

Helen Porter's Everyday Survival Stories: A Literary Encounter with Feminist Standpoint Theory

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an analysis of Helen Porter's short story "Mainly Because of the Meat" (1991) as a demonstration of the critical reading strategies that standpoint theories can offer literary critics. Particular use is made of work by Bettina Aptheker and Dorothy E. Smith on women's resistance to the capitalist structures and gendered discourses that constrain them in their everyday lives.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article fait une analyse de la Nouvelle d'Helen Porter intitulée "Mainly because of the Meat" (1991) (Surtout à cause de la viande) en tant qu'une démonstration des stratégies de lecture critique que les théories de point de vue peuvent offrir aux critiques littéraires. L'utilisation particulière du travail de Bettina Aptheker et de Dorothy E. Smith sur la résistance des femmes contre les structures capitalistes et les discours sur les sexes qui les limitent dans leur vie quotidienne.

INTRODUCTION

I'm very into what's going on here, like probably from the time of my childhood up until now...I feel like I could write forever about life, women's lives especially, in Newfoundland and especially in St. John's and especially in sort of this part of St. John's - downtown St. John's. (Helen Porter interview 1994)

As Helen Porter's comments suggest, her fictional lens focusses primarily on working-class families living in her native city of St. John's, Newfoundland. Her writing frequently explores relationships between family members, and describes the manual work that is undertaken by women within and beyond the home in order to sustain day to day life within it. Many of Porter's protagonists are faced with the mundanity of repetitive, low-paid jobs, and with the accompanying constraints of a life lived on a low income. Despite the material hardships, feelings of frustration, tensions within families, and the difficulties of breaking out of the cycle of poverty that Porter's characters often experience, her stories

are not overwhelmingly depressing. Instead, Porter's novel *January, February, June or July* (1988) and her collection of short stories *A Long and Lonely Ride* (1991) might be described as quiet celebrations of everyday survival since Porter conveys to her reader a sense of a character's courage in negotiating her way through another difficult - yet frequently fairly predictable - day.

In my brief consideration of Porter's fiction, I would like to examine the forms and meanings that "everyday survival" assumes within her work. This entails exploring the notions of resistance that occur in her fiction, and the strategies that her characters adopt in order to cope with and make sense of their daily realities. I have chosen one story that adeptly illustrates the anxieties and pressures that a limited income produces on individuals and their families, the fatigue that manual work creates, and the cycle of effort with low reward that it sets up. "Mainly Because of the Meat" is a story set in a supermarket somewhere in St. John's and it is about class differences and double standards, as well as the limited opportunities that are imposed on women as the result of economic hardship (1991, 101-110). "Meat" is a fine example of Porter's ability to

suggest to her reader the complexity of a particular event and the social structures that it can make manifest. The "drama" of Porter's fiction is generally centred on glimpses of this complex ordinariness rather than on the more radical changes that people effect within their lifestyles, politics or aspirations. Sudden transformations are not the stuff of her stories, but moments of resistance and insight, small variations within the daily repetitions that are enacted in the workplace and the home, do provide the narrative impetus for her work.

This paper also outlines how feminist standpoint theories have assisted me in my wider study of contemporary Atlantic Canadian women's prose and poetry and the communities in which that writing is produced and evaluated. In this respect, my analysis of Helen Porter's short story is offered as a demonstration of the critical reading strategies that standpoint epistemologies can offer literary critics. Secondly, it is also intended to illustrate the benefits of integrating a socio-political analysis of fictional narrative with a more nuanced examination of literary conventions. Whilst feminist historians and sociologists often incorporate women's literature into their social and political critiques of women's lived experiences, they tend to ignore the writer's knowledge of literary conventions and their skill in adapting them. I suggest that writers like Porter employ literary codes and genres within their work as a means of activating the "literary knowledge" of the reader. This process of engagement with, for example, a reader's familiarity with realistic fiction, creates an intimacy between reader and text that complements the writer's intimacy with her subject matter. In Porter's case, her own "local knowledge" of place, language and the social mores of downtown St. John's combines with her skill at adapting literary conventions to produce a convincing representation of the class and gender differences that inflect the actions and thoughts of her protagonist. My examination of "Meat" demonstrates how useful literary stories are in facilitating feminist analyses of daily life from the standpoints of people who are disempowered within contemporary society.

