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Women and Violence in the Stories of Raymond Carver

Sandra Lee Kleppe

- 1 Raymond Carver's short stories frequently depict scenes of emotional menace at the heart of domestic and working-class America. Verbal violence and psychological abuse are the most common forms of animosity in Carver Country. There are, however, scattered episodes of physical violence throughout Carver's stories, and more often than not these involve a woman either as perpetrator, victim, or narrator/witness to the scene. In one of the most blunt depictions of a violent woman, Carver has her perform a ritual act on her husband in which "she cuts out his heart and holds it up to the lustrous sun" (*No Heroics, Please* 52). In another story, two women are the victims of a random act of male violence: "Jerry used the same rock on both girls" to kill them (*What We Talk About* 56). In most cases, however, women are depicted within a domestic world where family tensions end in violence, such as when a husband hits his wife when he suspects she has cheated on him: "'Where were you all night?' he was screaming, standing over her, legs watery, fist drawn back to hit again. Then she said, 'I didn't do anything. Why did you hit me?'" (*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* 232).
- 2 This article examines the role of women characters who are involved in such violent passages. The first and middle sections provide an overview of Carver's development of the motif of violence from his formative years through his minimalist and later phases. The final section concentrates on an analysis of one story, "So Much Water, So Close to Home," and how it reflects the specific social trauma of the rape and murder of young women in Carver's native Washington State by serial killers in the 1970s and 1980s. By considering passages from different periods in which Carver yokes the representation of women to violence, the aim is to establish how the cumulative effect expresses something about Carver's idiomatic rendering of a violent world. What links the various parts of this paper is the attempt to see the violent episodes involving women as meaningful in the larger context of their status in contemporary America. The theoretical scope of the discussion will be limited to the few perspectives that seem particularly relevant to a reading of how Carver depicts women in a violent era.

- 3 I have chosen to include considerations of two studies that are sensitive to three aspects of the topic which seem paramount in Carver's case: 1) how violence relates to gender, 2) how violence is connected to women's worlds in a very *real* way, and 3) how literary realism is a vehicle for expressing such a contemporary condition. In an illuminating article on violence and representation, Teresa de Lauretis analyzes how "the representation of violence is inseparable from the notion of gender" and argues that the "real, the physical world and empirical reality" are crucial in understanding depictions of gender and violence (1989 240; 246). Josephine G. Hendin argues in her recent book, *HeartBreakers: Women and Violence in Contemporary Culture and Literature*, (2004) that "[v]iolent women in literature return the empirical energies of realism, the reach of emotions, and the narrative richness and meaning of language to center stage" (25). She considers specifically how women who commit violent acts in contemporary American literature and culture are performing communicative gestures that are ultimately not an indication of the breakdown of society but rather symbolic of a significant process of *change* taking place in the roles of men, women, and families. Since nearly all of Carver's violent women are portrayed in a marital or family context, his stories are particularly interesting in light of the concept of communicative violence as an expression of or wish for change.
- 4 Both de Lauretis and Hendin provide a critique of a number of current theories of representation that they find inadequate to an analysis of women and violence in literature.¹ Hendin, for example, holds that "American literature of violent women constitutes an assault by realism on postmodern unreality and nihilism" (51), and de Lauretis locates blind spots in current ideologies that fail to take into account women's experiences, "events and behaviors [that] weigh in the constitution of subjectivity as much as does language" (249). Carver occupies a curiously paradoxical position on the contemporary literary scene. Producing his most characteristic neo-realistic fiction at the height of the postmodern era (*What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* appeared in 1981), a minimalist among maximalists, Carver had a relentless faith in the power of words to evoke the experiences of everyday Americans in an age when language play and experimentation with technique reigned. At the same time, the meta-textual and hyper-real aspects of Carver's production nevertheless make it characteristic of the era.
- 5 Carver's portrayal of women and violence changed subtly over the course of his career. In the early years, he was struggling with literary models, and produced parodies of others' work in which women are both victims and perpetrators of violence. When he moved to his more idiomatic style in the 1970s, we see frustrated women performing violent gestures that seem to produce no changes in their lives. By the final years, however, women start achieving an amount of control over their lives as violence seems to move them from one phase to another in the direction they wish to be going. There is thus a parallel between the analyses of Hendin and de Lauretis and the development of Carver's portrayal of women. These scholars are sensitive to examining the nexus of gender and violence as women have experienced it in the postmodern world and find that the discourse surrounding this nexus has moved from private (i.e. the home) to public (e.g. the establishment of battered women's centers; the use of the concept "domestic violence" in court), and also that women who use violence do so ultimately in attempts to make real personal and political changes. In addition, the fact that Hendin and de Lauretis both give so much emphasis to the empirical realities of

women makes their methods for reading women and violence especially relevant to a writer who was intensely pre-occupied with the possibilities of literary realism.

