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CARVER AND FEMINISM
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Issue Two is a **special issue on Carver and Feminism**, guest edited by Claire Fabre-Clark and Libe García Zarranz. Included are an issue introduction by Claire Fabre-Clark; editors' essays by Libe García Zarranz on Carver and Feminist Theory and Vasiliki Fachard on Feminism and Carver; essays on using space and domesticity to re-read Carver's women by Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh; influences of Feminism and class in Carver's short stories by Vanessa Hall; masculinity as homosocial enactment by Josef Benson; a Feminist interpretation of "Cathedral" by Eve Wiederhold; and reviews of Maryann Burk Carver's *What It Used to Be Like* by Julia Kaziewicz and of Tess Gallagher's Dear Ghosts, by Jo Angela Edwins.

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Introduction

Robert Miltner, Kent State University Stark

Welcome to the second issue of *The Raymond Carver Review,* a special issue on Raymond Carver and Feminism. The idea for this issue was proposed by two members of the editorial board, Claire Fabre-Clark of the Université de Paris XII and Libe García Zarranz, previously at the University of Zaragoza in Spain and now a Doctoral Fellow at the University of Alberta. Having presented and published with them, I knew Claire and Libe would be ideal editors for the first in-depth discussions on Carver and Feminism. The journal is fortunate to have two such talented scholars, both European feminists, guest edit this special issue on a very American author.

Once the proposal was accepted, a call for papers was placed, and there was excitement among the community of Carver scholars, but some skepticism as well. Sandra Kleppe, Associate Editor for the journal and president of the International Raymond Carver Society, reported that she had received emails from people who knew Carver, including Chuck Kinder, who wrote, "'Carver and Feminism'! Are you kidding me? You academics are something else. Old Ray is rolling over in his grave laughing." To be fair, he may be right; Raymond Carver himself may have found the topic worthy of an initial laugh. After all, Carver never presented himself as a feminist, and while he talked many times during interviews about first lines, fellowships, and fishing, he appeared not to have discussed feminism, if the two dozen interviews collected by

Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull are representative. And while I respect Chuck Kinder's life-long friendship with Carver, and his own ludic presentation of him in his comic novel *Honeymooners*, Kinder may be misreading the intent of this special issue of *The Raymond Carver Review*: we are not arguing that Carver was a feminist, but rather that a feminist study will offer readers new perspectives for Carver scholarship.

Such a re-reading, by limiting its focus to what can be seen through the critical lens of feminism, offers new insights into Carver's work, allowing for a widening of critical assessment of one of America's—and the world's—greatest authors. Readers have long been impressed by the many strong women found in his stories, and favorites come easily to mind: the unnamed women in "Fat," "Intimacy," and "Blackbird Pie," Roxy the chimney-sweep in "Where I'm Calling From," the melodramatic Holly in "Gazebo," the helpful Mrs. Webster in "Fever," the sociable Paula in "Put Yourself in My Shoes," the optimistic Emily in "How About This?" and the savvy Toni in "Are These Actual Miles?" Through each of these characters, Carver shows women who carry their own burdens with strength, dignity, and, as much as circumstances allow, success. The presence of strong women characters in Carver's stories may be based on his admiration for formidable and resilient women he knew personally, or what he considered necessary to tell the kind of stories he wanted to tell, but such biographical or aesthetic considerations are hardly feminism in a theoretical sense. Examining these women characters and the stories from a feminist perspective moves the focus of scholarship from the personalities of these fictional women to the larger principles of critical theory. By doing so, this special issue on Carver and Feminism initiates a new discussion for Carver studies, opening the way for further assessments, connections, and

opinions The contributors and editors represent current scholarship in the U.S., Canada, Spain, Switzerland, Ireland, and France; as a result, these essays are not limited by geographic insularity or provincialism to any one current scholarly view; rather, they offer a representative sampling of critical readings that reflect contemporary feminist criticism.

Structurally, this issue contains peer-reviewed essays by four academic contributors: Josef Benson of the University of South Florida; Vanessa Hall of the New York City College of Technology, CUNY; Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh of the Dundalk Institute of Technology, Ireland, and Eve Wiederhold of George Mason University in Virginia. Additionally, guest editor Claire Fabre-Clark has written an introduction for this special issue, while guest editor Libe García Zarranz and associate editor Vasiliki Fachard have written topical essays, and these three essays provide a context for the four peer-reviewed essays. Finally, and appropriately, included in this issue are reviews of recent books by Carver's wives, Maryann Burk Carver and Tess Gallagher, by Julia Kaziewicz and Jo Angela Edwins, respectively.

This second issue is the first of a series of special topics numbers, providing for talented guest editors to bring a vision to a project and shape issues that expand discussions and topics of interest to readers and scholars. In this sense, *The Raymond Carver Review* is extending its range as an academic journal by not limiting itself to one set of editors. Moreover, it is also expanding and diversifying as more members join the various boards, making the journal richer, fuller, and more vibrant. Academic journals exist because of the dedication of a community of like-minded and committed scholars. Issues of *The Raymond Carver Review* are possible because of the excellent editorial

board members who volunteer their time to review the submissions, make recommendations, and begin the work of editing essays for the issues. The original members of the board remain: Tamas Dobozy, Jo Angela Edwins, Chad Wriglesworth, William Wright, Claire Fabre-Clark, and Libe García Zarranz, with the latter two serving as guest editors for this issue. In addition, the board has expanded: former journal contributors Alaya Amir, Angela Sorby, and Enrico Monti were invited to the board, and Paul Grant and Françoise Sammarcelli were invited after the Paris Symposium; together, they bring new, international voices to augment the original editorial board. Two of the finest Carver scholars, Randolph Paul Runyon and Kirk Nesset, accepted invitations to the now-expanded advisory board. On the technical side, Jason Piatt has joined as a website consultant. Finally, I want to acknowledge the talented and dedicated Vasiliki Fachard who accepted a position as Associate Editor with this issue. An independent scholar with great editorial instincts, comprehensive knowledge, and an international perspective, her contributions are invaluable.

On behalf of all of us at *The Raymond Carver Review*, I hope you find this special issue on Carver and Feminism, guest edited by Claire Fabre-Clark and Libe García Zarranz, as interesting, informative, and innovative as we do.

Robert Miltner

Editor, *The Raymond Carver Review*

Introduction to Special Issue on Carver and Feminism

Claire Fabre-Clark, Université de Paris XII, France

Although a significant body of criticism has not failed to recognize the pervasive presence of women in Raymond Carver's work (Nesset, 1991; Gentry, 1993; Demory, 1999; Kleppe, 2006), an extensive, in-depth study of female voices from a purely feminist perspective is surprisingly lacking. In an attempt to fill the critical gap, *The Raymond Carver Review* is devoting this present issue to addressing the sexual and gender dynamics in Carver's writings, questioning, in the process, clichés and stereotypes concerning both sexes.

Taking a first glance at Carver's portrayal of gender, one suspects that the early association of his work with that of Hemingway—a first major influence—as well as the cinematographic transcription of such stories as "Tell the Women We're Going" or "So Much Water So Close to Home" may have contributed to eclipsing the vital space women occupy in Carver's world and casting his work as predominantly masculine in its imaginary scope. As that space becomes the focus of this issue's feminist lens, the domestic roles working-class women are confined to, their struggle to make sense of their lives, as well as their embryonic stirrings toward self-assertion, became parts of a discourse that deserves to be heard, not merely for women's own demands but also for the light it throws on men and the larger social structure.

One cannot ignore Carver's concern to depict with equal accuracy the yearnings and wounds suffered by women and men alike. In fact, to focus on women implies gazing on masculinity as well, as the two are interlocked, each a necessary mirror for the other. Far from evoking conventional heroes and past stereotypes, moreover, the masculinity that emerges

from its dialogue with the feminine shows men often not faring much better than—or even as well as—women in their confrontation with the everyday; so unheroic are they at times as to be antipodal to Hemingway, Carver's early model.

The essays show, finally, that the stories are indeed nourished by culturally-inherited notions which they simultaneously subvert, forcing the reader to reconsider the different borders between definitions, including those of generic identities—also socially produced and no longer accepted as immutable or "factual."

Toni and Leo's tragedy in "Are These Actual Miles"—first published in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976) as "What Is It?"—seems to illustrate in a nutshell the gender dynamics in all of Carver's work. Toni's probable prostitution act to ensure the sale of the convertible car, although it is never explicitly referred to, epitomizes men's predation, the internalization of social pressure as to the instrumentalization of the female body (through the dubious metaphorical equivalence between the woman's body and the car at the end of the story) together with guilt, anxiety and remorse. Nevertheless, desire infuses the poetics of the text, as if to counter the sordid stereotypes that it stages. Confronted with such complexity and irresoluteness, this special issue on Carver and Feminism consists not in randomly applying feminist theories or reading grids to Carver's stories and poems, but rather in expanding the body of critical discussion on Carver by exploring his work through the selected lens of feminist criticism.

While acknowledging, in "Space, Domesticity and the Everyday: Re-reading Raymond Carver's Women," that the suburban domestic sphere to which women in Carver's fiction have been confined most often leaves them numb, alienated and trapped in domestic routine, Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh simultaneously questions the automatic association of such confinement with the negative. According to her, the idea that women lose all sense of identity in a space where self-realization is denied them needs re-assessment, as she

effectively shows many female protagonists challenging the structures of the dominant or constructing meaningful lives and identities within its constricting boundaries. This they accomplish by developing "tactics" that resist the male "strategies" aimed at marginalizing them. A case in point is the fulfilment Olla finds "within the symbolic richness of the home as a repository of memories and triumphs" she shares with her husband in "Feathers," affirming that it "can constitute a positive, life-affirming space." If men, furthermore, are offered a relative freedom or escape from the suffocating suburban structure, they never attain any heroic status by utilizing that freedom to "enhance" or "energize" their lives. In contrast, and without doing anything heroic or exceptional, women "find transcendence in the small acts of bravery and honesty that confront them on a daily basis."

According to Vanessa Hall's "Influences of Feminism and Class on Raymond Carver's Short Stories," if Carver espouses no "overt politics" in his stories, his sensitivity to the female condition turns them into "a valuable mirror of contemporaneous discourse on masculinity and femininity" in the 70s and 80s. Drawing "heavily on mainstream feminist discourse" of the period, his fictional depiction of their static lives in the home, with no possibility of escape or change, thus reflects Betty Friedan's discussion of the "unfulfilling nature of full-time domestic work," the fatigue and depression that result from its monotony. Despite their "back-seat status," however, women manifest a resilience and resistance to the "stasis" in their lives, as well as a capacity to relate to others which make them superior to the lethargy and emotional paralysis the men most often succumb to in Carver's stories. By showing empathy, furthermore, as well as a greater capacity to connect and identify with the experience of others, women become emblematic as well as paradigmatic for the working-class writer that he also is, struggling to overcome the biographical and socio-cultural obstacles to his creativity. Thus, women—and not only other writers or his children, as he writes in *Fires*—become overwhelming "influences" as well, even though, Hall rightly

observes, they are strangely not mentioned as such. It is "through several of his female characters," in other words, "that he is most convincingly able to demonstrate an inner growth and ability to break out of individual bewilderment and isolation to connect imaginatively with others, a necessary skill for a writer." By giving women a voice, in other words, he gives himself a voice as well.

The essays in this issue all show that the stories are indeed nourished by culturally-inherited notions which are simultaneously being subverted, thus forcing the reader to reconsider the different borders between definitions, including those of generic identities. In revealing the disjunctions that are at work at the heart of any identity, Carver anticipated recent theoretical studies that have shown gender identities as socially produced and no longer solidly and immutably "factual." The question of masculinity, and how it is represented in Carver's studies, is tackled in Josef Benson's article "Masculinity as Homosocial Enactment in Three Stories by Raymond Carver." By applying Michael Kimmel's insights on men and masculinity, Benson demonstrates how Carver's universe is permeated by male figures who are dependent on other males to prove their masculinity, thus generating homosocial desire. With the exception of the story "Cathedral," women in this scenario "are more present in their absence or distorted context, allowing the males to proceed in their dialectical bonding, and emasculation."

In the engaging opening to her study, "A feminist Re-vision of the Work of Interpretation in Raymond Carver's 'Cathedral,'" Eve Wiederhold asks her students to draw a cathedral, thus mimicking the last act of the narrator and Robert, the blind man in the eponymous story. The disappointing results—"pathetic scribbles" – point to a "failure in representation" in so far as the students "recreate the structure" in order to "capture the essence of 'cathedralness.'" The word "essence," of course, invokes the Platonic tradition—which sees truth as "universally and eternally valid" and language as a neutral vehicle rather

than active in shaping knowledge—or epistemologies where "the general is given priority over the specific; the abstract…over the phenomenal 'real'; the intellectual and rational…over the embodied and the emotional." Such essentialist thinking is at the root of the narrator's pre-conceived notions about having "this blind man" in his house, unexamined responses and prejudices which should "challenge the reader to look more closely at his or her own response patterns" to narratives. Just as the narrator's image of the blind, in other words, has been constructed "through artefacts in popular culture such as films," readers also "read 'the blind man' in terms of cultural scripts" that typecast him as "the blind man who has true wisdom" or the "wholesome hero" and which "render him an idea rather than a person." To resist the "rituals of reading" that merely appear to be "natural" and "logical" rather than "organized by cultural conventions," Wiederhold argues for the insertion of the "feminine" into our interpretive constructs and conventions ("the personal, the touch of flesh, the sexually generated, the wandering gaze…") along with the body, both more powerful in rendering the phenomenon in its present-ness, before "epistemologies that precede our interpretive acts" cause it to calcify into verbal "summations" and abstractions.

With the effort of a rigorous team of scholars on the editorial board and the continued support and advice of the editors, Robert Miltner and Vasiliki Fachard, this special issue of *The Raymond Carver Review* comprises a selection of fine and provocative essays that will hopefully contribute to moving forward what some colleagues have already called the third wave of Carver scholarship.

Four Female Voices in "Fever": Introduction to Feminism and Carver

Vasiliki Fachard, Lausanne, Switzerland

Feminism, both as a social movement and in its prolific theoretical writings, spanned two decades that coincided with a major part of Carver's work, yet any explicit reference to it is absent from his writings, as is the word feminism itself. This does not preclude Carver's intimation of its thrust and influence on the lives of his characters, caught in the invisible stir of its undercurrents. Hostile to theoretical and ideological abstractions, Carver is drawn to the movement in which the phenomenon of feminism discloses itself, the thud and impact of its collision with normative gender roles and thinking. Far from viewing Carver—whose work contains no overt politics or explicit concern with social issues or movements—as an engaged theorist, therefore, this issue focuses on his capacity to eavesdrop or peer into the powerful social forces feminism unleashed and which his characters, in their search for identity and self-knowledge, are groping to articulate and come to terms with.

In dramatizing the above forces, Carver's consummate technique evokes Bakhtin, for whom "The novel must represent all the social and ideological voices of its era," yet it must do so not in a single-voiced or "unitary language," but in dialogized discourse, where "the image of a man" gives way to "the image of the language": "Characteristic for the novel as a genre is not the image of a man in his own right, but precisely the *image of a language*. But in order that language become an artistic image, it must become speech from speaking lips, conjoined with the image of a speaking person" (367, 336). The result is a "diversity of social speech types…and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (262). It is also

Carver's formula for eschewing ideological abstractions. Far from being a mouthpiece of feminism's ideas—as advocate or adversary—Carver attributes "speaking lips" to its forces at work through a polyphonic orchestration of dominant, minor, or muffled voices, as well as intervening silences pregnant with significance.

Illustrating Carver's discourse on feminism through a plurality of "speech types" is "Fever," the story in which the protagonist, Carlyle, abandoned by his wife Eileen, is confronted to four females belonging to age groups that span three generations: the late adolescent Debbie, whom Carlyle took as a babysitter "in desperation to find someone" the day before resuming his teaching job (158); Carol, the secretary he works and occasionally has sex with; Eileen, whose absence he is trying to get over; Mrs. Webster, the elderly babysitter he can finally "count on" at the end of the story and whose authenticity of feeling and expression have the maieutic function of helping him express his feelings as well, thus overcoming his crisis and moving on to another phase in his life.

As suggested in the lexicological resonance of Mrs. Webster's name, the story has much to do with language. The four women are not given any psychological 'depth' according to the conventions of realism. Rather, a profile of each emerges through the speech type Carver attributes to them. When that speech is one's own, as is that of Mrs. Webster, it pre-supposes a self-knowledge that permits one to exist authentically as well as connect with the world of others. The unripe Debbie is thus disastrous for his children, abandoned on the lawn the first day Carlyle comes back from work, while "[i]n the living room with three teenaged boys" and her "blouse…unbuttoned," Debbie's voice is muted by "Rod Stewart scream[ing] from the stereo," a metaphor for the teenage sub-culture that exerts its total influence on her immature self (158-59).

Speaking in the clichés and stereotyped phrases of TV series, the older Carol's "voice," we are told, "sounded indistinct" (161). To convey the hollowness of her utterance,

her response to Carlyle's story of the incident with Debbie is parodied in the third person: "Did he want her to come over to his place? she asked…He shouldn't be afraid to say when he needed affection, she said" (161). Switching to direct discourse, her speech continues to echo sentimental stock phrases void of honest feeling: "Sweetie, I'm sorry about about what happened. But I understand your wanting to be alone. I respect that…. Honey, don't let it get you down" (161). Infected by her jargon, Carlyle finds himself responding similarly: "Thanks again for being there when I need you…You're one in a million, you know" (161). The ring of insincerity in his own words makes him regret not having "thought of something else to say to her instead of what he'd just said. He'd never talked that way before in his life" (161). Carlyle was apparently sidetracked into sentimental jargon that is neither his nor the path to an authentic relation with Carol, who remains marginal in his life. Neither Debbie nor Carol, finally, have any identity of their own—much less any insight into their feminine condition.

Set off against the undeveloped voice of Debbie and the "indistinct" voice of Carol, Eileen's voice, resounding through her frequent calls from California, has a volume and a *vibrato* all her own, as distinct from Carol's blandness as is her excessive volubility and 'fevered' exhilaration which exacerbate Carlyle's pain instead of soothing or healing it. For all its richer-sounding and sophisticated expression, however, Eileen's language is no less an amalgam of stereotypical phrases that are difficult to demarcate from what might be her own utterance, as they also mark its disjunction from the real: "We have to keep all lines of communication open," she tells Carlyle although in fact she never communicates substantially with him or the children. "I think the worst is over. For both of us. I've suffered too" (168). Exulting in her decision to emancipate herself from them, however, Eileen never sounds as if she has suffered, and the worst is far from over for Carlyle and the children she left behind.

At the root of the ferment and buoyancy that immunize Eileen to the wounds of others is the awakening of her past ambitions to realize herself as an artist: "In college, she had

majored in art, and even though she'd agreed to marry him, she said she intended to do something with her talent. Carlyle said he wouldn't have it any other way. She owed it to herself, he said. She owed it to both of them…. Then, after eight years of being married to him, Eileen had pulled out. She was, she said in her letter, 'going for it'"—"it" being the talent she prioritizes over motherhood: "Tell Keith and Sarah I love them. Tell them I'm sending some more pictures. Tell them that. I don't want them to forget their mother is an artist. Maybe not a great artist yet, that's not important. But, you know, an artist. It's important they shouldn't forget that" (164-65, 167).

One wonders how genuine Eileen's talent is when she sends them a photograph of herself "in a big, floppy hat, wearing a bathing suit" or "a pencil drawing…of a woman on a riverbank in a filmy gown, her hands covering her eyes, her shoulders slumped. It was, Carlyle assumed, Eileen showing her heartbreak over the situation" (164). Vaguely evocative of the David Hamilton photographs in vogue at the time, both show Eileen posing, imitating, or consuming a stereotyped caricature of a female "artist."

The words of a speaking person, writes Bakhtin, "are always *ideologemes*," carriers of an ideological discourse rather than neutral, ever registering "with extreme subtlety the tiniest shifts and oscillations of the social atmosphere" (300). Accordingly, one is tempted to see Eileen's decision to "unbond" or free herself from marriage as inspired, if not induced, by a certain social climate permeated by feminist ideology during the 70s and 80s. It is at least suggested in her expression "go for it" as well as in Carlyle's own justification, "she owed it to herself. She owed it to both of them," valorizing an emancipatory drive toward self-realization that was at the heart of feminism—its credo. In their respective professions as teacher of art and artist, their education, as well as in their adherence to a social milieu that distinguishes them from the working-class Carol, both Carlyle and Eileen could not but have

strongly felt the movement's force and influence. Carlyle may also be hinting as much when, during an art lesson on Byzantine paintings, "he took so long trying to place the anonymous artists in their *social milieu* that some of his students began to scrape their shoes on the floor, or else clear their throats" (my emphasis, 172). Are the students impatient, or even embarrassed, because Carlyle's preoccupation is personal, having to do with the "anonymous artist" in his own life rather than the milieu's pertinence to understanding Byzantine artists? If so, the above may be Carver's wink to the reader. Interestingly, no "ideologemes" in Carol's speech show that feminist ideas had yet seeped into the consciousness of her "social milieu."

