

“I Love You, You Bitch”: The Destabilization of the Language of Love in the Stories of Raymond Carver

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Love has a central role in the stories of Raymond Carver and, for the many people who populate his tales, it remains aspirational. Although the phrase *I love you* only appears eleven times in the entirety of his four major collections, when it does, it is because the characters in and out of relationships long for stability and resort to these words in desperation. Similarly, terms of endearment do not abound in Carver's stories, but their appearance always highlights the distance between the characters rather than their connection. In most of Carver's stories, both the expression *I love you* and the various terms of endearment become a cry for help—a last attempt to preserve whatever intimacy remains—uttered by characters whose actions do not necessarily reflect the sentiment of their words. When confronted with the possibility of divorce or separation, many of these characters exploit such language before seeking tangible solutions to the issue at hand.

Keywords: Raymond Carver; love; short story; North-American fiction; language of love; hypocorisms

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“Te quiero, zorra”: la desestabilización del lenguaje del amor en los relatos de Raymond Carver

El amor tiene un papel central en los relatos de Raymond Carver y, para la mayoría de los personajes que habitan sus cuentos, es aspiracional. Aunque la expresión “te quiero” sólo aparece once veces en sus cuatro colecciones principales, cuando lo hace es porque los personajes en relaciones románticas anhelan la estabilidad y recurren a dichas palabras en momentos de desesperación. Del mismo modo, los apodos cariñosos no abundan en las

historias de Carver. Cuando lo hacen, es posible observar la distancia entre los personajes en vez de su conexión. En la mayoría de estos relatos, tanto la expresión “te quiero” como los diversos apodos cariñosos se convierten en un grito de socorro o un último intento de preservar cualquier intimidad que aún quedaba, dichos por personajes cuyas acciones no necesariamente reflejan el amor que profesan. Cuando se enfrentan a la posibilidad de divorcio o separación, muchos de estos personajes abusan de este lenguaje antes de buscar soluciones tangibles a sus problemas.

Palabras clave: Raymond Carver; amor; relato breve; ficción norteamericana; lenguaje del amor; nombres hipocorísticos

Raymond Carver (1938-1988) was known for his slice-of-life stories about white, heterosexual, middle-class Americans dealing with alcoholism, relationship troubles and unemployment, among other issues, and who have often been described as inarticulate (Abrahams 2007, 1; Gearhart 1989, 439; McCaffery and Gregory 1990, 98, to name a few). Writer James Atlas, for instance, claimed that Carver’s “characters are hardly garrulous; their talk is groping, rudimentary” (1981, 97). He failed to see that while Carver’s characters may not speak very often, they do communicate in a multiplicity of ways. Even the dialogues that Atlas considered “vapid” (97) serve to elucidate much about each character, and to dismiss them as simply “rudimentary” (97) disregards the complexity of Carverian communication. This somewhat reductionist approach is similar to the one used to describe Carver’s writing. Considered by many the “godfather of minimalism,” (Neset 2013, 103) Carver actually rejected the label and found it “diminishing and trivializing” (Sklenicka 2009, 405). He argued that “[t]he people I’m writing about often have difficulty communicating head-on. But, things *do* get done, things *do* get said in the stories” (Applefield 1990, 208; italics in the original). The belief that Carver’s characters are inarticulate has, however, been challenged by more recent criticism (Fabre-Clark 2008, 174; Ayala 2010, 35) although, despite some scholars’ interest in Carver’s dialogues (Bramlett and Raabe 2004; Champion 1997; Gearhart 1989; Gómez Galisteo 2011), little to no attention has been paid to his portrayal of romantic language. Therefore, the aim of this article is to explore Carver’s representation of the language of love, with a particular interest in the phrase *I love you* and the use of terms of endearment, and to suggest that the author subverts such language by questioning its romantic connotations.

The evolution of capitalism in the twentieth century as well as the rise of psychoanalysis transformed the way love was understood (Bellah et al. 1996, 89; Fraser 2008, 43; Shumway 2003, 133). As popular media capitalized on the appeal of romantic love, more people began to acknowledge its illusory nature, but they also inevitably absorbed many of the ideals displayed in fiction (Belsey 1994, 688). The introduction of the disciplines of psychiatry and later psychology advanced the belief

that communication was key to the success of relationships, particularly those of a romantic nature. Though not everybody could access therapy, the slow democratization of psychology encouraged an almost clinical language that sought to forgo uncertainty. According to Eva Illouz, "[i]f we have been told since post-structuralism that meanings are unintended, undecidable, and loaded with emotional inflections, by contrast, the therapeutic techniques of communication decree that ambiguity is the archenemy of intimacy and dictate that we purge everyday language of unclear and ambivalent statements and of its possible negative emotional inflections and that we reduce communication to its denotated meaning only" (2007, 35). Carver's characters resort to formulaic romantic language that does not serve its intended purpose and often repeat words to the point of exhausting their meaning, revealing in the process their complex relationship with love.

