

Space, Domesticity and the Everyday:

Re-reading Raymond Carver's Women

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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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