Although the connection with feminism is never made explicit, it suffices to point out that Eileen *embodies* emancipation from the domestic sphere. Concerned as Carver is with living persons in real-life situations, however, he shows that principle in conflict with Eileen's responsibilities as a mother. In so far as Carlyle has a more developed 'motherly instinct' than Eileen, who seems to have none, or lost it in the process of emancipation, "Fever" upsets the myth of women as having a greater capacity to care for and connect with others, a capacity that is apparently not linked to gender.

As if to complicate the above question concerning gender, however, Carlyle will later tell Mrs. Webster that Eileen was not always the callous wife and mother she has now become: "Mrs. Webster, there's something I want you to know. For a long time, my wife and I loved each other more than anything or anybody in the world. And that includes the children" (184). Carlyle furthermore recalls that Eileen's voice was once also different: "He longed to hear her voice—sweet, steady, not manic as it had been for months now…" (166) Etymologically, "manic," from *mania* 'madness,' connects with *maenad,* 'bacchante,' which *Merriam Webster* defines as "an unnaturally excited or distraught woman." Invoking the frenzied women of all ages who left their homes to follow Bacchus in Euripides' eponymic *Bacchae*, maenad/manic also coheres with Carlyle's frequent repetition of Eileen as "crazy"

or losing her senses: "She *was* losing her mind. That much was clear to him" (166). Having dislodged herself from the past as well as present reality, Eileen is locked within a narcissistic image of herself as an "artist" that de-sensitizes her to the suffering she has caused her family, making her no longer someone Carlyle can "count" or *lean on* (Ei-leen).

From my above arguments, one may easily conclude that feminism was responsible for Eileen's flight from her commitment to Carlyle and her children, the pain she inflicted on both, the radical change her voice underwent from "sweet, steady" to "manic." To do so, however, is to accuse Carver of furthering clichés often heard about feminism's 'devastating effect,' the 'havoc' it wreaked on marriages and society as a whole—which Carver does not do. Had that been his 'intention,' he might have ended his narrative with Eileen rather than with the fourth and last female of Mrs. Webster, as he does. In a story structured like a musical fugue, where four successive voices contrast as they illumine and intertwine with each other, it would be remiss to conclude anything before the last voice has also been heard.

In counterpoint to the preceding females, therefore, but especially to Eileen's wanting commitment to others, we learn that Mrs. Webster has not only been a substitute mother for Carlyle's children, who "thrived under [her] attentions" (175). She appears to have had the same role for her husband's "son by a former marriage" when she consents "to help him with his mink ranch" by moving to Oregon at the end of the story (182). Keeping her commitment to Carlyle, however, she will not go away before helping him come to terms with the aching memory of Eileen in the past by enabling him to "talk" about it: "Go on…I know what you're saying. You just keep talking, Mr. Carlyle. Sometimes it's good to talk about it. Sometimes it has to be talked about. Besides, I want to hear it. And you're going to feel better afterwards" (185). Her conclusion, after hearing the story of Eileen's disconnection from her former self,

surprises the reader: "You're made out of good stuff. And so is she—so is Mrs. Carlyle. And don't you forget it. You're both going to be okay after this is over" (185).

How can Mrs. Webster be so affirmative about Eileen's ultimate resolution of her now broken self? In my view, one way of answering this question is by focusing on Eileen and Mrs. Webster as "speaking lips" for the movement of feminism. In her transformation from a girl of "eighteen…burning with" love for Carlyle into the unfeeling wife and mother we have heard on the phone, Eileen is shown in the *process of becoming* another woman through her appropriation of feminist discourse (184). Responding to the initial *jolt* of the feminist movement, however, Eileen is galvanized by its liberating force alone, its thrust blinding her to the responsibilities that inexorably come with freedom. Eileen's assimilation thus remains incomplete, suspended at a moment before its productive nature has *disclosed* itself to her in the clear light of its plenitude. In accepting to move to Oregon to help her husband's son, an act that is symbolic of the commitment to others that Eileen dodges, Mrs. Webster comes to fill the *lacuna* in Eileen's unfinished—abortive—appropriation of feminism's full message. A figure of maturity and wisdom, Mrs. Webster thus embodies the last phase of the movement, a function that also sheds light on her previous prophetic statement about Eileen being made of "good stuff": Eileen too, and women like her we presume, will be "okay," when all the dust from the seismic eruption of a powerful movement such as feminism settles, once she has appropriated its utterance to the end.

Not surprisingly, of the four consecutive females Carlyle turns to in his period of trial, Mrs. Webster is the only one he can finally communicate with, the only one who *hears* him. In sharp contrast to Eileen's babble about how to "stay in touch" or "keep all lines of communication open," aims she never achieves, Mrs. Webster's voice, steady and reassuring as opposed to the febrility in Eileen's, is the only one that soothes and heals him from the "fever" he has succumbed to at the closing of the story. Significantly, her feminine voice is

the one the story ends with, investing her with the role of representing the maturity needed to integrate feminism's principles without severing herself from others. With her, feminism has come to fruition, its message assimilated so as to become productive, caring, healing and, above all, capable of reconciling the two sexes to each other. If it was 'negative' in the early phase which Eileen embodies, it is because it *had* to be disruptive of a certain order before that order became re-established on new social grounds. In their age sequence, therefore, the four women and their voices fuse into one Woman, fractured *in time* so as to simultaneously represent feminism's moving process, from the inchoate Debbie to the ripeness and sagacity of one who has the name—and authority—of the dictionary. Thus has Carver, in his intuitive grasp of the feminist movement, nestled it in its "temporality," or its "historicity," both constitutive of its essence or "Being" (Heidegger 62, 63).[i]

In conclusion, focusing briefly on a single story, as I have done, may not be within the scope of a general 'introduction' to the essays that follow. Yet, it was my reading of those essays, their penetrating ideas infecting my own, that incited me to re-vision one narrative in light of their import, consequently adding my voice to theirs. By extension, the clear focus of the feminist lens found in this issue's writings as well as its axial references to the real world will hopefully invite other readers to do the same. In joining their voices to ours, they simultaneously respond to Carver's invitation to participate in a process which he neither names nor gives ideological unity to and which, in its openness, is analogous to the "process" characterizing his own writing in its endless revisions: "Maybe I revise because it gradually takes me into the heart of what the story is *about*. I have to keep trying to see if I can find that out. It's a process more than a fixed position" (*Fires* 218). This introduction then can only express my gratitude to the contributors for initiating a similar process of re-vision or re-

reading of his work as they welcome an open dialog between their discriminating views on feminism and those of our readers.

Notes

[i] In *Being and Time* Martin Heidegger writes: "The fundamental ontological task of the interpretation of Being as such…includes the elaboration of the *Temporality of Being*…. Being is comprehensible only on the basis of the consideration of time…" (62)

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Passionate Fictions: Raymond Carver and Feminist Theory

Libe García Zarranz, University of Alberta, Canada

"How should a man act, given these circumstances?" (179) wonders the troubled protagonist in Raymond Carver's early story "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" This question encapsulates one of the recurrent anxieties in Carver's oeuvre: how to perform the slippery category of man in a world where traditional sexual politics and gender assumptions are collapsing. What happens, however, with the category of woman? How do female characters act, react and become women in Carver's stories? Refusing to use the term "theory" as a scientist, U.S.-based Italian thinker Teresa De Lauretis rather refers to her writing as "passionate fictions,"[1] highlighting the inextricable nature of desire and narrative. Borrowing De Lauretis' poetic term, my proposal consists in suggesting some feminist "passionate fictions" as critical tools to discover uncharted spaces in Carver's universe.

TTCritics like Winfried Fluck have referred to the "weak identity" of Carver's characters, insisting on the fact that the crises they experience do not transform them (71). This reading, nonetheless, limits the possibility of women in the stories to achieve agency and power, so I propose to look at international feminist theory in search of a broader interpretative framework. Philosopher Julia Kristeva believes that all identities are unstable, so she coins the term "subject-in-process" to illustrate this destabilization. Her concept not only refers to the idea of process but also to a "legal proceeding where the subject is committed to trial, because our identities in life are constantly called into

question, brought to trial, over-ruled" ("A Question" 128). Aiming to revisit some of Carver's female characters, the concept "subject-in-process" works as a valuable critical tool. The woman in the early story "The Student's Wife" endures a painful existence with literal pains in her arms, shoulders and legs, thus fitting with Kristeva's notion of the subject as a wounded body.[2] At one point in the story, the protagonist asks her husband a question that reflects her fears and pains at "becoming" a woman: "Didn't you ever feel yourself growing?" (93). Treated as a child and patient by a paternalist husband, this woman significantly dreams with aerial metaphors signalling her desires to escape from a suffocating relationship: "I like that, flying in airplanes. There's a moment as you leave the ground you feel whatever happens is all right" (94). This ominous comment may anticipate the future independence of the woman, a future that might be rather close if we examine the final description of the story:

> When it began to be light outside she got up. She walked to the window…. The trees and the row of two-story apartment houses across the street were beginning to take shape as she watched…. Except for the times she had been up with one or another of the children…, she had seen few sunrises in her life…. By stages things were becoming very visible. (96)

Although her metaphorical awakening echoes modernist stories by Virginia Woolf or Kate Chopin, Carver's protagonist is still a "subject-in-process," since her identity is not fully formed, and she is involved in multiple trials in her domestic experience. Resembling this story, "I Could See the Smallest Thing" also introduces a woman narrator who feels the annoying presence of her husband, whom she compares to a slug. Suffering from insomnia, the woman leaves her house in the middle of the night. When she returns, she wonders: "I thought for a minute of the world outside my house, and

then I didn't have any more thoughts except the thought that I had to hurry up and sleep" (36). This woman feels that something is not working in her life although she is still reluctant to open her eyes and escape from her confinement. Readers have to wait for "Blackbird Pie" to witness a fully determined female character that gets rid of a suffocating marriage contract to develop into a new "ec-centric subject."

The multi-faceted term *subjectivity* stands as a key political concept in feminist theory, as Teresa de Lauretis' philosophy aptly illustrates. She employs the term "ec-centric subject" to refer to an "excessive critical position … attained through practices of political and personal displacement across boundaries between sociosexual identities and communities, between bodies and discourses" ("Eccentric" 182). Her insights on "ec-centric subjectivities" might help to re-evaluate some of Carver's female characters. If we examine Carver's first collection, we find "ec-centric" women in stories like "Fat." As Kirk Nesset argues, "Wanting to free herself of her husband's suffocating influence, [the protagonist's] desires for liberty take the form … of a *literal*, physical self-expansion whose dimensions reduce the man astride her, shrinking him both in importance and size" (299-300):

> I get into bed and move clear over to the edge and lie there on my stomach. But right away, as soon as he turns off the light and gets into bed, Rudy begins. I turn on my back and relax some, though it is against my will. But here is the thing. When he gets on me, I suddenly feel I am fat. I feel I am terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all. ("Fat" 4-5)

Nesset, nonetheless, reads this woman as victim whereas I interpret her imaginary transformation as an instance of the "ec-centric" position she has begun to occupy in terms of sexual and power politics. Her dreaming of an *excessive body* works as a

subversive strategy if we consider feminist theories on the female grotesque. Mary Russo argues that "the grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change … opposed to the classical body, which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism" (219). Therefore, the woman in "Fat" illustrates both Kristeva's notion of the "subject-in-process" and De Lauretis' defence of an "ec-centric subjectivity." Likewise, the young woman in "What Do You Do in San Francisco?" can also be read as an "ec-centric subject," since she does not conform to the traditional standard of femininity. Drawn as the New Woman of *Avant Garde*, she wears male clothes and paints, often raising suspicion among the neighbors, who constantly question her role as wife and mother:

> The story most folks seemed to believe … was the most horrible. The woman was a dope addict…. As evidence, the fact of Sallie Wilson's visit was always brought up…. She dropped in on them one afternoon and said later that … one minute the woman would be sitting and listening to Sallie run on … and the next she'd get up … and start to work on her painting…. Also the way she'd be fondling and kissing the kids, then suddenly start screeching at them for no apparent reason. (85)

Nevertheless, the woman is described by a man who belongs to the community, so the reader does not have the chance to hear her voice. Ironically, even though this woman is located in the subject position of the gaze when painting, she herself becomes a representation, since she does not possess any power to control how her image is constructed.[3] Although this woman slightly challenges patriarchal constructions of femininity, she does not stand as one of Carver's female "figures of resistance," in De

Lauretis' definition of the term.[4] As Patricia White explains in her introduction to De Lauretis' essays,

> [t]he phrase "figures of resistance" captures the way certain figures [thinkers, writers…] refuse to accede to prevailing orders and modes of knowing, as well as the way the figural properties of language (or representation more generally) *always* resist a purely referential approach to the world. (9)

Following this argument, some of Carver's female characters act as transgressive "figures of resistance." One of the best examples is found in the late "Blackbird Pie," a parody of detective fiction, where a confused man constructs a pseudo-conspiracy theory before admitting that his wife has decided to abandon him. The man feels "uneasy," as he explains, since his wife has written him a suspicious farewell letter he cannot decipher:

> Something was fishy in Denmark. The sentiments expressed in the letter may have belonged to my wife (Maybe they did. Say they did, grant that the sentiments expressed were hers). But the handwriting was not her handwriting. And I ought to know. I consider myself an expert in this matter of her handwriting. (94)

Notice the irony for a feminist critic, since of course, as a man, he thinks he masters fiction and literature, but as film theorist Kaja Silverman would say, he only recognizes "the dominant fiction" (30) but not this woman's writing, which stands as a powerful symbol for women's creative force. Her letter as object and herself as subject become figures of resistance because both are positioned outside patriarchal law. Ironically, the man longs to hear "the rhythmic clicking of her knitting needles" (99) but what he finds, to his surprise, is the "ec-centric" force of the woman's pen.[5] Likewise, Carver's

poem "The Other Life" portrays a male narrator explaining how his wife is filling out the divorce papers:

> My wife is in the other half of this mobile home
>
> making a case against me.
>
> I can hear her pen *scratch*, *scratch*.
>
> Now and then she stops to weep,
>
> then—*scratch*, *scratch*. (38)

The repetition of the verb "scratch" reveals the man's tension at the implications of women using a pen, since again it stands as a threat to marriage in a literal sense and a risk to patriarchal institutions by extension. Similarly, Carver's "One More Thing" introduces Maxine and her 15 years old daughter Rae confronting LD, the *pater familias.* The importance of this story lies in the fact that two generations of women are portrayed as "figures of resistance," after challenging patriarchal blackmail and abuse. Interestingly, the man is incapable of uttering that "one more thing" in the end of the story because the kind of masculinity he represents needs to be revisited.[6]

The concept of "masculinity in crisis" has attracted a number of feminist critics that interpret it not as a "crisis of manhood," but to the notion of masculinity itself as "theoretically and historically *troubled*" (qtd. in Chaudhuri 105). In gender theory, the concepts of 'men' and 'male subjectivity' are rendered unstable constructed categories, as Carver's stories aptly illustrate. Kaja Silverman explores masculinities that acknowledge and embrace castration and alterity, and are therefore socially constructed as being "marginal" to the norms of "conventional" masculinity. Among these, she addresses masochistic, non-phallic and wounded masculinities, which highlight the lack at the heart of male subjectivity. Some of these marginal masculinities challenge patriarchal institutions, thus attracting feminist investigation. As Silverman argues, a

"large-scale reconfiguration of male identification and desire would … permit female subjectivity to be lived differently than it is at present" (2). The narrator in the late poem "Two Carriages" believes he has turned into a different man from his previous self, which is now "a stranger" to him:

> I recalled all the details of that strange wild day, unique in my life, and it seemed to me that I really had gone out of my mind or become a different man. It was as though the man I had been till that day were already a stranger to me. (242)

As Kristeva would argue, the stranger is in us, so if men take in their internal differences and multiple constructions, their treatment of women will be radically transformed as well.

The whole collection *Cathedral* represents the collapse of traditional masculinities, since women become active subjects while men stand as passive objects, part of the furniture, commodities. After the tempest, some of Carver's characters, such as the recovering alcoholics in "Where I'm Calling From" or the male protagonists in "Cathedral," have to learn to endure existence with lack of confidence and therefore, anxiety. Nevertheless, other men repress their insecurity and are silenced, behaving like paralysed zombies such as the husband in "Preservation," who is out of work and passively sticks to his sofa, or obsessive men like Lloyd in the story "Careful," who, after separating from his wife, is locked in the top floor of a three-story house compulsively imbibing champagne. These men cannot assume a "marginal masculinity," so they try to stick to the impossible dreams of chivalric times where knights rescued their damsels, as Mel in the earlier "What We Talk about When We Talk about Love" nostalgically reimagines: "… what I liked about knights, besides their ladies, was that they had that suit of armor, you know, and they couldn't get hurt very

easy" (148-149). What he does not know, however, is that his masculinity would be more in tune with that of the knight Adrienne Rich cleverly portrays in one of her early poems: "Who will unhorse the rider and free him from between the walls of iron, the emblems crushing his chest with their weight?" ("The Knight" 16) In Carver's construction of masculinity, the presumption of heterosexuality pervades most of the stories. A close reading, however, reveals certain characters that perform their own sexuality and gender in ways that could be interpreted as queer. Teresa de Lauretis coined the phrase "queer theory" in 1990 aiming at "theorizing lesbian and gay sexualities" ("Queer Theory" iv), though nowadays it stands, in Ruth Goldman's words, as "a theoretical perspective from which to challenge the normative" (qtd. in Giffney 74). One of Carver's stories that could be revisited by employing queer theory is the well-known "Neighbours," since, as Nesset argues, the characters are often "trapped in a kind of sexuality they cannot understand" (294). Bill Miller gets into the neighbors' apartment, a place that William Stull defines as a "psychosexual rumpus room" (207) and abandons himself into what I call "an impossible queer fantasy":

> He lay for a while with his eyes closed, and then he moved his hand under his belt. … He finished the drink and took off the suit. 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 … he put on a black and white checkered skirt and tried to zip it up. He put on a burgundy blouse that buttoned up the front. He considered her shoes, but understood they would not fit. (9)

Bill's cross-dressing performance momentarily turns him into a queer subject. As feminist critic Alice Walker argues,

> the cross-dresser functions as a disorderly and subversive presence: by resisting assimilation within a system of binary oppositions, he or she reveals the inadequacy of this system, and, furthermore, questions the extent to which appearance and identity are coextensive. (35)

In fact, Bill's cross-dressing performance, even though it is limited in space and time, reveals queerness as the unspeakable and the unseeable, since his wife never actually sees his performance; a taboo for traditional masculinity and thus a threat to patriarchy.

Instances of queer desire can also be found in "Cathedral," where two men, initially drawn as rivals, finally discover a common bond.[7] At the beginning of the story, the narrator systematically underestimates his wife. And yet, when Robert, an old friend of hers, visits them, he feels threatened. Interestingly, the solution for the protagonist's masculinity crisis is to realign with the rival. In fact, many of Carver's stories draw on the motif of the erotic triangle and men's rivalry, two concepts that have been discussed by feminist theory at large. Commenting on René Girard's book *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1972), American theorist Eve Sedgwick states that

> in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: [in fact] the bonds of "rivalry" and "love," differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent. (21)

Sedgwick employs the term "homosocial desire" to comment on the "potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted" (1). The final description of the story "Cathedral" reveals a latent homoerotic desire between the two men if we consider the recurrent use of phallic images and the increase in rhythm in the narrative:

> He found my hand, the hand with the pen. … "Press hard," he said to me. "That's right. That's good," he said. "Sure. You got it, bub. I can tell. You didn't think you could. But you can, can't you? You're cooking with gas now." … "Don't stop now. Draw." So we kept on with it. His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went over the paper. It was like nothing else in my life up to now. (213-214)

The queer bond between the two men in "Cathedral" echoes Carver's earlier story "The Calm," where a man decides to leave his wife while he is in a barber shop:

> We looked into the mirror together, his hands still framing my head. I was looking at my self, and he was looking at me too…. He ran his fingers through my hair. He did it slowly, as if thinking about something else. He ran his fingers through my hair. He did it tenderly, as a lover would. (121)

Playing with male identification by employing mirrors and metaphors of the double, Carver manages to transform a masculinist scenario where men use toothpicks and discuss violent stories into a place of homoerotic possibility between the barber and the protagonist.

