is frequent in Carver. In “Careful,” for instance, after having his hearing redeemed by Inez, Lloyd attempts to reconnect with her through coffee. A similar use of coffee is also seen in “Viewfinder.”

<sup>4</sup> Susan Faludi explains that narcissism is “the route to manhood [. . .] through the looking-glass” (42).

**“I’d just like to get to the bottom of this”: Deferred Narratives  
of Knowledge and Identity in “Bicycles, Muscles, Cigaretts”**

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“Bicycles, Muscles, Cigaretts” is a hidden gem in the Raymond Carver corpus. Although it has received scant critical attention, it nonetheless adumbrates tensions and techniques characteristic of Carver’s most anthologized and recognized fiction. Specifically, the story meditates on the unfixed nature of identity and knowledge within a story-telling structure shaped by the themes it considers. Like “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” “Where I’m Calling From,” and other preeminent Carver stories, “Bicycles, Muscles, and Cigaretts” interrogates the relationship between life as it is lived and life as it is told and remembered.

Commentators rightly point to the final, tender exchange between father and son as a major source of the story’s power. Arthur Saltzman, for example, argues that the story exhibits “cautious but compelling hopefulness” (62); Adam Meyer, that the narrative’s action yields “some of the most honest and heartfelt communications in the entire collection” (60); Arthur Bethea, that the story’s resolution is “not uniformly positive” but proceeds to find parallels between Hamilton’s weaning off his nicotine addiction and the resurrection of Christ (82); and, finally, G. P. Lainsbury, reviewing the morally ambivalent events of the tale, claims that “the negative aspects of what has happened seem to have been mainly cancelled out by the son’s overwhelming love for his father” (108-9). While there is no doubt that this story is unusual in the Carver canon—

the Hamilton household is stable, the husband and wife are compatible, and the final scene is moving—I will argue that the story examines the intricacies of power, knowledge and control (including self-control) as they intersect with the characters' fluid identities, leading toward a reading that is less stable and less affirmative than those suggested above. As identity—both group and individual—grows less stable, who holds and who can grant power becomes uncertain.

At the heart of the story is the relationship between Evan Hamilton and his son Roger: both have fluid rather than fixed identities, and both have potentially transformative insights that are not, however, complete. To begin to unpack the tangled identities in this father-son relationship, I turn to Stuart Hall's "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation." Hall argues that identity is "a 'production,' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (68). Hall is specifically interested in "cultural identity," but the notion of "identity in process" can be considered universal as it is based on larger processes of meaning making captured by Derrida's concept of *différance*. Meaning, for Derrida, is always in progress, both because the relationship between sign and signifier is negatively defined, based on difference, and because meaning is always "deferred," always displaced by some future meaning. Identity, Hall argues, works similarly: it shifts and shades infinitely, and making meaning, at any moment, "depends on the contingent and arbitrary stop—the necessary and temporary 'break' in the infinite semiosis of language" (74). That is, to find meaning, one necessarily arrests the flow of semiotic information and uses what information one has in order to decide what constitutes a given identity at that moment. Even when one considers his or her identity fixed, acts and practices designed to



solidify identity only defer the development of new meaning, which continues to shift just under the surface of what is known.

Hamilton and his son Roger both confront their own identities in process, and Carver expands on Hall by putting these identities-in-process into conversation with narratives-in-process: the story's secret narrative of the bicycle shades into its unknowable narratives of identity. Indeed, the idea of a narrative ties all of these threads of thought together: to know someone, and to know one's own identity, is to know one's narrative, and to exercise power is to exercise power over narrative. Hamilton's power over himself slips just when he seems to be taking control by physically fighting another man. As Hamilton will soon find out, however, the power he seeks is not determined by violence but by control over the narrative of that violence.

Both power and identity revolve around two hidden narratives within "Bicycles, Muscles, Cigaretts": the story of the missing bicycle, which provides entry into the mysteries of Roger's young life; and the story of Evan's past. Throughout "Bicycles, Muscles, Cigaretts," the son's "story" (and, more generally, the world of young boys he belongs to) is probed and explored from an adult perspective parallel with the father's, but the investigation does not lead to a satisfactory conclusion. Similarly, the tale ends with Roger questioning his father about his past, about the father's own narrative, which the son feels is equally unknowable—a lost part of his father. The author, too, partakes in this theme of hidden narratives by conspicuously withholding useful information from his readers. As new information emerges and hidden narratives surface, the focus of the story shifts, repeatedly, and seemingly defers the locus of the story's meaning indefinitely. In this way, the narrative structure of "Bicycles, Muscles, Cigaretts" echoes and intersects a

pattern of gradually unfixing identity, an identity in process, particularly for Evan Hamilton, whose stable identity gradually dissolves. The narrative's architectonics and identity "intersect" where the plotting of the story does finally conclude—arrests itself—on considerations of generational inheritance, from father to son. In the end, the temporality governing the movement of narrative and generations holds knowability of narrative and identity at bay.

At the outset of the story, Evan, who has just quit smoking, reflects on the invisible omnipresence of cigarettes and their lingering hold on him: "It had been two days since Evan Hamilton had stopped smoking, and it seemed to him everything he'd said and thought for the two days somehow suggested cigarets" (147). His wife, an ex-smoker herself, sympathizes with him. "It's as if it sweats out of you," she says. That which is absent is obsessively present, and cigarettes still have a powerful hold on Hamilton's life. Shortly thereafter, an older boy appears at the Hamilton residence and tells Evan that his son Roger is over at his house. There has been a dispute about a bike, the boy tells Hamilton, and he has been sent by his parents to fetch one of Roger's parents. The boy is visibly anxious, "twisting the handle grip" on his bike and unwilling to offer any information beyond the little that he knows for certain.

The social hierarchy initially presents itself in the traditional form where parents hold themselves above kids, but that dynamic becomes more complex as the story develops. Hamilton's address to his wife illuminates early in the story the assumption that there is a separate reality for adults and children: "It sounds like it's just a childish argument, and the boy's mother is getting herself involved" (148). Hamilton wants to confine his son's problem to the world of children, and he resents the mother's

involvement in a trivial issue lying below the adult realm. Hamilton's wife asks if he would like her to go instead, and Hamilton answers: "Yes, I'd rather you went, but I'll go," suggesting that he thinks of this task as a masculine duty, one he accepts only reluctantly. His wife also performs a traditional maternal role when she says, "I don't like his being out after dark." Both parents' reactions are typical, avuncular and condescending at the same time.

When Hamilton departs, the power presumably held by the adults immediately begins to shift to the world of the young boys. Following the boy across the neighborhood to fetch Roger, Evan discovers the expansiveness of his son's life, which contrasts with the narrowness of his own:

Hamilton saw an orchard, and then they turned another corner onto a dead-end street. He hadn't known of the existence of this street and was sure he would not recognize any of the people who lived here. He looked around him at the unfamiliar houses and was struck with the range of his son's personal life. (148)

Hamilton enters another kind of reality, very different from the one in which he lives his day-to-day life, a reality over which the boys appear increasingly to have control. Almost as in an epic tale, a young messenger comes to invite Hamilton into the world of the neighborhood children. The whimsically named "Arbuckle Court" adds to this sense of otherworldliness and presages the court-like proceeding that will shortly occur. At the boy's house, the adult/child power dynamic is further destabilized, with the children in control of the narrative but reluctant to share it. The parents' power is confined to moderating the discussion, and perhaps to inflicting eventual punishments. The two groups need to work together to solve the issue of the bicycle—and the children would

need to confess in order to activate the adult powers in the room—but that is not what happens.

The attempts by Gilbert's mother to untangle this mini-drama reveal that there is a problem of discourse between the two worlds: whereas she and Hamilton are interested in sorting out the events and arriving at a larger truth, the boys are interested only in the individual wrongs inflicted upon them and show little concern for an objective analysis that might yield a single narrative and a clear verdict on the missing bicycle. The competing modes and objectives of discourse break the gathering into two separate spheres: that of the parents and that of the children.

Gilbert's mother (Mrs. Miller) begins by contextualizing the incident: "We were on vacation last month and Kip wanted to borrow Gilbert's bike so that Roger could help him with Kip's paper route. I guess Roger's bike had a flat tire or something. Well, as it turns out—" (149). As she gives this detailed background information, filling in spots in the story she does not know with assumptions, Roger cuts her off: "Gary was choking me, Dad" (149). Roger's intervention is dramatic and spontaneous; the adult narration is already off track. Pulling down the collar of his T-shirt, he reveals what may or may not be a bruised neck—the author does not say. Roger's interruption gives the other boys an opportunity to air their individual grievances, further disabling the attempt to produce a single story. This interruption shows the discursive spheres of children and adults as differently coded: whereas the children wish to obfuscate, complicitly maintaining the secrecy of their story, the adults attempt a cooperative interrogation.

Mrs. Miller tries to continue with an explanation of the choking: "I didn't know what they were doing until Curt, my oldest, went out to see" (149). Significantly, Mrs.

Miller does not enter directly into the children's world; it takes the adolescent boy to connect the two spheres. Indeed, the position of the "older boys" or adolescents is interesting in this story; a group of them is gathered around a phone, laughing and smoking as the discussion in the kitchen goes on. They serve as messengers and mediators between the adults and the children, and engage in both adult (smoking) and childlike (teasing) behaviors. It was Curt who originally fetched Hamilton from his house and it was he, again, who is sent out by Mrs. Miller when the boys are fighting. When a fight breaks out between the adults at the end of the story, these older boys mimic the adults by throwing playful punches at each other. While the adult and childhood worlds are nominally separate and boundaried, these boys demonstrate how fluid and malleable these identity categories actually are.

