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Raymond Carver and the Architecture of Emotion

Raymond Carver's short stories are often discussed, under the limited banners of dirty realism or minimalism, as verbal portraits of working class, working poor, hardly-working characters who hover in or around the fringe of "Hopelessville," as some place "beyond" the middleclass marker of literate readers who see Carver's characters, and their tales, as representative of the culture of the poor(er) *others* who live, figuratively, "on the wrong side of the tracks" from those same readers. Such a perception is "logical," for "[i]t is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the *beyond*"¹ writes Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*. Yet, in the idea of a beyond, it is implicit that *here*, where we stand as readers and writers, is oppositional to *there*, that place beyond, which Carver's characters inhabit as they act to claim their "identity in the modern world."² Logic constructs such binaries, based upon cultural differences—here/there, us/other, middle-class/working poor—yet the easy lure to construct simple binaries undercuts clear thinking since rigid polarities merely frame, rather than augment any discussion.

I wish to reconfigure these poles, however, into markers, brackets, or parentheses—inclusionary containers like rooms rather than the exclusionary walls of gated communities—so as to explore what is held *within* these boundaries. These “‘in-between’ spaces,” as Bhabha identifies them, can “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood...that initiate new signs of identity;”³ moreover, since it is “in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of...cultural value are negotiated,”⁴ it is further worthwhile to examine what happens when we explore *beyond* the boundaries as well as within them. By doing so, Bhabha suggests, “[t]he borderline engagements of cultural difference may...realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, [the] high and [the] low.”⁵

But how, exactly, do we locate these very boundaries? Pondering this question, Bhabha turned to African-American installation artist Renée Green’s *Sites of Genealogy* at the Institute of Contemporary Art which used a process of interrogatory interstitial fluidity to question and go beyond the stasis of categorical constructions of identity. Simply put, Green stepped beyond the gallery space to make the museum building itself a metaphor:

I used architecture literally as a reference, using the attic, the boiler room, and the stairwell to make associations between certain binary divisions such as a higher and lower and heaven and hell. The stairwell became a liminal space, a pathway between the upper and lower areas.⁶

I want to borrow Renée Green’s use of architecture as reference, as metaphor, and apply it to the emotional constructions—the architectures of emotion—that shape the cultural identities of characters in Carver’s stories. An examination of the interstices located “in-between the designations of identity” as limiting, mimetic human constructs and as

promising, metaphoric spatial designations may help to illuminate cultural identities present in Carver's work.

The use of architecture as a means of expressing intimacy, secrecy, and the private life goes back to the traditions of Renaissance poetry, for "architectural metaphors were essential for delineating a private sphere since the Renaissance did not have another vocabulary available...for depicting the inner self."⁷ The architectural metaphors, however, were more often drawn from the sumptuous palaces of the nobility rather than the small dwelling places of guildsmen, tradesmen, and farmers, largely because literacy was characteristic, at least at first, of the nobles and their world. Interestingly, the *nouveaux riches* began to decorate their emotional and intellectual view of the world with architectural references which they appropriated from the ruling class. As a result, cultural critic Jean Baudrillard concludes:

It is in the Renaissance that the false is born along with the natural. From the fake shirt in front to the use of the fork as artificial prosthesis, to the stucco interiors and the great baroque theatrical machinery. ... Theater is the form which takes on the social life and all of architecture from the Renaissance on. It's there, in the prowess of stucco and baroque art, that you read the metaphysic of the counterfeit and the new ambitions of Renaissance man—those of a *worldly demiurge*, a transubstantiation of all of nature into a unique substance, theatrical like social life unified under the sign of bourgeois values, beyond all differences in blood, rank, or of caste.⁸

What is *false*, then—or inconsistent, inappropriate, if one prefers—is the use of architectural metaphors for emotions that are inconsistent with one's social standing or cultural identity. Given the pervasive "American Dream" of home ownership, characters who chase that dream in Raymond Carver's stories often suffer from disjunction and dissociation when their emotional status is disrupted by false architectural metaphors. This disruption is evident, to varying degrees, in any number of Carver's best stories,

including “Put Yourself in My Shoes,” “Feathers,” “Where I’m Calling From,” “Why Don’t You Dance?” “Boxes,” “Kindling,” “Cathedral,” and others. Two stories in particular demonstrate the disruption of completing cultural identity by false location in the interstices between: the often discussed “Neighbors” and the critically under-studied “Gazebo.”