The incorporation of feminist "passionate fictions" as analytical and creative tools can certainly contribute to reimagining Carver's oeuvre from an innovative and refreshing critical perspective, as I have suggested in this essay. Personally, the examination of Carver's work from a feminist angle has proven both problematic and rewarding due to several reasons. To start with, the female characters portrayed in his stories and poems often stand as examples of De Lauretis' understanding of the category of *woman* as "a being that is at once captive and absent in discourse, constantly spoken of but of itself inaudible or inexpressible, displayed as spectacle and

still unrepresented or unrepresentable" (151). Similarly, Carver seems to obsessively reconstruct his male characters in the tradition of the macho hero promoted by American icons like Ernest Hemingway in the first decades of the 20th century. Nevertheless, the process of scrutinizing his work under a feminist lens has also involved endless pleasure and excitement, especially when finding shortcuts that led to hearing women's "ec-centric" voices and men's "marginal masculinities."

As some Carverian critics like Robert Miltner or Vickie Fachard have anticipated, a third wave of Carver scholarship is beginning to show its face. In fact, many hidden regions in Carver country are longing for revision if we consider those feminist voices and spaces that are still unheard and the queer homoerotic desire that pervades some of his most well-known collections. It is high time now to blow the dust off Carver's pages and unveil the hidden desires that are still in the closet of this male icon of American literature.

Notes:

[1] Theorists Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit employ the term "passionate fictions" to describe Freud's theories of desire. De Lauretis redefines the phrase in her book *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (1994).

[2] Kristeva's notion of the subject as a wounded body comprises her psychoanalytical theories on identity, subjectivity, abjection and foreignness. In order to welcome the differences we find in ourselves, Kristeva proposes to reconstitute what she refers to as "a wounded narcissistic identity." To do so, she suggests the following: "heal your inner wounds which, as a result will render you then capable of effective social action, or intervention in the social plane with the other" ("An Interview" 8). For a detailed discussion on these topics see, among other works, *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991) and *Julia Kristeva: Interviews* (1996).

[3] A similar problem arises in the character of Marian in Altman's film *Short Cuts* (1993), as Pamela Demory explains in her intriguing article "'It's About Seeing . . .' : Representations of the Female Body in Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* and Raymond Carver's Stories" (1999).

[4] De Lauretis wrote the illuminating essay "Figures of Resistance" for two lectures in 1991 and 2004. It was finally published in 2007 in a collection under the same name.

[5] For a fascinating article on the historical and literary implications of the oppositional association between knitting and writing see Kathryn R. King's "On Needles and Pens and Women's Work" in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 14.1 (Spring, 1995).

[6] Interestingly, this is the ending that the editor Gordon Lish proposed for the story "One More Thing." Carver's edition, however, is longer and allows the male protagonist to continue his argument, which complicates the feminist interpretation of the story. I owe this remark to Prof. Sandra Kleppe and the discussion that other "Carverian" colleagues and I held in December 2007 at *The International Raymond Carver Symposium*.

[7] See Chris J. Bullock's article "From Castle to Cathedral: The Architecture of Masculinity in Raymond Carver's 'Cathedral'" (1994) for an in-depth analysis of Carver's construction of masculinity in the story "Cathedral."

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Space, Domesticity and the Everyday: Re-reading Raymond Carver's Women

Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Ireland

Everyday life, as Rita Felski comments, is "the most self-evident, yet the most puzzling of ideas" (15). Although a growing area of academic focus, the concept of the everyday remains ambiguous and inexact. Paul Leuilliot's observation that "what interests the historian of everyday life is the *invisible*" succinctly captures the contradiction inherent in a concept so ordinary yet so difficult to define (xii). When we think of everyday life we are reminded perhaps of a series of unexciting routines and repetitive daily tasks from which we dream of escaping. It is this sense of entrapment within the routines of everyday life that Leuilliot emphasizes: "Everyday life is what we are given every day….what presses us, even oppresses us….Every morning, what we take up again, *on awakening*, is the weight of life" (xi). Often defined in the negative—everyday life is what is not extraordinary, heroic, and exceptional—it is not surprising that feminist critics find the everyday a particularly rich and resonant area of study. Traditionally marginalized from the public sphere of power and influence, women have habitually turned to the rituals and cadences of everyday activity as a means of defining and expressing their identities. Moreover, everyday life takes place within the unexciting spaces of the domestic sphere, within which women's lives have often been defined and inscribed. Although, as I will discuss later in the essay, early critiques of the everyday tended to focus on its curtailment of women's experiences and ability to

transcend the drudgery of their domestic duties, in recent feminist scholarship this automatic alignment of the everyday with the negative has been challenged and attempts made to reread the everyday as a potential source of empowerment for women. To this end, this essay proposes to examine some of the women who populate the stories of Raymond Carver within the paradigm of changing theories of the everyday, assessing the extent to which they are defined by their daily, domestic routines and revisiting the perennial feminist question of whether these routines are inherently negative in their inscription of women's identities and experiences. The key focus is on whether these daily routines constitute a form of constraint for the women or whether they can, in fact, be empowering and life-affirming. I will begin with a brief survey of theoretical approaches to the everyday.

Henri Lefebvre's main interest in the structures of everyday life is in determining the extent to which the social organization of space replicates and reinforces the ideology of those dominant in society. He argues that everyday life is intrinsically linked to industrialization, which has produced a workforce alienated and exploited by bureaucratic structures. As people are forced by the dictates of the workplace to live together in large cities, they become subject to homogenizing and numbing routines (*Everyday Life* 38). Lefebvre's observations on individual behaviour in the contemporary world reveal people who are: "Lost in routines, feeling helpless, estranged from themselves and others, experiencing anger and despair (even 'crises' in mid-life) about their jobs and future."[1] Lefebvre is particularly interested in the effect that the surrounding environment has on one's subjectivity and sense of identity. In *The Production of Space*, he draws on Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony to argue that the social organization of space reproduces the values of the dominant ideology: "[Social] space is a [social] product … the space thus produced also serves as a tool of

thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power" (26). In the contemporary capitalist world, space (in particular urban space) thus reflects and reinforces the values of the marketplace, with the result that public (work) and private (domestic) spaces have become clearly delineated (32). The demands of capitalism are thus closely allied to the patriarchal inscription of women within domestic spaces.

Michel Foucault supports Lefebvre's assessment that space operates to transmit and enforce the dominant ideology of a society: "Space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power" (140). What is most crucial about space, however, is that it naturalizes these structures of power and in doing so, renders them invisible. Edward Soja comments that:

> We must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparent innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology. (6)

The idea that space functions to perpetuate systems of dominance has long been a concern of feminists and reaches its epitome in suburbia which is widely regarded as a physical manifestation of the patriarchal desire to confine women in the domestic setting. Barrie Thorne notes that the language of the family and domesticity, with its taken-for-granted dichotomy between public and private identities, has simultaneously enabled and perpetuated the alignment of women with the closeted spaces of domesticity (6); while Deborah Chambers suggests that suburbia enables the perpetuation of gendered roles and identities:

> The suburban lifestyle was not simply a response to the rising patterns of consumption of an expanding economy. It was also a material and

> cultural expression of the ideology of feminine domesticity: woman as homemaker. Suburbanization was an experience of egalitarianism….yet only for men. (87)

Women are thus inscribed and limited by the structures of social space. Confined to the domestic, and marginalized from the male world of power, they are habitually aligned with the mundane and the unexceptional. It is for this reason that Lefebvre concludes: "Everyday life weighs heaviest on women. Some are bogged down by its peculiar cloying substance, while others escape into make-believe….They are the subject of everyday life and its victims" (*Everyday Life* 73).

It is certainly possible, even easy, to read Carver's women as exemplifying the kind of entrapment within the numbing routines of contemporary domesticity noted by Lefebvre. Most of the women in Carver's stories are embedded within the domestic sphere. Descriptions of the characters are often merged with descriptions of the surrounding space, as though the women do not exist independently of their domestic environments: "We'd finished supper and I'd been at the kitchen table with the light out for the last hour, watching" ("The Idea" 12); "Nina was at the kitchen table, the little box with her sewing things beside her on another chair" ("Sixty Acres" 54); "We went inside. This plump little woman with her hair done up in a bun was waiting for us in the living room. She had her hands rolled up in her apron" ("Feathers" 8); "The women were in the kitchen straightening up….Jerry and Bill were sitting in the reclining chairs on the patio, drinking beer and just relaxing" ("Tell the Women We're Going" 148). Although all of Carver's characters are, to a certain degree, subject to the claustrophobic constraints of the home, the women are more closely inscribed within the routine duties of domesticity. This is evident in the final example above which clearly delineates between the women who are immersed in domestic duties and the men who are free to

leave the domestic space if they wish: "Then Jerry said, 'How about a little run?' 'Sounds good to me,' Bill said. 'I'll tell the women we're going'" (148).

The women in Carver's stories are also more likely to be nameless, or at the very least defined primarily through their domestic roles of wife or mother. Many of them manifest the heaviness of spirit that Lefebvre suggests is the result of a life circumscribed by the mundane repetitions of the everyday. The marital bed, in the story "Whoever Was Using This Bed," serves as a metaphor for the nameless discontent of the narrator's wife, Iris: "She has a pillow behind her back, and she's more on my side than her own. The covers are up around her shoulders. The blankets and the sheet have been pulled out from the front of the bed" (28). Iris suffers from violent nightmares: "She thrashes around in bed during the night and wakes in the morning drenched with sweat, the nightgown sticking to her body" (29); and her conversations are peppered with references to death: "Lately I've been feeling this vein in my forehead. It *pulses* sometimes….I hate to think about it, but probably one of these days, I'll have a stroke or something" (34). What is most notable about Iris is her passivity. For most of the story, she sustains a meandering conversation with her husband while lying in bed, seemingly unable either to sleep or rouse herself to action, becoming animated only when they argue about whether or not they wish to be unplugged from life-support if they were to fall into a coma. The resolution to this conversation results in a moment of connection between Iris and her husband, but given that what animates them is the thought of dying, it seems unlikely that this connection will be anything other than fleeting.

The lethargy and boredom exhibited by Iris and her husband suffuse many of Carver's stories. The majority of his characters are seemingly numbed and exhausted by the tedium of their daily routines—worn out, as Leuilliot suggests, by the "weight of

living" (3). Bill and Arlene Miller in "Neighbours" have nothing specifically wrong with their lives, but they feel an undefined discontent with the way they have turned out:

> Bill and Arlene Miller were a happy couple. But now and then they felt they alone among their circle had been passed by somehow, leaving Bill to attend to his bookkeeping duties and Arlene occupied with secretarial chores. They talked about it sometimes, mostly in comparison with the lives of their neighbours, Harriet and Jim Stone. It seemed to the Millers that the Stones lived a fuller and brighter life. (6)

What is interesting is that when the Millers are asked to housesit for their neighbours, and thus get the opportunity to experience the life they envy, they can think of nothing to do other than repeat the same routines they have at home: "Inside it seemed cooler than his apartment, and darker too….He lay down on the bed and stared at the ceiling" (9). This lethargy suggests that there is little possibility that the Millers will ever transcend the limitations of their lives.

One of the ironies of suburbanization, according to critics, is the isolation and alienation it imposes, on its female inhabitants in particular, in spite of the close proximity in which people now live. Carver's stories are drenched with illusions to misdialled phone numbers and anonymous letters, as though to emphasize that contemporary advances in communications technologies have done nothing to bring people closer together. In "Whoever Was Using This Bed," the narrator and his wife Iris are repeatedly woken up by phone calls in the middle of the night, first from the narrator's embittered ex-wife, and during the course of the story from a drunk woman looking for someone called Bud. Carver's description of the phone calls resonates with loneliness and isolation:

> I hang up, wait until it rings again, and then I take the receiver and lay it on the table beside the phone. But I hear the woman's voice say "Bud, talk to me, please." I leave the receiver on its side on the table, turn off the lights, and close the door to the room. (27)

The phone calls terrify Iris: "'Answer that!' my wife screams from the bedroom. 'What in God's name do they want, Jack? I can't take any more'" (27). In fact so badly is Iris affected by the phone calls that she begins to imagine her own death, as though she would prefer to die than to have to engage with the world outside of her bedroom: "I want you to promise me that you'll pull the plug on me, if and when it's ever necessary" (40).

Iris' fear of the external world and attempt to insulate herself from it by cocooning herself within the domestic space leads to a kind of emotional and physical paralysis often linked by critics to inhabitants of suburbia. Stuart Ewen points out that suburbia was initially conceived of as a utopian alternative to life in the city: "Given the deprivations of the war and the depression, along with the spiritual deprivations of the dominant modernist vision, the suburb, as an idea, encapsulated a mix of frontier and technological utopianism" (224). Instead of promoting individuality and liberation from the constraints of modernity, however, suburbia soon became the primary cause of isolation and repression: "The suburban ideology challenged the anonymous regimentation of panopticism, yet the suburbs themselves were the product of a panoptic process" (227). Many of Carver's women demonstrate the internalised repression suggested by Ewen, and allow their problems to fester rather than disturb the fragile air of normality with which they have surrounded themselves. When Sandy's husband in "Preservation" loses his job and begins to spend all his time sitting on their

sofa, Sandy continues to participate in a charade of normality rather than trying to help him out of his depression:

> He always had a pot of coffee warming on the stove for her. In the living room, she'd sit in the big chair and he'd sit on the sofa while they talked about her day. They'd hold their cups and drink their coffee as if they were normal people. (33)

This willingness to engage in a performance of normality is a symptom of the panoptic repression of suburbia noted by many critics. Lynn Spigel, for example, regards this public performance of normality as a triumph of convention over individuality: "[T]hese mass-produced suburbs were on notions of everyday life as a form of theatre, a stage on which to play out a set of bourgeois social conventions" (219). Carver's characters are so busy performing their roles and watching their neighbours perform theirs, that they forget to have real lives and as a consequence are unable to conduct meaningful, emotionally satisfying relationships. Even sex, for Carver's women, has become routine and is unlikely to lead to any genuine emotional connection. In "Jerry, Molly and Sam," Jill drifts into an affair with the married Al because she is lonely: "Jill worked in bookkeeping at Weinstock's. She was a nice girl, said she loved Al. She was just lonely, that's what she told him the first night" (111). In "Fat," the narrator's sex life with her husband is but another unremarkable part of her daily routine:

> I pour the water in the pot, arrange the cups, the sugar bowl, carton of half and half, and take the tray into Rudy….I can't think of anything to say, so we drink our tea and pretty soon I get up to go to bed….Rudy begins. I turn on my back and relax, though it is against my will. (4)

The attention to the contents on the tray makes an interesting contrast to her passive though unexpressed rejection of her husband.

Many of Carver's women thus demonstrate the emotional and physical paralysis engendered by their entrapment within the mundane routines of everyday life in suburbia. Lefebvre's assertion that women become "bogged down by its peculiar cloying substance" (*Everyday Life* 73) is apparent in the heaviness of spirit demonstrated by many of the women in Carver's stories. Does this mean that there is no possibility of transcendence for women embedded in the domestic, suburban environment? A challenge to Lefebvre's alignment of the everyday with the negative and repressive came with the publication of Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). De Certeau attacked the idea that the weak in society passively reproduce the ideology and behaviour of the dominant and argued that, on the contrary, the weak can function autonomously even within the constraints imposed on them (xi). De Certeau's argument reflects a general realignment of the field of cultural studies during the 1980s, which sought to re-examine the balance of power between dominant and subordinate social groups. A central focus of these critical enquiries was whether subordinate groups could effectively challenge dominant structures and ideologies using only the tools made available to them by these dominant structures. John Fiske suggests that such challenges are indeed possible, although the victories achieved are often "fleeting and limited" and thus difficult to critically evaluate (1-2). This ambiguity also underlies theoretical approaches to everyday life, its very ordinariness an obstacle to its study: "Like the blurred speck at the edge of one's vision that disappears when looked at directly, the everyday ceases to be everyday when it is subject to critical enquiry" (Felski 15). Although certain that everyday life can empower its subjects and enable them to challenge dominant structures of power, therefore, theorists sometimes find it difficult to assess the success of these challenges, such is their subtle and undefined nature. This dilemma also succinctly pinpoints one of the main challenges of critically

evaluating Raymond Carver women within the paradigm of theories of the everyday. Carver's female protagonists offer a subtle but definite challenge to the social structures that surround them. Yet their challenge is often so half-hearted, and Carver's narratives so ephemeral, that the reader is often left wondering if anything has indeed changed. The revelation that her husband wilfully ignored the body of a dead girl so that he could continue with his fishing trip shocks the narrator of "So Much Water So Close to Home" yet her reaction is muted and often inarticulate, and there seem to be no lasting consequences for their relationship: "Nothing will be any different. We will go on and on and on. We will go on even now, as if nothing had happened" (77). Although clearly a moral figure who is uncomfortable with her husband's decided lack of accountability and compassion, the narrator appears unwilling—perhaps unable—to disrupt the balance of her relationship with her husband. Surely her willingness to suppress her true feelings about her husband's behaviour in order to preserve their domestic *status quo* illustrates a form of silent conspiracy evident among many of Carver's women to conform to their roles as the spectators to their husbands' lives rather than the actors of their own.

Rita Felski criticizes Lefebvre and other theorists of the everyday for what she regards as their unthinking alignment of the everyday with the negative and its automatic suggestion that the daily chores of women are somehow less important than the more exceptional duties of men:

> Both feminism and cultural studies have questioned the view that the everyday exists only as something to be transcended, as the realm of monotony, emptiness and dull compulsion. Furthermore, such a division between the everyday and the non-everyday slides imperceptibly into a ranking of persons: those exemplary individuals able to escape the

> quotidian through philosophy, high art or heroism versus the rest of humanity. (17)

Felski suggests a reassessment of the terms of everyday life should be conducted in order to liberate women from the limiting terms of these dichotomies. Drawing on some of Felski's arguments, this essay suggests that many of Carver's stories can be reread as exercises in revision and resistance to normative (masculinist) narratives of the everyday, enabling their interpretation as optimistic (feminist) accounts of women's everyday experiences.

Lefebvre cites repetition and routine as the defining characteristics of the everyday experience. Many of Carver's women, as we have seen, are trapped in the monotony of unsatisfying domestic routines. Their inability to liberate themselves from these routines is linked by many feminist critics to the plight of women within patriarchy: "Woman clings to routine; time has for her no element of novelty, it is not a creative flow; because she is doomed to repetition, she sees in the future only a duplication of the past" (De Beauvoir 610). This association of women with repetition and tradition, and men with advancement and modernity, is criticized by Felski who suggests that repetition can constitute a defence against the chaos of the modern world and enable us to learn from the past in order to better face the future:

> [T]here is a tendency, clearly visible in the work of Lefebvre, to equate repetition with domination and innovation with agency and resistance….In our own era, however, the reverse is just as likely to be true. Within the maelstrom of contemporary life, change is often imposed on individuals against their will; conversely everyday rituals may help to safeguard a sense of personal autonomy and dignity, or to preserve the distinctive qualities of a threatened way of life. In other words, repetition

> is not simply a sign of human subordination to external forces but also one of the ways in which individuals engage with and respond to their environment. Repetition can signal resistance as well as enslavement. (21)

On the one hand, therefore, we can read the narrator's mother in "Boxes" as a particularly poignant example of the alienated character suggested by Lefebvre. Estranged from both her family and the surrounding environment, she has retreated into the routine of moving house and spends her life in constant flux: "She was always in the process of packing or else unpacking. Sometimes she'd move two or three times in the same year" (16). If we reassess the constant moving of the mother in "Boxes" in the light of Felski's argument, however, we could interpret her repetitive packing and moving as an affirming activity. She began to move shortly after her husband lost his job:

> She started moving years ago, after my dad lost his job. When that happened, when he was laid off, they sold their home, as if this were what they should do. And went to where they thought things would be better. But things weren't any better there, either. They moved again. They kept moving. (16)

She continued to move regularly after her husband died. The repetition involved in the process of packing and moving thus perhaps represents a source of order for the mother, a way for her to structure the chaos surrounding her. Even the narrator is forced to admit that the constant moving does his mother no harm: "She's seventy years old, has grey hair, wears glasses with rhinestone frames, and has never been sick a day in her life" (17). In spite of the narrator's pity for his mother and tendency to regard her as someone trapped within her relentless cycle of packing and moving, therefore, it is possible that it

is this very routine that enables her to retain her identity and spirit in an increasingly jaded and uncaring world.