The Formative Years

- 6 In three early stories written during the 1960s, there are accounts of violence rendered in three distinct literary modes that Carver was imitating on the road to finding his own style. "Furious Seasons" is a Faulknerian tale narrated by using the device of repeating the scene leading up to a murder four times. A brother has a sexual relationship with his sister, and when he learns she is pregnant, he slashes her with his razor, though Carver omits a graphic account of the death scene and leaves it to the reader to fill in the details:
- 7 He lays down the razor and washes his face, then picks up the razor again... He carries her out to the porch, turns her face to the wall, and covers her up. He goes back to the bathroom, washes his hands, and stuffs the heavy, blood-soaked towel into the hamper. (*No Heroics*, Please 41)
- 8 Except for the technique of ellipsis, Carver rarely ever used Faulknerian devices or themes again. The same is true for the experimental tale "Bright Red Apples," which William L. Stull points out is Carver's "sole attempt at the self-consuming mode of 'superfiction' that swept through American literature in the late 1960s" (Preface to *No Heroics* 18). In this story a deranged son rides out from his apple farm on a camel into a desert landscape, returns and threatens to kill his family members, then later commits suicide in the orchard. The mother in the story tries to fend off the son's violence by protecting herself with a dog, as she also tries to dissuade him from shooting: "Rudy, now you wouldn't do anything now, dear, you'd be sorry for later" (*No Heroics* 59).
- 9 "The Aficionados" is a Hemingway parody and the most interesting story with reference to Carver's further development. Hemingway is the only writer from this period who had a significant influence on Carver's later work, and in this story he allows physical strength and violence to be the traits of a heroine, rather than a hero. Carver's title is an allusion to the passage in *The Sun Also Rises* where Jake explains that "Aficion means passion. An aficionado is one who is passionate about the bull-fights" (135). Carver's story transforms the bull-fight into a public ritual in which a woman cuts out the heart of her husband in front of a cheering crowd. At every point in the story, Carver parodies some aspect of Hemingway. The woman complains that the other women slayers lack aficion, "They seem so, so unprofessional" (47). On the day of the ceremony the man and woman sit drinking, engaged in a numbing dialogue, and he wonders how many of the previous men she has slain were her lovers: "How many of us have you lived with?" he asks, to which she replies "Why... five or six. I'd have to think" (49). Carver's woman is a stronger Brett Ashley; she is endowed with physical and not merely emotional power over the men she seduces. In the final scene the two are in the center of a public Arena: "She is standing over him dressed in a white robe, holding the long shiny obsidian knife... she cuts out his heart and holds it up to the lustrous sun" (52).
- 10 "The Aficionados" is not a mere inversion of Hemingway's bull-fighting plot. In this parody, in which the woman is powerful and the man is degraded to an animal, Carver ridicules at once heroism, male sports, and stereotypical gender roles. The story has a symbolic, almost mythic character, as the men and women seem types in a ritual

drama. Hendin has analyzed how specific myths native (indigenous) to the American continent have come to influence the treatment of violence in American realism. She finds central the male myth of the native who cuts out and eats his enemy's heart in order to assimilate his strength (28). The title of Hendin's book, *HeartBreakers*, refers to the phenomena of women who physically attack men, literally stabbing or mangling them in ways that stop their hearts, empowering themselves in the process. The frequency of these taboo phenomena² in current American film, literature and life is indicative, she believes, of a society in transformation, one in which women's *retaliatory* violence is expressive of their refusal to be victimized as the weaker sex. By allowing the woman to take control and perform such a violent act in "The Aficionados," Carver is contributing to the symbolic transformation in American literature and culture in which violent women metaphorically and literally are allowed to break men's hearts.

- 11 Hendin finds another native American myth, a female one, even more interesting. In it, a brother and sister have an incestuous relationship, and the brother kills their baby (30). The sister retaliates by bringing disease into the world. The theme of incest and the fear of (powerful) women is central to Faulkner's work, and parodied, as we saw above, in Carver's "Furious Seasons." In all three of his early stories containing violent scenes, Carver is clearly working through and ridding himself of influences, and thus the violence can also be read as a symbolic slaying of predecessors in order to make way for his idiomatic style³. With the exception of Hemingway, Carver quickly left early influences behind. And Carver's realism is a much closer rendering of the lives of everyday Americans than Hemingway's ever was. While Hemingway was preoccupied with war in Europe, Carver portrays the everyday battles that take place on the real home front: in domestic realms of America. Carver's stories are more often than not about family relationships, especially marriage. The existence of marital violence has become so pervasive in American society that it risks becoming commonplace⁴, and it is a pervasive presence in Carver's stories as well.
- 12 As both Hendin and de Lauretis suggest, a whole cold-war generation of women who experienced domestic violence were not taken seriously by health professionals and jurisprudence until the 1980s, as there were no official concepts with which to deal with their situations. In this context de Lauretis has examined a theoretical fallacy which leaves the empirical reality of violence unaccounted for: "To say that a) the concept of 'family violence' did not exist before the expression came into being, as I said earlier, is not the same as saying that b) family violence did not exist before 'family violence' became part of the discourse of social science" (246). Such violence is quite frequently recorded in literature and other arts before it reaches public discourse, and realist literature is a particularly well-focused medium that is sensitive to such a world. Both de Lauretis and Hendin agree that representations of women and violence are almost always linked to the relational. All of Hendin's examples "share three major elements: the affective, communicative and interrelational" (53). Violence committed against women as well as their own retaliatory violence are thus phenomena that grow out of specific social contexts, those of intimate and family life structures. After his formative years, Carver turned his attentions precisely to the depiction of marriage and of family life in America. In many cases, women are portrayed as the perpetrators of violence, and the frequency with which they smash items, hit or slap their family members suggests that their actions are both retaliatory and communicative within the context of officially unaccounted for, yet fictionally recorded domestic violence.

Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?: The Communicative Aspects of Family Violence

- 13 In Carver's first story collection *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976), he applies his developing skills as a realist to stories of domestic turmoil at the heart of American families. There are small, violent episodes scattered through the collection and they all have in common a communicative aspect. In three stories, frustrated women resort to violence when talk and other measures do not improve their life situations. The first of these, "Nobody Said Anything," is narrated by a boy who constantly hears his parents bickering. At one point in the story, the mother relates to the son her worry that the father is trying to break up the family. In the final scene, the boy finds his parents screaming at each other in the kitchen. The tension reaches its height when the mother performs a violent gesture that spoils the family dinner: "She pushed her chair back and grabbed the pan by its handle and threw it against the wall over the sink" (60). Though it does not resolve their conflict, the woman's rash action shows her unwillingness to accept the status quo by continuing the futile verbal battle.
- 14 In "Jerry and Molly and Sam," another story of domestic unrest, an adulterous and frustrated husband describes how his wife can suddenly resort to violence: "She could go along with [the children], let them get away with just so much, and then she would turn on them and savagely slap their faces, screaming, 'Stop it! Stop it! I can't stand any more of it!'" (157). When abusive mothers are portrayed in literature, Hendin has argued, they present a challenge to conventional notions of feminine behavior, stereotypes that would have us believe that women are inherently nurturing and passive. The realism of Carver's passages with violent women in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* shows all of them in contexts where they are caught in tense family relationships, and their violence can therefore be read as acts of communicating their dissatisfaction with roles and norms prescribed to men and women. In the third story depicting a violent woman, "What Is It?" the wife's shame and humiliation leads her to attack her husband. The couple are going bankrupt, and the story suggests that she ends up prostituting herself by selling her car and her body in order for the family to gain access to cash. After the night of the sale the drunk wife returns home to her husband and "lunges, catches his shirt, tears it down the front. 'Bankrupt!' she screams. She tears loose, grabs and tears his undershirt at the neck. 'You son of a bitch,' she says, clawing" (216).
- 15 In these stories, in which women express themselves through violence, their actions do not seem to resolve any of their problems. In two other stories where men have violent outbursts while a woman witnesses or is the victim, there is, on the contrary, a sense of resolution and closure. In "Bicycles, Muscles, Cigaretts" two fathers get in a fight over their sons' vandalism, and a mother of a third boy looks on in horror. The narrator, Hamilton, attacks the other father, "pound[ing] his head against the lawn while the woman cried, 'God almighty, someone stop them'" (203). Hamilton then takes his son home, where his wife expresses her disapproval of the fight, yet the father and son have a moment of emotional connection over the episode at bedtime the same night. Hamilton "moved to kiss his son, but the boy began talking. 'Dad, was grandfather strong like you? When he was your age, I mean'" (206). The violence establishes a masculine bond between father and son, a closeness the mother does not share.

- 16 The title story of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* is the tale of the husband Ralph's violent, physical and emotional reaction to his wife Marian's adultery. She takes the initiative of bringing up an episode that had happened a few years earlier, when the couple attended a drunken party, and Ralph had beaten her when he suspected she had sex with another man, something she denied at the time:
- "Where were you all night?" he was screaming, standing over her, legs watery, fist drawn back to hit again. Then she said, "I didn't do anything. Why did you hit me?" (232)
- 17 The fusing of violence and sex is, according to Hendin, one of the most common factors in the occurrence of domestic strife, or what she terms "the politics of intimacy" (6). Ralph later recalls some of the bloody details of battering his wife, which he fuses with imagining her and the other man:
- He thought of Marian...on the floor, blood on her teeth: "Why did you hit me?" Then Marian reaching under her dress to unfasten her garter belt! Then Marian lifting her dress as she arched back! (240)
- 18 Even Marian, in her narration of the sex episode to Ralph in an attempt to gain his forgiveness, strikingly fuses violence with her choice of imagery. Mitchell, the man she had sex with, said "something about Norman Mailer stabbing his wife in the chest.... He said he'd hate to think of me being stabbed in the breast. He said he'd like to kiss my breast" (237).
- 19 The plot is resolved through gesture, which is a communicative act that is a hallmark aspect of Carver's work. It is especially when words fail that characters resort to gestures as a means of connecting with their surroundings. In three stories of this collection, as we have seen above, women vent their emotional frustration and humiliation by using violent gestures: one woman smashes a frying pan, while another slaps her children and a third attacks her husband. In "Bicycles, Muscles, Cigaretts" it is a father who attacks another father in a neighborhood clash, then has a moment of reconciliation with his son. "Will You Please be Quiet, Please?" also closes with reconciliation, as the estranged couple find their way back to each other through sex. The story ends with the lines, "And then he turned to her. ...he was still turning, marveling at the impossible *changes* he felt moving over him" (251, emphasis added). The motifs of change and transformation link all of the stories containing violent scenes in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* However, it is only in the stories where men commit violent acts that there is any sense of reconciliation between characters. Women's violence in this collection is portrayed as sudden and futile, a clear expression of frustration and wish for change, but with no outlets for a positive resolution of the situation. Carver did not return to communication and reconciliation as major themes again until his later work.

