Teaching Raymond Carver Through Pacific Northwest Music

Angela Sorby

CHAPTER ONE

TEACHING CARVER'S VOICE(S) THROUGH PACIFIC NORTHWEST MUSIC

ANGELA SORBY

In Richard Russo’s novel, *Straight Man* (1997), a literary agent confides to the main character that his secretary’s story collection “won’t be a big seller. There’s a lot of grunge fiction out there since Ray Carver.”¹ Carver’s work is more often called “dirty realism,” which connotes grunginess only indirectly, but what interests me as a teacher is the specific relationship between Carver’s work and the 1980s-1990s Pacific Northwest music known as grunge. In my American survey course, American Literature since 1865, I teach literary and musical texts together, with several pedagogical aims in mind. First, although not all of my students read for pleasure, virtually all of them listen to some kind of music, so music gives them a degree of confidence and a platform for further learning. Second, music reminds my students that history is not just comprised of presidents and wars. By stressing the historicity of musical texts—many of which were produced by socially marginalized musicians—I encourage students to understand history as regional and intimate: history has a dialect and a rhythm, and it permeates everything, through our eyes and our ears. Finally, by comparing musical and literary texts, students almost automatically begin to think not just in terms of content, but in terms of style: what does it mean, for example, to write “folksy” dialogue or to construct “jazz” (or “grunge”) sentences? As students read Carver and listen to regional (folk and grunge) music, they begin to see him as a regional artist; in other words, they come to recognize how his work reflects and propagates specific “structures of feeling” that are indigenous to the Pacific Northwest.

The term “structures of feeling” derives from Raymond Williams’s *Marxism and Literature*. Structures of feeling, as Williams defines the

¹ Russo, *Straight Man*, 270.
concept, are patterns of shared internal and external experiences that emerge in response to changing socioeconomic conditions. They are experienced as individual and even isolating (“I am depressed”) but they are really collective (“We are living in a Depression”). However, it is only in retrospect that these structures of feeling become evident. To share a structure of feeling is not to be consciously influenced by an articulated set of ideas; rather, it is to be affected, in parallel with many others, by a set of material conditions. Williams’s concept explains why I have my students read folk, grunge and Carver together—not because of a direct biographical or textual link, but because of a broader (and ultimately more historically significant) regional connection: Pacific Northwest music and literary texts are rooted in the material conditions produced by an economy of extraction.

Our syllabus moves chronologically through a set of prose works and accompanying musical texts. I teach Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with Lee Wallin’s “Juba This” and Bogus Ben Covington’s “Adam and Eve in the Garden”; James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* with Stravinsky’s “Ragtime” and Scott Joplin’s “The Entertainer”; and Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues* with Robert Johnson’s “Cross Road Blues” and Indigenous’s “Leaving.” Towards the end of the semester, I pair Carver’s stories “After the Denim” and “So Much Water So Close to Home” with Woody Guthrie’s “Roll on Columbia,” Tad’s “Plague Years,” and Nirvana’s “About a Girl.” As we move through the semester, I stress three basic oppositions that all of the texts (both literary and musical) establish and complicate: female versus male, black versus white, and regional versus cosmopolitan.

The literary texts we study—all written by men—tend to depict masculinity as a fluid performance rather than a fixed identity, and often the most critical bonds are homosocial rather than heterosexual. Racial identity also emerges as a performance—one where whiteness is often dependent on blackness (and vice versa), in ways that recall Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*. At the same time, precisely because these racial and gender categories are performances, their boundaries often blur; for instance, Huck Finn famously tries on girls’ clothing and—as Shelley Fishkin has argued in *Was Huck Black?*—appropriates African-American dialectal features. The course’s overarching opposition, though, is regional versus cosmopolitan. Because this binary is so pervasive in all of the texts, to think through it is to engage with race, gender, and class issues, and to articulate power relations. For example, the unnamed protagonist in Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is cosmopolitan: he has
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no dialect (or rather, a "standard" dialect), no geographical home, and no "native" style, and he dreams of translating ragtime into classical (i.e., cosmopolitan) music. He enjoys Southern gospel performers, but he finds them picturesque, and they attract him because they are so far removed from his privileged subject-position. By contrast, Carver's characters, like Twain's and Alexie's, are regionals: they feed cosmopolitan assumptions about "authenticity," but they also struggle with relative economic and cultural powerlessness. Students recognize this anxiety about authenticity, which has been central to American popular music since regional African-American spirituals were discovered and appropriated by cosmopolitan white collectors in the 1860s. The question of authenticity—what it is, and why it matters—thus emerges as critical to our understanding of power, masculinity, race, and region.