Though the expression *I love you* is undoubtedly significant in a romantic setting, its overuse can lead to the emptying out of its meaning. In his autobiography, *Roland Barthes* (1975), the French critic discussed the expression *I love you*, saying: "Welling up from the body, irrepressible, repeated, does not this whole paroxysm of love's declaration conceal some lack? We would not need to speak this word, if it were not to obscure [...] the failure of desire under the excess of its affirmation" ([1975] 1996, 112). Used to compensate for an absence, *I love you* is thus "contradictory" due to "its simultaneous circulation as both a confession and a cliché" (Fletcher 2016, 17). In *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1977), Barthes argued that "[o]nce the first avowal has been made, 'I love you' has no meaning whatever; it merely repeats in an enigmatic mode [...] the old message [...]. I repeat it exclusive of any pertinence; it comes out of the language, it divagates—where?" ([1977] 2010, 147) While the first time the words come out of the lover's mouth they can have lasting significance, afterwards they can become practically meaningless; the phrase's "compulsive reiteration is symptomatic of its inability to do so in any lasting way: anxiety engenders reiteration" (Fletcher 2016, 18). For those whose relationships are deteriorating, the expression has an ephemeral quality to it; it needs to be repeated often in order for it to retain its intensity but, in doing so, its power paradoxically dwindles. Carver's characters turn to the expression *I love you* to atone for their inertia or the ways in which they have damaged the relationship yet often fail to follow up with significant action.

Carver skillfully shows this in his own version of "One More Thing." First published in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981) and heavily edited by Gordon Lish, it eventually saw the light as Carver had originally intended in *Beginners* (2009). The story features L.D., an abusive man prone to drinking, desperate to hold on to his wife, who repeatedly asks him to leave the house for good. He wants to talk to her but does not know how. The ending of the edited version reads as follows: "L.D. put the shaving bag under his arm and picked up the suitcase. He said, 'I just want to say one more thing.' But then he could not think what it could possibly be" ([1981] 2003, 134). The ending leaves L.D. suspended as he holds his suitcase and waits to find words

that might never arrive. This character is aware that he wants to stay, or at least does not want to move on, so he hopes he can say something to put off his departure for as long as possible but he cannot find the words and the story ends in silence.

In Carver's original version, the ending is much lengthier as the author allows L.D. to find the words:

L.D. put the shaving bag under his arm again and once more picked up the suitcase. "I just want to say one more thing, Maxine. Listen to me. Remember this," he said. "I love you. I love you no matter what happens. I love you too, Bea. I love you both." [...]

"You call this love, L.D.?" Maxine said. She let go of Bea's hand. She made a fist. Then she shook her head and jammed her hands into her coat pockets. She stared at him and then dropped her eyes to something on the floor near his shoes. [...]

"Maxine!" he cried. "Maxine!"

"Is this what love is, L.D.?" she said, fixing her eyes on him. (2009, 952-53)

In contrast to Lish's version, this time L.D. knows what he wants to say, namely, that he loves his family, but he repeats it four times, so much so that the expression starts to lose its meaning and thus becomes empty. In this sense, the emotions conveyed by both Carver and Lish are quasi-identical, with one overusing words and the other favoring silence. Carver eventually also chooses silence to close the story but takes longer to get there, as he allows Maxine to be inquisitive and give L.D. a chance to explain himself by asking him about what he means by "love." In the end, the only words that come out of his mouth are her name, which he again repeats twice. L.D. resorts to a cliché to implore his wife to let him stay, but the expression has now become devoid of meaning and thus fails to move Maxine, who seems aware that L.D.'s actions do not support his words. At this point, *I love you* has simply become a bargaining chip. Lisa Fletcher argues that there is a "fine line between the desire to make our words match our experience and the fear that the opposite happens—that we are somehow compelled to make our experience match the available words" (2016, 19). The only argument L.D. can find is "I love you," which, in an effort to recuperate their lost intimacy, he hopes will alter his and Maxine's experience. When he sees that reiteration will not elicit any positive response from Maxine, he pleads for help by calling out her name, but he is still unable to answer her as she asks, one last time, what love is. Maxine shows an awareness of their situation and of the significance of love that L.D. struggles to see. Everything he has done to disturb the house, Maxine and their daughter negates whatever romantic language he tries to use. L.D.'s words in the *Beginners* version serve as an example of Barthes's argument that "I-love-you [...]" is a socially irresponsible word" ([1977] 2010, 148) because it "is without nuance. It suppresses explanations, adjustments, degrees, scruples" ([1977] 2010, 148). Communication not only entails speech. Instead, it involves a myriad of subtle—and, at times, overt—actions that, along with the spoken word,