What We Talk About: Minimalist Ellipsis and Extremity

- 20 *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981) is considered a seminal book in what came to be known as literary minimalism, a pared-down style Carver developed as a sort of extreme form of Hemingway's telegraphic realism. Though Carver moved quickly beyond the minimalist aesthetic of this volume in his next works, the treatment of women and violence bears the characteristic traits of this movement. Carver made massive cuts to the stories in this volume while preparing it for publication⁵, replacing

some violent episodes with ellipsis, and leaving much to suggestion. Some of the stories take domestic situations similar to those in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* to absurd ends, providing compressed, dark humor in the place of narrative exposition. In the title story of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, two couples get drunk while discussing the nature of love, and debate, among things, whether a husband who beats his wife then kills himself can really feel love for her. The fusing of the themes of sex, love and violence reaches no conclusive resolution, as the gin runs out and the lights dim on the characters. This story sets the tone for a collection in which people commit sudden acts of violence that are more extreme than in the previous volume, yet less contextualized and sometimes seemingly random.

- 21 In an episode of the four-page story “Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit” we learn that the narrator’s rival “walked with a wound from a gunshot his first wife had given him...for not meeting his payments” (18), a more serious outcome than the wife’s attacking her husband for bankruptcy in “What Is It?” discussed above. In “Gazebo” the plot of “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” is condensed and reversed, as the wife threatens to commit suicide after learning of her husband’s affair. The women in these cases resort to more extreme measures than in the earlier fiction, though some of the stories are so reduced as to seem like vignettes. This is true of the shortest story in the volume, “Popular Mechanics,” which is almost a prose poem and contemporary allegory of the Biblical story of Solomon and his two wives. A husband and wife who are breaking up literally fight over who gets to keep their baby, each pulling at its limbs as the story ends abruptly: “In this manner, the issue was decided” (125). Domestic violence is thus taken to new levels in this volume, at the same time as character development is kept at a minimum. The result is a portrayal of contemporary life in which men and women commit violence as a matter of course in order to gain immediate or short-term resolution of a conflict.
- 22 In the longer “The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off,” narrated by a teenage boy named Jack, there is more character exploration, yet no clear explanation of why his father’s mute friend Dummy “[d]id in his wife with a hammer, then drowned himself” (102). The narrator’s father simply blames the wife: “That’s what the wrong kind of woman can do to you, Jack” (103). The story “Tell the Women We’re Going” contains the volume’s most horrific account of violence; in it the male perpetrator moves outside the family sphere and into the world at large. The protagonist Bill and his friend Jerry decide to take a Sunday afternoon off from their families. On their way driving home, the men encounter two women biking, and later follow the women onto a hiking trail. Jerry presumably kills them both, though the concluding scene is elliptic: “Jerry used the same rock on both girls, first on the girl called Sharon, then on the one that was supposed to be Bill’s” (66). This random act of violence is shorn of any cause-and-effect explanation. Another story that is connected to “Tell the Women We’re Going” through the theme of the random and/or serial murder of young women in the Northwest outdoors is “So Much Water So Close to Home,” discussed at length in the final section below. The complexity of Carver’s treatment of this theme does not become clear until his post-minimalist work. Almost immediately after the publication of this minimalist collection, Carver began revising and expanding several of its stories for inclusion in later volumes.

The Later Work

- 23 In Carver's final writing phase, the stories he gathered in *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories* (1983), *Cathedral* (1983) and *Where I'm Calling From* (1988), contain fewer violent scenes at the same time as the fiction becomes longer in its exploration of old and new themes. There is, however, a momentary escalation of violence in the expanded version of "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit," retitled "Where Is Everyone?" in *Fires*. The narrator recounts how his son has beaten his own mother, and then comments on how the violence has been passed on to the next generation: the teenage children "seemed to thrive on the threats and bullying they inflicted on each other and us – the violence and dismay, the general bedlam" (157). Overall, however, the violent scenes involving women in the later stories are similar to those in the earlier ones, yet with the significant difference that women achieve a degree of control in changing their lives. Women who are caught up in frustrating lives are not portrayed as victims of those situations. They occasionally vent their anger in sudden verbal and physical outbursts that are almost exclusively aimed at men, such as the final scene in "The Pheasant," in which a woman slaps her boyfriend when he decides to leave her (*Fires* 152).
- 24 In a few of the dozen stories in *Cathedral*, family violence is still a central topic. In "The Compartment" a father recalls how years earlier his son had attacked him while his wife stood "dropping one dish of china after the other onto the dining-room floor" (47). In "Where I'm Calling From" the protagonist is in a dry-out facility for alcoholics and befriends J.P., who tells him how his wife Roxy had broken his nose in a fight. The couple make up at the end of the story, which is the beginning of a new year. In the expanded version of the minimalist "The Bath" (retitled "A Small, Good Thing"), the child who remained in a coma-like state at the end of the shorter version dies in the longer one. The mother Ann has violent feelings for the baker, who has been harassing the parents on the phone for forgetting to pick up the child's birthday cake: "I'd like to kill him, I'd like to shoot him and watch him kick" she says (83), though they become friends at the closing of the story. The violence in *Cathedral* thus shows women engaging in outbursts that seem necessary catalysts to move from one phase of life to another.
- 25 An interesting story that connects Carver's formative and final writing years is "The Train." Carver picks up the plot of John Cheever's "The Five-Forty-Eight" in which a woman stalks and threatens a man who has mistreated her. In Cheever's story the woman, carrying a gun, forces the man to lie down and put his face in the dirt: "He fell forward in the filth.... He stretched out on the ground, weeping.... Then he heard her footsteps go away" (Cheever 247). Carver makes her a notch more violent in his version: "she put her foot on the back of his head and pushed his face into the dirt. Then she put the revolver into her handbag and walked back to the railway station" (*Cathedral* 147). In this realist story, Carver has come a long way from the early "The Aficionados" both in his use of influences and his portrayal of women and violence. The woman of the Hemingway parody figures as a mythical embodiment of female empowerment and wrath, whereas here we have a literally down-to-earth scene in which a woman takes control of her life and feelings, refusing to be the victim of a man's abusive behavior: "She tried to make him see that he couldn't keep trampling on people's feelings" (147). The woman then moves on with her life, and the rest of the story is a portrayal of the passengers she encounters in the waiting room and on the