As previously stated, in our unit on Carver I teach "So Much Water So Close to Home" with the story that precedes it in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, "After the Denim." Following the example of Randolph Runyon, I pay attention to the "table of contents" order rather than the order of composition; this encourages students to read the stories as they circulated in a particular moment as well to see them as the products of an evolving authorial intent. For this reason, too, I tend to skirt the issue of Gordon Lish's role in Carver's revisions—though Lish's involvement does raise interesting issues related to cosmopolitanism, regionalism, and authenticity. My aim is to present the stories as regional artifacts: together, they depict men and women negotiating—with varying degrees of success—the specific economic and social terrain of Washington State.

As Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman note, power is "the key term when referring to hegemonic masculinities." In twentieth-century Washington State, the Grand Coulee Dam functioned as both a literal and a metaphorical source of power: it electrified the region and it employed thousands of men—including Clevie Carver, Raymond Carver's father. The first musical text in the Carver unit is thus "Roll On Columbia," a song written by Woody Guthrie when he worked for the Bonneville Power Administration. I quote a few excerpts here, but I distribute it in full to my students. Teachers should note that most Web versions excise the Indian-fighting stanzas that are, in my view, important aspects of Guthrie's vision:

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2 Runyon's study focuses on "the importance of the order in which stories appear" (Runyon, Reading Raymond Carver, 7).
3 Brod and Kaufman, Theorizing Masculinities, 145.
Tom Jefferson's vision would not let him rest,
An empire he saw in the Pacific Northwest.
Sent Lewis and Clark and they did the rest;
Roll on, Columbia, Roll on!

It's there on your banks that you fought many a fight,
Sheridan's boys in the block house that night,
They saw us in death, but never in flight;
Roll on, Columbia, Roll on!

Remember the trial when the battle was won,
The wild Indian warriors to the tall timber run,
We hung every Indian with smoke in his gun;
Roll on, Columbia, Roll on!⁴

I ask my students: What forms of power can be found in this song? One source is imperial ambition, represented by Lewis and Clark; another is whiteness, which is reinforced by "Sheridan's boys" who fought the Yakima Indians in 1856 and "hung every Indian with smoke in his gun." But ultimately, the men's greatest source of masculine power is their work; they are made mighty, like the river, through their labor:

And on up the river is Grand Coulee Dam
The mightiest thing ever built by a man
To run the great factories and water the land
So roll on, Columbia, roll on

These mighty men labored by day and by night
Matching their strength 'gainst the river's wild flight
Through rapids and falls, they won the hard fight
So roll on, Columbia, roll on.⁵

Washington State was powered for much of the twentieth century by an "economy of extraction" based on the exploitation of natural resources: water, timber, and fish. This economy tended to reinforce rigid gender divisions: men did hard physical labor, often in camps with other men. It is

⁴ Guthrie, "Woody Guthrie Lyrics / Roll On Columbia."
⁵ These stanzas do not appear in the official lyrics as found on The Official Woody Guthrie Website!, but are included in many online versions. See, for example, the site from which these stanzas are cited: http://www.lyricsmania.com/roll_on_columbia_lyrics_woody_guthrie.html.
no coincidence that there are men and boys, but no women, in Washington State’s official folk song. Indeed, the only woman is the river itself—a wild force that the men “win” by the end of the song. The men in “Roll On Columbia” define themselves by their work and by their ability to subdue (however ritualistically and temporarily) feminine nature.