will form a cohesive whole. To say *I love you* without embodying its full meaning cannot compensate for past and present negative experiences.

The use of *I love you* as compensation for a wrong appears in another story called "So Much Water So Close to Home." Both the edited (in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*) and unedited (in *Beginners*) versions follow Claire, the first-person narrator of the story, who recounts how her husband Stuart and some of his friends found the murdered body of a girl in a creek. Instead of calling the police immediately, the men decide to first enjoy their fishing trip, since "the girl wasn't going anywhere" ([1981] 2003, 68). What seems natural to Stuart deeply unsettles Claire, who begins to suspect that her husband might have played a part in the girl's murder; this puts a strain in their relationship. In the edited version, the expression *I love you* is never uttered, but the word "love" is written twice to close a note. The first time, it comes from Stuart. Upon seeing the note, Claire narrates, "I sit in the breakfast nook and drink coffee and leave a ring on the note" ([1981] 2003, 71). Because of her discomfort with Stuart, the note, with its supposedly affectionate greeting, becomes a coaster for Claire; Stuart's purported love is now meaningless to her. By contrast, when she writes a note for her son, she signs it "Love, Mommy" ([1981] 2003, 72) and then "look[s] at the word Love and then [she] underline[s] it," ([1981] 2003, 72) making a point to differentiate her closing from that of Stuart in order to emphasize the fact that her love for her son is real. After finishing her note, she "see[s] the word backyard [and wonders] Is it one word or two?" ([1981] 2003, 72) Her sudden attention to language suggests that "the[se] words are drained of meaning for her; she does not trust their significance; they are merely conglomerations of lines and curves, and she has no confidence that they will be meaningful to anyone else, either" (Downes 1996, 57). Thus, since the word "love" itself might not sound genuine enough, she adds a symbol that underlines its importance.

Where the stories really differ is in their ending. In the edited version, Claire has begun to suspect Stuart and has become terrified of him and what he might be capable of. The story has also shown how ignorant Stuart is of the severity of the situation and the discomfort of his wife, so much so that, instead of asking her how he might help her, he assumes what might work is sex, telling her, "I think I know what you need" ([1981] 2003, 74) and proceeding to undress her. Defeated and understanding that her husband's lack of self-awareness will not allow her to have a meaningful conversation with him, Claire submits to her husband's abuse. Throughout the story, Claire has empathized with the victim to the point where she figuratively hears "so much water" ([1981] 2003, 74), the distress numbing her senses, disorienting her, and making her feel as though she was in the creek, like the deceased woman. In the *Beginners* version, the ending allows Claire to have more agency over her body as she rejects Stuart's advances, first saying "Not now, please" and then becoming insistent: "Stop, stop, stop [...] I stamp on his toes" (2009, 882). While Stuart becomes violent at first, he eventually "sobs" (2009, 882) and leaves the house. The next day, he calls and says, "Honey, how

are you? I'll be home early, I love you. Did you hear me? I love you, I'm sorry, I'll make it up to you" (2009, 882). At home, once again, he says "I love you" (2009, 883). Claire does not respond nor does she seem moved by his words, understanding that they do not make up for his actions. In this case, *I love you* becomes a vapid apology. Stuart has also sent Claire "flowers, red and yellow chrysanthemums" (2009, 882). The combination of the two actions almost feels like a tacky romantic comedy cliché, where Stuart attempts to win back Claire by using formulaic gestures instead of trying to address her discomfort, which would prove a more genuine demonstration of love. In fact, the last words of the story read, "I wake up and say, For God's sake, Stuart, she was only a child" (2009, 883). Stuart's words have done nothing to assuage Claire's pain, because his actions have not reflected his words. Roland Barthes argued that "the very task of love and of language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new, thereby creating an unheard-of speech in which the sign's form is repeated but never is signified; in which the speaker and the lover finally triumph over the dreadful reduction which language [...] transmit[s] to all our affects" ([1975] 1994, 114). Stuart fails at this task. Here, he does not create anything new; "the sign's form is repeated" and signified, the speech having been heard of many times before. Language here is transformed by becoming a cliché that means to stand for an apology, but even this seems redundant when Stuart has already uttered "I'm sorry" (2009, 882). Although clichés can "allow characters to express themselves in situations of crisis" (Ayala 2010, 35), Stuart's words fall flat. Perhaps he does not know what else to do to make Claire feel better, but the story shows that she has tried to talk to him repeatedly while he has been evasive or has disagreed with her views. Thus, Stuart's use of the phrase "I love you" negates its alleged intended meaning.