Thirdly, this paper offers an introduction to a writer whose work has been given very little attention by academic literary critics. Nevertheless, Porter's fiction is highly valued by the local and regional audiences who buy and borrow her books. Furthermore, her status as a writer and critic of considerable experience is regularly acknowledged by other Newfoundland writers, by the provincial writers' associations which invite her to adjudicate literary competitions, and the journals which publish her book reviews. Porter has also been awarded an honorary doctorate of letters from Memorial University in recognition of her contributions to the St. John's literary community. These acknowledgements of Porter's professional expertise combine with a local recognition of her work as emerging directly from the close observation of her home community. For St. John's readers in particular, but for other Atlantic Canadian readers as well, Porter articulates a familiar experience of geographic and economic marginalisation. However, her stories depict people whose ability to cope with difficult material circumstances derives in part from their community's collective knowledge of long-term social inequalities and economic decline. Whilst eschewing easy solutions and the idealisation of endurance, Porter's fiction expresses a quiet respect for the way that Newfoundlanders negotiate their everyday survival.

SITUATING THE EVERYDAY, LOCATING RESISTANCE

In my efforts to analyse Atlantic women's texts in terms of the writing, publishing and reading communities which form around them I have drawn heavily on the work of feminist standpoint epistemologists. Although the concerns and debates of feminist standpoint theories have been well developed and, indeed, contested by sociologists, philosophers and historians, few literary critics have turned to standpoint as a methodological and analytical resource (notable exceptions include Hunter 1996 and Pryse 1998). Feminist standpoint epistemology emphasises the importance of beginning thought from the lives of people who

have been excluded from dominant cultural practices. Since the writing that interests me is considered peripheral to the canonical literatures that dominate literary critical research, I have been concerned to develop a methodology that could take account of the value accorded to texts by those who are intimately involved with their production. In doing so, I wished to avoid merely reiterating the academic paradigms of "literature" in my methods of study. Work by scholars such as Dorothy E. Smith (1987, 1990, 1993) and Liz Stanley (1990) helped to shape my field work, both in my decision to interview a range of writers, publishers and editors who were variously engaged with writers' groups, journals, magazines and literary presses in the region, and in alerting me to the practical difficulties involved in conducting qualitative interviews. Furthermore, their work assisted my understanding of the interview experience and encouraged me to integrate an analysis of the research process into my written account.

Hence, in terms of feminist research practice, standpoint theories helped to shape what I did, how I did it and how I made sense of "what happened." Secondly, they have offered me a series of critical strategies and vocabularies. These have enabled me to recognise, conceptualise and critique, for example, the connections between writers' participation in local writing groups, and the way that they encode specific knowledges of women's everyday realities in their texts. In this regard, Lorraine Code's model of friendship as a way of knowing (1991), and work by Hilary Rose (1994) and Alison Jagger (1989) which rethinks the relationship between emotion and knowledge from the standpoint of women involved in care work, proved particularly helpful. Of course, the written analysis of prose and poetry which succeeded my investigations into and commentary on textual communities in Atlantic Canada is recognisable to literary critics. Given my own training, my readings of texts inevitably draw on my knowledge of generic codes and Euroamerican literary aesthetics. However, they are equally inflected by issues that are foregrounded within feminist standpoint epistemology. My reading of Porter's work is indebted to the notion that daily experience offers

a starting-point for an understanding of what Dorothy Smith calls "the relations of ruling" (Smith 1987). Equally important here is the recognition of forms of resistance to those relations and structures, as well as the examples of agency that emerge from women's accounts of their everyday lives.

Bettina Aptheker's discussion of resistance is particularly pertinent to a consideration of Porter's everyday survival stories. Aptheker proposes "a different concept of resistance as it has been generated by women out of their daily lives" rather than defining resistance only in terms of "opposition" and "power" (1989, 169). She suggests that there are forms of women's resistance that are not visible to us if we look only for examples of historical movements and broad social changes, if we persist in connecting our ideas about resistance to notions of progress (170). Aptheker offers a range of examples of "daily resistance," such as any attempts on the part of women to improve the quality of daily life for themselves and others for whom they care, and "the strengthening" of "connections between people in family, at work, and in the community" (180). These "coping" strategies are not "passive and accommodating qualities" in the context of a society that continually undermines connections between people (180). Instead, Aptheker proposes how "coping" can be a form of resistance:

