

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

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*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,<sup>1</sup> 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, *Yonnonidio* 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

"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 fact 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 Bakhtin'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 Bakhtin 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).<sup>6</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> "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.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Meyer agrees with this assessment, also considering it to be "one of the finest of all of Carver's stories" (76).

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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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