train. Cheever's story ends with the woman's violence, but in Carver's the violence comes at the beginning of a tale that leads her back into ordinary life.

- 26 In the six new stories gathered in *Where I'm Calling From*, women also take charge as they move into new life phases. In "Menudo" a wife hits her husband when she learns he has cheated on her (339), and "Intimacy" is almost completely constructed on a woman's verbal violence directed at her ex-husband, a writer who exposes ugly material from their marriage years in his work. In "Blackbird Pie" a woman is leaving her husband, and the deputy-sheriff who is at the scene warns the couple against violence, commenting that "Statistics show that your domestic dispute is, time and again, potentially the most dangerous situation a person, especially a law-enforcement officer, can get himself involved in" (377). By putting these words in the mouth of the officer, Carver shows an awareness of the ubiquitous menace of domestic violence in contemporary America, and stories from this period show how women do not accept the status of victim. Hendin has analyzed how both verbal skills and physical retaliation are methods frequently used by women in their fighting back against a system which they transform in the process. These stories depict such strong women who take their lives in their own hands, making both men and the general public aware that they do not acquiesce to playing the role of the weaker sex.
- 27 In "Blackbird Pie" the woman peacefully leaves her husband, but the public nature of the departure scene, when the husband, wife, rancher, and officer are gathered on the couple's lawn, indicates Carver's burgeoning preoccupation with the larger consequences of private violence. In the manuscripts gathered in the posthumous *Call If You Need Me*, violence almost ebbs completely out, but there is also a public scene in "Dreams" in which a woman who has just lost her children in a fire vents her shock on her neighbor. The whole neighborhood is gathered on her lawn as firefighters carry out the dead children. When the narrator addresses her, "She whirled on me.... She brought her hand back and slapped me in the face" (45). The story ends on a note of reconciliation that is characteristic of Carver's later work, as the narrator invites the bereaved woman to dinner and she accepts. In his later phase, Carver thus moves women's violence out of the privacy of the core family and makes it a publicly acknowledged spectacle, and his realism in such scenes depicts a world in which women are taking charge, and one in which the legal system begins to appropriate the terminology to deal with what the deputy-sheriff in "Blackbird Pie" had named "domestic dispute." As de Lauretis has shown in her analysis of gender and violence, the reality of domestic violence preceded the concepts for which to name it in official discourse. Carver's various phases of realism from early to late work parallel the actual paradigm shift from private to public concern with family violence from the 1970s to the 1980s, as most of the earlier works portray violence within the walls of the home, and the later ones carry it out into public. The final section will examine what happens to the topic of violence both inside and outside the home during the transition from Carver's middle to late phases.

The Contemporary Trauma of the Violated Female Corpse

- 28 The minimalist version of the story "So Much Water, So Close to Home" published in *What We Talk About* (1981) is a mere nine pages; Carver revised it to twenty pages for

inclusion in *Fires* (1983)⁶. A paraphrase of the story in both versions is fairly simple: a young woman's corpse is found in a river by a group of men who are camping and fishing; they wait until their trip is over to report it to the local sheriff, then return home. As I hope to show, however, Carver expanded it into one of his most complex stories about gender and violence. It is narrated by a woman, Claire, who is the wife of one of the men who discover the corpse. "So Much Water" is also one of several stories in Carver's canon that is set in his native Pacific Northwest. This is Green River Killer Country: a place of tall forests and gushing rivers, where one can drive through miles of mountainous roads without meeting another car, where series of women can be raped, murdered, and abandoned with little risk of being discovered. The Green River Killer case was not solved until 2003, though the 49 or more murders of young women took place two decades earlier, between 1982 and 1984⁷. The perpetrator, Gary Leon Ridgway, sexually molested and killed his victims, in most cases leaving their naked bodies in or near the Green River south of the Seattle-Tacoma area of Washington State.