Hemmed in by patriarchal, racist, and class restrictions, the overwhelming majority of ordinary women have made their existence around the cracks and crevices allowed them by this multifaceted authority. (174)

This is not to deny the damage that can be inflicted upon women and men who must struggle daily with the oppressive constraints of these restrictions. Furthermore, the internalization of sexism and/or racism which results from a person's continual engagement with a society that is systemically sexist and racist informs and inhibits the actions and attitudes of every member of that society and can result in complicity with oppression. These moments of disempowerment, of

psychological and social damage, exist in tension with the strategies of resistance that come into view if we adopt a standpoint that is located in "the cracks and crevices" of authority as they emerge within everyday activities and spaces.

This conceptualization of resistance and agency resonates with Dorothy Smith's efforts to use women's standpoint within her sociological practice as a means of developing "inquiry into the social relations in which [women's] experience is embedded, making visible how it is put together and organized in and by a larger complex of relations (including those of ruling and the economy)" (1993, 184; 1990, 159-208). The "actualities of people's lives," our experience of the "lived world" is the place where Smith, like Aptheker, wishes to start her investigations (1993, 185). She proposes that:

Women speaking...(in our sexed bodies) have things to tell us of their lives, of how things happen to them, of their work and struggles, that we don't already know, that discourse hasn't already previsited. (189)

Discourse for Smith is "a distinctive form of coordinating activities among people in a system of relations mediated by texts" (185). This means that women may be positioned as both the "discursive subjects of femininity," passive, "desired and desirable, but not desiring" whilst also being discursively constructed as "the active knowledgeable agent, the contriver and producer of her appearance as a discursive subject" (185). As she explains, "both levels are integral to the social organization of the discourse of femininity. Both are embodied in its texts, though neither are merely textual; both are socially organized practices" (185).

Smith's definition of discourse as "a socially organized practice" not "merely" a textual one, encourages her to listen to women's stories of their lives and struggles, attending to aspects of that lived daily life that are not already envisaged or encompassed within discourse. Lived experience is not tidy, nor is it entirely predictable or completely bereft of moments and strategies of resistance.

Helen Porter's stories also demonstrate this, but they are fictional texts constructed according to certain literary conventions, rather than the oral testimony of women which offers Smith a resource and starting-point for her sociological investigations. The life stories that Smith refers to form a different kind of text to Porter's fictions, although they may be equally described as creative stories that employ formal narrative strategies. Something of the difference between the two emerges through Helen Porter's account of the genesis of "Mainly Because of the Meat.":

I was telling my niece, who works in Dominion [supermarket] in Mount Pearl, how I forgot some of my groceries. I phoned up and they told me to just come back and pick up what I didn't have. She said there had been a woman in the week before who said that too; they accused her of lying and she started to cry. It's the double standard more than anything else. I'm not very affluent, but they were used to me and knew who I was, that my husband was a teacher. This other woman was rundown looking and was always followed by three or four children. That story would probably never have been written if Marilyn hadn't told me that.

I don't insist that these ideas be in my work; it just happens. But I can hardly imagine not writing about that kind of thing; it's so much a part of me. (1993,117)

In her commentary, Helen Porter interprets this real-life event as rendering visible a "double standard" that operates along class lines and constructed notions of respectability that depend on physical appearance and the social position of a woman's family. Within this discourse of "social decency," Porter is accorded a degree of prestige that is denied to the woman who appears to have little economic power and who is associated with the socially undervalued work of child care rather than the more highly valued profession of teaching.

However, the way that these social relations of class and the operations of the capitalist economy enter into the routine experience of shopping only becomes visible through the recurrence of this particular "forgotten shopping" event, and the different responses that are made by those involved on each occasion. As Smith's work suggests, the relations of ruling are present within our everyday lives but they are not always detectable within them (1987, 89). However, within the dialogue that Porter exchanges with her niece Marilyn, the significance of her own "forgotten shopping" incident emerges. In telling, and thereby representing their experiences as shopper and worker to each other, Helen and Marilyn expose the network of economic relations that extend beyond their own immediate vision. Their narrative also renders visible the way that discourse is used more locally by those in authority (presumably the supermarket manager) to maintain the hierarchies of power necessary to the operation of that network. The "raw experience" of shopping does not generate this insight, but the "telling" of it, and the analysis incorporated by the two women within their narrative, does.