Along with rigid gender roles, the economy of extraction promoted extreme patterns of substance abuse and control: the term “skid row,” which now refers to any urban area populated by drunks, originated in the Seattle logging industry. At the same time, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was active throughout the region—indeed, Yakima’s first public library was founded and financed by the WCTU. Substance abuse, in this regional culture, is perceived as primarily masculine and connected to work: it is what men do (and what women try to prevent) in their leisure hours. To present this history—a history of resource extraction, rigid gender divisions, and substance abuse and control—is to set the stage for Carver’s fiction.

It is crucial to note that the economy of extraction was not sustainable: in the latter half of the twentieth century, escalating in the 1970s and 1980s, fishing and logging towns throughout the Northwest experienced massive unemployment. Seattle, by contrast, prospered as corporations like Boeing, and later Microsoft and Starbucks, took hold. At the crux of this transition, grunge music emerged. Grunge blended punk rock (the indie-import music of Seattle sophisticates) with heavy metal (the downscale music of small-town, blue-collar workers). Its musicians played to the “college radio” (new economy) crowd, but they dressed like fishermen and loggers, in plaid shirts and visible long johns. They also consumed drugs and alcohol, visibly and performatively. Grunge was, in some ways, a form of minstrelsy: it embodied but also parodied the dying economy (and form of masculinity) that traps and defines so many of Carver’s characters. And like minstrelsy, grunge invited contemporary audiences to practice what Eric Lott calls “love and theft”: the complex process of identifying with a performer while at the same time reinforcing the boundaries that marginalize that performer.

I present two “grunge” texts to my students, to help them picture the collapse of the economy of extraction and its expressive manifestations: Tad’s “Plague Years” and Nirvana’s “About a Girl,” written by Kurt Cobain. “Plague Years” can be found online; the version I prefer has an amusing MTV “frame” which reminds my students of the cosmopolitan / regional split we have discussed all semester. The video clearly eulogizes the economy of extraction: the musicians are dressed like loggers, placed on the physical and economic margins of a booming Seattle. There are no
women, and their “camp” is a parody of logging, mining, or fishing communities. Later, the musicians walk with an old man through Pioneer Square in Seattle—the original “Skid Row,” where homeless alcoholic men lived (and live) in hotels like the Gatewood. I ask a number of questions: (1) How is the Pacific Northwest represented? (2) How are the members of Tad regional? (3) How are they “picturesque” or anti-picturesque? (4) Why are their facial expressions so flat as they sing? (5) How does their exaggerated masculinity contrast with that of the MTV veejay, who acts as a representative listener / viewer? (6) How are the categories of “regional” and “cosmopolitan” at work here?

If “Plague Years” depicts “Carver Country” characters directly, Kurt Cobain raises more complicated issues that nevertheless translate into our discussion of Carver. Cobain is useful partly because the students have already heard of him; they therefore think they know what to expect. But we approach this celebrity from what, to them, is a surprising perspective. I play two clips: first, a brief interview with Nirvana, in which they talk about logging before launching into an extended absurdist diatribe against work; second, an acoustic performance of “About a Girl” in which Cobain—an ex-resident, like Carver, of the devastated, clear-cut Olympic Peninsula—engages the codes of masculinity. As we watch, I ask: how is this an adaptive response to the failing economy of extraction? Based on traditional measures of masculinity, who is “girlish” in this performance? Is the question of how men act simply being revised here? I also ask my students to consider matters of style. “Grunge” was a deliberately minimalist musical movement that rebelled against the baroque technopop of the 1980s: it relied on simple chords and unpretentious, repetitive lyrics, as well as on clothes that seemed “natural,” not like costumes—but which were costumes, nonetheless. In this way, it is the musical equivalent of Carver’s minimalist, colloquial prose. I ask my students: why would this region and this economy generate a minimalist impulse? How is minimalism, as practiced by Tad, Cobain and Carver, related to masculinity?