Felski also criticizes the assumption that the domestic space of the home signifies stagnation and entrapment. Because modernity celebrates mobility, movement and boundary crossing, she states, it has become the norm to equate the home with stasis and tradition (23). Feminist critics have contributed to this designation because of their representation of the home as the site of containment of the woman and the obstacle to her participation in the outside world (Felski 23). Felski suggests that the significance of the home and its role as the fixed certainty at the heart of everyday life need to be re-imagined. Although often conceived of as the arena of female subjugation, the home, she suggests, can also be the showcase for a woman's domestic skills and an opportunity to demonstrate financial success (24). She quotes Iris Young who argues for the symbolic richness of the home as a repository of the memories and triumphs of its inhabitants: "Dwelling in the world means we are located among objects, artifacts, rituals, and practices that configure who we are in our particularity."[2]

Olla, in "Feathers," is one of the few of Carver's women who have achieved genuine satisfaction in their domestic role. Dismissed by the narrator and his wife who have tremendous difficulty remembering her name, she appears initially to be an insubstantial character, reduced to the mundane routines of her housekeeping:

> Just then Olla came back with a can of mixed nuts and a bottle of root beer. She had her apron off now. She put the can of nuts onto the coffee table next to the swan. She said, "Help yourselves. Bud's getting your drinks." Olla's face came on red again as she said this. She sat down in an old cane rocking chair and set it in motion. (10)

In pride of place in Olla's home is a mold of her teeth taken before they were corrected by an orthodontist. She kept the mold, she explains to her guests, to remind her of how lucky she is to have met her husband, Bud, who paid for the treatment. Her pride in her husband and the close bond between them negates any suggestion that Olla is a figure of pity: "Olla looked over at Bud. Bud winked at her. She grinned and lowered her eyes" (12). Even the narrator's description of Olla's son as "the ugliest baby I'd ever seen" (18) fails to dent the air of satisfaction with her home and family emanating from Olla: "It *was* an ugly baby. But, for all I know, I guess it didn't matter that much to Bud and Olla" (22). Certainly her willingness to celebrate the small triumphs of domestic life make her a more admirable and contented character than the narrator and his wife who epitomize the vague dissatisfaction of many of Carver's characters and their inability to forge concrete bonds with one another:

> We wished for a new car, that's one of the things we wished for. And we wished we could spend a couple of weeks in Canada. But one thing we didn't wish for was kids. The reason we didn't have kids was that we didn't want kids. Maybe sometime, we said to each other. But right then, we were waiting. (3)

It is unsurprising, given this superficial and half-hearted attitude towards starting a family, that the narrator's son turns out to be a disruptive, negative force in their lives: "Bud shrugs. He eats his sandwich and says Harold's going to be a linebacker someday. 'You ought to see that kid,' Bud says. I nod….The truth is, my kid has a conniving streak in him. But I don't talk about it. Not even with his mother. Especially her. She and I talk less and less as it is" (23). In "Feathers," therefore, the home can constitute a positive, life-affirming space, but only if the characters who dwell within it are willing and able to communicate with each other. Olla draws her strength from the memories

and meanings inscribed in her surroundings and is, as a result, more present in the world than the narrator and his wife.

Olla's ability to construct a coherent identity from within the constraints of her domestic setting is indicative of Fiske's argument that the subordinate in society can resist dominant culture even if all they have at their disposal are the tools provided to them by that dominant culture (2). In order to explain how the weak can triumph, De Certeau divides the institutions and regulations governing social space into two categories: "strategies" and "tactics." "Strategies" he aligns with dominant social institutions and instruments of power, which impose a certain structure on social space. "Tactics," on the other hand, are the ways in which individuals engage with their environments, creating a space for themselves amidst the constraints operating around them. "Tactics" do not overtly resist the "strategies," but rather draw from them and create a space that is dependent on, yet never fully obedient to them: "The place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance" (De Certeau xix). Taking the act of reading as an example, De Certeau notes that although reading is commonly perceived to be a passive activity, with the reader constrained by the strategies of the author, in reality the reader imposes his own reasoning and experiences onto the text: "He insinuates into another person's text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation: he poaches on it, is transported into it….The thin film of writing becomes a movement of strata, a play of spaces. A different world (the reader's) slips into the author's place" (xxi). According to De Certeau's argument, everyday life thus works by poaching and recombining the rules and elements that already exist in culture to produce a space that is influenced by but never fully defined by those rules. This engagement with the surrounding environment enables the individual to forge his own

identity and take responsibility for his own destiny: "This mutation makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another person's property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient" (xxi).

De Certeau's theories of the everyday resonate, in particular, with those interested in forging a space for the marginalized and disenfranchised in society. It suggests that rebellion does not have to be heroic and exceptional to be valid. On the contrary, according to De Certeau's argument, it is the small, daily, often unnoticed acts of rebellion characteristic of everyday life that constitute the true possibility of transcending the constraints of the dominant culture. In Carver's stories, the exceptional acts are the reserve of the male characters. They frequently get to escape from the confines of domesticity and engage with the external world. What they do with their freedom, however, neither enhances nor energizes their lives. Bill and Jerry leave their wives at home in "Tell the Women We're Going" and murder two girls they meet hitchhiking. Bill's offhand and detached description of the murders indicates how little it affects him: "Bill had just wanted to fuck. Or even to see them naked. On the other hand, it was okay with him if it didn't work out. He never knew what Jerry wanted. But it started and ended with a rock. Jerry used the same rock on both girls" (154).

Quite frequently, the male characters are given a chance to be heroic, but they never succeed in rising to the challenge and inevitably keep drifting unhappily through their lives. The narrator in "Boxes" stands by helplessly while his mother plans yet another move, unable to reach out to her and offer her some support: "I stand there wanting to say something. But I don't know what….I feel sad for a while, and then the sadness goes away and I start thinking about other things" (24). The men in "So Much Water So Close To Home" discover the body of a young girl and decide to continue with their fishing trip:

> [O]ne of them thought they should start back to the car at once. The others stirred the sand with their shoes and said they felt inclined to stay. They pleaded fatigue, the late hour, the fact that the girl "wasn't going anywhere." In the end they all decided to stay. They went ahead and set up the camp and built a fire and drank their whiskey. (71)

Al, in "Jerry and Molly and Sam," is worried about impending redundancies at work, but instead of discussing them with his wife, he begins an affair with a colleague. Rather than boosting his ego, however, the affair only adds to Al's sense of anxiety: "Now he was having an *affair*, for Christ's sake, and he didn't know what to do about it. He did not want it to go on, and he did not want to break it off; you don't throw everything overboard in a storm. Al was drifting"(112). He decides he needs to take some action and impose some order on his life: "He had to start someplace—setting things in order, sorting all this out" (112), and figures that taking the family dog away and dumping it somewhere is the first step towards resolving his problems. His chance to play the hero comes when he promises his distraught children that he will find and return their dog to them. When he does find her, however, she walks away from him and he makes no effort to pursue her: "He sat down on his heels, reached out his arm, waiting. They looked at each other. She moved her tail in greeting. She lay down with her head between her front legs and regarded him. He waited. She got up. She went around the fence and out of sight. He sat there"(122). This is a wonderfully subtle undermining of the concept of heroism as a possible means for Carver's male characters to transcend their own limitations and find fulfilment.

Carver's women are not afforded the same opportunities to be heroic. Instead, they triumph through the small acts of courage and determination that make up their everyday lives. Doreen, in "They're not Your Husband," quietly takes on a waitressing

job to make ends meet when her husband loses his job. She submits to his jibes about her weight and obediently embarks on a diet to please him. When Earl participates in the objectification of his wife by other customers in the coffee shop in which she works: "When Doreen started down the counter again, Earl nudged the man's shoulder and said: 'I'm telling you something. Listen. Look at the ass on her'" (21), Doreen shrugs it off with great dignity and continues with her work. Patti in "Vitamins" forges a career for herself selling vitamins door-to-door, conscious of her need to have a focus in life: "She said she needed a job for her self-respect. So she started selling multiple vitamins door to door….She had personality. Pretty soon the company gave her a promotion" (85). Her husband responds to her success by cheating on her with one of her co-workers. However, this damages him far more than it does Patti, and he begins to lose control: "'Where's the aspirin?' I asked. I knocked down some more things. I didn't care. Things kept falling" (102).

Perhaps most poignant is "A Small, Good Thing" which depicts a couple trying to come to terms with the sudden death of their only son. Their grief is interrupted by a series of angry, anonymous phone calls from the local baker, incensed at their failure to pick up the child's birthday cake. Ann's decision to confront the baker enables her to begin dealing with her grief: "She clenched her fists. She stared at him fiercely. There was a deep burning inside her, an anger that made her feel larger than herself, larger than either of these men" (80). Her honesty and refusal to shy away from her grief is unique in Carver's stories and causes the baker to reflect on his lack of humanity and compassion: "I'm just a baker. I don't claim to be anything else. Maybe once, maybe years ago, I was a different kind of human being. I've forgotten, I don't know for sure. But I'm not any longer, if I ever was" (82). The story ends with a rare sense of hope as the characters discuss the truly important aspects of life:

> They ate rolls and drank coffee….Although they were tired and in anguish, they listened to what the baker had to say. They nodded when the baker began to speak of loneliness, and of the sense of doubt and limitation that had come to him in his middle years. He told them what it was like to be childless all these years. To repeat the days with the ovens endlessly full and endlessly empty. (83)

In spite of the huge void at the centre of this story, created by the tragic death of a young child, the characters' willingness to confront their inner feelings enables them to overcome the depths of their grief and begin to imagine a future.

I have argued that Carver's women exhibit many of the characteristics associated with everyday life: they are embedded within the structures of domesticity and find themselves constrained by the mundane repetitions of their ordinary everyday duties. In such duties, however, one often finds fulfilment. Although Carver's women rarely have the opportunity to be heroic in the traditional sense of the term, they find transcendence in the small acts of bravery and honesty that confront them on a daily basis. John Berger suggests that the new centrality of space as an organizing principle has serious consequences for the integrity of the narrative. With the undermining of the historical metanarrative, he claims, comes the opportunity to explore previously hidden underworlds of experience:

> We hear a lot about the crisis of the modern novel. What this involves, fundamentally, is a change in the *mode of narration*. It is scarcely any longer possible to tell a straight story sequentially unfolding in time. And this is because we are too aware of what is continually traversing the storyline *laterally*. (40)

Carver's stories are often misinterpreted by readers eager to impose on them a traditional heroic metanarrative. Robert Altman's celebrated film *Short Cuts* fuses several of Carver's stories together in order to construct his narrative. Moving the action to Los Angeles and framing the stories with a dramatic backdrop of earthquakes and bug spraying suggest that Carver's stories, for Altman, lack drama and tension. What I have argued in this essay is that situating Carver's stories within the paradigm of theories of the everyday enables us to engage with the often ephemeral content of his stories and the fleeting emotions of his female characters without imposing a (masculine) structuring narrative on them.

Notes

[1] Wander, Philip. "Introduction" to Lefebvre, Henri. *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, xvi.
[2] Young, Iris Marion. "House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme." Quoted in Felski, 25.

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Influences of Feminism and Class on Raymond Carver's Short Stories

Vanessa Hall, New York City College of Technology, CUNY

> *Class—economic circumstance; problems of being in the first generation of one's family to come to writing—its relationship to works of literature: the great unexamined.*
> —Tillie Olsen, *Silences* 288

In the essay "Fires" (1982), Raymond Carver writes about the difficulty of "pin[ning] down with any…certainty" the influences on his writing, even as he recalls the diverse nature of these influences: influences that include the more traditionally discussed literary influences such as writing mentors and favorite authors; important but transient encounters that became grist or "suggestions" for his writing, like a menacing phone call or a terse remark; and finally, the "ferocious years of parenting" that he believed were the greatest influence on his writing (28, 34). Carver struggles to describe why he believes parenting itself—it's notable here that he doesn't mention poverty, alcoholism, or even marriage—is the center of gravity around which many of his creative efforts will be flattened for years. That he figures his greatest influence as negative, and that he figures parenting largely as an absence, as a series of deprivations and distractions, provides a potentially productive inroad into an examination of the relationship between one's creativity and life experiences, as embedded in a unique social and cultural context.

Years before Carver published "Fires," Tillie Olsen published the essay "Silences" in Harper's Magazine (1965, originally delivered in 1962), an essay about

how the circumstance of most lives preclude artistic creativity. She later included this essay in a collection of creative essays; this became the feminist classic *Silences*. This collection explores the nature of literary silences, extensively documenting the experienced agony of work interrupted for various life circumstances, even amongst the most esteemed writers. An essential part of Olsen's argument is that creativity is an integral part of human identity, which scars and stultifies human growth when interrupted or silenced. Particularly invested in answering the question of why women are so underrepresented in literature, Olsen posits that women are "traditionally trained to place others' needs first," thereby lacking the necessary self focus to create time and space to cultivate their writing (35). Lack of confidence, or belief that one has anything worthwhile to say, or the right to say it, are part of the lacking inner "needs of creation" (46): Olsen reminds us that "Chekhov (a first-generation) [and one of Carver's greatest writer-influences] called becoming a writer, 'squeezing the serf out of one's soul'" (288). Class, as Chekov and Carver attest, as well as race, as Olsen also argues, are also obstacles to creativity. Being a member of the nondominant class, race, or gender means one rarely has access to the time and resources necessary to cultivate creativity, or is able to find validation of a "different sense of reality" and the confidence to express one's own perspective" (88). Although his writing and educational needs came first in his relationship with Maryann Burk Carver,[1] Carver's class—both his and his wife's need for employment—prevented him from being comfortably cushioned from the demands of daily domestic life, the "unrelieved responsibility and permanent distraction" he found almost unbearably frustrating (33).

While Carver's representation of working-class characters is lauded in discussion of his stories, both critical and popular, it is notable that his writing is never examined in relation to the writing of one of the most visible literary figures of his time who also became renowned for her depictions of working-class people, Tillie Olsen. Although Olsen was of a generation prior to Carver's, and was actively involved in the American Communist Party during the 1930s, she also published two of her three major book collections during the 1970s, *Yonnondio* and *Silences*. Olsen was also an important short story writer, winning the O. Henry Award for "Tell Me a Riddle," in 1961, an award that Carver himself would receive in 1983 and 1988. While both Olsen and Carver were important short story writers interested in representing fairly and accurately working-class people, one of the more obvious reasons for their not being treated together is the writer's respective political and cultural contexts and audiences. Whereas Carver was published in glossy magazines and achieved mainstream literary recognition, as close to a household name as a literary figure was likely to become in his era, Olsen found a narrower, and more politicized audience. As Kaye Hoyle Nelson argues

> [h]er work has had the broadest appeal to women and those concerned with the affairs of women. ... Primarily, Olsen has gained attention because she has placed women at the center of her art as the stalwarts of class and gender struggle. She has crystallized the charge that twentieth-century American society has failed to understand and cultivate the full potential of its underclasses, particularly its working-class women (2).

In contrast to Olsen, Carver eschewed an overt politics; for many, his stories also embodied the widespread political ennui of the post Civil Rights era.

This essay posits, however, that Carver's biographical experiences and historical positioning sensitized him to the many social and cultural discourses on femininity and masculinity prominent during the 1970s and 1980s. While it is impossible and not even necessarily desirable to examine the relationship between biography and fictionalized characters, it is important to note that both Ella and Maryann worked in service jobs for much of his life. They provided, from their vantage points as mothers, wives, and workers, an influential lens onto the world for Carver, and one that intersects variously with a labor feminist perspective. Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism gets at the process by which language and representation escape an author's control, some of which one is unaware (Holquist xx). A writer of what Bakhtin calls polyphonic texts, Carver was certainly aware on one level of how complex his female characters are. However, it is unlikely he was conscious of the many discourses or even politics they tapped into. Teasing out the different languages and voices in Carver's stories provides a fuller reading of his treatment of working and middle class characters, as well as insights into the decades they were written.

While there is not an overt politics in Carver's stories, his stories do treat feminist issues and concerns and can be read as a valuable mirror of contemporaneous discourse on masculinity and femininity. Although Carver's treatment of feminism sometimes draws heavily on mainstream feminist discourses of the 1970s and 1980s, his representations at times also intersect with what Dorothy Sue Cobble terms a labor feminist perspective, a feminism which has not viewed gender difference and equality as incompatible, and stressed the "multiple sources"—notably of class and race as well as gender—of women's secondary status in society (3-4). Examining parts of Carver's

biography and stories in relation to Tillie Olsen's and more general labor feminist insights into the nature of representation and class will help tease out the relationship between Carver and his female characters, both working class and middle class.[2] Even as Carver struggled to reconcile his own domestic responsibilities with his desire to write, it was largely through female characters in his fiction, defined and confined by their domestic roles, that he comes closest to writing metafiction.[3] In something of a paradox, then, it is through several of his female characters that he is most convincingly able to demonstrate an inner growth and ability to break out of individual bewilderment and isolation to connect imaginatively with other people, a necessary skill for a writer. While Carver apparently viewed parenting as a uniformly negative force on his writing, and it is notable that his own children in fictional guises rarely appear in his stories ("Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit" excepting), the primary women in his life, including Maryann Burk Carver, as well as his mother, Ella Carver, and second wife, Tess Gallagher, seem to have been an enormous influence on his writing. Interestingly, although Carver never mentions them as influences in the essay, these relationships manifest themselves complexly in his stories, in the conflict-laden realm of male/female relationships but in more positive ways as well.

There was a resurgence of interest in the working class in both politics and popular culture in the 1970s, the decade Carver's stories achieved recognition. This was the decade in which Richard Nixon discovered, or arguably created, the Silent Majority, an amorphous group of non-radical Americans whose description, in addition to being white and conservative, was often decidedly blue-collar. As labor historian Jefferson

Cowie demonstrates, this popular and political interest in blue-collar workers diminished during the 1980s even as industrial employment waned in the United States. However, notable exceptions remained, and the hardhat remained a stock figure throughout the 1980s, although notably *Roseanne* joined Bruce Springsteen in popular iconography by the decade's end, denoting an increasing complexity in working-class representation. It is significant that Raymond Carver's stories, which also featured working-class characters, were published and achieved renown during these decades; Carver's stories also loosely followed this class trajectory, likely due as much to his own social mobility as to external social and cultural factors. Although class was an important dimension of Carver's fiction, critics and reviewers rarely explored it as a component of identity beyond the surface signifiers by which his much touted minimalism became identified: the transitory jobs, money worries, junk food. Carver complicated often facile treatments of working-class characters. Even as studies of the working-class continued to primarily revolve around white, male industrial workers, which Julie Bettie correctly understands to be an "exclusionary formulation of class" that generally ignores formulations of class among women and non-white workers, Carver reflected the changing composition of the working-class in the United States from industrial to service work (126). Perhaps even more notable than his focus on working-class male characters—a rarity for "serious" literature even during the 1970s—is his depiction of working-class women.

As representations of women were becoming more complex in American culture, thanks largely to what became known as the second wave of feminism, complex portrayals of working-class women were (and are today) too scarce in fiction and popular culture. Carver, like other writers of his period, notably female writers of color, was

helping to give women a voice as classed, as well as gendered, subjects. In his stories, Carver contributed to the cultural representations of strong, believable women, many of whom were working-class, foregrounding their perspectives and experiences. Carver's men suffer in comparison with women in his stories, who are often clearly hampered by the impulses or institutions that bind them to the men in their lives. In their more benign form, his male characters are paralyzed by lack of imagination, by alcoholism, by depression and/or by a more inexplicable lethargy. Also confined in unsatisfying jobs or marriages, his female characters, however, are most often actively involved in the process of living, and frequently also try, even if indeterminately, to find meaning or bring change to their lives.

The marital discord permeating Carver's stories echoes the seismic shifts marriage was encountering in mainstream United States culture as changing gender norms, including changing masculine norms, provoked feminist critiques of traditional marriage. This, combined with the increasingly liberal divorce laws and a more culturally sanctioned focus on individual needs and desires, resulted in the dissolution of many marriages. Some of Carver's stories, like "The Student's Wife" and "I Could See the Smallest Things," seem to overtly reference mainstream feminism and its focus on the constraints of the domestic sphere, particularly for women. "The Student's Wife" from *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please*? depicts Nan's sleepless night and increasingly horrific existential journey toward morning, as her husband snores, nodding to sleep during her attempt to create a list for him of things she likes. In one of her several attempts to keep her husband awake with her, Nan tells him of one of her dreams, a thinly veiled metaphor for her backseat status in their relationship. While her husband successfully soothes

himself to sleep with Rilke, Nan spends the night reading magazines, perhaps an allusion to the women's magazines that were the target of Betty Friedan's ire in *The Feminine Mystique*, with their exaltation of all things domestic. The story ends with her contemplating a "terrible" sunrise and returning to her bedroom, in preparation for a day to be spent supervising, we learn at the beginning of the story, "all of the four-to-seven-year-olds in the Woodlawn Apartments" (122).

While we get even less context for "I Could See the Smallest Things" from *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*," the story's protagonist Nancy, like the similarly named Nan in "The Student's Wife," is suffering a sleepless night next to her also snoring and gurgling husband. Venturing outside and going to close the gate—which she notices in the moonlight is standing open "like a dare"—takes on epic dimensions: "The moon lighted up everything—houses and trees, poles and power lines, the whole world. I peered around the backyard before I stepped off the porch. A little breeze came along that made me close the robe. I started for the gate" (32). The smallest [domestic] things take on enormous proportions in the story, from the clothespins on the line glowing in the moonlight to her next-door neighbor, whose battle with his personal demons takes the form of a lonely battle with the slugs in his yard. We also learn that domestic life can be fatal; this alcoholic neighbor's first wife died of "heart failure. It hit her just as she was coming up the drive" (33). Even as Nancy's moonlight "adventure" seems as if it may be liberatory, the overall feel of the story is claustrophobic, as the only escape from the domestic confinement seems to be alcoholism, potential infidelity, or death. For both Nan and Nancy, and for many of Carver's female characters, the domestic realm is stifling, and, as Sandra Kleppe demonstrates in "Women and Violence

in the Stories of Raymond Carver," they find diverse ways to "communicat[e] their dissatisfaction with roles and norms prescribed to men and women" (113).