This is the stage at which a sociologist such as Dorothy Smith might begin an analysis of Helen and Marilyn's "everyday life story." Smith might use their understanding of the "double standard" as her starting-point for an analysis of supermarket shopping practices in Mount Pearl, Newfoundland, that proceeds in terms of women's active and passive participation in discourses of femininity and social respectability. Porter, however, uses this insight, generated by herself and Marilyn out of what initially appeared to be ordinary, undramatic, and not very meaningful events, as the impetus for a fictional story about two women who both forget their groceries and are treated very differently by the supermarket manager. In common with a standpoint sociologist, Porter perceives the gender and class politics that shape the lived event. Her self-described interest in "what's going on" in her local community, and her sensitivity to the inescapably political significance of those events, enter into her creative writing so that the "ideas" and subject matter are very close to

her daily realities, as she confirms in the interview with Bruce Porter quoted above.

In "Mainly Because of the Meat," Helen Porter re-imagines and re-represents the forgotten shopping episode as lived and told by herself and Marilyn, into a "new" story. This process of re-imagining a lived event is not only a form of revision, although "Meat" does revise particular aspects of the incident as part of its commentary on gender/class dynamics. In this respect, the story's title, a Dominion supermarket advertising slogan, undergoes a series of revisions as Porter indicates how its significance shifts according to class and gender. From a slogan encouraging consumption and therefore deliberately incorporating the assumption that all customers have equal spending-power, "what" is "mainly because of the meat" becomes identified with and by the different economic status and social power of each character. The relatively well-off shopper returning to collect her forgotten groceries "mainly because of the meat" that she has already purchased is identified by the supermarket manager as the kind of respectable "lady customer" envisaged (in his view) by the store's slogan. For the shop worker, Debbie, and Mrs. Molloy, however, "mainly because of the meat" becomes a more complex expression of their lack of economic power and their attempts to assert their integrity as working-class women in the face of the manager's assumptions about them.

Although Porter revises the "forgotten shopping incident" in this respect, her story also engages in a type of transformation that is more fully expressed by the term "re-imagining." Whilst rooted in her understanding of the original event, she is able to use her skills as a creative writer to move from her own standpoint as the "respectable" customer to the perspective of the shop worker, Debbie. Although this standpoint might begin in Marilyn's version of the event, Porter supplies Debbie with an emotional life to which the reader has access via Debbie's consciousness. She explores Debbie's day-dreams, her frustrations and her unspoken responses to incidents, as well as her interactions with her friend and co-worker Phyllis, the store manager and various customers. This has the effect of complicating rather than fully

explaining Debbie's behaviour and attitudes. Porter portrays her sifting through aspects of her home life, her past, and her experiences as a shop worker as she tries to make sense of her own feelings and responses and those of the other characters. These processes are incomplete, just as the significance of various incidents in the story is not made entirely clear to the reader. Since this is a fiction, Porter is able to both construct and then capitalise on these ambiguities as part of her layered narrative which is structured around dialogue and Debbie's thoughts. At the same time, Porter's sensitivity to the partiality of Debbie's knowledge and understanding suggests the importance of recognising the situated and partial aspects of all standpoints and knowledges: as readers we empathise with Debbie's perspective of the power relations in the supermarket, but our understanding of their dynamic derives from Porter's attention to the ways that each character negotiates her position within them.

In her re-telling of the forgotten shopping incident, Porter telescopes the "action" into one day, so that the "double standard" described in her non-fictional account is brought into sharper relief and becomes the focus for a moment of resistance and solidarity shared between Debbie and Mrs. Molloy (the "poor" shopper). Viewed chiefly, although not entirely, from Debbie's perspective, the event renders visible her situation within the economic and social relations that organise her workplace and inform her understanding of her day to day life. However, Porter also uses the incident to indicate Debbie's ability to disrupt that organisation, and it is this brief exhibition of agency that produces the subtly upbeat ending to the story. Hence, Porter re-imagines a real-life story in order to analyse and explore its significance from a perspective that is not her own, and one which subsequently redefines both the experience and meaning of the class difference that she and Marilyn identified in the "real life" version.