After Mrs. Miller's explanation, Gary insists that Roger "started it" by calling him a jerk. Gilbert, ignoring all other parties and the parent-driven need for a moderated debate and a single story, interjects, "I think my bike cost about sixty dollars, you guys . . . You can pay me for it" (149). His mother is unsatisfied with his comment, but her response—"you keep out of this, Gilbert"—fails to re-assert an adult superiority. The incongruence between the two groups—the calm presumptuousness of the adults punctured by the emotional interruptions of the boys—creates tension. The boys are in possession of the truth, and the adults' potential for power relies entirely on the boys' cooperation.

Mrs. Miller attempts to revive her narrative by telling Hamilton that the boys took turns "rolling" the bike. Hamilton asks what "rolling it" means. The boy's vocabulary, belonging to a separate discourse sphere, is foreign to him. His alienation is highlighted

by her stilted response, which reads like a definition out of a dictionary: “‘Rolling it,’ the woman said. ‘Sending it down the street with a push and letting it fall over’” (150). Most likely, Mrs. Miller herself had received the definition from one of the older boys only moments before. She tells him, too, that the boys threw the bike against a goal post. When Roger partially confirms the last bit, saying he, Kip and Gary rolled the bicycle a single time each, Hamilton reprimands the boys: “Once is too many times, Roger. I’m surprised and disappointed in you. And you too, Kip.” Hamilton does not, however, say anything to Gary Berman, whom he does not know as well. By his own moral compass, it would go beyond his parental authority to chastise, even if completely justified, a boy he is less familiar with. Hamilton tries to abide by a code of principled adult conduct—as dictated by his identification with an adult sphere—but that code will ultimately unravel.

At this point, the real issue is revealed: the bicycle is missing. This new piece of information makes all the other expositions seem almost irrelevant. Kip gives a detailed but shaky explanation of his last sight of the bike: “The last time we saw it was when me and Roger took it to my house after we had it at school. I mean, that was the next to last time. The very last time was when I took it back here the next morning and parked it behind the house” (150). Kip’s false ending to the story is the first of many hints that the boys do, in fact, know what happened to the bike. They are harboring a secret narrative and Mrs. Miller’s distrust now appears justified.

The arrival of the intimidating Mr. Berman, Gary’s father, changes the tone of the tale dramatically and fractures the more or less homogeneous discourse and code of conduct evident in the adult sphere. Gary, who has barely participated in the conversation thus far, does not get along with the other boys and appears to be waiting for his father to

come to his defense. Mr. Berman's first request is a full account of events from his own son. Gary delivers his account but, interestingly, Carver chooses to conceal the speech from the reader: "The boy began his account of the affair. His father listened closely, now and then narrowing his eyes to study the other two boys." Carver here removes the one chance we have of hearing a complete version of the story from one of the boys and not as pieced together by a parent. This is clearly a deliberate choice on Carver's part and, as part of a story about hidden narratives, this withholding of information invites further scrutiny. Part of its effect is to place the reader in a situation very similar to that of the parents—particularly Hamilton—as they try to figure out what happened to Gilbert's bike, uncovering along the way surprising events in the world of the boys. In this instance, however, Gary tells his story out loud, in front of the three parents, but the reader is not allowed to listen in. Nor, given the reactions of the listeners, do we get any obvious clues as to its content: Roger and Kip shake their heads, and Roger proclaims, "It's not true, Gary," so perhaps Gary has laid the blame on those two boys. Later details will imply that Gary himself ruined the bike and has threatened the other boys not to tell, and thus the relatively muted reactions of Roger and Kip might represent a fine line between complicity and accusation.

Adam Meyer makes the assumption that Gary "plead[s] total innocence" (60) in the concealed speech as well as later, alone with his father. But it is notable that Gary's story does not draw any reaction from any of the adults. Hamilton, for instance, does not ask his son, "Is that true, Roger?" the way he did earlier, and the way one might expect if indeed Gary had pleaded his innocence. And although Hamilton and Mrs. Miller both hear Gary's testimony, they still do not know what happened to the bicycle, as Mrs.

Miller responds by saying (twice): “I’d like to get to the bottom of this.” Gary’s story does not solve the mystery but further muddies the waters. There is almost certainly something more to the bicycle story that Roger and Kip do not wish to reveal, or some disparities between Gary’s account and theirs that Carver chooses not to reveal. Again, Carver’s concealment weirdly mirrors and guards the secret the boys are keeping: the author presents a child telling a story without telling us what that story is, thereby forcing us to see the events surrounding the bicycle as ultimately unknowable from an adult perspective.

The issue of narrative concealment is underscored when Gary asks to speak to his father in private and the two retreat into the next room. Hamilton worries: “He had the feeling he should stop them, this secrecy” (151). At this exact moment, he has a desire for a cigarette. Though he does not have any, he is still sweating their scent: “His palms were wet, and he reached to his shirt pocket for a cigaret. Then, breathing deeply, he passed the back of his hand under his nose . . .” (151). A crisis is building in Hamilton. The secrecy between father and son may seem so uncomfortable because, up until now, the boys have maintained secrecy among themselves, but the adults were zoned off in their separate world. Hamilton assumed that, if the adults were to learn anything, they would all learn it together, but Mr. Berman seems not to share this assumption and with his introduction the sphere of adult discourse shrinks and cracks along lines of gender and class. What Hamilton is on the verge of realizing is that he himself is a liminal and transitional figure, and that his idea of a neat boundary between the worlds of childhood and adulthood is getting blurred. In fact, the alliances among the adults are breaking down just as they did among the children. Hamilton, for instance, now finds himself caught between the



characters of Mr. Berman and Mrs. Miller, who exhibit radically different sensibilities. In direct contrast to Mr. Berman's accusatory glares, Mrs. Miller, referred to as "the woman," says, "I'm not accusing any one of them, you understand" (151). While Mr. Berman appears recklessly bull-headed and biased, Mrs. Miller seems incapable of any real judgment. And while Mr. Berman is only willing to listen to his own child, both publicly and secretly, Mrs. Miller refuses even to let her son speak, insisting that he should stay out of the matter. Hamilton finds himself, for the first of two times in "Bicycles, Muscles Cigarets," uncomfortably positioned between warring sensibilities. During Berman and Gary's private interface, Hamilton has a direct, non-private confrontation with his son: "Roger, do you know any more about this, other than what you've already said?" (151). He does not, however, obtain any new information from his son. During Mr. Berman's absence, Kip changes his story a bit, saying he left the bike behind the garage, not the house, thereby undermining his credibility even further.

Although Gary has said almost nothing thus far, after his conversation with his father he returns to the kitchen with an accusation: "It was Roger's idea to roll it" (152). Roger returns Gary's accusation ("It was yours!") and adds: "Then you wanted to take it to the orchard and strip it!" The tension heightens as Mr. Berman, breaking generational allegiance and the code of the adult discourse sphere, exclaims to young Roger, "You shut up!" Mr. Berman, having been taken into the confidence of his son (who in all likelihood was lying to him), seems now as immature as anyone in the room. He accuses the boys of being "roughnecks" but this is more accurately a description of himself. In a threatening manner, he says to Kip and Roger: "Now if either of you . . . know where this kid's bicycle is, I'd advise you to start talking" (152). With these exchanges, Carver

teases out the complexities in how stories are told and heard: Roger provides his father with stumbling half-truths that arouse a mixture of skepticism and sympathy in Hamilton's mind. Gary, on the other hand, appears simply to lie to his father, and yet this leads to Mr. Berman's total faith in the truth of Gary's story.

At this point, Mr. Berman appears even to believe that the other adults no longer have a say in this investigation. When Hamilton says to Berman that he is getting out of line, Berman responds he'd do better to mind his own business. The priority Berman claims over the right to information violates Hamilton's sense of an "adult" compact to sift through narratives and reason rationally. Just as there are fissures in the boys' sense of a common code, so too with the adults.

Fed up with this situation, Hamilton decides to leave. His exiting compromise, in which he promises that his son will take partial financial responsibility if need be, is a final attempt at adult moderation: "I intend to talk this over more with Roger, but if there is a question of restitution I feel since Roger did help manhandle the bike, he can pay a third if it comes to that" (152). Whatever is building in Hamilton, however, cannot be stopped. Only a couple of moments later, Hamilton lunges at Berman—"manhandles" him—and pounds his head to the ground. The remark that provokes the fight recalls the remark that caused a fight earlier between Gary and Roger. But in this instance, family members' roles are reversed. In the boys' fight, Roger calls Gary a "jerk" and then Gary chokes Roger. Here, when Mr. Berman hears of the earlier remark, he says: "Well he's [Roger's] the jerk. He looks like a jerk." In adopting the argot of boyhood, Mr. Berman undermines the adult-child categorization. Hamilton, his patience and adult responsibility stretched to their limits, gives Berman a final warning: "I think you're seriously out of

line here tonight, Mr. Berman. Why don't you get control of yourself?" The idea of "control," of course, resonates across a number of plot details, including Hamilton's attempt to control his smoking. And eventually the remark proves to be ironic. Berman pushes by Hamilton, causing him to step into some "prickly cracking bushes" and then Hamilton lunges at him, pins him, and begins "to pound his head against the lawn" (153). In other words, Hamilton runs amok, and at this moment seems as thoroughly transformed into a ten-year-old boy as Berman. Much as the bully Gary choked Roger, now Hamilton is choking Gary's father.

More interesting than the fight itself is the aftermath that confirms a pattern of deferred and withheld narratives in "Bicycles, Muscles, Cigaretts." If, in the initial narrative, the manhandling of the bike is finally displaced by the long awaited fact that the bike is now missing, and the conversation about the bike itself is displaced and overshadowed by the fight, the fight too is eventually overshadowed by the father-son exchanges that follow. Carver appears to be self-consciously staging the question, "What is the real story here?" It may be that Hamilton's dawning sense of himself as a fluid and transitional figure, both a son and a father, both a child and an adult, turns out to be the real story. However, the real story may also be the natural forward flow, in which narrative and generation must both give way to what comes next, and, thus, the link between the linearity of narrative and generation.