In “Neighbors,” Bill and Arlene Miller work at low-rung managerial positions—Bill is a bookkeeper and Arlene a secretary—and they rent an apartment, but do not own a house: the plot of the story is a trajectory of events that occur as they apartment-sit for their neighbours, the Stones. While not categorical members of the working poor, the Millers are (barely) in the American middle class, yet they seem to feel as though they are entitled to more than they have. Evidently, the Millers were “a happy couple”⁹ in their situation, at least, that is, until they began to weigh their cultural identities against others in their social realm—in this case, their neighbours—for we learn that “It seemed to the Millers that the Stones lived a fuller and brighter life” (86). Moreover, in that critical opening paragraph, Carver is certain to alert his readers to the basis of this observation, informing us that the Millers “now and then... felt they alone among their circle had been passed by somehow. ... They talked about it sometimes, mostly in comparison with the lives of their neighbors, Harriet and Jim Stone” (86). Despite their living in nearly identical apartments in the same complex, the Millers, however, view the Stones as better off: going out to dinner, entertaining, or traveling “about the country somewhere in connection with Jim’s work” since Jim, a salesman, “often managed to combine business with pleasure trips” (86). What Bill and Arlene seem not to consider is that the corporate model of business, of which Jim is a part, allows for company cars and

business travel that includes spouses, as we see the Stones doing. All of this offers the Millers the *appearance* of a “fuller and brighter life” without the attendant support for such an assumption. What *is* evident is the Millers’ envy of the Stones’ lifestyle, evident in Bill’s comment to Arlene, as the Stones drive away, that “I wish it was us” (87).

The envy becomes manifest when Bill crosses the hallway, physically to the Stones’ apartment and metaphorically to the other side of the fence where the grass, like envy, is greener. When Bill takes “a deep breath,” it is as if he is diving in to Jim Stone’s life, an enchanting, Eden-like exotic world where “the air was already heavy and . . . vaguely sweet” (87). During his visits, Bill eats their food, tries on their clothes—both Jim’s *and* Harriet’s—and, as Carver comments, “[w]ith each subsequent trip to the Stones’s apartment, Miller is drawn deeper and deeper into an abyss of his own making.”¹⁰ Yet, the deeper he descends, the more, in effect, he climbs a social ladder he envisions, his emotions moving from envy to achievement. Yet, in the process, he becomes an *imitation* Jim Stone. Readers recognise that Bill’s imitation is based upon a false notion—that the Stones are of a different social and cultural standing—and that his actions are a counterfeit of what is real. Baudrillard sees this as a trait of the disruption of social rank by class mobility, for “[c]ompetitive democracy succeeds the endogamy [sic] of signs proper to statutory order. At the same time we pass, with the transfer of values/signs of prestige from one class to another, necessarily into *counterfeit*.”¹¹ Instead of being located within a common denominator of cultural equality, the Millers find themselves in a disenchanted universe of dissociation when they are locked out of the Stones’ apartment, with all of its overtones of being cast from their secret garden for transgressions.

If we trace the emotional architecture of “Neighbors,” we see that the Millers move from disappointment (their apartment) to envy (the Stones’ apartment) to fear (the hallway). Left in the “in-between” space, the liminal space of the hallway between the binaries of “being passed by” and “a fuller and brighter life,” the Millers are exposed, the boundaries between public and private blurred. Holding each other, leaning into the door “as if against a wind,” the Millers are “braced” for redefinition as the winds of change move them into an uncertain future, for, observes Homi Bhabha:

The present can no longer be simply envisaged as a break or a bonding with the past and the future, no longer a synchronic presence: our proximate self-presence, our public image, comes to be revealed for its discontinuities, its inequalities....¹²

The Millers’ false sense of inequality created the events which led to their fear of the future, for the short story’s focus is “on the mysteries of dreams, fears, and anxieties based on experiences or perceptions outside the realm of familiar, everyday life.”¹³ But the Millers also suffer as well from their own dissociation—that “sense of disengagement from one’s own identity and life, a state of standing apart from whatever defines the self, or of being unselfed.”¹⁴ The unresolved question of cultural identity such as the Millers’ is central to the short story as a genre, for “the short story insists that the self must be challenged by crisis and confrontation,” as Charles E. May points out, for “[t]his is the basic tension in the [short story] form.”¹⁵ As a result, the crisis of cultural identity—caught between being themselves and being imitation Stones—leaves the Millers trapped in the no-person’s land of the hallway between their apartment and the Stones’, exposed in the in-between, out of which they seem incapable of negotiating an escape from their emotional paralysis.