"Gazebo" (in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*) introduces motel managers Holly and Duane as they talk about their deteriorating marriage. After discussing his and his wife's future together following his infidelity, Duane concludes with "Holly, honey, I love you" ([1981] 2003, 21). In the *Beginners* version, however, Carver grants Duane more linguistic awareness. It reads, "I go, 'Holly, honey, I love you.' But I don't know what else to say or what else I can offer under the circumstances" (2009, 774). In both versions, right before he utters these words, Duane admits to the reader that he is still thinking about the woman that he has had an affair with. Like Stuart, Duane uses *I love you* as a form of apology, yet his actions have not shown the love he professes; still, the unedited version shows that he understands he might need to add more, but he does not know how. *I love you* becomes a plea for Holly to stay. However, using such a traditionally potent phrase in this context verges on an insult, considering how, once again, the actions do not match the words. Holly is not moved by Duane's words because she recognizes the emptiness behind them. In all the cases mentioned above and when confronted with an uncertain future, the men in Carver's stories can only resort to a formula whose significance is lost through overuse. They turn to platitudes or clichés, which are essentially "a ritual expression" (Haiman 1998,

139). The problem is, as previously suggested, that "an often repeated ritual [...] can pall. With staleness very often comes a reduction of the ritual's formal manifestation and [...] a diminution of its meaning" (Haiman 1998, 139). Carver thus destabilizes the traditionally romantic expression *I love you*, which no longer offers solace or comfort.

Carver's use of the phrase stands in stark contrast to Barthes' argument that "[*I love you*]" has a meaning only at the moment I utter it; there is no other information in it but its immediate saying: no reservoir, no armory of meaning. Everything is in the speaking of it: it is a 'formula,' but this formula corresponds to no ritual; the situations in which I say I-love-you cannot be classified: I-love-you is irrepressible and unforeseeable" ([1977] 2010, 148-9). In the majority of Carver's stories, whenever *I love you* is said, it has become a formula that corresponds to a ritual and one can easily discern the intention with which the phrase is uttered. Most of the time, it is a man who uses the expression in a context that suggests desperation; whether the man has hurt his partner or feels like he has been wronged, they ultimately utilize these words to convey their terror in the face of uncertainty. Carver's men seem continuously disillusioned with their lives and know only how to escape or displace their anxiety, blaming others for their inability to process their disappointment. This disappointment specifically describes that of a man "who feels cheated of something, of everything; a man whose life seems prematurely drained of passion, purpose, and intensity; a man with nothing to look forward to but more of the same: a lifetime's work at the Mart, a lifetime of routine cares and responsibilities" (Cornwell 2005, 354). Incessant, repetitive work hours that provide them with little money coupled with the myriad social and cultural changes taking place throughout the twentieth century have overwhelmed them. While Carver's women seek tangible solutions to their ailments, as Maxine and Claire do, Carver's men are usually stagnant, unable to escape the loneliness that plagues them. Both the men and women's attitudes inform the way they communicate with their partners and how they make use of the language of love. For the men populating Carver's stories, *I love you* no longer denotes a love of the other, but a preservation of the self.