Embarrassed by his loss of control, Hamilton apologizes to Roger, but Roger, it turns out, is fascinated by what he saw: "What if he'd picked up a knife, Dad? Or a club?" (154). Hamilton dismisses this suggestion, but his son presses him into admitting, "It's hard to say what people will do when they're angry." This statement, interestingly,

could apply to Berman or to himself (or even Hamilton's father, given what we later know about him). Hamilton may realize that he and Berman, whom he declared "out of line," and he and the boys, now occupy the same moral ground. In an atmosphere of rage, identities have become, to a degree, unsortable. Nonetheless, Roger finds the fight appealing, to the extent that he asks his father, "Let me feel your muscle." This Hemingway-esque moment reveals that Roger has seen a side of his father that is more like himself and other boys his age than, presumably, he ever has before. Hamilton's childish outburst, in turn, will eventually provoke in Roger some surprisingly adult insights .

Hamilton speaks briefly with his wife and eventually visits Roger in bed: the boy "was in his pajamas and had a warm fresh smell about him that Hamilton breathed deeply" (155). Smell in this story has previously been associated with cigarettes and it is possible that, in being exposed to the expansive world of his son and re-discovering his own capacity for boyish behavior, Hamilton is now successfully breaking free of his adult addiction. Hamilton briefly reprimands his son about the bike, and though Roger dutifully promises never to let it happen again, he, like the narrative as a whole, is interested in other issues now. It is only when Roger and Hamilton are left alone, towards the end of the story, that the narrative re-focuses a final time from Hamilton considering a synchronic categorization of those around him to a diachronic consideration of where he stands in relation to those who have come before and after him. Roger asks about his grandfather, Hamilton's father, whom Hamilton himself had just been considering as he sat on the porch. Hamilton recalled how witnessing his father in a fight significantly shaped the way he thought of the man: "It was a bad one, and both men had been

hurt . . . Hamilton had loved his father and could recall many things about him. But now he recalled his father's one fistfight as if it were all there was to the man" (154). Carver critics agree more or less uniformly that Hamilton fears a kind of reduction of identity at this moment: for Bethea it is the fear Hamilton must feel in being reduced, like his grandfather, to a single depleted memory (82); for Meyer (61), aligning himself with Saltzman (63), the end of the story suggests Evan's chagrin that the fight will overshadow his otherwise mature handling of the situation.

Now, when Roger asks about the grandfather ("was Grandfather strong like you?"), it is as if he too senses the generational importance of what has just happened. He is similarly concerned with the way in which his grandfather is remembered, not just by himself, but also by his father. He tells his father that he does not want to forget his grandfather, and when Hamilton is silent, Roger enters a strange line of questioning: "When you were young, was it like it is with you and me? Did you love him more than me? Or just the same?" (155) The questions put Hamilton first in the role of the son and then in the role of the father, focusing Carver's interest on the theme of generational fluidity. Meyer argues that Evan achieves a new understanding of "the passage of generations within a family" (62) that Roger, too, will come to understand with the force of time. The son is now questioning the father—trying to obtain the unknowable narrative that is a more complete version of Hamilton's identity—and Hamilton realizes that he could easily be reduced, just as he has reduced his own father, to a single incident, this fight with Berman.

With this final consideration of markers of generational identity, "Bicycles, Muscles, Cigaretts" now most clearly enters into conversation with Hall's notion of

deferred identity. Hamilton's fear of being reduced to a single incident brings him into an awareness of what Hall notes as the necessity of arresting a continuous semiotic flow to make meaning in a given moment. Hamilton fears that his son will no longer see him "in process" but, rather, will ossify his identity around the single incident.

Perhaps sensing that Hamilton is not comfortable in this discussion of feelings, Roger switches to less emotionally charged questions: "Did he smoke? I think I remember a pipe or something" (155). Hamilton says that Roger's grandfather tried to quit smoking cigarettes a number of times, but was unsuccessful, a fact that, genetically, does not bode well for Hamilton's own attempt to quit. Hamilton gives Roger the back of his hand to smell, in order to show him the unpleasant effects of smoking, but the smell is gone. Hamilton has discovered, in this moment with his son, that he is past the most difficult part of his effort to quit smoking. Hamilton speculates that the smell was "scared out of me"—another possible benefit of engaging in the fight. In this way, he has traded one manner of losing self-control for another. It is as if a fever, spurred by the fight, has broken and Hamilton has perhaps now beaten his addiction. But the haunting similarities to his own father militate against a permanent sense of optimism.

Before Hamilton leaves, his son engages him in one last speech:

Dad? You'll think I'm pretty crazy, but I wish I'd known you when you were little.

I mean, about as old as I am right now. I don't know how to say it, but I'm

lonesome about it. It's like—it's like I miss you already if I think about it now.

That's pretty crazy, isn't it? Anyway, please leave the door open. (156)

This is a remarkable utterance for a boy of nine. The word "lonesome" betrays the insight of an adult, and generations once again meld together. Certainly, Roger has seen a

“childish” side of his father earlier that evening, is intrigued by it, and wishes he could know the whole story. Asking his father about when he was younger implies something about Hamilton’s current state: he is somehow less now than he was as a child. Roger “misses” this more robust version of his father that he has glimpsed but never had a chance to know. Carver suggests that our ability to know an identity in process may not always increase with new information but may sometimes also diminish in the face of it. Similarly, Hamilton has gotten a glimpse of the complicated world his son occupies. Neither father nor son, however, is fully willing to provide a narrative—be it a narrative of identity or of past events—for the other: both recognize the limits of complete, unmediated communication, although from different perspectives. Roger’s concealment is the child’s act of self-protection; Hamilton’s is the adult recognition of the futility of trying to know someone completely. Roger has reduced his grandfather to a memory of smoking a pipe and Hamilton has reduced his father to a single fistfight. Hamilton appears to realize the inevitability of this process and that the wise thing for him to do is to try to control those aspects of his life that his son can see. Perhaps it is for this reason that Hamilton does not verbally respond to Roger after he, Roger, struggles—despite worrying that his dad will think he’s crazy—to articulate his insight in words. He wants his father to sympathize with him in their inability to know each other, to apprehend in the other an identity in progress that fades to incompleteness both in the past and in the future.

Hamilton’s non-verbal response demonstrates his conflicted sense of inheritance: “Hamilton left the door open, and then he thought better of it and closed it half way” (156). The partial access that he allows Roger quite obviously parallels the restricted

view he grants of his own past. His reaction to his son's attempt to communicate *about* communication can seem cruel, but it is Hamilton's way of sympathizing with his son about the incomplete nature of sympathy.



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**Intentionality and Narrative Thrust in the *Beginners* Version  
of “Why Don’t You Dance?”**

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When Raymond Carver’s short story collection *Beginners* was published in 2009, readers were finally offered an opportunity to read the original, unedited manuscript that Carver had submitted in 1980 to Gordon Lish, his friend and editor at Alfred A. Knopf’s, and which, after Lish’s editing, was published in 1981 as *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (hereafter *WWTAWWTAL*). Academics have since debated the relative merits of the two versions; readers have expressed preferences for one or the other; and writers have discussed which is better crafted. The debate has focused primarily on the *product*; that is, which version of the particular stories some scholars, readers, or writers prefer. Certainly, there has been excellent textual and typographical analysis by scholars such as Enrico Monti and William Stull. But there has been little discussion about the degree to which Lish’s interventions altered Carver’s original aesthetic *intentions*. Literary critics and Carver scholars are partly to blame for this: their focus has been on the story as the *product* of the writing process. But in a process-oriented approach, to use the terminology of writers and creative-writing instructors, the *process* that generated the story becomes the focus of inquiry. This approach is more the realm of craft and theory, as well as creative writing pedagogy as practiced in contemporary MFA programs for writers, and it is augmented by my own work as a graduate of such a program and as a writer of contemporary fiction; rather than set this against the scholarly practice of close reading

through lenses of literary theory, I wish to use both approaches to discuss the Lish edits of the *Beginners* version of “Why Don’t You Dance?” so as to consider the story both from the outside (as a critic) and the inside (as a fiction writer). This twofold approach highlights the problematic nature of Lish’s edits. Particularly, it shows the impact that his interventions had on Carver’s aesthetic vision of what a story could and should be. Lish, from my perspective as a writer/critic, redirected the meaning of entire stories. By analyzing the authorial and edited versions of “Why Don’t You Dance?”, I will attempt to show how important changes in text and dialogue from the unedited to the edited version affected both the narrative thrust and the intention Carver had for the story. I use the term narrative thrust to describe the process by which a writer builds the story from scene-setting and exposition, through the intricacies of plot and character development, as it arcs toward the climax and/or ending.

### **Conflicting Intentions**

On February 15, 1981, two months before the publication of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, the *New York Times Book Review* published an essay by Carver that can be read as a statement of his aesthetics. Originally titled “A Storyteller’s Shoptalk” (Stull “Notes on the Texts” 989), the essay was republished under its current title, “On Writing.” Given the timeline of these two publications, one can speculate that Carver may have published his essay in advance of the book so that his writing aesthetic—the one that prevails in *Beginners*—would be stated both prior to the publication of *WWTAWWTAL* and in advance of the new stories (“Cathedral,” “Vitamins,” and “Chef’s House”), stories that, as Stull notes, “differ markedly” both “in style and scale” from the

stories in *WWTAWWTAL* as does the “restored version” of “A Small Good Thing,” namely, the “original story about the baker” that Donald Hall, Carver’s friend and guest editor for *Ploughshares*, requested in 1982 (“Chronology” 973). If “On Writing” is Carver’s aesthetic statement, then it shows his intention as a writer. My definition of *intention*—“one of the most challenging terms in literary semantics” (Patterson 135)—follows that of phenomenologist Edmund Husserl: “the relation between an act of perception and the real object perceived” (137). It also matches that of idealist aesthetics, wherein an intention “exists in the artist’s mind before he begins the physical act of creativity; and the more idealist the aesthetic, the more value is placed on intention . . . as compared to the merely physical product” (138). The central issue, then, is that Carver’s aesthetic is oppositional to Gordon Lish’s minimalist aesthetic.