Crisis, confrontation, and cultural negotiation are central as well in Carver's brilliant short story, "Gazebo." Duane and Holly are motel managers, each with specialized skills: Holly, Carver tells us, "took care of the books. She was good with figures," much like Bill Miller in "Neighbors," and "she did most of the renting of the units" (140); Duane "saw to the grounds, mowed the grass and cut weeds, kept the swimming pool clean, did the small repairs" (140). But Duane and Holly want more than jobs, for, as Duane states, "When we'd first moved down here and taken over as managers, we thought we were out of the woods. Free rent and free utilities plus three hundred a month," and, in addition, Duane was "holding down another job nights, and we were getting ahead. *We had plans*" (140, my italics). Their "plans" indicate they aspire to upward social mobility, plus, as we learn, Holly has her own reasons for her desire for private ownership, for owning a home rather than managing a motel where she rents rooms to others. Whereas Bill Miller blurs the boundaries of self and marriage by impersonating the Stones, Duane transgresses the boundary by going "outside the marriage" (142) when he has sexual relations with the Mexican maid at the motel. What results is that their plans for upward social mobility come crashing down, and readers find Holly and Duane holed up in one of the rooms of the motel trying to decide what possible identities they will be able to forge in the future. By doing so, they inhabit a space of disruption which is in-between the mobile tourist-customers they disdain and the desire for what they perceive as the permanence of home ownership.

Duane believes the ruptured past can be restored, that his transgressions can be forgiven and forgotten: "Then I go, 'Holly, these things, we'll look back on them too. We'll go, 'Remember the motel with all the crud in the pool?' ' ' " (146). Duane's

optimism illustrates Bhabha's metaphor of "the dead hand of history" which "tells the beads of sequential time like a rosary, seeking to establish serial, causal connections."¹⁶ One of those causal connections is Duane's seeming sense of entitlement that accompanies his economic rise, his "getting ahead" (140) from motel management. Duane, who begins falsely to see himself as a man of prestige, privilege and power, gets involved with "this little Mexican maid" (140); in doing so, he can be seen as an imitation emperor, a counterfeit representative of colonialism. Sacramento, where the motel seems to be located—according to *Carver Country* which presents the Diablo Riviera as "the apartment complex in Sacramento that was the reference for 'Gazebo'"¹⁷—was once part of Mexico; therefore, it is possible to read Duane's relationship with the maid through a postcolonial lens. Consider that in a story where names are foregrounded—names of importance—such as Duane, Wyatt and Holly, the minority character who is shaped by "colonial dislocation, its displacement of time and person, its defilement of culture and territory,"¹⁸ goes unnamed and diminished to "this little Mexican maid." Clearly, her cultural identity exists in the beyond, a place so splintered from Duane's reality that she, like her cultural identity, is beyond naming. This postcolonial silencing mirrors Carver's use of characters whose ideas and actions carry them to a place beyond words, leaving them to mutter place-holding clichés as enunciations of emotions: such as "it was something" (as in *Cathedral*) or "Drinking's *funny*" (141, my italics) as Duane says. Further, since Duane is the manager, and the Mexican maid a person shaped by the colonial condition, she calls him "Mister," a term which acknowledges his position of power in the asymmetrical relationship—boss to

worker, bourgeois to proletarian, patriarch to woman, colonizer to colonized. Moreover, her means of address is not unexpected, for as Franz Fanon observed,

The colonist and the colonized are old acquaintances. And consequently, the colonist is right when he says he “knows” them. It is the colonist who *fabricated* and *continues to fabricate* the colonized subject. The colonist derives his validity, i.e., his wealth, from the colonial system.¹⁹

Duane’s new economic status, as a white male in California, configures him as a colonist by a system which both validates and empowers him; through that lens, in his assumption of the Mexican maid’s cultural identity, he fabricates a counterfeit identity for himself, one that parodies the literary figures of the nobility in eighteenth-century English novels who viewed their right to have sexual relations with the maid as entitlements of their position in the social hierarchy.