One final example of relevance appears in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," the title story of the 1983 collection. The story revolves around two couples, Mel and Terri as well as Nick and Laura, who spend the evening drinking and trying to define love. One of them, Terri, has previously been in an abusive relationship that she considers an example of love. As she explains, "He kept saying, 'I love you, I love you, you bitch.' He went on dragging me around the living room. My head kept knocking on things. [...] What do you do with love like that?" ([1981] 2003, 114) Here, the use of *I love you* does not follow an injury to the relationship; instead, the harm—in this case, physical and emotional—and the phrase occur simultaneously. Not only is there violence taking place while love is allegedly professed, but the repetition of *I love you* along with the addition of the insult invalidates its meaning. However, Terri seems to believe the utterance to be genuine and spends a significant portion

of the story trying to convince the others that her relationship with Ed was a valid example of romantic love. Terri has embraced a narrative of romance in which love and violence coexist, a coping mechanism adopted by many people—particularly women—who experience domestic violence (Wood 2001, 242). Though her lived reality proves violent, Terri seeks to normalize it by seeing it as an obvious—but also extreme—example of love. She does this not only by invoking traditional gender norms but also by attempting to rationalize chaos. Indeed, “when our experiences do not readily make sense, when chaos intrudes in our lives, we are compelled to find some way to generate coherence—or the illusion of it” (Wood 2001, 242). Therefore, while the other characters of the story may disagree with her, Terri continues to defend her belief that Ed’s violence was proof of his love, especially considering the fact that he repeats *I love you*. Instead of seeing the irony in his words, she convinces herself that it was an act of love and even tries to convince the others. She tells Mel, “He did love me though, Mel. Grant me that. [...] That’s all I’m asking. He didn’t love me the way you love me. I’m not saying that, but he loved me. You can grant me that, can’t you?” ([1981] 2003, 116). If Terri and the others can agree that Ed’s behavior resulted from love, then she might be able to accept or find meaning in her experience more easily. It will also allow her to feel worthy in a social and individual context, since “in modernity, love has become central to the constitution of worth” (Illouz 2012, 119). Feeling that she has been loved despite the violent nature of her and Ed’s relationship and receiving external validation proves essential for Terri’s sense of self.

“What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” is perhaps the only story by Carver in which a character responds positively to an empty utterance of love. While the other women ignore or refuse their partners’ vapid declarations of love, Terri clings to Ed’s in order to confirm the romantic nature of their relationship. None of the other characters in the story agree with her, but they also do not openly disagree, except for Mel, who tells her, “That’s not love, and you know it” ([1981] 2003, 115). Nick and Laura avoid positioning themselves by arguing that they would have to know more about the story, even though Terri’s description is quite clear, and by stating that it is not their place to judge. These characters tell each other stories about what they consider examples of romantic love but never fully manage to agree on a definition or reach a conclusion. The story “speaks less of love than of the inadequacy of language to convey those monumental abstractions that spring from ‘unbridled emotions.’ Even the title suggests a practice of displacement” (Hathcock 1991, 32). *I love you* cannot fully convey the intense and complex emotions one feels while in love but, when uttered with intention and when standing in alignment with the speaker’s actions, it can prove undoubtedly significant. In Carver’s stories, however, characters generally employ this phrase—often in vain—in an attempt to mitigate the pain they have caused. Carver thus unsettles the most traditional utterance of love in order to act as a parallel for the progressive breakdown or end of these characters’ relationships. This story is, therefore, “a narrative about unsuccessful narratives—about the uselessness of striving to know

ourselves better through talking about love or through telling stories about love. The two married couples who attempt to converse throughout the story lack the support of shared mythological context; they lack the confidence of traditional symbols or meanings and the belief that dialogue, though difficult, is possible. Their words, their physical touches, their terms of endearment simply do not get through" (Downes 1996, 58). Downes separates "terms of endearment" from "words," thereby emphasizing their significance, particularly within the context of intimate relationships. Besides *I love you*, love can also be expressed with terms of endearment, which Carver's characters frequently employ towards their partners or ex-partners in ways that do not always express fondness.

Terms of endearment, also known as hypocorisms or pet names, are vocatives that commonly suggest "tenderness and intimacy" (Morton 2003, 49). They are rarely used with this intention in the stories of Carver; when they are, it is because the characters are trying to recover a dwindling intimacy and reestablish a faltering bond. Their attempts to reconcile with their spouses are related to the fact that, most of the time, these are individuals whose relationships are crumbling and who cannot fathom becoming single because they associate it with loneliness, uncertainty and worthlessness. As a result, they use hypocorisms out of necessity rather than love. Generally, pet names serve as hedging devices that protect the speakers whenever they make disparaging remarks about their partners; other times, however, they show the transformative nature of intimacy.