In some of Carver's stories, however, marital dysfunction has more tangible causes and symptoms. The feminist issue receiving the most in-depth treatment in the late 1970s and 1980s was the subject of male violence toward women, which received particular attention on television. Although other feminist concerns about women's relative lack of social or economic power were often treated lightly or not at all in American popular culture, this issue was brought to light so successfully by American feminists for the obvious reason that it was difficult to argue in American society at this time that domestic abuse was not an abuse of power. For feminists, the challenge was exposing these instances of abuse; high profile trials and television programs featuring domestic abuse and rape significantly aided in this process, but so did literature which was increasingly likely to seriously treat domestic abuse. The infusion of women's voices, both white and nonwhite, in literature and their increasing representation in academia, where women's studies programs were taking off, certainly aided this process.

The more free-floating threat of male violence that infiltrates Carver's stories is tied to the awareness of violence feminism helped bring to the mainstream during the 1970s and 1980s. Kleppe argues that in Carver's portraits of domestic violence, his female characters are as likely to engage in violent acts as the male characters, and in fact, their violence has a liberatory subtext, as it is increasingly likely to be carried on in public in later stories and result in a transformation in the perpetrator's life. Carver's treatment of male violence, however, is much more ominous. The male character's dissatisfaction with his life and marriage in "Tell the Women We're Going" results in

the double homicide of two random women, and the title character of "Dummy" (renamed "The Third Thing that Killed My Father Off") avenges his wife's betrayal and his emasculation by killing her with a hammer and then drowning himself (*What We Talk about*). "So Much Water So Close to Home," arguably Carver's most sustained treatment of a woman's consciousness and feminist themes, has raped, mutilated women's corpses haunting its narrative. As the story's narrator, Claire, reveals her own unhappiness and constraint in her marriage, she imaginatively links her marriage to society at large, in which women are objectified and under constant threat. This story, then, links the domestic and public, or personal and political as called for by second wave feminists.

Even as one can trace how contemporaneous feminist discourses permeate Carver's stories, I argue that we need feminism to think about the vulnerable, fraught identity that he writes about. Carver's stories not only reflect feminist discourses, but feminism can help us make sense of some of his stories, particularly those featuring working-class women's perspectives. "Fat" is probably the most well-known of these stories, and is in some ways, the most puzzling. Narrated by an anonymous waitress, who is in turn narrating a story to her friend, Rita, "Fat's" plot is simple; having waited on a fat man in the restaurant in which she and her husband Rudy work, the waitress returns home to serve him food and have sex, then falls asleep fantasizing that she is as large as the man she served in the restaurant. There are a variety of critical interpretations of this story, ranging from those that emphasize the character's thwarted attempts to find meaning or to articulate her experience, to the more literal interpretation that the waitress may actually be pregnant, something she speculates about near the end of the story.

Reading "Fat" with particular attention to class in addition to gender provides another perspective on the story, and the waitress's identification with her overweight customer. As Dorothy Sue Cobble and Nancy Seifer demonstrate in their studies of working-class women and labor feminists in the 1960s and 1970s, for female workers particularly in jobs that were sex-typed, sexual objectification on the job was a real problem that labor feminists sought to address. Most famous during the 1970s were airline stewardesses' unions' ultimately successful attempts to restore dignity to their jobs, and stop the airlines from selling their sex appeal along with tickets; by the 1980s, they had halted mandatory firing when stewardesses hit their early thirties, and presumably had lost sexual attractiveness, and a variety of other blatantly sexist and discriminatory practices (Cobble 206-11). Implicitly, the waitress in "Fat," and overtly, the waitress in "They're Not Your Husband" are disempowered as a result of their objectification.

Keeping in mind that the narrator of "Fat" is a small woman who tells the fat man that she "would like to gain" but can't, it is easy to surmise that she, like the waitress, Doreen, in "They're Not Your Husband," is constantly the recipient of such surveillance (7). "They're Not Your Husband follows "Fat" in *Will You Please be Quiet, Please?* by only a few pages. Instead of focusing on the waitress, Doreen, however, this story focuses on her husband and shows how his "injuries of class," as Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb term the injuries to ego resulting from men's social class, become an unhealthy (for both him and his wife) obsession with controlling Doreen's body. "[B]etween jobs as a salesman," Earl hears two businessmen making fun of his wife one day at the diner where she works (22). The joke is ultimately on him in the story, and ends with him making a

fool of himself when trying to solicit compliments about his wife's now dieted and reduced body from a stranger. However, the story, like "Fat," makes clear how women's bodies, particularly working-class women's bodies, which were at least historically more likely to be serving men in a variety of gender-specific occupations, function as a spectacle. For all the humor in the story, it is also a pretty brutal portrayal of the cultural currency of the properly regulated female body. Having Doreen strip naked and weigh herself at the beginning of his "project," Earl councils her not to eat for "a few days, anyway," and calls her a "slob" when, in between her job and caring for their children, she slips and eats a meal (25, 26).

While the waitress in "Fat" also struggles with her weight, although gaining rather than losing is her focus, Carver makes it clear that she is also both objectified and powerless with Rudy at home, who has sex with her "against her will" at the end of the story (7,8). In "Fat," however, the waitress's story transfers the phenomenon of the body as spectacle to a male body, that of the customer. Unlike the body of Doreen in "They're Not Your Husband," with its "girdle, and ... pink, thighs that were rumpled and gray and a little hairy, and veins that spread in a berserk display," the male customer's body in "Fat" is depicted as grotesque display (23). The waitress's fascination with the customer is a result of her relating to him; throughout the story, she does not say what she means or feels, like the customer, and she is also unhappy with her own body and imagines at the end, while Rudy is having sex with her, that she is "terrifically fat" like the customer. Although there is a moment when this seems in the story as if it may be a liberatory fantasy, the waitress's depression after telling the story signals something much different. Her story about the fat man is actually a story about herself, herself as relatively

powerless spectacle; this is why she "won't go into it with [Rita] and feels that she has "already told her too much" (8).

Like her customer, and like working-class women in the popular imagination in general, the waitress of "Fat" is both overembodied and denied a real presence at once, both in her personal life and on the job; in fact, she is not even named in the story. While her story seems to provide her with insight into her own life, if her life is really "going to change," she will have to change it through the kind of job and personal action feminism called for in the 1970s. Although there is no overt reference to political action in "Fat," she realizes the futility of "waiting," like her friend Rita; "Waiting for what? she wants to know" (8). However, society will also have to change. The kind of powerlessness the customer reveals, saying "there is no choice" but to continue eating, she can also relate to (7). Even as she demonstrates her impatience for change, there is only so much a woman with limited social and economic capital can do to change the circumstances of her life. A pregnancy, an option toyed with by her as a possibility for increased girth and maybe clout in her life, would only tie her more irrevocably to Rudy and her job.

Like the waitress in "Fat," Carver's female characters are often in unsatisfying relationships. However, he portrays them as being anything but passive victims, showing a strength, introspection and creativity rarely seen in the infrequent representations of working-class women in American culture, and until very recently, in mainstream representations of women. In "Fat," the waitress's husband, Rudy, makes crude jokes at the customer's expense and those of other fat kids he used to tease, but the waitress empathizes with the customer and tries to understand the significance of their encounter. In "They're Not Your Husband," Earl's solipsism makes him both callous toward his

wife and the butt of a joke of his own making, as well as of Carver's story. His female characters' ability to empathize and connect with others is a big source of their strength. This is true for both his working-class and more middle-class female characters.

In "So Much Water so Close to Home," the female protagonist's ability to imaginatively relate to a drowned woman enables her to see how her own adherence to traditional gender roles is causing her to live a kind of death in life. "So Much Water So Close to Home" was obviously an important story for Carver, and the one he most frequently re-published, appearing in collections spanning the 1970s and the 1980s: *Furious Seasons* (1977), *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love* (1982), *Fires* (1983), and *Where I'm Calling From* (1988). With the exception of the much shorter version in what *We Talk about When We Talk about Love*, Carver made only minor revisions in republications of the story. Like so many of Carver's stories, "So Much Water So Close to Home" contains a distressed marriage and a protagonist who seems paralyzed and unable to really alter her circumstances. Remarkable in this story, however, is Carver's development of the protagonist, as well as the intricate layering of social, cultural, and psychological issues. In addition to its length (twenty pages) and remarkable character development, the story frankly documents the crisis and its effects on the protagonist. With the exception of its dramatically compressed version in *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*," "So Much Water So Close to Home" is one of Carver's least minimalist, and best, stories, a conclusion in which he likely concurred given its publishing history.[4]

"So Much Water So Close to Home" reveals an extreme masculine callousness toward women. The episode the story revolves around is a biannual fishing trip of the

protagonist's husband and three other men, and is narrated through the perspective of Claire Kane, the story's first-person narrator. After hiking to their campsite and setting up camp, the men discover a "girl floating face down in the river, nude, lodged near the shore against the branches" (43). Instead of immediately hiking back to civilization and getting help, the men, pleading "fatigue, the late hour, the fact that the girl 'wasn't going anywhere,'" decide to do nothing until later that night, though they "thought they should do something to keep the body from floating away" (43). Claire imagines this event as a symbolic rape, as the men bind the girl's body to shore with a "nylon cord and ogle her corpse (43). After two days of drinking, telling "coarse stories" and tales of "vulgar or dishonest escapades out of their past" as well as fishing and washing dishes near the girl's body, the men decide to return home (44). When they return to civilization, they alert the police of their finding. Stuart returns home late at night, has sex with Claire, then tells her of the events the following morning, when they are receiving outraged calls concerning the men's failure to report their finding earlier. When Claire discovers what has happened, she first wants assurance that it didn't really happen the way the newspaper explains, and responds with shock when she discovers that it has. The rest of the story's plot revolves around her attempts to make sense of her husband's actions and his attempts to make her let it go, to forget his complicity in the episode, in the form of pleading, menacing, and sexual coercion.

Carver frames the questions about gender, violence and responsibility the story raises through Claire's consciousness since her experiences sensitize her to connections Stuart is incapable of making. As she reveals in her story of two brothers who killed and dismembered a girl in her hometown, Claire grew up hearing horrific tales of male

violence toward women, as did many American women in the 1970s and 1980s (47). The biggest internal struggle Claire faces is whether to pursue these connections, or, as Stuart wills her, to put it "out of sight, out of mind, etc., and 'go on'" (42). What is "at store" is her marriage, but, we find out, she cannot let herself be as passive as that would require; passivity and detachment inspire pity for her husband in the story: "I pity him for listening, detached, and then settling back. ... He can never know how much I pity him for that, for sitting still and listening, and letting the smoke stream out of his mouth" (42).

Claire's initial attempts to suppress her meditation on the meaning of the fishing events repeatedly fail as she begins to make connections between this event and parts of her marriage that have troubled her. Carver implicitly references several key feminist texts in this story. The descriptions of middle-class housewife's Claire's feelings of powerlessness and ennui recall Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Claire describes her days: "Sometimes she spends the whole morning on her knees in the sandbox behind the garage playing with Dean (her son) and one or two of his friends. But every afternoon at four o'clock her head begins to hurt" (50). This section parallels Friedan's discussion both of the unfulfilling nature of full-time domestic work and the physiological distress that can accompany psychological distress. In *The Feminine Mystique*, the symptoms are tiredness and depression, in "So Much Water So Close to Home," they are headaches and a feeling of dissociation from herself, revealed in Claire's discussion of her "unclear" past and her numbed present (49). She describes herself as being unaware of her actions, shaking her head "stupidly, stupidly" as if she really is in some kind of semi comatose state (41). She sees a doctor for her headaches, who recommends that she stay at an

institution of some sort for awhile. She returns home after a couple of weeks, though, "spoil[ing]" everything for her mother-in-law, who is taking care of her husband and son in her absence. She clearly reveals by her choice of words here that she believes she is interchangeable with another female caregiver; she lacks a clear sense of self, as Friedan would have diagnosed, a fact revealed by her expression that she wishes she "were somebody else, or else just nobody, nothing, nothing at all" (54).

Claire's sense of lethargy in the story is related to her fear that "nothing will change for Stuart and me" despite the face that she believes that something has happened that should change things (49). Her perspective has changed, despite the fact that no one seems to recognize it: "Meanwhile, the people around you continue to talk and act as if you were the same person as yesterday, or last night, or five minutes before, but you are really undergoing a crisis, your heart feels damaged" (49). The story then reveals the gradual process of her awakening (another play on a feminist classic); acquiescence is represented by lethargy. Connecting her personal relationship with Stuart to larger social conditions and gender relations becomes part of Claire's awakening to the power imbalance in her relationship.

Claire's reliability as a narrator can be called into question. Clearly overwrought, traumatized, and mentally struggling with her situation throughout the story, her brief stay at an institution and her extreme connections suggest the possibility of some form of mental illness.[5] However, a careful reading of the story and attention to its allusion to feminist texts, as well as attention to the story's inner logic and its cultural context, argue against a dismissal of her critique of gender relations as paranoid or neurotic, and in fact, endorses her perspective. First of all, the men's ignoring of the woman's body for three

days—washing and fishing near her—is reprehensible by most human standards, as the abusive phone calls Stuart receives at the beginning of the story indicate; that they are described as "decent men, family men, responsible" makes it even more difficult to swallow (43). Although Claire initially makes two pithy, despairing observations about the episode—"1) people no longer care what happens to other people, and 2) nothing makes any real difference any longer" her own actions reveal otherwise, as she continues to hold the men accountable for their careless treatment of another person, and herself attends the girl's funeral (49). Claire's identification with the dead woman/women in the story is juxtaposed with the male characters' feelings of distance from them; this perspective is in clear opposition to those of the men in the story, as well as to that of the killer, who represents an extreme lack of identification.

Her identification with these violated women also helps her draw meaning from the event, even though it means facing painful truths about her marriage and women's status in society. She is remarkable among Carver's protagonists for actively resisting the stasis in her life that ignoring the event, as she repeatedly worries, would signify. Although she is about to reconcile with Stuart at the end, fatigued by the work of fighting with him, in the last line of the story, she "wake[s] up and say[s], 'For God's sake, Stuart, she was only a child'" (61). More than any other of his stories, this one holds the hope that the protagonist's life actually will change for the better. If not a rapist or murderer, and not even necessarily overtly violent—although some of his final actions in the story raise questions about this—Stuart is nonetheless portrayed as being controlling and clueless, treating Claire alternately as a child or a sexual object. The doubts and anxieties Claire has held about their marriage surface after an episode in which a murdered,

submerged woman's body comes to represent all the sexism and gender dysfunction she has encountered.

This story is therefore both dated and contemporary in its preoccupations. Critique of marriage as an institution has a long history in English and American literature. Carver's analysis of gender roles, however, grants his treatment of marital dysfunction a critical edge. His treatment of femininity and its relationship to masculinity tap into the more specifically contemporary preoccupations of second wave feminism and a cultural preoccupation with representing male violence toward women, albeit often from a sensationalist, or caricatured, perspective. The story is also notable for its incorporation of feminist discourses through the character of Claire. Her voice transcends simple signification and references a range of meanings, many of which Carver was likely even unaware. As Michael Holquist explains regarding Bahktin's theory of dialogism, "all transcription systems—including the speaking voice in a living utterance—are inadequate to the multiplicity of the meanings they seek to convey. My voice gives the illusion of unity to what I say; I am, in fact, constantly expressing a plenitude of meaning, some intended, others of which I am unaware" (xx). By creating a[n] "unfinalizable character" like Claire, Carver demonstrates that he is truly a dialogic author, embedded not in the remarkable world of the novel Bahktin explores, but, as befitting a postmodern writer, in the social and cultural text (Morson 112). In order to do this convincingly, Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson argue, Carver was able to "encounter his characters as unfinalizable others and engage them in a genuine open-ended dialogue" (112). Creating a female character this complex attests to Carver's strengths as a writer and his ability to imaginatively cross the gender divide.

As a writer, Carver is able to draw on his understanding of what feminist scholars have posited is traditionally a rich characteristic of most female networks, empathetic connection with others, in order to strengthen his craft. This feminine ability to relate to others and feel responsible for them, whether a product of nature or nurture (and likely of both), is a disputed topic among feminists, with some seeing it as a source of strength, and others seeing it as a liability for women, serving to ultimately prevent women from pursuing their individual interests and reinforcing their subjugation to men. Friedan primarily adheres to the latter perspective, and would likely locate Claire's ennui in her need to "be somebody yourself, not just exist … in and through others" (88). As a writer and as a man with roots in working-class America, Carver finds her ability to connect with others imaginatively to be a source of strength; this perspective puts him in agreement with labor feminists, who tend to emphasize solidarity over individuality. Until the 1960s, when many labor feminists joined mainstream feminists in supporting the ERA, a distinction between the two broadly defined groups was labor feminists' insistence "that gender difference must be accommodated and that equality can not always be achieved through identity in treatment. Theirs was a vision of equality that claimed justice on the basis of their humanity, not on the basis of their sameness with men. Where the male standard, or what labor feminists called the 'masculine pattern,' didn't fit their needs, they rejected it" (Cobble 8). In Carver's stories, there is a discernible difference between his male and female characters with this difference as their strength; Carver consistently portrays his female characters as being more engaged, creative, and markedly less isolated than the male characters.

As Olsen reveals so poignantly in *Silences*, however, the conditions among women so portrayed by Carver, Olsen, and others vested in representing women's ability to relate and care for others as a source of strength are paradoxical; what engages them more fully with humanity short-circuits their opportunities to represent their experience. She claims that to develop their ability to create art, women need "[w]holly surrendered and dedicated lives; time as needed for the work; totality of self. But women are traditionally trained to place others' needs first , to feel these needs as their own ... their satisfaction to be in making it possible for others to use their abilities" (35). Women also need self confidence to develop their talents and this (Friedan and Olsen agree here) is denied women through a constant reduction to domestic roles, to a "need to please" others (47). As Olsen claims "the will, the measureless store of belief in oneself to be able to come to, cleave to, find the form for one's own life comprehensions. Difficult for any male not born into a class that breeds such confidence. Almost impossible for a girl, a woman" (46).

Lack of economic resources (almost completely overlooked by Friedan) is perhaps the largest obstacle to artistic development for both men and women, although it is a particular deterrent for women who often sacrificed their ambitions to further those of their husbands. This was the case in Olsen's biography of Rebecca Harding Davis in *Silences*; it was also the case in Raymond and Maryann Carver's marriage. Carver's own struggle with the circumstances of his life was monumental, as several of his autobiographical essays reveal. Because both he and his wife had to work, even as he was also working his way through college, he was responsible for domestic work and childcare in a way many men of his era with more economic resources were not.

Recalling fatherhood, he writes in "Fires" of the "unrelieved responsibility and permanent distraction" parenting entailed (31). Carver's choice to further his career at the expense of his family is a selfishness Olsen would likely excuse as necessary to his development as a writer, recognizing it as an "effect of class, first-generation status, on writings," a part of "the blood struggle for means: one's own development so often at the cost of others giving themselves up for us or of our own inability to help our kin" (288).[6] Of course, the cost, both to himself and to his family, was high. Carver's self-referential story, "Intimacy," contains self-deprecating allusions to his own tendency to mine his family, particularly his marriage with Maryann, for material. In addition to the marital disharmony which his stories most famously portray, however, Carver also represented strengths in his female characters, strengths which he likely located in the women he was close to, and strengths which are also, ironically, necessary for a writer of dialogic stories.

"The Bridle," another story that foregrounds the perspective of a working-class woman, has a protagonist, Marge, who is able to imaginatively connect with another woman, whose life and family are falling apart. While Carver humorously details her shortcomings and prejudices in the story—her eavesdropping on the tenants of her and her husband's apartment complex, and her simultaneous envy and censure over their apparently freer lifestyles—the main storyline follows her relationship with Betty and Holits, the couple who come to Arizona from Minnesota after Betty's husband's gambling results in the loss of their farm. Holits, his two sons, and Betty, his second wife, find jobs to support themselves until Holits sustains brain injury from an alcohol-soaked

attempt to jump from the cabana to the apartment swimming pool. No longer able to pay rent, Betty leaves the apartment complex with her family, uncertain of where to go.