- 29 Though the details and locale of the Green River killings are similar to those in "So Much Water, So Close to Home," Carver was not necessarily modeling it specifically on that case, as the story's genesis suggests it is prior to this murder spree. During the 1970s, however, there had been several similar rape/murders of young women in the same region, at least four of them committed by another notorious serial killer, Ted Bundy, in Lake Sammamish State Park south of Seattle. Lake Sammamish, Green River, and the north tip of the Naches River, which is the setting of both "So Much Water" as well as "Tell the Women We're Going" discussed above, are all within a fifty-mile radius. In "So Much Water," a young woman's corpse is found in the Naches, while in "Tell the Women" two young women are (presumably) stoned to death hiking near its banks. While following the two women in the latter story, Bill looks down from the path to see "a strip of the Naches like a strip of aluminum foil" (55).
- 30 The murder of women in the great Northwest outdoors was an ominous phenomenon in Carver's day, having reached its most horrific dimensions by the time of the Green River case. Carver's story is therefore a fictional recording of the contemporary trauma of the pervasive threat of the rape/murder of young American women in non-urban settings. Carver's expansions to the story underline this threat and deal with two main areas: 1) the exploration of the consciousness of the female narrator with emphasis on her traumatic reaction to the corpse, 2) a foregrounding of the danger to women in domestic, community, as well as outdoor spheres. In the longer version, which is the focus of this discussion, we see Claire struggling to make sense of her life in the context of this triple level of menace, and Carver contextualizes this as specifically gendered and linked to the positions of men and women in his contemporary society. The naked female corpse becomes a symbol of the state of that society, and the protagonist clearly identifies with the dead woman's plight.
- 31 "So Much Water" is a story narrated in an expansive realism. Carver applies the techniques of juxtaposition and suggestion he had honed in his minimalist phase, at the same time as he adds depth to character exploration. The main juxtaposition in the story is between the men's inability to elicit any affective response to the corpse they find, which is the opposite of Claire's intense emotional reaction when she later learns about it. The discovery of the corpse is related in Carver's characteristic cold and blunt

realism, but filtered through the mind of Claire who gets the information from her husband Stuart:

One of the men, I don't know who, it might have been Stuart,...took a piece of nylon cord and tied it around her wrist and then secured the cord to tree roots, all the while the flashlights of the other men played over the girl's body.... The next morning, Saturday, they cooked breakfast, drank lots of coffee, more whisky, and then split up to fish, two men upriver, two men down.

That night, after they had cooked their fish and potatoes and had more coffee and whisky, they took their dishes down to the river and rinsed them off a few yards from where the body lay in the water. (169)

- 32 The men continue to fish near the corpse, and do not report the body to the local sheriff until Sunday afternoon. Stuart then drives home to Claire, but does not tell her of the find until the next morning, as he is eager to have sex and sleep.
- 33 In the 1981 shorter version, Claire acquiesces to all of Stuart's sexual advances, but in the longer one she refuses twice, angering him (177; 185). In his revisions Carver includes passages that make clear how Claire is disturbed by the fact that Stuart had wanted sex the same day as he left the corpse, as well as every day after. When he tells her of the find, she "looked at his hands, the broad fingers, knuckles covered with hair, fingers that had moved over me, into me last night" (171). In both versions, the final section includes a sex scene between the couple, but in the longer one Claire fights Stuart off: "Not now, please," Claire says, which Stuart repeats in a mocking tone, then slips one of his hands under her bra, to which she reacts, "'Stop, stop, stop,' I say. I stamp on his toes" (185). In both stories, Stuart is portrayed as brutal and insensitive, but only in the longer version does Claire refuse to have sex, after which Stuart throws her to the floor and exclaims, "I hope your cunt drops off before I touch it again" (185). The parallel between the sexually abused corpse that Stuart finds (the police believe she had been raped) and Stuart's brutal sexual advances is suggestive of the threat to women both inside the home and out, and it is particularized in the consciousness of Claire who makes such connections.
- 34 The story is narrated in retrospect after Claire learns of the corpse, and in both versions, she has a violent outburst near the beginning of the story because Stuart does not accept that the incident is of any importance: "Despite everything, knowing all that may be in store, I rake my arm across the drainboard and send the dishes and glasses smashing and scattering across the floor" (168). Like the women who perform such gestures in Carver's other stories, Claire's act is clearly communicative, coming as it does when words between the husband and wife fail. This does not elicit any immediate response from Stuart, though he tries throughout the story to prevent his wife from internalizing the drama of the dead young woman. At one point in the story Claire remembers a specific case from her Northwest youth that resembles the current find and she infuriates Stuart when she shares it:
- "The Maddox brothers. They killed a girl...cut off her head and threw it in the Cle Elum River. She and I went to high school together. It happened when I was a girl."
 "What a hell of a thing to be talking about," he says, "Come on, get off it. You're going to get me riled in a minute" (173).⁸
- 35 He does get angry, and she loses control and slaps him, then regrets it as he raises his fist at her. The couple is clearly having a communication crisis, something Claire articulates to herself in several passages in the longer version: "Something has come between us" (167); "you are really undergoing a crisis" (175).