Working people in Aberdeen and Port Townsend—people who dressed like Cobain and talked like Carver characters—were disappearing at precisely the moment that Carver and grunge made them iconic. This is, of course, a hallmark of regionalism: since Sarah Orne Jewett perfected the conventions in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* in 1896, regionalism has always sought to capture, romanticize, and mourn dying ways of life. Carver’s “After the Denim” depicts both a fading economy and a fading retired couple, although I read the story as ultimately redemptive. James and Edith Packer attend their regular Friday night Bingo game, only to
discover that a young couple (long-haired, dressed in denim) has taken their spot at the table. James is convinced that the young man is cheating and confronts him, to no avail. Meanwhile, Edith realizes that she is “spotting”—and both she and James know that this signifies a grave medical condition. In the end, the Packers return home, Edith goes to bed, and James—who is a needlework hobbyist—takes up his embroidery.

I do not demand that students discuss “After the Denim” in a narrowly controlled way; however, the grunge texts in particular do set up topics for us to address, including matters of region, economics, class, and gender. Regionally, the story is set in a coastal town, and this (metaphorical as well as literal) climate affects the Packers:

There was a cold breeze. He zipped the windbreaker to his neck, and she pulled her coat closed. They could hear the surf breaking on the rocks at the bottom of the cliff behind the building. (CS, 266)

It is helpful to remind students that in the Pacific Northwest, the coast is distinct from the inland counties east of the mountains. The coastal economy has been more vulnerable to resource exhaustion because there is no agriculture. At the same time, it has also been subject to cosmopolitan influences and change. West of the mountains, “outsiders” are likely to be urbane cosmopolitans, whereas east of the mountains, outsiders are likely to be rural Mexicans.

The coastal economy in “After the Denim” is recalled by the Bingo hall’s décor:

There was a sofa in the room, a wooden table, folding chairs stacked up. On the walls were hung photographs of fishing boats and naval vessels, one showing a boat that had turned over, a man standing on the keel and waving. (CS, 266)

The upended fishing economy is echoed by James’s own situation: he is retired, but clinging to his old identity (like the man clinging to the boat) by turning part of his house into an office. At the same time, the Packers represent an older generation, just as their name represents an older occupation: the packing and distribution of raw goods associated with an economy of extraction. In Merriam-Webster’s dictionary, “Packers” are specifically associated with meat, but in the Pacific Northwest, packers most often work, or worked, in fisheries. James Packer is a Packer who is not a packer, but an accountant, or—to use the colloquial expression—a bean counter.
The Packers use beans to measure their profits and losses at the Bingo hall, but their enjoyment is disrupted by interlopers:

The Packers hurried to their regular table. But a young couple occupied the Packers’ usual places. The girl wore denims, and so did the long-haired man with her. She had rings and bracelets and earrings that made her shiny in the milky light. Just as the Packers came up, the girl turned to the fellow with her and poked her finger at a number on his card. Then she pinched his arm. The fellow had his hair pulled back and tied behind his head, and something else the Packers saw—a tiny gold loop through his earlobe. (CS, 266-67)

Why is James so threatened by this young couple? I discourage my students from assuming that a “generation gap” is at work, asking them to focus instead on the similarities between the young couple and the Packers, because like so many Carver stories, this one uses doubles. Indeed, while James wants to imagine an Oedipal conflict between himself and his male usurper, the confrontation does not escalate into a fight, but fizzes:

‘I see what you’re doing,’ James said.
The man turned around. ‘Pardon me?’ he said and stared. ‘What am I doing?’
‘You know,’ James said.
The girl held her cookie in mid-bite.
‘A word to the wise,’ James said.
He walked back to the table. He was trembling. (CS, 269)

James is not a brawny fisherman, any more than the young man with the earring is: they are both bean counters, and both are negotiating their masculinity in a post-fishing, post-packing, post-extraction economy. Their confrontation is indirect, and in the end James cannot even tell the young man what he is doing, just as he cannot admit to himself why this young man (his young double) upsets him so much.