Like so many of Carver's narrators, Marge is a voyeur. As her repeated phrases, "I see" and "I hear" indicate, Marge supplements her isolated existence as part-time receptionist, maid, hair "stylist" and her unfulfilling marriage with her boorish (and boring) husband by observing others. For example, when doing Betty's hair in between Betty's shifts at the restaurant where she waitresses, Marge "can see how we're both wearing uniforms" and later "try to picture myself in Betty's shoes" (197, 201). Rather than serving primarily for blue-collar characters as a "a wistful identification," or fantasy, as Boxer and Phillips conclude voyeurism functions in the stories of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please*?, voyeurism has a more profound meaning for Marge, enabling her to identify with Betty's struggles to raise Holits' children and to care for her family. Throughout the story, Marge's husband, Harley, serves as a foil for Marge's own careful observation of the couple: his careless, callous stereotyping of the couple, first as "the Swedes" and then his gross misrepresentation of the struggling, broke family who cannot even pay rent at the end of the story as "'[p]eople who sail through life as though the world owes them a living'" (192, 206)

There is no dramatic resolution to the story stemming from the insights Marge gains into her own marriage from her encounter with Betty. As for the waitress in "Fat," however, the purpose of Marge's narration seems to be the increasing insight into her own condition witnessing and narrating another's grants her. The story closes with Marge observing her husband's lethargy: "He acts like nothing ever has happened or ever will happen" (208) and her examination of a bridle Holits leaves behind, which becomes an

ironic symbol of freedom, designating both movement and captivity. It is also clearly a pun on marriage as represented in the story, which keeps Marge from moving, but Betty and her husband moving, but in ways unintended by Betty. While the conclusion does not seem optimistic for Marge, her "thanks" to Betty at the story's end for cleaning the apartment before she leaves could also be an expression of gratitude for giving her a clear insight into her own condition.

Carver's stories, like Carver himself, do not evidence an overt politics, but they certainly employ the discourses used by working-class and mainstream American feminism. Although it would be too speculative to assume Carver had any interest in working-class feminism or feminist voices, he certainly drew on his understanding of working-class culture in his rich portrayals of these characters. Empathy, or the ability to relate to another person's experience, is central to working-class women's understanding of correct relationships and as a result is central to working-class feminism, which has historically emphasized communal sensibility and responsibility as opposed to individual achievement. For people who are often in precarious economic situations, reliance on community members' understanding generosity can be necessary for comfort and even survival. For union women and labor feminists, this communal sensibility is necessary to achieve more desirable working conditions and fair compensation. This emphasis on communal sensibility, while obviously necessary to union recruitment, is also a rich current in the writing of such notable working-class feminists as Meridel Le Seuer and Tillie Olsen, although as Olsen stresses in *Silences*, not at the expense of the self. The need to nourish female's individual creativity and self-esteem is also an integral part of their visions.

This is the quality Carver's most alienated characters lack; the inability to form bonds—either imagined or real—with others is a real source of many of his characters' discontent. While there are few female characters who fit this description—a notable exception is the hypocritical voyeur in "The Idea"—it is more central to Carver's depictions of alienated masculinity. While a general alienation can be linked to a widespread ennui underlying postmodernity as well as to the alienation created by working-class jobs and economic marginality, it is notable that this is a characteristic Carver can most richly envision his female characters overcoming. Within his stories, these characters' careful observations of others serve not as voyeuristic escapism, but as a very human attempt to understand and even relate to others. These observant characters also function as metafictional references to task of a writer such as Carver, whose class identity as well as vocation contributed to his discerning eye; his stories are exceptional for their believable characters. As Dorothy Sue Cobble demonstrates, "[i]n policy and in scholarship, [working-class women] remain murky and enigmatic—one-dimensional figures, depicted more by what they are not than by what they are" (1). However, Carver's stories provide an important counterbalance to this widespread cultural invisibility and make these women, with their desires, and their struggles with relationships and jobs, as well as their strengths, real.

Notes

[1] Maryann Burk Carver's telling of their lives together in *What It Used To Be Like* relates both of their struggles, but also shows how her acceptance of traditional gender roles, in addition to the strains of class and parenthood Carver documents, deferred or extinguished many of her dreams.
[2] I use the term labor feminist here broadly to designate people who are specifically interested in the fair representation and advancement of working-class women.
[3] "Put Yourself in My Shoes" arguably obscures more than it reveals about the nature of writing, functioning as a kind of extended joke about the nature of influence and writing.
[4] Adam Meyer agrees with this assessment, also considering it to be "one of the finest of all of Carver's stories" (76).
[5] Although it is often interpreted "straight," that is as a treatment of a woman's insanity and its effect on her family, *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974) provides an interesting cultural touchstone for the issues "So Much Water So Close to Home" raises about what is insanity—or how is it understood— and how does it relate to woman's acting out against the culturally sanctioned constraints of traditional feminine domesticity and controlling masculinity.
[6] It is difficult to separate the choices he made as a writer from his actions as an alcoholic. That Carver did prioritize writing over family, even early in their relationship, is clear in MaryAnn Burk Carver's biography of Carver; this is also apparent in his own essays and stories.

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Masculinity as Homosocial Enactment in Three Stories by Raymond Carver

Josef Benson, University of South Florida

Michael S. Kimmel notes in his essay "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity" that men "are under constant careful scrutiny of other men. Other men watch us, rank us, grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood. Manhood is demonstrated for other men's approval" (186). This homosocial construction of masculinity—the idea that men receive their sense of manhood from other men—ultimately leads to homophobia because, as Kimmel notes, "the overriding emotion is fear" (187). Going back to the Freudian model, before a child learns to emulate his father, he desires him, and then is reliant upon him for a sense of his own masculinity. Perhaps the reliance, the insecurity, and the desire to prove oneself are predicated on this early homosexual desire, causing fear and exaggerated masculinity. The homosocial enactment of masculinity and subsequent homophobia play a large role in three of Raymond Carver's short stories: "They're Not Your Husband," "So Much Water So Close to Home," and "Cathedral."

The idea that men establish their masculine identity by the gaze of other men is most present in the story "They're not Your Husband." Indeed, the trigger of the narrative is pulled when the main male character, Earl, overhears two men comment on how "fat" his wife is. Earl is unemployed, and his wife has taken a job as a waitress. One night when Earl is half drunk he visits the diner his wife works at, seeking a meal

on the house. While sitting at the counter he hears two men chatting about his wife. One man comments, "Look at the ass on that. I don't believe it . . . some jokers like their quim fat" (45). Wounded in his masculinity, Earl at that point becomes determined to regain it by imposing a diet on his wife.

In "So Much Water So Close to Home" the narrator, Claire, tells the story of her husband, Stuart, and his friends finding a dead naked girl on their fishing trip. Instead of immediately calling the authorities and risking an abrupt end to their getaway they go ahead and drink and fish for a few days, deciding to cut their weekend short by only one day instead of missing out on the whole thing. What keeps the men from reporting the dead woman is their collective desire to prove their masculinity to each other. No one wants to be the sissy who decides to cut the trip short. Had any women been around with the men, the chances that anyone would put their hook in the water would have been presumably slimmer. Indeed, when Stuart realizes the extent of Claire's outrage he tells her, "I won't have you passing judgment on me. Not you" (214). This statement suggests Stuart is used to having others pass judgment on him, namely other men, but will not allow his wife, or perhaps any woman, the same luxury; it could also suggest that his wife's (a woman's) judgment counts little, or less than that of the men.

The two different versions of this story found in the early *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* and the later *Where I'm Calling From* differ little in the primary conflict, that of the men privileging their fishing trip over the humanity of a girl whom they have never met. In his treatment of the both stories two stories, Gunter Leypoldt deals mostly with either the minimalism/realism discussion or Claire's unreliability as a narrator in the longer version. What this focus fails to see is that Claire is a completely different character in the second, longer, version, a more empowered female character, or as Sandra Lee Kleppe points out in her article, "Women and

Violence in the Stories of Raymond Carver," a more "independen[t]" (17) woman, suggesting that indeed Carver was in fact conscious of the gender threads of his story.

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, because the homosocial construction is undercut, is Carver's most anthologized work "Cathedral." Kimmel points out that it is the eyes of other men, their seeing, which promotes masculine performance. In "Cathedral" there is immediate tension between the unnamed narrator and Robert, a blind man for whom the narrator's wife once worked. The narrator is clearly uncomfortable having the blind man in his house. He claims it is mostly due to the fact that the man is blind, but it is fairly obvious that he fears Robert will usurp the narrator's masculinity and perhaps steal his wife. It is only when the narrator begins to come to terms with the actuality of Robert's blindness that the homosocial construct of masculinity breaks down. Indeed, it is *because* Robert is blind and cannot see the narrator or his wife that the narrator mistakenly feels Robert cannot possibly steal his wife or usurp his masculinity, suggesting that the homosocial construction is predicated on the gaze, and without the gaze, there is no threat. Only when the homosocial tension between the narrator and Robert is released can the narrator and Robert connect spiritually. Indeed, only then is the narrator's homophobia vaporized.

The homosocial construct of masculinity is predicated on other men but also on women. Yet it is not the direct presence of women or the direct interaction of women with men that provokes homosocial masculinity. It is rather the absence of the female that allows men to confront other men. In the case of "They're Not Your Husband" Doreen is present in the diner, but she is absent in that she is waiting on Earl and the other two men. She is liminalized. Likewise in "So Much Water So Close to Home" the dead woman is present in the water, but she is dead and so absent. Finally, in "Cathedral,"throughout most of the story the wife is either locked in the past as the

narrator tells her story or has passed out on the couch. She is the impetus of the conflict and yet she is hardly in the story as she participates very little in the dialogue between the two men at the end.

Interestingly, the opening sentence of the story, "Earl Ober was between jobs as a salesman" (44), tells the reader that Earl is in an insecure space. Kimmel asserts that first and foremost it is "Marketplace Masculinity" that defines manhood (184). Given that Earl is jobless, he already feels emasculated before he even hears the two men disparage his wife. After the men initially comment on Earl's wife's "ass," his wife, while scooping out some ice cream, shows her "thighs that were rumpled and gray and a little hairy, and veins that spread in a berserk display. The two men sitting beside Earl exchanged looks" (45). Before Earl eavesdrops on the two men and finds out what they think about his wife he has had no problem with her appearance. Once he realizes that his wife is not coveted by other men, she is no longer attractive to Earl. It is in this instance that Earl is defining his own masculinity by the gaze of other males. Finally, when Doreen begins "shaking the can of whip cream, Earl g[e]t[s] up, leaving his food, and head[s] for the door" (45). The phallic symbol of the can of whipped cream and the sight of his wife shaking it is too much for Earl. Not only is Earl ashamed of the fact that he is unemployed and reliant on the wages of his wife, but now he is further emasculated by the notion that he is married to an unattractive woman.

Kimmel maintains, "Masculinity becomes a defense against the perceived threat of humiliation in the eyes of other men" (193). The next morning Earl is hell bent on rescuing his flagging sense of manhood when he tells Doreen: "Just look at yourself in the mirror . . . I hate to say anything . . . but I think you better give a diet some thought" (46). Of course Earl does not mention where his new found concern for his wife's figure stems from, and consequently Doreen is surprised and perhaps a little flattered that Earl

is paying attention to her at all. Rather than get upset Doreen simply mentions that Earl "never said anything before" (46). Perhaps the most tragic aspect of this is that Earl is not at all concerned with his wife's health. If he had recommended to his wife that she exercise or that the two of them eat better, perhaps he would not seem so selfish and superficial and failingly human. He would still appear weak and insecure but not dangerous, as he appears when he tells Doreen "Just quit eating . . . for a few days anyway" (47).

Kimmel further insists that "Manhood is equated with power—over women" (193). No doubt this is the case when Earl becomes Doreen's weight loss coach. Indeed, Earl is the overseer of his wife's body, having "Doreen take off all her clothes and get on the scale. He frowned when he saw the veins. He ran his finger the length of one that sprouted up her thigh" (47). It is important to note that Doreen is not blameless. She allows Earl to bully her into starving herself. Perhaps as mentioned earlier, she simply likes the attention her husband is giving her. Nonetheless, after Doreen has lost nearly ten pounds, Earl stops by the diner to reap *his* rewards. Now that in his mind his wife is no longer "fat," he can feel more secure in his manliness, even though Doreen tells him that people at work have told her that she is "too pale" (49). Of course, Earl's response is "they're not your husband" (49), invoking the title of the story. But the joke is on Earl, for when he beseeches a random male customer to "Look at the ass on her" (51), meaning Doreen, the stranger does not take the bait and grant Earl his masculinity. Instead, the man merely "rattle[s] the newspaper" (51). Further, when one of the other waitresses asks Doreen, "who is this joker, anyway," (52) referring to Earl, Doreen responds, "He's a salesman. He's my husband" (52). But in fact Earl is not a salesman. He is unemployed. Clearly, Doreen does not want to admit that Earl is unemployed and in a strange parallel risk her own homosocial femininity.

It seems that the gaze of others necessitates a shift in space and context for the object. In this case, when Earl is seeing Doreen through the eyes of the other males she is not his wife. She is a waitress and a woman, an object for the use of men. One could say that Doreen is present as a consumable object, but absent as a sentient human being. This notion of absence and presence comes up repeatedly when examining the construction of masculinity through homosocial relations.

In looking at "So Much Water So Close to Home," especially in terms of gender, one must deal with the fact that the two versions of the story are narrated by two different characters. In the shorter Lish/Carver[1] version found in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," the narrator Claire is simply a weaker person. In his article "Reconsidering Raymond Carver's 'Development': The Revisions of 'So Much Water so Close to Home,'" Gunter Leypoldt focuses on Claire's obvious emotional problems, made clear in the longer version but which are absent in the shorter version. Further, Leypoldt notes that in the shorter version Carver treats "the theme [rape] quite differently, with Claire immediately accepting Stuart's sexual offer" (333). Leypoldt is quite right that Claire is a more rounded character in the longer version. Not only does Claire not accept Stuart's advances at the end of the story in the longer one, she violently rejects him, "stamp[ing] on his toes" (*Where I'm Calling* 236), causing Stuart to snap "you go to hell then, do you hear, bitch?" (236). The other telling difference in the two stories is that in the shorter one on the night Stuart comes home from the fishing trip and gets into bed with Claire, she admits, "I turned and opened my legs" (*What We Talk About* 82). Contrarily, in the longer version Claire admits "I turned slightly and then moved my legs" (*Where I'm Calling* 217). This is significant because in the longer version Claire does not give in to Stuart. She is a much stronger person and is simply not the Claire of the shorter Lish version. Consequently, one could make the argument

that Carver was very interested in giving Claire more agency. He clearly was not comfortable with Claire as a helpless, sexualized, indeed hysterized[2] woman.

That said, the homosocial element is evident in both versions but the spatial relationships are more pronounced in the longer version—the idea that when women are present and interactive men are not as prone to homosocial constructions of masculinity—and so all references to this story will be in terms of the longer version *Where I'm Calling From.*

Kimmel believes that "as adolescents, we learn that our peers are a kind of gender police constantly threatening to unmask us as feminine, as sissies" (190). The fact is, if Stuart and his buddies do the right thing by contacting the authorities once they find the girl, perhaps Stuart and Claire's relationship would not decline so precipitously. Further, though we do not find out if the other men are having difficulty explaining themselves to their wives and others, one may reasonably assume they are. So the question is why do the men continue their leisure fishing trip in the face of death and dehumanization? The answer is that none of them want to be looked at as the "sissy" who flakes out and squeals. Carver writes,

> even before they set up camp, Mel Dorn found the girl floating face down in the river, nude, lodged near the shore in some branches. He called the other men and they all came to look at her. They talked about what to do. One of the men—Stuart didn't say which—perhaps it was Vern Williams, he is a heavy-set, easy man who laughs often—one of them thought they should start back to the car at once. The others stirred the sand with their shoes and said they felt inclined to stay. They pleaded fatigue, the late hour, the fact that the girl "wasn't going anywhere." In the end they all decided to stay. (215)

Interrestingly, Claire, who is still narrating, conjectures that it may have been Vern, the fat man who laughs a lot. Kimmel notes that "We come to know what it means to be a man in our culture by setting our definitions in opposition to a set of 'others'—racial minorities, sexual minorities, and above all, women" (182). Perhaps Claire imagines Vern Williams being the one who suggests that they turn back because Vern is the most feminine, marked with fleshiness and a feminine penchant for laughter.[3] Interesting to note as well is the fact that Stuart, maintaining the masculine code till the end "didn't say which" man it was who wanted to "start back to the car at once." Regardless of who it was, he did not have the power to break the homosocial bond of the other men. The man who decided to turn back would forever be banned from future fishing trips and marked as other. Later, it is pointed out through Claire's retelling[4] that "Vern Williams went to sleep, but the others told coarse stories and spoke of vulgar or dishonest escapades out of their past, and no one mentioned the girl" (216). Whether of his own volition or by the silent disapproval of the other men, Vern has been banished from the male group while they one up each other in anecdotal masculinity. Kimmel further notes that "Homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men" (189). It is this homophobia that causes the men to not act, to not show compassion for the dead girl or the dead girl's family. Kimmel goes on to say, "The fear—sometimes conscious, sometimes not—that others might perceive us as homosexual propels men to enact all manner of exaggerated masculine behaviors" (191). Exaggerated masculinity is shown when one of the men Claire surmises might be Stuart, fearing he might be the real culprit,

> waded into the water and took the girl by the fingers and pulled … her, still face down, closer to shore, into shallow water, and then took a piece

> of nylon cord and tied … it around her wrist and then secured … the cord to tree roots. (216)

One must consider the coarseness of this act. Rather than honor the life of the naked dead girl, the men further dehumanize her by tying her by the wrist to a tree. If the men had not so recently experienced a litmus test for their masculinity, one that Vern Williams surely failed, none of them would have been so quick to prove how vulnerable they are to fly from anything feminine. feminine flight.

Similar to Doreen in "They're Not Your Husband," who occupies a space that is both present and absent in that she is present as a server but absent as Earl's wife, the dead girl is both present, occupying space in the water, and absent because she is dead. Indeed, the dead girl represents the feminine which Kimmel notes "threatens emasculation by representing the home, workplace, and familial responsibility, the negation of fun" (191), the very thing the men are running from. After the dead girl is fastened to the "roots of a tree" the men comment on the "firmness of the trout they'd caught, and the terrible coldness of the river water" (216). Carver writes that "they stopped talking then" (216). It is the presence of the dead girl that they are really referring to without mentioning her and so her absence in death is more powerful than if she were alive.

The strongest feature of the homosocial enactment of masculinity is the visual. Kimmel maintains that

> the father is the first man who evaluates the boy's masculine performance, the first pair of male eyes before whom he tries to prove himself. Those eyes will follow him for the rest of his life. Other men's eyes will join them—the eyes of role models, such as teachers, coaches, bosses, or media heroes; the eyes of his peers, his friends, his workmates;

> and the eyes of millions of other men, living and dead, from whose constant scrutiny of his performance he will never be free. (188)

The reason the homosocial and subsequent homophobia break down in "Cathedral" is because the narrator's rival, the other man, the other pair of eyes, Robert, is blind. Once the narrator, never named, comes to terms with Robert's blindness, he no longer feels threatened and therefore does not feel the need to prove his masculinity. And once this insecure need is gone he is able to connect humanly with another man without the fear of being regarded as homosexual.

It is clear from the beginning of the story that the narrator considers Robert a rival for his wife. Referring to her, the narrator admits, "She and the blind man had kept in touch. They made tapes and mailed them back and forth. I wasn't enthusiastic about his visit. He was no one I knew. And his being blind bothered me" (356). Because the narrator has never previously met anyone who is blind—the narrator admits, after all, that his "idea of blindness came from the movies" (356)—in his ignorance he finds Robert's presence disturbing. Indeed the narrator admitsInterestingly, when the narrator's wife tells the narrator that the blind man has recently lost his wife, he considers what a tragedy it is that the woman, named Beulah, "could never see herself as she was seen in the eyes of her loved one. A woman whose husband could never read the expression on her face" (360). This proposition sounds heinous to the narrator because he and the other men of the other stories are used to determining their masculinity through the eyes of others, usually other men. Further, it is clear that the narrator is suggesting that Beulah's identity is interrupted by the fact that she cannot "see herself" as Robert, her man, sees her.

Soon, however, as the narrator begins to realize what it really means to be blind, his preconceived notions of blindness are dashed:

> I remembered having read somewhere that the blind didn't smoke because, as speculation had it, they couldn't see the smoke they exhaled. I thought I knew that much and that much only about blind people. But this blind man smoked his cigarette down to the nubbin. (363)

Yet Robert's blindness simultaneously puts the narrator at ease, in so far as he no longer feels he will be unmasked, as it also disconcerts him, since he cannot use the other's gaze as a means to construct his own masculinity. It sets him apart as the other and therefore disarms him, as it also allows the narrator to engage himself without fear. Nonetheless, a life of homosocial masculinity construction cannot be rid of in one night. When the narrator's wife falls asleep on the couch with her robe open and showing "a juicy thigh" (368), it is more than the narrator is comfortable with, as he admits with some self-deprecation, "I reached to draw her robe back over her, and it was then that I glanced at the blind man. What the hell! I flipped the robe open again" (368). His wife's humanity only matters in so far as it affects the narrator. Never mind that his wife, even though Robert is blind, probably would rather not be showing "a juicy thigh" if for no other reason than because Robert *is* blind and it does not seem right to treat him any differently, for example strutting around the house in the nude simply because the blind man cannot see her.