- 36 Claire also feels specifically threatened by the general danger of being a woman in a community of macho fishermen, mechanics and truckers. In both stories, she makes the decision to drive the 120 miles to the community of Summit to attend the young woman's funeral. In the longer version, her journey is expanded to include more detailed episodes of menace to Claire. When she stops for gas and to ask for directions, she feels the mechanic's and attendant's eyes on her, and they try to stall and keep her there, and offer to drive her to Summit themselves (180-181). There is an intense scene which follows and in which Carver is acutely aware of and records the very real threat to women's bodies that was a fact of his contemporary world. She is on a long stretch of mountain highway alone, bordering the Naches River, when a green truck with a male driver starts trailing her. When she slows to let him pass, he stays behind her, but finally does pass, tooting his horn and waving at her. Shaken by the episode, she pulls over and parks, but he comes back, and tries to force her car open:

"Come on, roll down your window.... It's not good for a woman to be batting around the country by herself." He shakes his head and looks at the highway, then back at me.... "Open the door, all right?".... He looks at my breasts and legs. The skirt has pulled up over my knees. His eyes linger on my legs, but I sit still, afraid to move. (182)

- 37 Luckily for Claire he leaves, but the man in this scene could easily have been a Ted Bundy or the Green River Killer, could easily have broken the car window, raped, murdered and abandoned Claire without being discovered. And Claire has learned from the news that the suspect of the murder drove a green car and had likely raped his victim; though this is a truck, the symbolism in the identical color of the vehicles is suggestive. Claire also knows that the woman died of strangulation (a method of operation common to factual Washington State serial killers), and the driver's choice of words to coax her to open the door, "You're going to smother in there," adds another eerie touch to the scene (182).

- 38 In the longer version of "So Much Water," Carver thus takes pains to contextualize Claire's crisis on the triple level of domestic strife, community gender roles, and the larger and dangerous world of violence that specifically targets women. He also allows Claire to explore the meanings of her own situation by expanding the passages where we follow her stream-of-consciousness. Most conspicuously, we learn that Claire has earlier had a stay in a mental institution precipitated by inexplicable headaches (176). Claire's disturbed mental state, however, is not presented as insanity but rather as clairvoyance (hence perhaps the choice of her name) and omniscience. In the course of the story she comes to identify so completely with the dead young woman that she imagines that she is the woman: "I look at the creek. I float toward the pond, eyes open, face down, staring at the rocks and moss on the creek bottom" (173). The following related passage is absent from the short version; while she is at the funeral she imagines the

journey down the river, the nude body hitting rocks, caught at by branches, the body floating and turning, her hair streaming in the water. Then the hands and hair catching in the overhanging branches, holding, until four men come along to stare at her. I can see the man who is drunk (Stuart?) take her by the wrist. Does anyone here know about that? I look around at the other faces. There is a connection to be made of these things, these events, these faces, if I can find it. My head aches with the effort to find it. (184)

- 39 Claire's efforts at articulation reach the reader but are time and again brushed off by her husband. She is trying to make sense of her place in the family as well as in the

larger community, and by being so concerned with the dead woman, her efforts extend to the lot of women in general and more specifically to the fate of women who are victims of random or serial killings.

- 40 Marshall Bruce Gentry, in an article on women's voices in Carver's work, believes that Carver's "fiction regularly shortchanges women by making their minds seem less complex than men's minds" (88). In his discussion of "So Much Water," he writes that "the husband's silence [is] more menacingly mysterious and complex than the wife's relatively explicit anxiety" and that the "mystery and complexity of Claire's thoughts are deflated somewhat by a simple, stereotypical explanation: she is crazy" (91). On the contrary, I hope to have illustrated that the complexity of Claire's thoughts and anxieties is not mysterious, but rather portrayed within a specifically gendered context in which she is caught up in role pressures at every level in her life from private to public. "Craziness" and its many synonyms, such as the 19th century "hysteria" and the 20th century "neurosis" are terms central to women's history and most frequently analyzed in women's studies as precisely connected to pressures exerted on women that are inextricably connected to period gender roles⁹.
- 41 A brief comparison with a story that has a similar protagonist, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), published almost a century before "So Much Water," should bring out some of the gender and health issues that the stories share despite their distance in time. Both are narrated by a married American woman with one child who has been diagnosed with mental illness. Both husbands have patronizing attitudes toward their wives, and will not listen to their worries, which are expressed in strikingly articulate terms in both texts. Finally, both women identify and in their minds fuse with another woman who is the symbol of their contemporary society's ill treatment of women in general. The protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" imagines there is a woman imprisoned inside the paper, shaking the bars to get out. We also learn that the protagonist feels trapped and infantilized in her room, which is a former nursery described as a prison with a bolted-down bed and barred windows. In the final scene, the protagonist believes she is the woman behind the paper: "I've got out at last," she says to her husband, "And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (36).
- 42 In "So Much Water," as we have seen, Claire identifies with the dead woman, though her story ends on a milder note, as she continues her efforts to get her husband to understand the magnitude of the situation: "For God's sake, Stuart, she was only a child" (186; the female victim is identified as being between 18 and 24 years old, 171). The short version, on the other hand, ends with a scene in which she acquiesces to having sex with Stuart. The revised story thus underlines in its closure Claire's independence and concern with the issue of women's brutalization. In Gilman's story, the "hysteria" of the protagonist is contextualized within 19th-century norms that expected women to stay within the domestic sphere. Gilman, in her non-fiction, had radical proposals for the restructuring of domestic life not based on the traditional core family¹⁰. A century later, Carver's Claire is in an almost identical situation as Gilman's narrator in terms of her (mental) health and family status as a stay-home mother.
- 43 In 1985, the U.S. Surgeon General identified domestic violence as a major health problem; in 1988, the year of Carver's death, the Surgeon General declared domestic abuse as the leading health hazard to women. By 1984 serial killers in Carver's home State had molested and killed dozens of young women, abandoning them in areas