Moreover, Duane, in his economic ascendance both to man-ahead instead of man-behind and to manager/boss, can see from the higher rung only the view that is so limited that Duane reports, “I can’t really say I’d noticed the little thing before, though we spoke when we saw each other.” In that instance of *notice*, the maid is brought from the historical past into cultural present, yet she is only an object, an outline, a nameless shadow to the gazer; the maid is thus transparent to Duane. Such transparency is characterized by Homi Bhaba as

the action of the distribution and arrangement of differential spaces, positions, knowledges in relation to each other, relative to a discriminatory, not inherent, sense of order. This effects a regulation of spaces and places that is authoritatively assigned; it puts the addressee into the proper frame or condition for some action or result. Such a mode of governance addresses itself to a form of conduct that equivocates between the sense of disposal, as the bestowal of a frame of reference, and disposition, as mental inclination, a frame of mind.²⁰

Duane's disposition is such that he feels privileged to transgress the boundaries of class and marriage, based on the discriminatory sense of order that empowers him to act accordingly; thus, when Holly confronts him for his marital indiscretion, he easily disposes of the maid, erasing her both from his life and from her position. The motel room is therefore the architecture that holds Duane's transitory emotion (his comings-and-goings between the sexual binaries of Holly, the-known-object, and the Mexican Maid, the-exotic-object); his private affairs take place in rentable, semi-public rooms which function as counterfeit representations of "home."

Holly, however, is marking her own private space with binaries; simultaneously she wants to be "moving to Nevada. Either there or kill myself" (142), a set of fantastic, dramatic polarities, both of which exist realistically *beyond* her current situation. Interestingly, she also locates herself between *counterfeits*: Nevada, with its theatrical, Disneylandish façade and spectacle, and the farmhouse and gazebo, with its Thomas Kinkaid-like romantic nostalgia; but sadly, neither of these locales offers Holly a realistic base from which to negotiate a cultural identity. Even Holly's presentation of her situation borders on the counterfeit: she acts like the stereotypical drama queen as she frames the parameters of her intimate life between two men:

"You weren't my first, you know. My first was Wyatt. Imagine. Wyatt. And your name's Duane. Wyatt and Duane. Who knows what I was missing all those years? You were my everything, just like the song" (145).

What's noticeable is Holly's reduction of her intimate relationships to labels—"Wyatt and Duane"—and to pop culture cliché—"my everything, just like the song," presented as a binary: "what I was missing" as opposed to "my everything." Moreover, her drama-queen performance echoes Baudrillard's observation that "theater is the form which takes

on the social life,” so that in effect, Holly further locates her identity between performance and stasis as she “just sits there on the bed with her glass” (146).

In reality, Holly is positioned between staying at the hotel with Duane in a state of emotional indignity that is “hurtful” (142), where love is “dead” and “everything is dirt” (141) and her dream of dignity that she associates with an old farmhouse they had stopped at years ago:

You remember... there was this gazebo there out back? It was way out back under some trees? It had a little peaked roof and the paint was gone and there were these weeds growing up over the steps. And the woman said that years before, I mean a real long time ago, men used to come around and play music out there on a Sunday, and the people would sit and listen. I thought we'd be like that too when we got old enough. Dignified. And in a place. And people would come to our door (145-6).

Arthur Saltzman comments that for Holly, the “idyllic old farmhouse” becomes “a place of easy good will and romantic ceremony where people maintained a natural dignity that weathered the hazards of the modern age. That had been her dream.”²¹ Yet, what Saltzman calls Holly’s dream, Jean Baudrillard might label “imaginary.” Baudrillard muses that signs of the real now substitute for the real itself, a state he labels hyperreality; in this age of simulation, the counterfeit of reality, the “simulacrum,” operates as “a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor of truth” and “lends itself to all systems of equivalence, all binary oppositions.”²² For Holly, the nostalgic *image* of the gazebo substitutes for the real, a phantom she desires, but which has little base in reality, and which represents to her an emotional state of dignity. Perhaps Holly unknowingly acknowledges the nostalgic dimension of her emotional state when she remarks, “Those old people [at the farmhouse with the gazebo] must be dead now” (145). Baudrillard’s comment that “When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full