Again, what allows the homosocial bonding and subsequent breakdown due to Robert's blindness to take place, is the absent presence of the wife. She is in the story either in flashback or upstairs or asleep when all of the bonding takes place between the narrator and Robert. When she is awake the narrator merely feels left out "wait[ing] in vain to hear [his] name on [his] wife's sweet lips" (364-65). In all three stories the women are more present in their absence, allowing the construction, or deconstruction

in the case of "Cathedral," of masculinities to occur among the males.

The difference in "Cathedral" is that since Robert is non-threatening in his blindness and cannot unmask the narrator with his gaze, the narrator is finally free to connect with Robert without fearing that Robert or his wife will deem him homosexual. And thus, the narrator agrees to help Robert understand what a cathedral is by literally drawing a cathedral with Robert hand in hand:

> He found my hand, the hand with the pen. He closed his hand over my hand. "Go ahead, bub, draw," he said. "Draw. You'll see. I'll follow along with you. It'll be okay. Just begin now like I'm telling you. (373)

One gets the feeling that Robert, whose blindness has enlightened him to a degree, has done this sort of thing before, been the great emancipator for frightened men. Indeed, Robert quips, "Never thought anything like this could happen in your lifetime, did you, bub? Well, it's a strange life, we all know that" (373).

Some critics such as Kirk Nesset believe that "Cathedral" is about the narrator leaving the confines of himself, exiting his insularity in order to enter into a "gesture of fraternity" (125) with the blind man. I would argue that the narrator is now able to leave the social world and enter *himself* without fear. He is now able to commune with Robert emotionally and spiritually from the inside, and by thus being safe within himself he is able to free himself from his own gaze, from his own partnership in the homosocial enactment of masculinity. When the narrator's wife interrupts them by asking them "What's going on?" (374), Robert tells the narrator to "close your eyes now" (374). After the two are done drawing the cathedral, Robert tells the narrator to "take a look" (374). But the narrator is not ready to give up the sheer bliss of not being weighted down by the possibility that his new found freedom will be interrupted by the presence

of his wife, and so he admits "My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything. 'It's really something,' I said" (375). Of course what the narrator is referring to is not the cathedral; it is—perhaps for the first time—the way it feels to connect with another man without the fear of being disempowered.

The question frequently asked is, did the author realize what he was doing? In this case, was Raymond Carver aware of the gender implications in these stories? A question such as this has no answer, but keeping in mind the changes in "So Much Water So Close to Home" it seems clear that yes, Carver was conscious of how he was characterizing females. If indeed it was Lish who initially shortened the story, then it was clearly Carver who lengthened the later version and empowered the narrator, Claire. In all three of these stories men rely on other men to establish or maintain their masculinity. Further, the women are more present in their absence or distorted context, allowing the males to proceed in their dialectical bonding, and emasculation. The exception is the ending of "Cathedral" where, given the reliance of the homosocial on the male gaze and the blindness of the main male counterpart and rival, the homosocial construct breaks down, allowing the narrator and Robert to share a moment of freedom and spiritual connection.

Looked at together, these three stories are interesting because they not only depict relationships *between* men and women but also the relationships *between* men *in relation to* women. No doubt the stories in *Cathedral* and several of the later stories in Carver's oeuvre suggest an opening up of sorts, a gravitation toward connection instead of disconnection and the possibility, though small, of moments of grace.

Notes

[1] As is well known, Gordon Lish was Carver's editor for this manuscript and heavily revised the story causing Carver at one point to plead with Lish not to publish the book. More can be found about this in D.T. Max's *New York Times Magazine* article, "The Carver Chronicles."

[2] Michel Foucault defines this term in *The History of Sexuality:* "*A hysterization of women's bodies*: a threefold process whereby the feminine body was analyzed--qualified and disqualified--as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality" (104).

[3] This strikes me as aligning with those theorists such as Judith Butler who claim that gender is entirely performed. As she notes in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution": "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (903). Vern here is being assigned his gender failure by Claire, because in her mind he is not "doing" his gender correctly. Perhaps rather than one performing his or her gender, it is the other, the audience witnessing the performance, a performance that is unwitting and perhaps not a performance at all, who are really the ones who are taking part in a "performance."

[4] It is important to note that Claire is the one telling the story and that her reliability is certainly in question. As readers we are not privy to all of what Stuart has told Claire and even if we were, even if the story was narrated by Stuart, his reliability would be in question as well. In a sense we must simply take Claire's word for it as to what really happened, though the basic facts seem to be undisputed.

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A Feminist Re-Vision of the Work of Interpretation in Raymond Carver's "Cathedral"

Eve Wiederhold, George Mason University

When I teach Raymond Carver's "Cathedral," the story of an encounter between an unnamed narrator and his wife's friend, Robert ("this blind man"), I ask students—juniors and seniors in college—to recreate the ending. That is, I ask them to close their eyes, join hands and draw a cathedral. They obey, albeit with reluctance, obviously feeling awkward about touching each other to perform this activity. But after nervous laughs and rolled eyes, they grab hands, put the pen to the page and begin tracing lines, some angled, some crossed, often including an additional squiggle to give form to the idea of a tree or a cloud. In other words, they act dutifully in their aim to recreate a whole structure, if not an entire scene, as if doing so will capture the essence of "cathedralness" and demonstrate their willingness to obey the assignment. This means they have paid attention neither to me nor to the story itself.

"Look at these pathetic scribbles," I say after I've collected their papers. "Look at how you attempted to encapsulate and re-present the idea of a cathedral, as if that should have been the point of your drawing; as if you were obligated to sketch lines that would induce the viewer to declare, 'ah yes, a cathedral.' If that was your goal, you were doomed to fail." This inevitable failure in representation, I add, is precisely what Carver's story addresses as it asks readers to question the legitimacy of epistemologies that

precede our interpretive acts and guide what we think we should do with symbols. When we fail to question those epistemologies and their effects on our interpretive practices, we can make some inane decisions about how to understand and partake in our representational work.

Because Carver's story offers this lesson, it is germane to a feminist review. More specifically, "Cathedral" can be read to help articulate the elements of a feminist materialist rhetoric that questions the metaphysical goal of using symbols to generate the reappearance of an originary self-presence and to regard the endeavor as virtuous. This goal marks the difference between philosophy and rhetoric, and contemplating that difference can enable us to craft other organizing frameworks to guide conceptions of interpretive processes.

That students are so obedient in their endeavors to draw accurately may tell us something about how they have learned to signify that they are "in the know." Their responses indicate that a cultural regard endures for a component part of Western philosophy that can be found in texts as diverse as Platonic dialogues and eighteenth-century aesthetics. This tradition would civilize language by imposing order on conceptions of its production and reception. It is committed to the pursuit of truth that, presumably, is accessible to receptive audiences because it will be recognizable once it is found. By showing devotion to "cathedralness," the students offer a "modern incarnation"[1] of this history, demonstrating that they have adopted the expectation that one should bring order and completeness to any representational task at hand. Such expectations are cultivated by the idea that the goal of representation is to encapsulate an already-available truth that is absolute, repeatable, and translatable.

Feminist theorists and scholars in rhetoric each have explored the limits of such expectations and their effects on conceptions of how knowledge is produced and recognized. Susan Miller, for example, has taken issue with the legacy of the Platonic idea that knowledge is an object made available for review, either empirically or through insight. She questions whether that review must occur in a context that allows for the neutral and objective contemplation of pure form. And by questioning the methods of review, she also questions the presumed goal of the work of representation: To tell the truth; to act as a testimonial to a kind of telling that is universally and eternally valid; to use writing to obtain a representational "fix." Like Miller, Sharon Crowley explores an anti-rhetorical strain within Platonic-influenced epistemologies by tracing the impact of Western philosophies that have envisioned the isolated contemplation of pure form as the height of integrity. Crowley outlines the consequences of this vision: The general is given priority over the specific; the abstract is prioritized over the phenomenal "real"; the intellectual and rational take precedence over the embodied and the emotional.

These explorations are pertinent to Carver's story in that they highlight the ways in which Platonic thinking continues to influence conceptions of how people participate with language. In effect, "good" contemplation is obtained when the subject provides evidence of the attempt to grasp "the truth" and genuinely communicate it. To proffer that evidence, the language user is encouraged to mimic the model that prioritizes abstractions—to use language to re-present that which has been made available from judicious insight, that which is always true, that which expresses the big transcendent, coherent idea. Participation is measured and evaluated accordingly: how accurate, how judicious, how authentic, how representative of the mind of the genius, all of which,

presumably, will be recognizable to other like-minded geniuses (or, as in the case of students, geniuses-in-training).

As the language of recognition suggests, a metaphor of vision organizes such descriptors of the work of interpretation.[2] Significantly, the visual act is itself rendered abstractly, as if removed from the realm of the personal, the touch of flesh, the sexually generated, the wandering gaze, and the rhetorical, each of which has been assigned to the domain of the feminine. Carver's story about the interpretive interactions between a man who has physical vision and one who does not can be read to confound the logic that conflates metaphorical vision with knowledge. "Cathedral" not only calls attention to the role of physicality in the work of interpretation, it also disavows the idea that such work can itself be represented within narratives that aim to describe and then sum up complex moments of thought and action, memory and history, embodiment and cognition. Raising questions about how to conceive of representational acts speaks to the interpretive problems dramatized in "Cathedral" while giving shape to an alternative model of discursive participation informed by feminist rhetoric.

Knowing Foundations

Carver may be a genius but the narrator of "Cathedral" does not appear to be. Indeed for many readers, the narrator is something of a jerk. "Cathedral" tells the story of an interpretive encounter between Robert and the narrator, who does not give himself a name but announces a temperament by communicating a less than gracious attitude about Robert's visit. The plot seems relatively simple: Robert, a former employer of and old

friend to the narrator's wife (also unnamed), is paying a visit and the narrator, a misanthropic man of prejudice, is reluctant to play host. His wife

> worked for him one summer in Seattle ten years ago. She and the blind man had kept in touch. They made tapes and mailed them back and forth. I wasn't enthusiastic about his visit. He was no one I knew. And his being blind bothered me. My idea of blindness came from the movies. In the movies the blind moved slowly and never laughed. ... A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to. (209.

The narrator's "informed" perspective about "the blind" simultaneously conveys his ignorance and sets up the story's dramatic tension, which appears to be resolved when knowledge is exchanged at the story's end. At that point, Robert and the narrator join hands to draw a cathedral and satisfy Robert's curiosity about what exactly a cathedral is. By engaging in this endeavor, the narrator appears to undergo an internal transformation as he realizes the limitations of his outlook. In sum, "Cathedral" tells a story about insight and personal change. At least this is the way the plot is conventionally told, particularly by my students who, when asked to write about the significance of the end, say something like: "The narrator, a man of many prejudices, learns a lesson from Robert and comes to see that it was he (the narrator) who has been blind."

This tidy conclusion is precisely what Carver's story complicates. Rather than allow for definitive claims about the story's meaning or characters, the narrator's perspective in the opening paragraph can be read as a provocation, designed to cause the reader discomfort and in so doing, both dramatize and engender a decidedly disorderly encounter with the act of interpretation itself. By introducing representations that

generate uneasiness, "Cathedral" asks readers to question those rituals of reading that have lost their status as ritual and seem instead to be natural, inevitable, indeed logical. The narrator's confession in "Cathedral's" opening challenges the reader to consider how the narrator is rendering judgments and in so doing, asks the reader to look more closely at his or her own response patterns, particularly when encountering loaded phrases such as "this blind man."

On the one hand, most of us would denounce someone who objects to playing host to a person who is visually impaired. On the other hand, the narrator poses an important question about the influence that entrenched cultural narratives have on judgments about people and events. As rhetoricians argue, what we know is shaped by the contexts we inhabit and for those who have not had personal experiences with someone who does not have vision, knowledge of what that means *does* come through artifacts in popular culture such as films, most of which fail to depict stories about bodies that are not deemed to be "normal. "The blind" occupy a generic place of "the handicapped" in U.S. culture, rarely seen, and when represented, typically identified in terms of lacking vision, as if the totality of an identity can be summarized with a single descriptor. The narrator's blunt confession of displeasure holds up a mirror to the reader's own attitudes about "the blind" and the ways in which the reader interacts with cultural signifiers that influence how bodies and identities are read.

Students tend to bypass this kind of analysis when devising statements aimed to prove that they get the story's point, having learned to rely instead upon reading conventions to compose their replies, including the convention that directs readers to find a way to resolve textual tensions.[3] In response to the narrator's initial disclosures,

students tend to engineer judgments that dismiss his concerns by asserting a series of decorous obligations: He should not feel apprehensive about Robert's visit. He should not fear the blind. He should be friendly to his wife's friend. With these preconceived ideas in place, it becomes possible to validate the rightness and goodness of the idea of having such obligations by reading the ending as proof of their merit. This argument effectively suggests that the narrator does become that decorous person readers thought he should be. But in order to describe "Cathedral" as a story about the narrator's transformation from cynical and misanthropic to open-minded and sociable, a corresponding view of Robert must be imposed. His character will be read as a heroic figure—the wise man who quietly imparts a valuable lesson to the skeptical and narrow-minded. In this version of the story, Robert's lack of vision seems to endow him with special knowledge that enables him to "see beyond mere appearances" and, like the Platonic philosopher, offer enlightenment to those who mistook illusions for truth. Such an ascription is evident in student responses to the narrator's description of his wife's relationship with Robert, which was solidified on her final day at work: "On her last day in the office, the blind man asked if he could touch her face. She agreed to this. She told me he touched his fingers to every part of her face, her nose—even her neck! She never forgot it. She even tried to write a poem about it" (210). This activity, which the wife engaged in once or twice a year "usually after something really important had happened to her," leaves the narrator unimpressed. "I didn't think much of the poem. Of course, I didn't tell her this. Maybe I just don't understand poetry. I admit it's not the first thing I reach for when I pick up something to read" (210).

Students tend to see in this passage more evidence of the narrator's general obtuseness. Not only is he incapable of appreciating his wife's attempts at self-expression, he shows disrespect for and insensitivity to her emotional landscape, while his alarm at her physical contact with Robert is indicative of sheer pettiness. We discuss expectations that organize our experiences of marriage/cohabitation, and then I press them: Is he completely ridiculous to feel threatened by the physical exchange? *Yes*, they reply. *There is nothing illicit. That's how "the blind" communicate.* What becomes clear is that, like the narrator, most students read "the blind man" in terms of cultural scripts that abstract and marginalize those assigned generic identity categories. Robert is typecast as the "blind man who has true wisdom," the image of which has been offered in films, and the result is that this story of intimacy—a story so powerful it inspired the wife to write a poem—is converted into a tale of decency and purity about an embodied act of translation and interpretation.

But to convert Robert into the wholesome hero means, according to the logic within such scripts, that the reader must deny the possibility that Robert's desire to touch the wife's face communicates erotic flirtation. To automatically desexualize "the blind man" is to see only part of his identity, to render him an idea rather than a person, and then to use that construction to evaluate the narrator's response. One must believe that running one's hand over another's face is a neutral, information-gathering act and not charged with sexual energy, nor a transgression of physical boundaries of space that people, in the United States at least, are culturally conditioned to maintain. And of course, to illustrate what is at stake in this discussion, I invite students to run their hands across each other's faces, an invitation they invariably refuse.

Why the refusal? Here, we encounter the limits of the philosophical frameworks that have shaped our understanding of what is included in and relevant to the work of interpretation. Rather than position Robert within prefabricated narratives about the wisdom of the blind and the narrator as his imperceptive opposite, we can read this story to undermine the authority of a dichotomous logic that would bring order and clarity by denigrating or sentimentalizing bodies engaged in interpretive encounters. What would happen, for example, if everyone mimicked the ways in which Robert reads another's face? What would change about what is known and how we visualize states of knowledge? Valorizing the knowledge acquired through touch that is not necessarily translated into language disrupts the hegemony of current epistemologies that bear the legacy of the Platonic depiction of knowledge as an object available for review.

Feminist Interventions

Such disruptions have been launched by poststructuralist authors as various as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Jacque Derrida, each of whom has challenged prevailing epistemologies by examining the ways in which discursive practices bear upon acts of interpretation. Derrida, in particular, has made the point that signifiers do not present information; they communicate by acting within a linguistic system that establishes meaning through acts of deferral. The presence of meaning is always elusive and relational and involves an endless substitution of signifiers that come to be regarded as representative of truth itself.[4] Consequently, human knowledge can no longer be depicted as transcendent or visible to the potentially obtainable Discerning Eye. Repetition and difference, rather than language's grip on truth, are fundamental to the

working of narrative, suggesting that language does not mirror but constructs what we know.

Feminist theorists such as Teresa de Lauretis have argued that the emphasis in Derridean theory on linguistic "play" retains a masculinist bias by retaining the idea that the work of interpretation involves a neutral exchange of signs within an abstract discursive order. Such formulations do not consider how specific bodies contribute to how meaning is made. A materialist rhetorical approach builds upon Derridean analyses of language production by asking after the significance of the materiality of the sign when accounting for the experience of interpretation. Hence de Lauretis's useful definition: "I use the term [experience] not in the individualist, idiosyncratic sense of something belonging to one and exclusively her own ... but rather in the general sense of a 'process' by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed" (159). Because one's reality is immersed in social domains, experience can be described as a perpetual dynamic of one's subjective engagement in practices, discourses, and institutions that are "social and ... historical"(159).

Wendy Hesford makes a similar point by noting that "the concept of 'material rhetoric' highlights the discursivity of the material world as well as the materiality of discourse" and in so doing "prompts consideration of how individual and collective struggles for agency are located at complex intersections of the discursive and material politics of everyday life" (197). Acknowledging a perpetual interplay between bodies and texts alters the context for envisioning the work of interpretation and invites more scrutiny of the ways in which we think bodies abide those enigmatic transactions. To acknowledge embodiment as a contributor to how we know requires a rereading of "the

body" and a disentangling of embodied readings from normative narratives that affect how individuals engage with cultural scripts. Such a review would encourage readers not only to seek something that might be described as knowledge of the experience of reading but also to interrogate the satisfaction they receive when they think they've figured everything out.

One specific strategy for staging this kind of interrogation would explore the ways in which reading conventions propel judgments about what in a text holds significance. Significance is a provocative word because it both grounds acts of reading in general and remains evasive when we attempt to pin down its meaning in any particular case. As Patricia Harkin writes, finding the significance of a text is deemed to be basic to the act of reading itself. Indeed, we expect texts to have significance and if they don't, we tend to question why we've bothered to engage in the reading act at all (67). This conventional view of significance, however, suggests that its qualities will be evident to those readers who know how to sort through narrative complexities and perceive what warrants attention. But it is within the domain of significance that competing perspectives may collide. Material bodies engaging with material texts will likely disagree about what matters—that is, about what deserves notice and further review. Hence, rather than ask readers simply to seek significance, the convention of significance can be explored to consider how meaning is assigned through our subjective interpretations of already-written constructs that may subsequently condition our responses.

Each incident described in Carver's story is available for this kind of materialist review in which reading for significance means choosing what to see and not see in any given scene of representation. When reviewing the story's opening, for example, how

should readers weigh the significance of the narrator's brusque style, which mocks his wife for writing a poem about her experiences with Robert even as the narrator undertakes to do the same thing in prose? What should readers make of the narrator's choices about what to develop and what to mention briefly as his story unfolds?

For example, we learn in passing that the narrator's wife, while married to a military officer, attempted suicide and that this act prompted her to contact Robert after she quit her job. Here, the narrator's apparent lack of interest in talking about his wife's suicide attempt would be of interest, particularly when exploring the text's representation of gender. The relative invisibility of the wife's perspective throughout the story supports a reading that suggests that Carver has followed the convention of using a female character as a material obstacle to overcome to enable a male protagonist's intellectual epiphany. Students might be encouraged to mull over this observation by considering how the word "wife" has been positioned within the "histories of articulation" (Ahmed 1) that will influence ways in which the wife in "Cathedral" gets read. The cultural subordination of those who are assigned the identity category "wife" lends support to the idea that "Cathedral" is about the narrator's transformation. The trauma of a suicide attempt and speculation about its relevance to the story can be credibly pushed aside, weighted as a mere detail like all of the other background information, and therefore rendered relatively insignificant when determining "Cathedral's" overall significance.

Interestingly, however, representations of Robert's wife can be read to complicate examinations of gender's representation at a moment when the narrator is at his most objectionable: when conveying his surprised reaction to the news that Robert married and that his wife's name was Beulah.