According to Kerry McSweeney, “Carver deplores ‘sloppy or haphazard writing whether it flies under the banner of experimentation or else is just clumsily rendered . . .’ [agreeing with] Isaac Babel’s [belief concerning] the writing of fiction: ‘no iron can stab the heart with such force as a period put just at the right place’” (4). In “On Writing,” Carver expresses this view:

Some writers have a bunch of talent . . . But a unique and exact way of looking at things, and finding the right context for expressing that way of looking, that’s something else . . . Every great or even good writer makes the world over according to his own specifications.

It’s akin to style . . . but it isn’t style alone. It is the writer’s particular and unmistakable signature on everything he writes. It is his world and no other. This is one of the things that distinguishes one writer from another . . . a writer who has

some special way of looking at things and who gives artistic expression to that way of looking . . . (728)

Carver's "right context for expressing" his "unique and exact way" is his "artistic expression," his "unmistakable signature." By applying this aesthetic to the stories in *Beginners* in general and to "Why Don't You Dance?" in particular, we gain a clear sense of Carver's intention for the story, as carried out in the process of crafting his story, as the narrative thrust arches from the beginning to the ending. Carver goes on to explain how this intention for a story is carried out in the process of writing: "There has to be tension, a sense that something is imminent, that certain things are in relentless motion, or . . . there simply won't be a story." To produce a story, the writer will have to:

bring his intelligence and literary skill to bear (his talent), his sense of proportion and sense of the fitness of things: of how things out there really are and how he sees those things—like no one else sees them. And this is done through the use of clear and specific . . . used so as to bring to life the details that will light up the story for the reader. For the details to be concrete and convey meaning, the language must be accurate and precisely given. (732)

Accuracy of language and meaningful details are manifest in the version of "Why Don't You Dance?" that Carver gave to Lish.

Lish, however, who had another intention and aesthetic vision, saw things differently. He had built his editorial reputation by naming and promoting a literary school of "minimalism." Derived from a 1960s pop-culture movement noted for its "simplicity of form and content, bare settings, stock characters, limited dialogue and silences, present tense tension, and open endings" (Miltner "Minimalisms" 11), it is

“primarily an impulse towards reduction . . . [as well as] suggestions and their omissions,” with the intention of “teaching readers how to interpret and navigate the infinite interplay of surfaces in the contemporary world” (Sartain 3) due to its being “suspicious of ‘depth’” and enamored with “a play of surfaces” (Herzinger, qtd. in Sartain 3). Regarding Lish’s style in his *Collected Fictions*, Ayala Amir observes that his protagonist is a man named Gordon Lish; that the other characters are anonymous; that the plots are “ridiculous, absurd situations” that are “deprived of any psychological depth” (5). She notes that, stylistically, “the mimetic power of the stories lies in the voice that evokes them . . . in short, enigmatic, aggressive statements, or long meandering, whining stream-of-consciousness monologues and letters” that are noticeably “so different . . . from Carver’s short fiction” (5). Whereas Lish and the minimalist aesthetic favor reduction, absurdity, anonymity and surface, Carver was interested in stories built on an aesthetic that encompassed developed characters, meaningful detail, unique vision, and a tension that operated below the surface. These contrasting aesthetics suggest that Lish tailored Carver’s *Beginners* stories to his vision of writing and did not preserve the author’s artistic expression of his special way of looking at the world.

### **Exposition/Reader’s Relationship to Characters**

Part of Lish’s editing of “Why Don’t You Dance?” involved deleting whole chunks of exposition from the story. By doing so, he changed readers’ relationships to the characters in two ways. First, readers are no longer given the privilege of backstory, which would allow them to understand the characters or their motivations in more complex ways. Second, readers are no longer given enough detail to develop an intimacy

with the characters as people with backstories, feelings and thoughts; instead, they see them as one-dimensional character actors. The resulting prose style is one which for Arthur Saltzman, commenting on the published Lish version, labels “astringent,” characterized by “stifled descriptions . . . and a narrative voice that ‘seems to come from the furniture’” (100).

For example, this is how Carver describes, in the original version, Max’s (who is unnamed in the edited version) return home from the market:

Max came down the sidewalk with a sack from the market. He had sandwiches, beer, and whiskey. He had continued to drink through the afternoon and had reached a place where now the drinking seemed to begin to sober him. But there were gaps. He had stopped at the bar next to the market, had listened to a song on the jukebox, and somehow it had gotten dark before he recalled the things in his yard. (3)

Readers learn that Max has been drinking all day and could perhaps surmise that the songs on the jukebox were a welcome distraction from the real life messy ending of a relationship that leaves him with his material belongings scattered on his front yard. But Lish’s trimmed-down version—“The man came down the sidewalk with a sack from the market. He had sandwiches, beer, whiskey” (157)—removes Carver’s expository details, as well as the writer’s enticement to make conjectures about Max’s life. Readers no longer consider why Max was drinking all day, nor what the songs on the jukebox may or may not have been distracting him from. As Carver biographer Carol Sklenicka argued, Lish’s editing omitted “whole lines of personalizing details” and added “lines that suggest a philosophical bleakness” (186).

### **Character Intimacy and Exposition**

Lish's suppressions of relevant details that initiate the narrative thrust impoverish readers' intimate connections to the characters and, also, between the characters themselves. In the original version, for example, Carver writes:

She closed and opened her eyes. She pushed her face into Max's shoulder. She pulled him closer. "Jack," she murmured. She looked at the bed and could not understand what it was doing in the yard. She looked over Max's shoulder at the sky. She held herself to Max. She was filled with an unbearable happiness." (5)

During this moment of physical contact (an intimacy that partly suggests the effect of alcohol), she is filled with a happiness that is "unbearable." Whatever the moment is about, it shows Carver's attempt to capture a moment of human connection. After Lish's edits, however, the characters are not only deprived of intimacy; they have not even reached that moment of connection:

The girl closed and opened her eyes. She pushed her face into the man's shoulder. She pulled the man closer.

"You must be desperate or something," she said. (227)

Paradoxically, in contrast to the physical proximity between the two, the girl's dialogue underscores the emotional distance between her and the man, instead of bringing the characters closer together, as Carver seemed to intend in the original version. Moreover, Lish's insertion that Max "must be desperate or something" introduces a value judgment that Carver never intended. In Carver's version, Carla's final moment before the epilogue-like section allows her to experience feelings of "unbearable happiness" that



derive from the intimacy of a slow dance. But in Lish's version, the scene prior to the epilogue ends with a criticism that underscores the obvious lack of intimacy between the characters, one that emphasizes instead an emotional distance between them. A similar disconnection is visible in Lish's version of the relationship between the boy and the girl. Not only did his edits tamper with the characters's emotions, but he also altered the narrative thrust.

While Lish made minor edits in the contrasted passages that follow, these changes nonetheless affect the way readers understand the relationship between these two central characters. In the original, Carver writes:

She turned on her side and put her arm around his neck.

"Kiss me," she said.

"Let's get up," he said.

"Kiss me. Kiss me, honey," she said.

She closed her eyes. She held him. He had to prize her fingers loose.

He said, "I'll go see if anybody's home," but he just sat up.

The television set was still playing. Lights had gone on in houses up and down the street. He sat on the edge of the bed. (2)

Lish's version removes some of Carver's text while adding some new details:

She turned on her side and put her hand to his face.

"Kiss me," she said.

"Let's get up," he said.

"Kiss me," she said.

She closed her eyes. She held him.

He said, "I'll see if anybody's home."

But he just sat up and stayed where he was, making believe he was watching the television.

Lights came on in houses up and down the street. (157)

Not only does Lish pare down Carver's sentence rhythms to a staccato-like cadence, but he also changes the way the characters physically interact with each other. Carver's version shows the girl being physically intimate with the boy, putting her arm around his neck and the boy having to "prize her fingers loose." Lish's version removes the act of Jack prizing loose of Carla's fingers and makes him sit up and pretend to be "watching the television," which calls to mind Bill Mullen's observation that "televisions run constantly throughout the stories [in *WWTAWWTAL*], providing a dramatic echo or counterpart to the 'real life' action" (qtd. in Oxoby 108); this shift from the television playing in the background, making the scene reminiscent of a situation comedy, to Jack's actually using it as a way to avoid responding to Carla's request to "see if anybody's home" illustrates how Lish's edits utilize the television as a means for the boy to continue showing his disengagement from the girl and from the moment, emphasizing the elimination of intimacy. In Carver's version, the boy stays in the real-life moment, engaged with the girl, and he makes no physical or emotional move to leave the space that they are occupying together: "[The boy] said 'I'll go see if anybody's home,' but he just sat up. The television set was still playing. Lights had gone on in houses up and down the street. He sat on the edge of the bed" (752). The boy stays sitting on the edge of the bed near the girl and the TV remains a mere prop in the background, not the focal point of the moment, as in the Lish version. The original relationship that Carver intended

to show between Carla and Jack is further disrupted by Lish's deletion of the term of endearment "honey." Lish changed Carver's line from "'You want anything else, honey?' the boy said" (4) to "'So what do you want?' the boy said to the girl" (159). Endearment no longer exists and a loving question turns brusque.

As Lish changes how the characters interact, both physically and emotionally, the characters are diminished, as Kirk Nessel observed in his reading of the published Lish version:

In the course of the story we learn nothing of the young couple; we are ignorant of who they are, of what they dream about and where they are going. Coupled with such noninformation, the repeated assertions of identity coming in the forms of pronouns promote nonidentity more than they do identity, much less full or stable selves. (39)

Lish further underscored this "nonidentity" by deleting the man's name, Max. The characters have become pronouns—"he" for Jack, "she" for Carla—and Max, unnamed and deprived of any personalizing signifier, is now simply "the man." These interventions undermine the story's emotional content, distancing the characters from each other and disrupting the possibility of readers' intimate connections with them—possibilities that Carver seems to have intended. Stripped of their identities, Jack, Carla, and Max have become nameless characters, flat cardboard cutouts, and not the more developed fictional characters that Carver had envisioned.