meaning,”²³ illuminates Holly’s substitution of the nostalgic gazebo for the indignity of the “Duane and the Mexican Maid” scenario back at the motel: Holly wants to leave the world of negative experience so she can return to the past and again sing of innocence. Just as the Stones’ apartment was an image of Eden to Bill Miller, Holly’s nostalgic remembrance is a kind of revision of the present situation with Duane, offering a pastoral image of rural life, complete with brass band on the gazebo such as one might find in small town squares on Sunday afternoons a century ago. For Holly, emotional safety and comfort derives from its being located in inclusionary spaces—the farmhouse with its isolated, stable, self-sustaining lifestyle, and the gazebo as a closed space where music is located, from which it magnetically attracts a culturally homogenous crowd—in short, happiness is here, not beyond. In the real-time, real-life present, however, located between young indignity (the hotel) and old-age dignity (the farmhouse with its gazebo), Holly must explore the interstices, for, as Duane observes in perhaps his one moment of insight in the story, “We’d reached the end of something, and the thing was to find out where to start” (144).

Somewhere, Carver therefore suggests, between the binaries in which his characters operate, there is another opportunity for realignment, redefinition—but it exists *beyond* the end of the plot. Carver does not show his readers what Holly discovers about her self in that exploration, nor does he offer her clear cultural identity; instead, despite Duane’s “pray[ing] for a sign from Holly” about what to do next, Carver offers this resonant ending image:

I [Duane] hear a car start. Then another. They turn on their lights against the building and, one after the other, they pull away and go out into the traffic (146).

Readers are left to assume that, like the cars, Holly and Duane, one after the other, begin their difficult transition from their specific situation toward opportunities for transforming their identities. Duane's false action—transgressing the boundaries of his marriage to Holly—has derailed them from their ride from a migratory, temporal life style to one of home ownership and stability. What we do not know at the end is where those symbolic cars which visually dominate the end of the story will arrive next; what we do know is that “the move from the specific to the general, from the material to the metaphoric, is not a smooth passage of transition and transcendence.”²⁴

Raymond Carver “knew well the short story’s tradition of centering on that which can be narrated but not explained,” notes Charles E. May.²⁵ What we see Carver doing is narrating plot lines that bring his characters along trajectories to locations in-between or beyond binaries. By placing them there, and rejecting a traditional idea of fictional closure, readers must speculate on where the characters will turn to make the transition from dissociation to cultural identity. C. S. Lewis observed that short stories are, on the surface, “a series of events, yet at the same time it must be understood that this series is only a net to catch ... ‘something other than a process and much more like a state or quality.’”²⁶ In Carver’s fiction this state or quality is emotional, and careful readers learn to identify the architectural representations of those emotions which help decode the crisis and confrontations faced by the characters in these stories as they negotiate the boundaries and dimensions of their cultural identities.

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- ¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 1.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid., 2.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid., 4.
- ⁷ Wendy Wall, quoted in Kleppe, "Raymond Carver's Poet-Voyeur as Involved Spectator." Sandra Lee Kleppe, Unpublished essay, in Sandra Lee Kleppe and Robert Miltner, eds., *New Paths to Raymond Carver: Essays on His Life, Fiction, and Poetry* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, forthcoming 2008), 12.
- ⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), 87.
- ⁹ Raymond Carver, *Where I'm Calling From* (New York: Vintage, 1988), 86.
- ¹⁰ Raymond Carver, "On 'Neighbors,'" *No Heroics, Please* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 103.
- ¹¹ Baudrillard, 85.
- ¹² Bhabha, 4.
- ¹³ Charles E. May, "Why Short Stories Are Essential and Why They Are Seldom Read" in Per Winther, Jakob Lother, and Hans H. Skei, eds., *The Art of Brevity* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 12.
- ¹⁴ Boxer and Phillips quoted in Kirk Nessel, *The Stories of Raymond Carver* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1995), 18.
- ¹⁵ May, 22.
- ¹⁶ Bhabha, 4.
- ¹⁷ Carver, Raymond, *Carver Country* (New York: Scribner's, 1990), 73.
- ¹⁸ Bhabha, 41.
- ¹⁹ Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 2.
- ²⁰ Carver, *Carver Country*, 109.
- ²¹ Arthur M. Saltzman, *Understanding Raymond Carver* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 108.
- ²² Baudrillard, 4.
- ²³ Ibid., 12.
- ²⁴ Bhabha, 5.
- ²⁵ May, 23.
- ²⁶ Quoted in May, 15.