> "Beulah! That's a name for a colored woman."
>
> "Was his wife a Negro?" I asked.
>
> "Are you crazy?" my wife said. "Have you flipped or something … What's wrong with you?" she said. "Are you drunk?"
>
> "I'm just asking, I said. (212-213)

That Carver included this exchange in the story at all is problematical because it communicates an unspoken acceptance of a context that presumably informs the narrator's question: that Caucasian identity stands as a neutral point of reference to which all other identities are compared, and then marked as different. And given previous evidence of the narrator's cynicism, it seems reasonable to conclude that his "just asking" is a statement that also aims to exasperate and challenge, if not belittle. Yet the exchange about Beulah's racial identity offers another site of dissonance that can prompt readers to consider how our allegiances to reading conventions guide interpretive habits. The narrator's ostensibly offensive comments about Beulah can be read to ask readers to confront the network of codes that must be in place in order for a statement to be "recognized." How have established networks of codes invisibly underwritten a referential system that gets regarded as real, and once so regarded, regulates what will get seen to enable an interpretation to be rendered? Such questions encourage readers to think about the ways in which judging what offends emerges contextually and not because one has recognized an unchanging essential quality. This is not meant to disregard the significance of the narrator's snide attitude. But if "whiteness" were not positioned as a default center from which other races and ethnicities are read as marked, then a question about Beulah's racial identity would not necessarily function as a

signifier of a racist boorishness. After all, why wouldn't Robert, whose race is never described but apparently is Caucasian given the wife's reaction, marry a woman of color? (Indeed, the narrator asks several questions that seem impertinent: To his wife: Should we take Robert bowling? To Robert: Where did you sit on the train? Do you want to watch TV? Such questions can be read as mocking Robert's lack of vision. And yet these questions are also unexpected and interesting. How does a person who does not see decide where to locate his or her body in space? Is it possible to know how to throw a bowling ball down a lane by using sensory information other than vision? Further, it turns out that Robert owns two televisions, one of which broadcasts in color.)

Because the narrator's responses can be read simultaneously as callous and astute, they cannot be rendered meaningful via summary and organized classification. This becomes especially clear after he speculates on the state of Beulah and Robert's marriage, offering another opportunity for exploring Carver's representations of the interplay between what discursive orders present and what we are able to know:

> They'd married, lived and worked together, slept together—had sex, sure—and then the blind man had to bury her. All this without his having ever seen what the goddamned woman looked like. It was beyond my understanding. Hearing this, I felt sorry for the blind man for a little bit. And then I found myself thinking what a pitiful life this woman must have led. Imagine a woman who could never see herself as she was seen in the eyes of her loved one. ... A woman whose husband could never read the expression on her face, be it misery or something better. ... And then to slip off into death, the blind man's hand on her hand, his blind eyes

> streaming tears—I'm imagining now—her last thought maybe this: that he never even knew what she looked like, and she on an express to the grave. Robert was left with a small insurance policy and half of a twenty-peso Mexican coin. The other half of the coin went into the box with her Pathetic. (213-14)

There is a perpetual doubling in all of the narrator's statements that, when given significance, can be used to offer alternative models for thinking about how we reach conclusions by interacting with signs put forth for review. What is visible in the offending paragraph: A derisive attitude revealed through a rhetorical style that is also strangely humorous; a rejection of sentimental romance narratives that also conveys faith in the power of love. And most crucially, even though the narrator's response might be regarded as the height of tactless incivility, it also conveys a poignant sensitivity as he considers what the woman who has physical vision will not receive from a lover who cannot see. The absence of visual adoration as a non-verbal communication is not inconsequential, and to disregard it is to deny an important part of how people who have vision experience love. This is not to say that lack of vision precludes intimacy. Rather, the narrator's comments can be read to refuse the binary logic that would construct vision and its lack as opposites. To dismiss the narrator's perspective is to overlook our susceptibility to narratives that valorize the domain of cognition and intellect *by* denigrating that which is associated with the material, the phenomenal, and the embodied. Indeed, who knows what can be learned from the look of love?

Rereading Conclusions

This insight offers a different position from which to read and assign significance to the story's last scene, which can be read as a depiction of the failure of speech as much as the acquisition of insight. Without any frame of reference, that is, without any prior knowledge of context, Robert is unable to interpret the narrator's words to comprehend what a structure called a cathedral looks like and how it would compare to other structures that are identified in other ways. At Robert's request, they join hands to draw. And then the last paragraphs:

> So we kept on with it. His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went over the paper. It was like nothing else in my life up to now.
>
> Then he said, "I think that's it. I think you got it," he said. "Take a look. What do you think?"
>
> But I had my eyes closed. I thought I'd keep them that way for a little longer. I thought it was something I ought to do.
>
> "Well?" he said. "Are you looking?"
>
> My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything.
>
> "It's really something," I said. (228)

The meaning of "It's really something" is about as ambiguous as it gets, and the lack of clarity provides a space in which readers can encounter the cultural push to fold conceptions of interpretive transactions into a language of virtue in order to assign significance. A cultural investment in, for example, narratives of redemption encourages readers to see evidence of the narrator's transformation, when one could just as easily question whether anything of the sort occurred. "I was in my house. I knew that. But I

didn't feel like I was inside anything" could be read to signify confusion as much as self-awareness. By the time this statement is uttered, much alcohol has been consumed along with marijuana; it just might reflect the narrator's drug haze, an activity that is vilified in U.S. culture rather than regarded as, say, providing entry into life-enhancing alternative states of mind. The conventional reading—the one proffered on the web by various sources aimed at students writing term papers to demonstrate they get the story's point—deemphasizes the drug activity to make claims about the narrator's internal progression towards goodness: "One man's prejudice is overcome by another man's gift"; "While Robert is physically blind, it is the narrator who cannot clearly see the world around him"; and "As the story progresses, the narrator's eyes are opened to the blind man's world."[5]

Such summations seem indicative of the reader's good will, which may be one reason why students are so eager to offer them. After all, what could be more satisfying to a teacher than to know that her students have appreciated and learned from a story about another person's growth? But to devise this version of the story's meaning, readers must rely upon a commonplace that suggests that reciprocity characterizes the work of interpretation. Accordingly, one interlocutor can become like another; the other can be read like one's self. Equitable interpretive transactions appear to be structured by a discursive order that continues to be regarded as an abstract and neutral vehicle that allows for fair and evenhanded substitutions. But in Carver's story, there isn't equity. Even after they share in the act of drawing, the narrator still has no idea of what it is like to be blind and Robert has no visual knowledge of the cathedral. To suggest as much is to enact an interpretive violence that favors the abstract summary over the particularity of

lived experience. This is not to say that nothing benevolent happened in their encounter. But expressing *what* happened is a completely different issue. What they experienced as they clasped hands and embarked on a shared embodied activity cannot be fully recuperated into a summary narrative that the rest of us will recognize and deem significant. Nor is it certain that a language exists that could convey what was specific to each of their experiences in this event. Instead of devising a tale that unquestionably reveals a transformation, Carver's story leads us back to that old but still relevant question feminists posed decades ago: What is the relationship between language and experience? How are dominant languages inadequate for expressing the contours of interpretive experiences that emerge from various embodied reactions we have to vision, its lack, its relationship to touch, to the capacity of touch to change an attitude and persuade one to listen differently?

To presume equity within a visual representational economy is to establish an interpretive framework for reading that not only overlooks what can be distinctive in each component part of our interpretive encounters, but also installs a preference *for* coherence, homogeneity, the familiar, the conventional, the cognitively recognizable, each of which appears to be automatically significant, valuable and authoritative. Alternatively, those representations that *don't* exhibit such recognizable qualities tend to be discounted and then dismissed. But if context and embodiment affect how texts are read, then knowledge cannot be fully objectified and made available for review. Knowledge instead is determined rhetorically and involves a transaction between speakers and audiences that incorporates the ways in which each adheres to, challenges, or translates institutional norms that precede utterances and make them comprehensible.

And that transaction also implicates our judgments about which people will seem worth listening to. Carver's story can be read to generate questions about the ethics and ambivalence of those interpretive practices that seem most familiar and proficient. The materialist feminist rhetorical response that I have sketched here proposes an alternative model for imagining how bodies interpret what has value as they interact with cultural texts that make something like communication possible.

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[1]Thanks to an anonymous reviewer of this essay for this phrase. I would like to thank both anonymous reviewers for their astute and helpful comments about how to strengthen my argument.

[2] See Martin Jay as well as Peggy Phelan for explorations of the importance of visual metaphors within Western epistemologies.

[3] Patricia Harkin's *Acts of Reading* influences this part of my discussion. Her book introduces students to the idea that acts of reading are not natural, but organized by cultural conventions.

[4] See Mary Poovey's "Feminism and Deconstruction" for a helpful elaboration of this point.

[5] These interpretations can be found at: www.associatedcontent.com/article/13368/blind_to_the_truth_blindness_in_raymond.html and www.123helpme.com/search.asp?text=cathedral

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Book Review

What It Used to be Like: A Portrait of My Marriage to Raymond Carver .
Maryann Burk Carver. St. Martin's Press, 2006. Hardback $25.95.

Maryann Burk Carver's *What It Used to be Like: A Portrait of My Marriage to Raymond Carver* is a reclamation of the role she played in the life of her famous author husband. While Tess Gallagher has been given the credit for being Carver's muse, it was the life he lived with Maryann that gave him much of the fodder for the down and out, working men and desperate women found in his fiction and poetry.

In general, Carver scholars and fans tend to champion the writer's relationship with Tess Gallagher—who does not love the image of the pair writing away in their Syracuse home, phones unplugged, a sign on the door clearly stating "No Visitors"—over the seemingly trite and overdone story of two high school sweethearts with its pregnancy, rushed marriage, and difficult life together. Though this plotline is often a model for Carver's fiction, readers prefer to think the writer's life was just a touch more glamorous. In addition, Carver lore is full of warnings from friends and writers who advised him to get away from Maryann, as if she was a dead weight holding his writing back. Burk Carver recalls Gordon Lish's warning in particular: "If you would just let him go, if you would just free him from the exigencies of his life, there is no telling how far he could go." Against these claims, she uses this book to assert her love for Carver, her presence in his life, and her necessity in the creation of his poetry and fiction. Beginning with their youthful flirtation to unexpected pregnancy and marriage—all before she was sixteen—

Burk Carver details the minute ups and downs of the Carver romance with compelling, if not wholly believable detail. Her writing at times seems forced, as if moving clumsily between writing for scholars and the everyday reader, trying to please both audiences at once, and the result is at times a difficult play with cliché and convention. One method Burk Carver adopts in the book is listing what she is reading during a certain time, be it for high school summer reading or a college class. These lists work as declarations of her intelligence, and stylistically they mimic the methodical nature of the author herself. Writing about the course "Adolescent Literature" taken at Stanford, Burk Carver writes,

> We read Arthur C. Clark's *Childhood's End* and John Knowles's *A Separate Peace,* among other books…December 7 was the final exam. Pearl Harbor day. I went to the exam wearing a brown wool miniskirt and a beige long-sleeved top from Joseph Magnin in Palo Alto. I had on Italian brown leather boots that came up to my knees. My hair was long and blond. Can you dig it?

This passage is representative of the pastiche in her style of writing. Awareness of historically important dates, academic (and fashion) name dropping, references to her alluring appearance, topped off with a phrase meant to signify some moment of larger cultural reference—this is typical of Burk Carver's attempts to show throughout the text how "with it" she was.

This stylistic bold style points to Burk Carver's need to make sure all of her story is heard. Her unabashed admittance to wanting to look good, being up on the latest fashion trends, and attention to physique may seem shallow in the company of her literati husband and his crew; yet this frankness seems so much a part of who Maryann Burk

Carver is, and why her marriage to Carver was so successful for so long. Despite her lapses into the seemingly superficial, it is the journey of the Carver family—largely fueled by her patience, malleability and, most importantly, income—that make the book so compelling. Just when things look absolutely miserable, after bankruptcies, extramarital affairs, and severe physical conflict, the Carvers always seemed to get it together and move along, due largely to Maryann.

Burk Carver's book details the earliest days of Raymond Carver's career, which surely will be useful to Carver scholars. This book, however, was not written for those who want to know more about Ray; it was written so that Maryann could let everyone know more about her. Certainly there are points in the book where one is apt to roll one's eyes—"I was sure I was looking lithe and attractive in my new yellow toreador pants and a brown striped T-shirt of Ray's"—yet one reads on because the need for Maryann's story to be heard is open and honest.

Recalling their days at Humboldt State University, she writes,

> Nothing was more exciting for me as Ray saying, "I've got a draft of a story to show you now, Maryann!" All the magic in the universe gathered in his study when we read and analyzed the first draft of a story or poem, our cups of hot coffee together on the floor beside us.

Readers fine Burk Carver showing, through numerous examples and anecdotes, how important she feels she was to Ray, and though not masterful in her stylistics, she drives her point home. Even when she refers to herself as "stoic," claiming to have made every personal sacrifice to ensure her family's survival, one's thoughts of possible self-obsession melt away into sincere sympathy. At the end of the book Maryann details a last

meeting with Ray before his death: she talks about him holding her feet, and her continued correspondence until Ray was no longer there to write. It is clear she never stopped loving him and would relive their relationship in a heartbeat. What is truly heartbreaking is that the story is definitely over. In the end, though Maryann Burk Carver wants her reader to like her and her book. She did not write this story—her first published work, a memoir—for anyone except herself. This is her peace.

Julia Kaziewicz, The College of William and Mary

Book Review

Dear Ghosts,. Tess Gallagher. Graywolf Press, 2006 (hardback); 2008 (paperback). $20.00 (hardback); $15.00 (paperback).

In the world of Raymond Carver studies, Tess Gallagher often ignites controversy. Her positive influence on Carver's life and writing during the post-alcoholic "good Raymond" years cannot be denied, but some Carver readers, most recently in the wake of Gallagher's move to publish the unedited versions of Carver's early stories, raise complex questions about the choices she makes as Carver's widow and literary executor. But any Carver aficionados who, because of such concerns, would choose not to read *Dear Ghosts,*—Gallagher Gallagher's most recent collection of poetry—would be cheating themselves not only of poems that inform Carver studies but of poetry that is as vivid and evocative as any Gallagher has published in her long career as a writer.

Dear Ghosts, is the first poetry collection Gallagher has published since *Moon Crossing Bridge* in 1992, a volume that contained many elegiac poems that continued poetic conversations begun between her and Carver in the poems featured in Carver's last collection, *A New Path to the Waterfall*. The comma appended to Gallagher's title reflects the nature of the book, whose poems create epistles to the many people, living and dead, who shaped Gallagher's identity as a poet, including her new love after Carver's death, Josie Gray, and, of course, Raymond Carver himself.

Two poems that address Gallagher's relationship with Carver are "Black Beauty" and "Sixteenth Anniversary." "Black Beauty" pivots on Gallagher's memory of the

couple eating raspberries out of season at a since-demolished bar in the St. Regis Hotel. The image of the raspberries will likely remind Carver readers of one of his sparest and most haunting poems, "Simple." But in Gallagher's poem, the raspberries become a metaphor for the couple's life together, rich and dearly paid for, as while eating they imagine a Latin American child gathering the fruits destined to be shipped to America, where the writers eat them in luxury enjoyed at a publisher's expense. Despite the five-star setting, the couple recalls their blue-collar roots as they consume the fruits of the child's labor. The poem ends, as do many later Carver poems, with the possibility of immortality:

> Who said: *Raspberries do not keep*
> *or travel well?* I'll stake my lot
> with those ancient seafaring Chinese
> who believed trees shed blood, or that to eat
> the fruit of the 10,000 foot high Cassia tree
> would make them immortal.

"Sixteenth Anniversary," as the title suggests, commemorates the sixteenth anniversary of Carver's death in 1988. Always fascinated with doubles, Gallagher in the poem meets a man who acts as a kind of double for Carver, a Quileute-nation carver who teaches her how to say "I'm going home" in his native language. Gallagher is transformed by taking in his language, a transformation that hints at the change that emerged when she and Raymond Carver began sharing their lives and the work of language:

> I felt an entirely other

spirit enter my body. It
made a shiver rise up in me
and I said so. The carver
nodded and smiled.

Yet many of the most powerful poems in *Dear Ghosts,* take up other subjects, including Gallagher's own battle with breast cancer, a battle which she hides neither in her poetry nor in the startling image of herself missing her characteristically long hair in the author photograph on the book's dust jacket. "The Women of Auschwitz" sensitively reflects on the many horrors that leave women stripped of parts of themselves, from genocide to disease. One of the best poems in the book, "Surgeon" describes her experience with and recovery from three breast cancer surgeries, honoring friends who gave her shelter as she healed. The motherly ministrations of her friend Susan Lytle render the poet childlike and comfortable, leaving her to declare in the poem's last line, "Don't talk to me of heaven."

As is characteristic of Gallagher's work, the poems often provide a space for the personal to meld with the political. "The Dogs of Bucharest" contrasts the productive but often restricted lives of women scientists and artists in eastern Europe with the relatively wealthy yet spiritually barren lives of solipsistic businessmen. "Lady Betty" imagines the life of an Irish woman who chose to become an executioner in exchange for dying herself as penalty for killing a member of her family. An elegy of sorts to Gallagher's father, Leslie Bond, "Fire Starter" connects Gallagher's birth in 1943, Bond's efforts as a working-class laborer in 1940s America, and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1944.

Indeed, many of the poems of *Dear Ghosts,* are recognizably Gallagher, with their expansive and often associative meditations on idea and image and her frequent use of sometimes lengthy, almost always unexpected metaphors, some of which amplify her subject beautifully and some of which fly a bit too fancifully to accomplish Gallagher's poetic goals of long-term communication and connection among writer, subject and reader. But such missteps are rare for such a seasoned poet. And "Choices," arguably the finest poem in the volume, treats the speaker's decision not to fell a tree to gain a mountain view with such an imagistic economy of words that the poem practically sparkles. *Dear Ghosts,* is a fine collection that demonstrates the generosity of image and of spirit apparent in all of Gallagher's oeuvre and likewise shows the growth of a poet entering decidedly new phases of her life.

Jo Angela Edwins, Francis Marion University

Contributors

Josef Benson, a PhD student at the University of South Florida, teaches creative writing at USF and composition at the University of Tampa. His poetry and fiction appear in *The Adirondack Review*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Moon City Review,* and others. His dissertation-in-progress is *Winning for Losing: Men and the Epistemology of Failure in 20th Century Literature.*

Jo Angela Edwins is Assistant Professor of English and Assistant Composition Coordinator at Francis Marion University in Florence, South Carolina. Her poems have appeared in *CrossRoads: A Southern Culture Annual* and *Migrants and Stowaways*, an anthology of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction devoted to the journey theme.

Claire Fabre-Clark is *Maitre de Conferences*, a research and teaching position, at Université de Paris XII. She has published on David Foster Wallace, Patricia Eakins, Grace Paley, Nicholson Baker, and Raymond Carver. During the summer of 2008, she organized and hosted the Carver Symposium in Paris. Fabre-Clark is guest editor for this issue on Carver and Feminism.

Vasiliki Fachard is an independent scholar who divides her time between Switzerland and Greece. She studied at the Sorbonne in France and completed a PhD in French literature at the State University at Albany. Fachard edited a special issue on Raymond Carver for *Journal of the Short Story in English*. She is Associate Editor for *The Raymond Carver Review.*

Libe García Zarranz, a former PhD researcher at the University of Zaragoza in Spain is currently a PhD Fellow at the University of Alberta, Canada. She has presented and published on Emma Donoghue, William Trevor, and Merlinda Bobis, and she serves on the editorial board for *Revista Atenae,* published by the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez. García is guest editor for this issue on Carver and Feminism.

Vanessa Hall is Assistant Professor of English at New York City College of Technology, CUNY. Her dissertation was a cultural study of Raymond Carver's fiction and biography in 1970s and 1980s America. She received her PhD in American studies from Purdue University, with an emphasis in twentieth-century American literature, specializing in cultural studies, women's literature, working-class literature, and western American literature.

Julia Kaziewicz is an American Studies PhD student at The College of William & Mary. She received her BA and a MA in English and American Literature at New York University. Kaziewicz presented a paper at a panel sponsored by The International Raymond Carver Society at the American Literature Association conference.

Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh, PhD, is a Lecturer in literature and cultural studies at Dundalk Institute of Technology, Ireland. She is the co-editor of *Borders and Borderlands in Contemporary Culture* and *Rethinking Diasporas: Hidden Narratives and Imagined Borders*, both from Cambridge Scholars, and has published articles on Irish literature, American literature, and cultural theory. A founding researcher in the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society at Dundalk Institute of Technology, she is secretary to the Irish Association for American Studies.

Eve Wiederhold is an Assistant Professor of English at George Mason University, where she teaches courses in rhetoric, critical theory, and the history of composition studies in the United States. Her current research explores representation and democratic politics in relation to rhetoric and public sphere theories.