This disruption of character development not only changes the nature of how some readers interact with the story, but it also impacts upon the narrative thrust, changing the way the story is read. Readers, rushed in Lish's version, do not feel invited

to linger over these characters; consequently, no intimate emotional relationship is permitted to develop between readers and characters as the former are forced to race through to the end.

Seemingly, Lish felt disdain for any trace of emotionalism present in the *Beginners* manuscript and sought to edit it out. By means of reduction, deletion, and substitution, he “more than halved the length of Carver’s manuscript and radically altered many of the stories” (Stull “Notes on the Texts” 982), leaving Carver “shocked by the extensive changes that he found” (992) as, in its most extreme, “‘A Small, Good Thing,’ a 37-page story . . . cut to 12 pages and renamed ‘The Bath’” (992), that is, “cut by 78%” (1000), an act that left Carver so distraught that he included it, restored to its original form and length, in *Cathedral* (1000). What Lish cut was the emotional content, the perceived “sentimentality” that was incompatible with his vision of Minimalism. Such excisions had repercussions on the narrative thrust. For instance, the character of the baker, at the end of “The Bath,” is reduced to a stock character, just a viperous hiss over the telephone, whereas in “A Small, Good Thing,” he brings Ann and Howard towards closure over the loss of their son Scotty by asking forgiveness for his unintended callousness, while seated together over rolls and coffee at a table at the bakery, where the baker seems to be *tenderly* attending to their pain, telling them that “[e]ating is a small, good thing in a time like this” (829). Since this scene is cut, it must be assumed that Lish deemed it too sentimental, preferring instead the “peculiar bleakness” that he liked in Carver’s work: “To foreground that bleakness, [Lish] cut the stories radically, reducing plot, character development, and figurative language to a minimum” (Stull “Notes” 991).

Carver spoke of his own position regarding the appropriate use of emotion in his stories:

Any right-thinking reader or writer abjures sentimentality. But there's a difference between sentiment and sentimentality. I'm all for sentiment. I'm interested in the personal, intimate relationships in life, so why not deal with these relationships in literature? (Stull *Conversations* 180)

Readers see the effect of Lish's editing out sentiment in the scene where Max is studying Jack and Carla. Carver's original version reads:

He looked at them as they sat at the table. In the lamplight, there was something about the expressions on their faces. For a minute this expression seemed conspiratorial, and then it became *tender*—there was no other word for it. The boy touched her hand. (4)

However, Lish strips this passage all the way down to the frame:

He looked at them as they sat at the table. In the lamplight, there was something about their faces. It was nice or it was nasty. There was no telling. (159)

Lish has supplanted Carver's intention for tenderness with uncertainty ("nice" or "nasty"). Gone now is the emotion, the "tenderness" of the moment, the sense of possibility. James Atlas, in his review of *WWTAWWTAL* in the *Atlantic Monthly*, found that such "eschewal of feeling bec[a]me tiresome" (Sklenicka 368). Commenting on the ambiguity resulting from such "eschewal of feeling," Nessel writes:

We are obliged to consider . . . the narrator's comments about the young couple's expressions, the looks on their faces after they've bargained with him. "It was nice or it was nasty," the man says early on. "There was no telling." They are

indeed “nice” kids, the story seems to suggest, and yet they are also eager to exploit circumstances . . . In the end, then, the man’s story is her story as well as a story about the man, herself, and the boy—one that both heightens our sense of both “nasty” insensitivity and nicer curiosity, of exploitation and awkward sympathy, and of the way forebodings can spell out emotional wreckage to come.

(39)

So we are left to wonder—whose “story” are we reading? I see this question as an important aspect of the critical consideration of the Lish version set against the restored Carver version. While for Lish “there was no telling” how to read the couple—“nice or nasty”—for Carver it was not only clear but also essential that the emotional movement chart a transition from “conspiratorial” to “tender”: he emphatically wrote that “there was no other word for it.” Moreover, he illustrated this tenderness by having “the boy touch her hand.”

### **Arc and Closure**

A well-crafted story arcs from its opening toward its ending, and the narrative thrust is the road that the plot travels along. Having altered the path of the plot, Lish led the story towards a different closure and aesthetic than those intended by the author. In Carver’s version, readers discover more character development and an ending with a different sense of closure:

The girl said later: “This guy was about middle-aged. All his belongings right out there in the yard. I’m not kidding. We got drunk and danced. In the driveway. Oh, my god. Don’t laugh. He played records. Look at this phonograph. He gave it to us.

These old records, too. Jack and I went to sleep in his bed. Jack was hungover and had to rent a trailer in the morning. To move all the guy's stuff. Once I woke up. He was covering us with a blanket, the guy was.

This blanket. Feel it." . . .

She kept talking. She told everyone. There was more, she knew that, but she couldn't get it into words. After a time, she quit talking about it. (6)

In the above version, Carver may be exalting Max, or underscoring his worthiness through his paternalistic gesture toward the young sleeping couple that he covers with a blanket. Carla struggles to find words to describe what she feels, but her keeping of the blanket suggests that, sentimentally, she is attached to it, as if the blanket were a tangible link to the man. Lish's version reverses the above situation:

Weeks later, she said: "The guy was about middle-aged. All his things right there in his yard. No lie. We got real pissed and danced. In the driveway. Oh, my God. Don't laugh. He played us these records. Look at this record player. The old guy gave it to us. And all these crappy records. Will you look at this shit?" . . .

She kept talking. She told everyone. There was more to it, and she was trying to get it talked out. After a time, she quit trying. (161)

Lish's elimination of Max's thoughtful covering of the couple with a blanket, as if they were exhausted children, strips him of his worthy resonance and reduces him to "worthlessness," as the moment, like the blanket, is removed. As Nessel notes, "[w]ith this shift in perspective, a final comment provides us with something new: a confirmation of the man's worthlessness" (36). That worthlessness is highlighted by Carla's rude

reference to her dancing with him: “We got real pissed and danced” clashes with the “unbearable happiness” occasioned by the dance in Carver’s version. Her contemptuous repudiation of the man is also manifest in her depreciation of the “crappy records . . . this shit.” Lish deprives the man of any redeeming quality as he removes from the story’s closure the tenderness and worthiness Carver had intended.

“Why Don’t You Dance?” was cut by 9 % from the version originally published in *Quarry West* in 1978, two years before it was included in the manuscript of *Beginners* (Stull “Notes” 999). The deletions modified the intended narrative arc. Clearly, typical of Lish’s “ruthless, if not aggressive” editing (Amir 5) of *Beginners* in general and of “Why Don’t You Dance?” in particular—his elimination of details, alteration of readers’ perceptions of characters, censoring emotional depth—has profoundly disrupted the narrative thrust, leaving readers with a different conclusion about the story: Carver’s intended “sentiment,” has been replaced by a bleak epiphany, and the story leaves the reader stuck on its surface, as emotionally stunted as the characters. There is a clear pattern of this in “Beginners,” “A Small, Good Thing,” and “Why Don’t You Dance?”

Besides being an editor with a different aesthetic from Carver, Lish also saw “his editorial work on Carver’s stories [as] a creative act in its own right for which he deserved acknowledgement” (Sklenika 187). Though Raymond Carver died before the Lish-editing controversy was exposed, and therefore was not able to comment on it, we can recall what he himself said:

[I am] drawn toward the traditional . . . methods of storytelling: one layer of reality unfolding and giving away to another, perhaps richer layer; the gradual accretion of



meaningful detail; dialogue that not only reveals something about character but advances the story. (“All” 210)

Raymond Carver was a master storyteller who knew the importance of detail and its relationship to the narrative thrust of a short story. As this essay argues, had Gordon Lish not edited the text to conform to his vision of minimalism, Carver’s original version of “Why Don’t You Dance?” from *Beginners* would be studied for its “gradual accretion” of significant details, emotional undercurrent, and an effort to build a narrative arc tending towards an aesthetic closure, while preserving the “richer layer” to the story that Carver intended.

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## Recent Publications in Carver Studies

*Robert Miltner, Kent State University at Stark*

*The Poetry of Raymond Carver: Against the Current.* Sandra Lee Kleppe. Surrey, England, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2014. 186 pages.

*The Visual Poetics of Raymond Carver.* Ayala Amir. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010. 197 pages.

*Critical Insights: Raymond Carver.* James Plath, Editor. Ipswich, MA: Salem Press, 2013. 270 Pages.

*Not Far From Here: The Paris Symposium on Raymond Carver.* Vasiliki Fachard and Robert Miltner, Editors. Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014. 131 pages.

*Carver Across the Curriculum: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Teaching the Fiction and Poetry of Raymond Carver.* Paul Benedict Grant and Katherine Ashley, Editors. Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011. 173 pages.