"Are These Actual Miles?" (*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, 1976) follows Leo as he waits for his wife Toni to come home from selling their car because they need the money. The story depicts Toni as assertive and confident, as opposed to Leo, which is why she carries out the transaction. The first line of the story, narrated from Leo's point of view, suggests that he is in control by noting that "the car needs to be sold in a hurry, and Leo sends Toni out to do it" ([1976] 2009, 150). However, soon the narration reveals that it is Toni that makes the decisions; her demeanor and the way she talks to Leo show the unbalanced nature of the relationship. Leo's insecurity overwhelms him as Toni spends the evening at a restaurant with a man trying to sell him their car and does not return until dawn. He drinks incessantly while he waits for her to come back, fearful that she will sleep with the man in order to guarantee the sale. This is ironic, since he himself once brought a woman home while Toni and their kids were away. His insecurity and sense of inadequacy is, however, not only linked to Toni's actions but also to his own; he understands he has failed his family and quite possibly himself. As Kirk Nessel notes, "Leo's failure underscores his feelings of impotence, his sense of himself as a zero in both the sexual and the material realm" (1995, 22). The dynamics between Toni and himself highlight his need to be seen and recognized as worthy, but both his past and present actions prevent that from happening. This increases his insecurity and leaves him lost and confused. According to Eva Illouz, "In modern romantic relations, recognition is both crucial and complex because worth is performatively established,

because this process has become highly individualized, and because of the ensuing multiplication, and thus unpredictability, of criteria for choosing a mate. This in turn makes love the terrain par excellence of ontological insecurity and uncertainty at the very same time that it becomes one of the main sites for the experience of (and the demand for) recognition" (2012, 123). As Leo drinks and contemplates his life, he becomes increasingly agitated but does not act. Instead, he waits restlessly. On a later phone call with Toni, his use of terms of endearment to get her to acknowledge him as well as his inability to do so underscore his sense of worthlessness. The following conversation shows Leo's increased desperation and desire for Toni to recognize him:

"Where are you, honey?" he says slowly, gently.
 "We're at this restaurant," she says, her voice strong, bright.
 "Honey, which restaurant?" he says. He puts the heel of his hand against his eye and pushes.
 "Downtown someplace [...] Everything is all right [...]."
 "Honey?" he says. He holds the receiver against his ear and rocks back and forth, eyes closed.
 "Honey?"
 "I have to go [...] I wanted to call. Anyway, guess how much?"
 "Honey," he says.
 "Six and a quarter [...] I told him everything. I think I had to."
 "Honey," Leo says.
 "What?" she says.
 "Please, honey," Leo says. (154-55)

Every time Leo speaks, he uses the hypocorism "honey" to try to appeal to his and Toni's lost intimacy. It also seems as though he is attempting to control his distress, so he speaks "slowly, gently" and moves in ways that soothe him. The term of endearment might serve to abate his anxiety as well, thus its purpose is twofold: it acts as a reminder of Leo and Toni's once loving relationship and it prevents Leo from losing his temper. By saying "honey," Leo hopes to make Toni notice him and recognize him, but its constant repetition divests the word of its endearing function. Toni ignores Leo's pleas, which shows the inefficacy of the term when used in such a context.

Mark Morton claims that terms of endearment are mostly "verbal precursors of sex," (2003, 49) often being uttered before or during intercourse. This happens only once in the stories of Raymond Carver, namely, in "Neighbors" (*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, 1976). Bill and Arlene have been asked to watch over their neighbors' flat, which rekindles their relationship as they begin to enact a fantasy in which they become the inhabitants of the other house, the Stones. After Bill spends longer than usual in the other flat, Arlene asks him what has happened. He answers evasively and "went over to her and touched her breasts. 'Let's go to bed, honey'" ([1976] 2009, 7). This utterance conveys intimacy in a fairly direct manner and acts as a way for Bill to appeal to Arlene's desire. Similarly, in "Jerry and Molly and Sam," from the same

