

***Passionate Fictions:
Raymond Carver and Feminist Theory***

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“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 Nessel 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)

Nessel, 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 Nessel 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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