One measure of the vitality of a field of academic study is to consider the frequency, range, and quality of its conference presentations. Each year since the founding of the International Raymond Carver Society in 2005, papers on Raymond Carver and his work have been presented at conferences including the American Literature Association, the American Literature Association American Poetry Symposium, the Midwest Modern Language Association, Association of Writers and Writing Programs, the Louisville Conference on Literature & Culture, as well as its own symposiums in Chicago and Paris. A second measure of that same vitality lies in examining the vibrancy of its level of publication on its focus, which in this case is the writing of Raymond Carver. The past four years have seen the publication of five new books that will be reviewed in this essay. Two of the works are single authored works: *The Poetry of Raymond Carver: Against the*

*Current*, by Sandra Lee Kleppe of Hedmark University College, Norway, former co-editor of this journal and director of the International Raymond Carver Society and *The Visual Poetics of Raymond Carver*, by Ayala Amir of Bar Ilan University, Israel, an editorial board member of this journal; three are edited collections: *Critical Insights: Raymond Carver*, edited by James Plath of Illinois Wesleyan University; *Carver Across the Curriculum: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Teaching the Fiction and Poetry of Raymond Carver* by Paul Benedict Grant of Memorial University, Canada, and Katherine Ashley, Editors; and *Not Far From Here: The Paris Symposium on Raymond Carver*, edited Vasiliki Fachard, Swiss independent scholar, and Robert Miltner (author of this essay) of Kent State University at Stark, both of whom edit this journal. As the following reviews will make evident, the recent work is varied and comprehensive, and that by perusing these texts a network of active scholars who bring great energy to the enterprise of Carver studies can be identified as enriching and shepherding scholarship on Raymond Carver.

***The Poetry of Raymond Carver: Against the Current* by Sandra Lee Kleppe**

Raymond Carver told Michael Schumacher in a 1987 interview that he would be happy “if they simply put ‘poet’ on my tombstone ... and in parenthesis, ‘and short story writer.’” Given Carver’s own preference to be viewed foremost as a poet, Sandra Kleppe offers the first book devoted exclusively to Raymond Carver’s poetry. While Carver is best known for his fiction, his first three books were poetry [*Near Klamath, Winter Insomnia, At Night the Salmon Move*] as well as three of his last

books [*Where Water Comes Together with Other Water, Ultramarine, A New Path to the Waterfall*]. *The Poetry of Raymond Carver: Against the Current* focuses on six aspects of Carver's poetry.

The first part of the book presents two chapters on autopoetics, that is, the idea that the poems are not isolated pieces, but rather part of the large body of his poetic work that are both connected with each other through intertextuality (cross-referencing and permutation) as well as reaching out into other spheres of discourse and scholarship and pulling those into the body of his own poetic work. By way of illustration, Kleppe notes how often Carver's poems develop the recurring motifs of sight and blindness, as boundaries of observations, as well as by exploring his use of voyeurism drawn from the specialized artistic traditions more commonly associated with the visual arts. This analysis is augmented, amplified, by the chapter "Crossover Between Poems as Stories" where Kleppe focuses on three illuminating sets/pairings: the story "Why Don't You Dance?" and the poem "Distress Sale"; the breaking marriages in the story "Blackberry Pie" and the poem "Late Night With Fog and Horses"; and the relationship between sons and mothers in the story "Boxes" and the poem "Mothers." What Kleppe makes clear in this study is that, rather than a critical hierarchy in which the stories appear to be more important than the poems, the stories and poems, when read in pairs such as those which she presents as examples, are both equally important and central rather than tangential to understanding Carver's work.

The two chapters in the second part of the book consider self-referentiality, that is, the ways in which poems call attention to themselves as artifacts of language.

The third chapter, "All Poems are Love Poems," Kleppe argues that the love poem is Carver *ars poetica*, offering the early poems "The Blue Stones" and "For Semra, With Martial Vigor" as example. The fourth chapter, "Water and Fish" begins with noting how the titles of nearly all of Carver's books of poetry, including limited editions, directly or indirectly refer to water; Kleppe discusses the early books (1968-76), the late books (1985-89), and limited editions from the late period; ultimately, she chronicles Carver's "career-long search for a path to the waterfall [as] a metaphor for the quest to discover and rediscover the source of creative energy" through the interconnections between the act of fishing and the relationship between memory and creativity.

Chapters five and six, which conclude the book, explore a new area of Carver study: the relationship between the art of poetry and medical science, the process of the writer composing a body of work which is set against the natural science that describes the decomposition of the human body following death. The fifth chapter, "Carver's Baudelaire Sandwich," explores his use of elegiac poetry in an extended discussion on one early poem, "Your Dog Dies," and a late poem, "Ask Him," where the former is an elegy for a pet, of childhood loss and first personal understanding of the objectivity of death, with the latter a personal response to the historical death of another writer, giving pause to consider how art outlives the artist. The final chapter considers more directly the "interdisciplinary intersection" of poetry and medicine, therapeutically engaging in metapathography, wherein an author who is ill writes from a narrative position about his or her illness or impending death, including two early poems, "Looking for Work" and "The Mailman as Cancer Patient"

as well as some of Carver's most emotionally powerful late poems, such as "Proposal" and "What the Doctor Said." Kleppe points out that Carver's poetry is widely used and studied in the medical field, especially for terminal patients, at a rate and range that goes beyond that of the academic community. This particular area of research opens up important new territory in Carver studies.

Sandra Kleppe's *The Poetry of Raymond Carver: Against the Current* is a must-read for fans of his poetry, for scholars interested in the relationship between Carver's fiction and poetry, or for anyone interested in the ways in which poetry provided Carver for new opportunities of expression, particularly in the field of medical studies. For the first time, a book on Raymond Carver's poetry is available to augment the study of his fiction.

### ***The Visual Poetics of Raymond Carver by Ayala Amir***

Ayala Amir has chosen to look at the way the space—the form and content, the narrative and disruption, the speech and silence—of Raymond Carver's stories is conceived of and executed through a kind of visual poetics. Building on Poe's comparison of a short story to a painting, Amir follows Walter Benjamin in making a comparison between a short story and a photograph, or more explicitly, between the short story and the eye of the camera. Her source is W. J. T. Mitchell who argues for a "pictorial turn" toward a more spatial and visual approach to the study of literature as the "new visual paradigm of our time." What we find in *The Visual*



*Poetics of Raymond Carver* is Amir's focus on visibility, spatiality, and stasis, attributes which she argues are too often absent from discussions of literature.

Divided into three sections, *Visual Poetics* triangulates a thorough analysis of how Raymond Carver's narrative point of view is more that of a photographer using a camera than as a writer typing on a typewriter or laptop. The kind of psychic distance, which Kirk Nessel identifies as a "vicariousness" in Carver's narrative points of view, is achieved not by a man looking out a window, but through a camera lens. This is illustrated directly in Carver's story "Viewfinder" in which a photographer with hooks for hands makes a living taking photographs of people's house; the homeowner is voyeuristically fascinated when the photo provided shows "my head, *my head*, in there, inside the kitchen window" looking out at the photographer. This ironic dichotomy illustrates both the divide and the link between the writer inside looking out and the photographer outside looking in, yet it also shows—visually—how Carver and the minimalists eschewed what Nessel labels the "obsessively self-reflexive" post-modern experimental writers from which they were distancing themselves. When the photographer in "Viewfinder" tells the homeowner, who asks for his picture to be taken throwing rocks from the roof, "I don't do motion shots," it establishes the contrary states of stasis and motion that are the subject of the first section of Amir's book, "Movement," in which she explores Carver's scenic minimalism as offering fragmented narrative, often with divergent endings, that demonstrates the existential condition of his characters as well as his use of dialogue that is circuitous, discontinuous, idiosyncratic, or clichéd.

In the second section, “The Eye of the Camera,” Amir explores the impersonal narrators whose points of view exemplify what Ann Banfield calls “*unoccupied perspective* [where the narrator] is devoid of subjectivity and consciousness while at the same time embodying the most personal experience—that of the possibility of one’s own absence.” Carver’s narrative modes of description and visualization, Amir argues, offer a visible reality through different ways of looking than found in standard narrative—choices Carver makes in not only what he looks at, but *how* he looks at it: “the direct look, the sidelong look, the glimpse, and the eyes shut,” the latter the ending image in his most anthologized story, “Cathedral,” wherein a blind man asks a man with sight to trace the shape of a cathedral on a piece of paper, the blind man’s hand over his own. For the sighted man, to *not* look is a choice. Partly this is due to his experiencing the blind man’s sightless world, a camera with its lens cap on. But it is also due to the narrator’s sense that he may be experiencing his own absence.

The third section of *Visual Poetics* has at its heart Amir’s borrowing from Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the *optic situation* which creates “a unique relationship between vision, action, and time, and much like Carver’s frames [blurring] the distinctions between stasis and movement, inside and outside, open and closed.” Of course, while she discusses these as literary frames, they are comparable to frames as used in photography and cinema as well. To return again to “Cathedral,” the sighted man watches TV with the blind man who can only hear the narrator of the program while the sighted man both hears the sound and sees the image. This relationship “frames” Carver’s use of interconnected, interchangeable

doppelgangers, the so-called “doubling” features common in Carver’s stories, and while they begin in stasis—the blind man limited to sound, the sighted man to sound and sight—there is movement between the doubled characters as they transition into each other’s “frames” so that by the end of the story the blind man, after feeling the sighted man trace the cathedral, can “see” what he has been hearing about while the sighted man, eyes closed, follows the sound of the blind man’s directions, then keeps his eyes closed at the end, as sightless as the blind man began.

Overall, the author’s knowledge of both cinema theory and literary theory makes this a book in which the discussion moves seamlessly between these related arts. For anyone interested in Carver’s fiction, a book that explores, by chapter, the concepts of movement, dialogue, voice, vision, textual frames, and realistic effects is useful. While these first four chapters are more literary in focus, the latter two are more aesthetic and contextual as the author remains true to the camera’s lens as the focused perspective for critical analysis. As a result, the book examines Carver, both in practice and in theory, and the theory in particular has a new dimension from previous criticism, offering visual analysis and camera aesthetics as new directions for Carver studies; as a result, Ayala Amir’s work establishes her position as an important Carver scholar.

*Visual Poetics* speaks to younger scholars and contemporary readers who have high visual literacy and are drawn to other writers such as Brett Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney, David Foster Wallace, Tama Janowitz, and Amy Hempel, writers who are sometimes described by critics as strongly influenced by television. Given the interest of directors to turn Carver’s stories into movies, Ray Lawrence’s *Jindabyne*

and Robert Altman's *Short Cuts*, for example, this book will attract readers who come to his work through movies, and who have an interest in the intersection between cinema and literature. Ayala Amir's *The Visual Poetics of Raymond Carver* extends the range of Carver Studies by opening up an entirely new field of interdisciplinary study that uses photography as a critical lens to view and read Carver.