collection, the main character, Al, goes to the apartment of Jill, with whom he is having an affair. Their initial interaction and language when he arrives there suggest that they are going to have sex, as "They embraced clumsily and he kissed her on the cheek" ([1976] 2009, 117). She tells him, "Sit down, honey" and asks, "What would you like, honey?" ([1976] 2009, 117). When he does not answer, she repeats the question, this time prefacing it by a somewhat belittling form of address, particularly in this context: "Poor baby, what would you like?" ([1976] 2009, 117-8). Eventually, she sits on his lap and says "You come on over to the bed, baby. I'll give you what you like" ([1976] 2009, 118). Her use of "poor" before "baby" clashes with the other terms of endearment used in this situation because it is infantilizing rather than romantic. Their initial actions suggest intimacy, as "She pulled his face to hers and kissed him on the forehead and then the lips. She turned slightly on his lap" ([1976] 2009, 118). However, soon Carver breaks the reader's expectations—even though the use of "poor baby" might have subtly foreshadowed it—by completely changing the direction of the scene. The moment Jill shifts in her place, "She held his head in place in her strong fingers. With her thumbnails she was squeezing out a blackhead to the side of his nose" ([1976] 2009, 118). Now, what seemed like a potentially sexual encounter turns to one in which Jill belittles Al by treating him like a child. The fact that Jill feels comfortable enough to do this does denote a kind of intimacy, but the way she talks to Al shows how she infantilizes him. Al does not seem particularly responsive to Jill's advances when she first offers him drinks and says "honey," thus she stops using it and turns to "baby" instead. Although this term of endearment is favored by many people in relationships to address their partner, in this context it does not indicate any kind of romantic intimacy. In this story, Carver "displaces the expectation of sexual activity with a marvelously grotesque, absurd reversal" (Bethea 2001, 76) having cleverly used terms of endearment to guide the reader towards the former outcome.

To say that the use of terms of endearment almost always leads to sex (Morton 2003, 49) seems quite reductive; in general, these words can be used in various situations between people who have intimate relationships (Hill 1986, 90). In his stories, Carver often unsettles the familiarity of these terms and renders them uncanny. Instead of using hypocorisms to denote affection, Carver's characters sometimes use them as a way of hedging the potentially violent outcome of the various situations they find themselves in. This is not necessarily done to protect the other but to protect the self, which is evident in the dynamics displayed by Mel and Terri in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." Mel and Terri have dated for much longer than Nick and Laura, which shows in the way they interact with each other. The first dominate the conversation and tend to bicker as well. They can thus be linked to the spoken word, while "Nick and Laura, who do not quarrel and seem more in love, are conversely associated with touch and human warmth" (Bethea 2001, 95). Indeed, Nick and Laura never utter *I love you* nor do they use terms of endearment to refer to each other, but their gestures draw attention to their intimacy. At one point, Nick "touched the back

of Laura's hand. She gave [him] a quick smile. [He] picked up Laura's hand [...] [He] held her" ([1981] 2003, 116). By contrast, Mel and Terri rarely touch, but they use terms of endearment often and say *I love you* only to mitigate their words and the tension between them. For instance, Terri tells Mel, "[S]ometimes you're just too much. But I love you, hon" ([1981] 2003, 123). She combines both the phrase *I love you* and the hypocoristic "hon" in order to palliate her previous statement. This occurs often throughout the story as Mel, who could be described as "cacophonous," (Monti 2014, 40) takes over the conversation, which exasperates Terri. It begins when he berates her after she recounts her experience with Ed, using it as an example of romantic love. Mel tells Terri, "My God, don't be silly. That's not love, and you know it" ([1981] 2003, 115). Upon noticing Terri's expression, he adds, "Terri, hon, don't look that way" ([1981] 2003, 115) and keeps insisting on the fact that what Terri and Ed experienced was not love, adding, "That's all I'm saying, honey" ([1981] 2003, 115). Mel seems to have realized how his words have affected Terri and avoids confrontation by using the term of endearment "honey" and playing down his previous rudeness. However, by this point Terri has become frustrated with Mel and uses the same technique as him. She interrupts one of his tirades to ask him, "Are you getting drunk? Honey? Are you drunk?" ([1981] 2003, 121), to which Mel replies, "Honey, I'm just talking" ([1981] 2003, 121). Anytime Terri makes a remark that seems to upset Mel, she uses a term of endearment to abate the tension, thereby managing to be critical of the other while preventing open confrontation. Throughout the story, she tells Mel, "Sweetie, I'm not criticizing" ([1981] 2003, 121), "Go on with your story, hon. I was only kidding" ([1981] 2003, 125) and "Don't always be so serious, sweetie. Can't you take a joke?" ([1981] 2003, 126). In the same way that Carver changed the meaning of *I love you* to signify, for instance, "I'm sorry," he unsettles traditional meanings of hypocorisms to the point where they no longer denote intimacy or fondness.