within an hour or two's drive of the setting of "So Much Water, So Close to Home." The multiple threats to women's health and lives in the domestic, public, and outdoor spheres is vividly portrayed in Carver's story by using a woman, Claire, as narrator. At every level, in the home, at the gas station, and on the mountainous road, she experiences threats that are specifically gender-related. As a woman in a rural community – the place where Carver grew up – she is not free to move anywhere without the fear of harassment, not even into her own extra bedroom, the door of which Stuart breaks open when she locks herself in (185). Moreover, this symbolic imprisonment which she shares with Gilman's 19th-century narrator is taken to an extreme form in the symbol of the woman's molested corpse in the river, representing women's status as not only unfree but as sex objects in their homes or as victims of sex predators at large. Unfortunately, the symbol was factually a horrific reality of Carver's time and place, one which he boldly transforms into a realistic woman's encounter with the gendered trauma of contemporary violence in America.

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NOTES

1. It is not possible to do justice to their elaborate critiques here. Hendin, for example, finds that "Baudrillard's voice erupts from a dark well of misogyny in which woman is in the passive, immobilized position of the abstract linguistic category of the feminine" (20), and in one of de Lauretis's examples she examines how "sexuality, not only in general and traditional discourse, but in Foucault's as well, is not construed as gendered (as having a male form and a female form), but simply as male" (245).
2. Hendin notes in this context that "Fear that discussing violence by women is politically bad for women is widespread and has inflamed denials that violence by women exists at all or is meaningful if it does exist" (9). See also note 4 below.
3. Harold Bloom attempts to apply his theory of anxiety to Carver's works in *Bloom's Major Short Story Writers: Raymond Carver*, stating that Carver "wisely fended Hemingway off by an *askesis*" in his later career (10). Yet he goes on to reduce Carver's worth to one story, "Cathedral," which he finds a mere imitation of D.H. Lawrence's "The Blind Man." Bloom's conclusion is that Carver "died before he could realize the larger possibilities of his art" (11). Such an approach, however, provides no insight into the complexities of how a contemporary realist like Carver deals with the issue of women and violence.
4. Current statistics estimate that approximately 4 million women are physically abused by husbands or partners every year in the U.S. (<http://womensissues.about.com/od/domesticviolence/a/dvstats1.htm>). By comparison, a battered men's organization estimates that over 800,000 men are yearly the victims of violent women (<http://www.batteredmen.com>).
5. In a controversial *New York Times* article (August 9, 1998), D.T. Max has explored the extent to which Carver's editor Gordon Lish wielded influence on the massive cuts that were made to *What We Talk About*. Though Carver sanctioned the cuts, his later expansions of stories suggest that he was not altogether comfortable with the minimalism of the volume. See also the following note.
6. It is possible that Carver was returning to an earlier, 1970s version in his revisions of this story. The problematic issue of the striking expansiveness of the stories after *What We Talk About* has been the topic of critical debate concerning the influence of Carver's editor Gordon Lish. Recent accounts of this debate can be found in Arthur Bethea's *Technique and Sensibility in the Fiction and Poetry of Raymond Carver* and Philippe Romon's *Parlez-moi de Carver*. Bethea suggests that "widening knowledge of the Carver-Lish connection is likely to become an easy explanation for Carver's 'minimalist phase,' with Lish being partially credited (or blamed!) for the minimalism" (263). However, regardless of whether Carver was returning to material or adding new passages, the story in question is an example of his career-long concern with the topic of women and violence.
7. Facts on the Green River Killer case have been gathered from <http://faculty.ncwc.edu/toconnor/428/case03.htm>

8. Randolph Runyon reads the dead girl in the Cle Elum as well as the one in the Naches as Medusa figures (*Reading Raymond Carver* 121-122). The violence targeting women in this area, however, also has non-mythical sources; one of the Green River Killer's escaped victims was taken to this very spot; this woman "told police Ridgway took her to a campground near Cle Elum, where he tied her to wooden stakes driven into the ground while he used nylon rope to tie her wrists and ankles to the stakes. She later was released." (<http://www.karisable.com/crime.htm>)
 9. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), is a seminal though outdated work in this context. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's work treats the topics of gender and hysteria relevant for Gilman's time. See, for example, her *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*.
 10. See Gilman's *Women and Economics* in which she argues that women's economic dependence on men is the root of ill in society and their roles as housekeepers and child-rearers keep them in a state of quasi-slavery.
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ABSTRACTS

This article examines the role of women characters in the stories of Raymond Carver who are involved in violent passages either as victims, witnesses, or perpetrators. The first and middle sections provide an overview of Carver's development of the motif of violence from his formative years through his minimalist and later phases. The final section concentrates on an analysis of one story, "So Much Water, So Close to Home," and how it reflects the specific social trauma of the rape and murder of young women in Carver's native Washington State by serial killers in the 1970s and 1980s. In considering passages from different periods where Carver yokes the representation of women to violence, the aim is to explore how his idiomatic rendering of a violent world can be linked to the larger context of women's status in

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