***Critical Insights: Raymond Carver* by James Plath**

Editor James Plath has assembled an impressive collection of essays by fourteen talented scholars, resulting in the largest collection of essays yet published in Carver studies. While the *Critical Insights* series is primarily aimed at a student market—colleges and college prep high school programs—this collection is also an excellent introductory text for general readers and offers Carver scholars some finely-honed essays by William Stull and Maureen Carroll who launched Carver Studies; Kirk Nessel, Ayala Amir, and Randolph Runyon, all of whom have published a single-authored book; a strong clutch of active scholars and editors who make significant contributions to the field of Carver studies: Vasiliki Fachard, Robert Miltner, Claire Fabre, Françoise Sammarchelli, Chad Wriglesworth, Enrico Monti, and James Plath; as well as new Carver scholars Matthew Shipe and Peter J. Bailey.

The collection begins with a brief introductory section, "Career, Life, and Influence," comprised of two essays. Editor James Plath opens with, "On Raymond Carver," a concise and comprehensive literary and biographical summary of the

author subject of the book, which serves as an excellent shorthand reference, particularly for students. Plath is accompanied here by Chad Wriglesworth's "Raymond Carver and the Shaping Power of the Pacific Northwest" in which Wriglesworth explicates how the scenery and socioeconomic history of the Pacific Northwest, where Carver lived through childhood and adolescence and returned to during his last years, shaped both Carver's working class perspective and the honesty of his voice. These two pieces establish a strong ground upon which Plath builds a scaffold to prepare readers for the second section, Critical Contexts.

Critical Contexts is comprised of six essays, each offering valuable frames for viewing Carver's work. Who better to open with than William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll? Stull more or less launched Carver studies, as one of the first to do critical pieces, and is the pre-eminent archivist of Carver's work, discovering previously unpublished stories and poems. The Stull and Carroll piece, "The Critical Reception of the Works of Raymond Carver," is more than a mere overview, but weighs the dissonance between the stories, as Carver wrote them, and as they appeared, after intrusive editing by Gordon Lish, Carver's editor. Stull and Carroll consider the publication of Carver's unedited *Beginners* set against the Lish edited version of the same text *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. On the whole, Stull and Carroll's essay is the most comprehensive review of publications by or about Raymond Carver to date: a must have reference for Carver scholars. Enrico Monti's "Minimalism, Dirty Realism, and Raymond Carver" focuses on several terms applied both in the US (Gordon Lish) and abroad (Bill Buford) to periods or phases of Carver's work; Monti traces the use of these terms by editors as set against the

consistent body of work Carver produced irrespective of publishers labels. Jim Plath returns with an essay, "The Carver Triangle: Lost in an Edward Hopper World," that uses the American painter Edward Hopper as a contextual visual lens through which to read Carver, citing common depictions of isolation and inaction in static states, which he sees as Carver's decision to begin stories after the main climax has already occurred. In a similar, yet literary comparison, Matthew Shipe writes, in "Middle-Age Crazy: Men Behaving Badly in the Fiction of Raymond Carver and John Updike," that Carver and Updike, both considered *New Yorker* authors, shared a bond by writing about men ill-adjusted to divorce and its effect upon subsequent marriages and who struggle with guilt, acting out or denying complicity in the breakups. Noted Carver scholar Kirk Nessel, in "Intimate Divisions: Raymond Carver and Alcoholism," considers the intertwined worlds of Carver the writer and Carver the alcoholic, tracing the changing positions of the male protagonists whose lives are or have been shaped by alcohol, from the early silenced or frenetic males to the reassembled and attempting salvation males of the late stories, which support Gail Caldwell's observation that "there's no more intimate construction of an alcoholic world in contemporary fiction" than Carver's. The Critical Contexts section ends with "Feminist Perspectives on the Works of Raymond Carver," by French scholar Claire Fabre who co-edited the special issue on Carver and Feminism for the *Raymond Carver Review*. Fabre, considering that Carver's period of writing was concurrent with the rise of and establishment of Feminism and Feminist Criticism, considers Carver's female characters, presentations of masculinity, critiques of male-dominated social discourse, violence against women characters, gender

boundary incursions, and empowering language appropriation by women; as a result, Fabre elucidates how current gender criticism contributes to a re-reading of Carver's work when considering "his treatment of marital tragedies and the constraints imposed on women within a patriarchal world."

The final section of the book, *Critical Readings*, offers again a balanced selection of six essays, in this case best read following the biographical and critical sections preceding it. The opening piece, "First Inclinations: The Poetry of Raymond Carver," by Robert Miltner, argues that Carver's poetry developed concurrently with and parallel to his fiction. His piece traces the arc of Carver's poetry—and fiction—through three periods: the Early Poems, in which he writes with a young man's bravado; his late poems, following his sobriety to embrace themes of recovery, memory, creativity, identity, recompense, and new relationships; and his last poems, written as he was dying from cancer, exploring memories of childhood innocence and the mystery of death as a transition. Randolph Runyon, in "Cycling Fiction: On the Structure of Raymond Carver's Three Main Story Collections," analyzes the ways in which Carver, when assembling his stories into collections, altered or edited the already published poems so that they would relate and refer to each other, leading to each book as a unified aesthetic whole, despite the counter balance of risking the emotional impact of the individual stories. In "Carver, Realism, and Self-Consciousness," Swiss scholar Vasiliki Fachard argues that the originality in Carver's fiction is achieved by its occupying a location between realism and modernism/postmodernism, and that by knowingly doing so, Carver is able to give voice to the unconscious by hinting while telling, exemplified by his focus on

locating a sense of menace beneath the narrative level of many of his stories; Fachard effectively challenges readers to read beyond the limited field of minimalism and representation so often attached to Carver's work and seek the repetition of signs and signals that work to probe reality. Israeli scholar Ayala Amir's "Small Good Things: Symbols and Descriptive Details in Carver's Short Fiction" explores the methodology Carver used to layer his stories with meaning. Arguing that Carver follows the modernist tradition of tension between the concrete and the symbolic and the impression of reality, affecting the intersections of form and content, as well as rhetoric and thematics, Amir explicates an important aspect of Carver's stories. Peter J. Bailey's "*Short Cuts: Robert Altman's Take on Raymond Carver*" examines the challenges, complexities, complications, and credibility of adapting Carver's stories to cinema. While acknowledging the sense of success expressed by director Robert Altman and the author's widow, Tess Gallagher, Bailey seems less certain; as a result, he believes that rather than a collaboration of sorts, Altman more or less translated Carver's stories to his own artistic and philosophical vision so that it matched his cinematic signature. The Critical Insights section closes with French scholar Françoise Sammarcelli's "What's Postmodern about Raymond Carver?" Though minimalism and realism are the commonly ascribed labels for Carver's stories, Sammarcelli makes an excellent case for locating him in the postmodern school of writers by examining representative stories on several postmodern criteria: fragmentation and the effects of discontinuity, narrative self-reflexivity, and the power of the unsaid; as a result, she believes acknowledging



these techniques will help readers better appreciate the unique quality of Carver's voice in his stories.

A well-structured and sequenced collection, *Critical Insights: Raymond Carver* demonstrates that Carver studies continues to grow. This collection brings together some of the most active established and emerging scholars in the field, offering a great starting point for anyone interested in learning more about Carver's writing.

***Not Far From Here: The Paris Symposium on Raymond Carver*  
by Vasiliki Fachard and Robert Miltner**

Given that Raymond Carver was an American Writer, it is not surprising that critical study has been predominantly represented by North Americans, that is, from the US and Canada. Yet Carver is a writer read world wide, and subsequently critical study has become progressively more international. The scholarly society dedicated to his work, led by American-born scholar Sandra Lee Kleppe of Hedmark University College in Norway, is the International Raymond Carver Society. Moreover, a brief review of the masthead, editorial and advisory boards shows representation that forms a quilt of countries. It was from these trajectories of international scholarship and growing literary criticism that Sandra Lee Kleppe of the International Raymond Carver Society, an American Literature Association affiliate, and Claire Fabre-Clark from the Université de Paris XII organized the Paris Symposium on Raymond Carver in June of 2008. The essays in this collection are taken from papers presented at that Carver Symposium in Paris, "Commemorating and Celebrating Raymond

Carver,” held at Université de Paris XII on June 6<sup>th</sup> and at Hôtel Massa, Société des Gens de Lettres, on June 7<sup>th</sup>. *Not Far From Here: The Paris Symposium on Raymond Carver* offers the richest and most varied international conversation by emerging and established scholars to date on the importance of Carver’s work.

The book opens with a Preface by Swiss co-editor Vasiliki Fachard who ruminates on Carver’s relationship with Paris, based on his readings of Hemingway’s presentation of the city of lights in *A Moveable Feast*, questioning whether Carver’s romantic notions of Paris are reconciled with the country that forges his literary identity. As a result, her preface sets the stage for the Paris symposium of 2008. In her own contribution, “Sign vs. Symbol: The Gift in Raymond Carver’s ‘Cathedral,’” Fachard argues that, according to Marcel Mauss, gifts forge bonds that open up giver and receiver to each other. She explores both the symbolic and humanistic value of gifts in three important stories from *Cathedral*: of bread, feathers, and cigars in “Feathers,” of candy in “Preservation,” and of watches and self in “Compartment,” initiating new topics for future examination by Carver scholars.