The last story I wish to discuss regarding the remapping of terms of endearment is "Intimacy," from Carver's final collection, *Where I'm Calling From* (1988). It sees the first-person narrator go back to his ex-wife's house to talk to her, seemingly in search of material for a prospective story he wants to write. She does most of the talking while he remains silent. The use of vocatives and hypocorisms on her part accentuates the ambiguity and complexity of their relationship and the introduction of insults to signal affection further subverts the language of love. Interestingly, the ex-wife never refers to the first-person narrator by his name, which remains unknown to the reader, thereby increasing the pervading ambiguity in the text. She first calls him "buster," ([1988] 2003, 46) a disrespectful and condescending form of address. Her monologue is initially hostile, so it is not surprising that she uses aggressive terms that highlight the distance between them, namely "son of a bitch" (46), "mister" (47, 49), "brother" (48) and "buddy boy" (50). All of these insults belittle the narrator, who quietly listens to her tirade. Although she speaks most of the time, using idioms and repetitions often, she seems more straightforward than many other characters in Carver's stories, particularly

from previous collections. She initially employs a myriad of insults. Her most violent line, however, is preceded by a prototypically romantic term of endearment: "Honey, no offence, but sometimes I think I could shoot you and watch you kick" ([1988] 2003, 50). In this context, using a pet name instead of an insult sounds even more condescending and insulting than her previous forms of address and shows the distance between the two characters. No longer together and no longer intimate, they have now become strangers. Thus, the ex-wife uses "honey" in a way that suggests she views her ex-husband as utterly inept. The only time she uses "honey" in a more endearing way happens towards the end of the story, when, after listening to her in silence, the narrator suddenly gets on his knees and holds the hem of her dress without saying a word. This gesture softens his ex-wife, whose language becomes kinder, including the vocatives she employs. Interestingly, the first few words she uses to address him are insults: "She says, Hey, it's all right, stupid. You're so dumb, sometimes. Get up now. I'm telling you to get up. Listen, it's okay. I'm over it now" ([1988] 2003, 51). They share a brief intimate moment in which both of them seem more vulnerable than before, which allows the woman to let go of her anger and understand what her ex-husband means to her now: nothing. Upon seeing the narrator's immobility, she continues: "Did you hear what I said? You have to go now. Hey, stupid. Honey, I said I forgive you. And I even reminded you about the knife thing. I can't think what else I can do now. You got it made in the shade, baby. Come on now, you have to get out of here. Get up. That's right. You're still a big guy, aren't you" ([1988] 2003, 52). The ex-wife repeats the insult "stupid" but uses it, like the first time, as a term of endearment. It conveys the tenderness and pity the narrator's gesture has roused in his ex-wife, who now sees him almost like a helpless child. Insults can sometimes be used to express affection within intimate relationships and, even though these two characters are no longer together and have become strangers, this brief moment has fleetingly rekindled their intimacy. At this point, the ex-wife uses "conventionalized (ritualized) insults as a mechanism for stressing solidarity" (Brown and Levenson 1987, 229). She no longer says "son of a bitch," and instead switches to a lighter, more playful insult like "stupid"—the only one she uses in this context. As opposed to the insults used at the beginning, the two uses of the word "stupid" "(counterintuitively) function as discursive resources for creating affiliation" (Korobov 2017, 280). In this particular story, terms of endearment and insults are quite malleable and swap meaning depending on the context, with the first no longer conveying fondness and the second suggesting complicity. Most of the time, however, Carver's stories subvert the intimate quality of hypocorisms by stripping them of their positive and affectionate connotations.

As Eva Illouz argues, "imagination has changed and raised the thresholds of women's and men's expectations about the desirable attributes of a partner and/or about the prospects of shared life. It has therefore become aligned to the experience of disappointment, a notorious handmaid of imagination and, especially in the realm of love, a major source of suffering" (2012, 215). In Carver's stories, terms of endearment

and the expression *I love you* are more often than not vehicles for such disappointment: no longer carrying their original meaning, they now express the individual's discontent about failing relationships. Carver remaps traditional romantic expressions in order to convey the contemporary destabilization of intimacy and shows the different ways in which men and women deal with this change. While the women in Carver's stories tend to be more straightforward and attempt to resolve conflict as best as they can, Carver's men dwell within the formulaic, resorting to clichés in order to bring back a dimming intimacy, though in vain. The examples provided in this article are but a few; other stories such as "A Serious Talk," "Blackbird Pie" and "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" feature resilient women who are more deft with words than their partners. Overall, Carver's so-called "minimalism" was extremely complex in its depiction of language. He saw the difficulty of understanding, dealing with and expressing one's emotions, particularly for individuals navigating an accelerated world that continuously exalted the unattainable American Dream, and showed the infinite possibilities for communication.

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