Carver’s reticent prose style reflects his characters’ circumscribed style of communication: like grunge chords, his sentences avoid superfluous flourishes. Reticence and affective flatness are “masculine” traits, associated with men who control their emotions and their women; although Carver’s women also speak this way at times, their dialogue is embedded in a masculine prose tradition that extends back through Hemingway to Mark Twain. And yet James’s reticence does not ultimately prevent him from expressing what needs to be expressed: before his wife goes to bed, James embraces her, and resolves to accompany her to the
doctor’s the next day. Although James is easily threatened—both by the younger man and by his own wife—I suggest to my class that he successfully adapts to changing conditions, in his community and in his married life. The ways in which he adapts are evident in the final paragraph of the story, which I ask my students to read carefully:

He pushed aside his knitting basket, took up his basket of embroidery, and then settled himself in the chair. He raised the lid of the basket and got out the metal hoop. There was fresh white linen stretched across it. Holding the tiny needle to the light, James Packer stabbed at the eye with a length of blue silk thread. Then he set to work—stitch after stitch—making believe he was waving like the man on the keel. (CS, 272)

Since by this point in the semester we have already read *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, I remind my students of Judith Loftus’s advice to Huck:

Bless you, child, when you set out to thread a needle, don’t hold the thread still and fetch the needle up to it; hold the needle still and poke the thread at it—that’s the way a woman most always does; but a man always does t’other way.6

When Mrs. Loftus explains needlework to Huck, she is not just giving him advice on cross-dressing; she is giving him advice on how to survive. Unlike Huck, James knows how to “hold the needle still and poke the thread at it” because—like the young man with the earring—he is limited, but not utterly imprisoned, by his gender role. But why not? I ask my students. Does it help that he is an accountant, and not a fisherman—that his job can be done in a domestic environment, and that it makes him white-collar and at least nominally middle class? Does it help that he can instinctively recognize himself (though he cannot openly admit this) when he looks at the young man with the earring being “poked” in the arm by a woman?

The “fresh white linen” evokes not just cloth, but paper—indeed, the highest quality papers are made from linen. Throughout the semester, the students have discussed the ambiguous gender status of creative work: it is not fishing or logging, not physical, and therefore not typically respected by working-class men’s culture. By the time an author is published (or a musician gets a recording contract) they are already one step away from “authentic” blue-collar communities, even if they seek to depict those

6 Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 72.
communities. What exactly is James imagining as he embroiders while picturing a fisherman on a sinking boat? How are his skills (needlework, accounting) more adaptive than the fisherman’s skills? And given this, why does the image of the fisherman attract him? By asking these questions, I steer students away from the easiest interpretation of the final image, in which we just assume that James is drowning in troubles like the fisherman. James, I argue, is not drowning—he is more like the photographer than the fisherman in the picture. He is also, as students will recognize, like Cobain, a young heterosexual man with an earring. He has successfully re-negotiated his masculinity in response to changing conditions, rather than allowing himself to be mired in archaic forms of manhood and male power.

“So Much Water So Close to Home,” the second of the two Carver stories we study, is set in Eastern Washington, along the banks of the Naches River, which is a tributary of the Yakima River. Yakima, as an agricultural center, has a more stable economy than coastal fishing and logging towns like Aberdeen and Port Townsend. It is also more culturally isolated—longhaired young men could, until recently, expect to be beaten up—and culturally conservative. If “After the Denim” is partly about negotiating flexible gender roles, then “So Much Water” is about defending rigid gender roles at the expense of women, and perhaps men as well.

When teaching this story, it is necessary to note that Carver uses a female narrator. But is her voice feminine? Is this “feminine” prose? The question makes more sense for students if we return, momentarily, to music. Most grunge music was produced by men, and even when there are no vocals, students identify heavy bass lines and loud guitar chords as more “masculine” than, say, a disco beat or a few bars of Chopin. This gendering of style is not natural, but cultural, historical, and, of course, race- and class-related. A similar dynamic is at work in the American prose line, as epitomized by Carver’s stylistic precursor, Hemingway. As Thomas Strychacz notes, one of the most “time honored” critical assumptions about Hemingway is that “tough, emotionally restrained, laconic concision is deeply masculine.” I suggest to my students that in “So Much Water” the woman narrator talks / writes like a man because there are simply no cultural resources available to her as a woman. She is surrounded by masculine culture; she ventriloquizes it; and she is drowning in it.