American scholar Randolph Paul Runyon’s “‘Beginners’ Luck,” which was presented as the keynote address at the symposium, offers an intertextual analysis of Gordon Lish’s editing of Carver’s stories, most of which had just previously surfaced in *The New Yorker*. What is remarkable about Runyon’s keynote address is how it seemed to predict the need for the publication of the complete collection, which Carver wrote as *Beginners*, so that the two competing texts—the complete manuscript of Carver’s *Beginners* and the version heavily edited by Gordon Lish, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, which was a National Book Award

finalist and Carver's first major critical and popular success—could be available for critical study.

The issue of Lish's influence on the published versions of Carver's stories is discussed in detail in the essay which immediately follows Runyon's essay. Italian scholar Enrico Monti, in "From 'Beginners' to 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love': Variations on a Carver Story," analyzes the shaping of the story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," leaning on Carver's early draft "Beginners." A textual analysis of Lish's radical editing, including omissions, rewriting, and different endings, shows the nature and extent of Lish's hand, which was clearly aimed at expelling what Lish considered to be any sentimentality and most psychological introspection; by doing so, Lish strove to highlight the stories' bleaker tones and edgy minimalist undertones.

Canadian critic G. P. Lainsbury, in "Reference ≠ Reduction: Literature & Life of Raymond Carver," offers a defense for, and argues the necessity of, the use of biographical material in criticism of Carver's work. By examining a variation on an anecdote from Carver's essay "My Father's Life," Lainsbury notes how Maryann Burk Carver's memoir *What It Was Like* shows a tendency to view her life experience through an expectation for literary utility, ultimately rationalizing Carver family violence by asserting that it was of importance in the larger net of material from which Carver often drew for material for his writing.

Spanish scholar Libe García Zarranz presents a feminist critique of Carver in "A Threatening Fetish: The Female Body through Carver's Hitchcockian Eye," establishing thematic similarities between Hitchcock and Carver in their

representation of femininity and the female body. She examines Carver's ambivalent construction of the female body in relation to Hitchcock's trilogy on voyeurism: *Rear Window* (1954), where woman stands as the perfect fetish, *Vertigo* (1958), which portrays the collapse of ideal femininity and as a result, the depiction of woman as agent of fear, and *Psycho* (1960), where the female body is finally represented as corpse and turned into a source of abjection.

French scholar Laetitia Naly, in "Celebrating the Moment: The Writing of Time in Raymond Carver's 'The Calm,'" explores how the story-within-a-story format that opens like Russian dolls reveals the Carver's use of time as a means of construction. Naly considers how the story displays the simultaneity of various facts without ever assigning a single meaning to any of them, while the celebration of a unique moment that is both decisive and banal is the underlying theme of the story, showing how that unique moment is like a microcosm, self-referred and self-contained. Naly explores how, in "The Calm," the simultaneity of events outwits narrative linearity and brings the reader closer to the existential experience of time.

In "Excess and Lack: the Economy of Signs in Carver," French critic Claire Fabre proposes to synthesize the place of the real in Carver's stories through the close study of two stories belonging to two different collections of stories of the end of his writing career. The characters in "Feathers," through the dinner at Bud and Olla's, are faced with the excessive presence of the real in the form of the peacock and the baby, which Fabre sees as "excessively real" and bordering on the grotesque. However, as the analysis of "Menudo" shows, this "excessive presence" is

not incompatible with the Lacanian notion of the real as the impossible, and therefore representing what constitutes the concept of “lack”.

Marie Le Grix de la Salle considers two understudied stories in “‘Waiting for what? I’d like to know’: Confusing Expectations in Raymond Carver’s Train Stories.” Written with limited action and scant dialogue, “The Compartment” and “The Train” dramatize the characters’ waiting for something ill-defined to happen. By focusing on specific symbolical details which capture the reader’s attention—watches, waiting rooms, train cars—Carver manages to create narrative suspense, although what the characters are expecting is never clearly stated, leading readers to uncertain and divergent conclusions of the stories.

Françoise Sammarcelli, in “So why would I want a photograph of this tragedy?”: The Inscription of the Eye in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*,” examines passages which most explicitly and powerfully address the issue of the eye and the related crisis, shedding light on the various strategies used by texts which recurrently call into question the codes of representation. By scrutinizing the intriguing close-ups on fascinating objects in texts that resort to disjunction and displacement, Sammarcelli dwells on Carver’s ambiguous negotiation with abjection and the notion of “borderline.” A close-up on “Viewfinder” and the questions of vision and abstraction show how linguistic codes come under scrutiny through exploring the topos of photography.

*Not Far From Here: The Paris Symposium on Raymond Carver* demonstrates more than ever the rich and vibrant international scholarship, especially among French scholars, that celebrates the remarkable work of Raymond Carver.

***Carver Across the Curriculum: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Teaching  
the Fiction and Poetry of Raymond Carver***  
by Paul Benedict Grant and Katherine Ashley

While recent scholarship in Carver Studies has been divided equally between edited collections and single-authored books, Paul Grant and Katherine Ashley's *Carver Across the Curriculum* offers a very practical balance with scholarly study by presenting ten excellent and varied chapters on how and where to *teach* the writing of Raymond Carver.

Angela Sorby's "Teaching Carver's Voices through Pacific Northwest Music" explores the relationship between the economics of extraction in the Pacific Northwest and its influence on the shifting dynamics of masculinity, with a focus on violence and power, themes she sees echoed both in the folk music of the past and the more contemporary grunge music movement. The following chapter by Robert P. Waxler, "Teaching Male Violence and Vulnerability In Carver," extends on Sorby's chapter as he explores how male violence is a "consequence of inarticulacy and rigid gender roles" when expressed in Carver's stories, though the same stories often present gender-transcending moments of redemption.

In "It Doesn't Look Good': Teaching End of Life Care through Carver's Poetry," co-authors Johanna Shapiro and Audrey Shafer explore the prevalence of Carver's poetry in medical training programs, discussing how literary analysis of poems such as "What the Doctor Said" help medical students better understand their own emotional responses, including working through stages of grief and using humor as a release, when working with end-of-life patients. Paul Grant's "It's *Grave*

... *Tempered with Humor': Carver in a Humor Class*" extends upon Shapiro and Shafer as he discusses how gallows humor can create common ground between people from diverse backgrounds and varied emotional connection, not only in the medical field, but across the arts and humanities as well. Jeff Birkenstein's "Teaching Significant Food in Carver's Fiction" deftly extends the concept of connection as he explores the communal activity of shared eating as a universal activity that bridges differences, loss, and trauma, an idea that is central to "A Small, Good Thing" wherein the Baker, after clarifying the misunderstanding at the cause of the tension between himself and a couple who have lost a child, shares rolls and coffee while he and the couple speak freely, arriving at understanding and closure.

*Carver Across the Curriculum* also extends its focus across cultures, offering two chapters and using Carver's work in second language acquisition classes. Katherine Ashley, in "Translating Carver in the Modern Languages Classroom," demonstrates how using the briefest fictions, such as "Popular Mechanics," make excellent models for whole-text translations, considerations of literary and non-literary language and style, and expanded understanding of comparative literature. Ashley's chapter connects very effectively with Sandra Lee Kleppe's "Performing and Deforming Carver in the Classroom" in which she draws from her experience teaching in Norway; second language learners who perform the stories and poems reduce the distance between themselves and both text and culture, and "deform," in which they re-form the work by adapting it into film or visual art, both actively engage students through meaningful immersion into the text.

What follows Kleppe's student "deforming" Carver's stories into visual art and film are chapters on teaching Carver through film and photography. Film maker Zhenya Kiperman's "Teaching Carver through Robert Altman's *Short Cuts*" considers how Altman's popular collage film with an ensemble cast employs the common artistic sensibility of the art of the everyday shared by both author and director, and how isolating dialogue from the text provides stimulating models for screenwriting exercises. "Teaching Carver through the Eye of the Camera," by Ayala Amir, is another excellent pairing in this collection, as she presents photography as a metaphor for Carver's fiction, exploring the boundaries and limitations of realism in photography and literature, as well as the temporal and spatial elements of writing.

The final chapter, "Imitating Carver in the Creative Writing Classroom" by Robert Miltner (the author of this essay), briefly reviews how Carver's writing was shaped during his own years as a student writer by imitating Hemingway and later in his career by imitating Chekhov. Miltner suggests that teachers of creative writing in today's classrooms can offer assignments that have students imitate Carver's list poems and his lyric-narrative poetry, as well as his flash fictions and minimalist fictions; the pedagogy for imitation in creative writing classes is based on the imitation models commonly found in visual arts programs.

*Carver Across the Curriculum* is the first pedagogic collection on Carver, and Grant and Ashley have assembled a diverse body of essays written by talented and creative scholars. The collection is organized both for quick reference by scholars seeking chapters pertinent to their own area of interest and for seamless perusal by



readers interested in exploring the concept of the book. An excellent new addition to Carver studies, this book offers a model for comparable books on other authors.

## Contributors

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**Molly Fuller** is a Teaching Assistant in the PhD program at Kent State University, with a focus on Native American writer Louise Erdrich; she was previously Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Marshall University. Fuller holds a BSJ in Journalism and an MA in English from Ohio University, and an MFA in Fiction from Sarah Lawrence College. The author of three chapbooks, *The Neighborhood Psycho Dreams of Love*, *All My Loves*, and *Tender the Body*, as well as a flash fiction sequence, *Hold Your Breath*.

**Joseph Kappes** is a doctoral student in English literature at Syracuse University, where he works on the intersections between games, modern and contemporary American literature, and theories of space and ambiguity. He has presented papers on topics as various as whiteness in Raymond Carver's short fiction and the phenomenological other in Playdead's *Limbo*.

**Katarina Polonsky** holds a BA in English and American Studies from Nottingham University, UK; she has also undertaken a Masters programme in Hemingway studies and American whiteness studies at the Ca' Foscari University in Venice, Italy. Her specialisation spans twentieth century American thought and culture, modern British fictions and linguistics. Polonsky has published on Diary Writing and Creativity, and on Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day* and Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*. She is a free-lance editor based in Dubai, UAE.