7 Strychacz, Dangerous Masculinities, 8.
“So Much Water” works as a savage critique of small-town gender norms and the perils of static regionalism. In “After the Denim” and in the grunge texts, we find characters who register in their creative expression the enormous costs, but also the small benefits of, change. In “So Much Water” we find characters, men especially, who will not—or cannot—change. Stuart and his friends find a girl’s body in the Naches River while they are on a fishing trip. Instead of reporting it immediately, they finish their trip. This bothers Stuart’s wife, Claire, so much that she attends the dead girl’s funeral and begins to identify with her. The shorter version of the story that appears in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* ends with Stuart initiating—and Claire accepting—sex, in a scene that reiterates the text’s undercurrent of sexual menace.

One central question that students are likely to ask without prompting is: why do the men continue their trip after they find the body? They can be pushed further to ask: is homosocial bonding more important to these men than heterosexual love? Some critics have addressed this question by considering the wilderness retreat as an “idyll,” an Edenic place on the *American Adam* model. But the Naches River is not, precisely, wild; it is a tributary of the Yakima, and at this juncture it is helpful to look again at Guthrie’s song. The river in “Roll On Columbia” is feminized, and the men feel “mighty” when they band together to tame it, a triumph that involves both labor and bloodshed. On their trip, the men in “So Much Water” are reprising not an Edenic or pastoral experience, but an earlier moment in Pacific Northwest history: a moment when men lived together in work camps without women and derived their power from imperial ambition, whiteness, and physical labor.

Claire clearly senses the menace (to her, and to all women) of the economy of extraction as she drives to the girl’s funeral; this is the most extended description we are given of the landscape:

> I drive through farm country, through fields of oats and sugar beets and past apple orchards, cattle grazing in pastures. Then everything changes, more like shacks than farmhouses and stands of timber instead of orchards. Then mountains, and on the right, far below, I sometimes see the Naches River. (CS, 277)

As she drives, Claire is shadowed by a man in a blue workshirt, with a crew cut and a pickup; his masculinity is a threat to her, and it is defined by his literally blue-collar clothing and his truck, signs of his working life. It is also notable that Claire describes the scenery not as a “forest,” but as “stands of timber”—that is, as raw materials ready to be cut down.
Claire attempts to reassert herself as a woman by retreating to a feminized space—the hairdresser’s—then attending the funeral. At the ceremony she sees two males who are unlike any others in the story: “a boy in flared pants and a yellow short-sleeved shirt” and “a nice blond man in a nice dark suit” (CS, 278). These males represent alternative modes of masculinity: the boy is young and androgynous, and the man is a middle-class minister whose suit contrasts with the would-be rapist’s blue workshirt. These particular males, however, are framed by the theatrical funeral scene; they do not comprise the actual landscape of Claire’s life. Thus, when she returns to Stuart, she is resigned; she will let him seduce her, because she feels that she has no other choice: “I can’t hear a thing with so much water going,” she says (CS, 279). The water that she hears roaring in her ears is not illusory; it is the “Yakima, Snake, and the Klickitat, too,” that Guthrie mentions in “Roll On Columbia.”8 It is the economy, an economy of rigid gender roles and homosocial bonding that traps her (and Stuart, too) in acts they can only repeat.

Teaching Carver with musical texts does not limit our examination to the links between texts; many other issues arise over the course of our class discussions. However, Woody Guthrie, Tad, and Kurt Cobain provide concrete reference points to students who often lack a sense of regional history. This, in turn, allows us to approach Carver not as an isolated genius, but as a writer whose stories share “structures of feeling” with other texts from the same region, as well as with real human beings whose lives were—and are—shaped by the Pacific Northwest’s economies of extraction.

**Works Cited**


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8 Guthrie, “Woody Guthrie Lyrics / Roll On Columbia.”


—. “Nirvana—Stoned Interview.”
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKA7cCmboQI.