WRITING AND READING THE EVERYDAY

Porter's extensive knowledge of her local

neighbourhood informs her ability to write the story as much as her skills and experience as a writer. She is attuned to the subtexts and silences of the human interactions taking place around her and she is able to represent these in her work. In my interview with Porter she explains her interest in:

the local ambience and just the way people look at things and the way they instantly know what the other person is talking about. There's something like that about a person who grows up in the same neighbourhood - you might not have much in common in other ways, but you find this reference point there which you can take off from, you know. (1994)

In "Meat," Porter uses her knowledge of accents and idiom to indicate the class and age difference between her characters, but she also builds her narrative around non-verbal responses such as eye contact and glances, and she differentiates between the types of silence that punctuate the dialogue. These aspects of Porter's story will form the focus of my analysis, since it is largely through these literary strategies that Porter revises the story of "a double standard" into a more complex account of everyday survival.

The story opens with an exchange between Debbie and Phyllis as they punch in for work on a Monday morning. Their easy familiarity with each other and Phyllis's immediate sense that Debbie is upset about something suggests their friendship. Their speech is casual, peppered with idiomatic expressions such as "'I don't know, girl,'" "'I can usually depend on you to get me up out of the dumps'" and "'we did drop up to Mom's yesterday evening'" (Porter 1991, 101-2). Speaking to each other, Debbie and Phyllis use the language and accent of downtown St. John's, dropping the endings of verb participles like "doin'" and "goin'," and contracting other words: "s'pose" and "one of 'em." When they speak to the store manager Mr. Marshall, or to the relatively affluent customer Mrs. Allen who comes to fetch her forgotten groceries, Debbie and Phyllis "correct" their speech and adopt a more "standard" form of English: "'Yes, of

course, Mrs. Allen. Just go ahead and pick up what you're missing" (104). Mr. Marshall and Mrs. Allen also use this more standard form, with Mr. Marshall adopting a particularly formal tone in order to express his authority as manager: "'Miss Evans,' said Mr. Marshall. He always called the girls Miss when there were customers around" (108). Whilst the differences between these ways of speaking are not great, Porter nevertheless uses them to suggest the intimacy between Debbie and Phyllis, their position within the store as Mr. Marshall's subordinates, and the subtle but important socio-economic gap between their lives and Mrs. Allen's. By contrast, Mrs. Molloy's speech is closer to the young women who serve her, than it is to the manager who hesitates to name her a "lady" (108).

These alliances and differences, and the importance of class and money within the story, are also established by Porter through Debbie and Phyllis's conversation about their weekend activities. Debbie's understanding of her friend's home life and its similarities to her own prompts her to express both solidarity with Phyllis's situation and to question their circumstances: "'Yeah, some life, hey? Do you ever wonder what we're all workin' for? The money goes out faster than it comes in, right?'" (101). Here, Porter demonstrates the women's keen awareness that their effort as workers is poorly rewarded, despite the long hours of work and careful budgeting of income that they both undertake. Porter develops this discussion into far more than just a friendly chat. As the women prepare for another day's work, they try to make sense of the tension between their desires and expectations, and the constraints of their lived lives. Debbie's description of her family home is interwoven with her sustained questioning of the economic system that seems to leave her with no more options than her parents possess:

"I don't know if I ever want to get married. Seems like it only makes everything harder. I looks at Mom and Dad sometimes and I can't help wondering what in the world they're gettin' out of it all. Still four more youngsters to put

through school and as soon as that's over it'll be almost time for Dad to be pensioned. Then I s'pose one of 'em'll get sick, like so many more do." (102)

Phyllis, however, challenges the connection that Debbie makes between marriage and poverty, pointing out to her friend that she need not have a large family, that at least they have more choice than their mothers in that sphere.

By creating this interchange, Porter represents the kind of talking that women frequently do with their friends: the comparing of experiences and situations, the moments of understanding and empathy, and the analytic work that is woven through the telling of events. Using this talk at the beginning of the story allows Porter to establish Debbie's character not merely as a worker in a supermarket, but as a friend and colleague, as a daughter, and as a young woman with aspirations. This immediately complicates any tendency the reader might have to categorize Debbie only in terms of her paid work, and indeed that is exactly what Mr. Marshall achieves in his interactions with her: "'You're a good worker, Debbie, a good, fast worker. That's why it surprises me when I have a complaint about you'" (102). By talking about their personal lives whilst in their workplace, Debbie and Phyllis are in fact challenging a straightforward definition of them as workers producing a profit for the supermarket. Their conversations, which continue in a more sporadic and interrupted form throughout the day, can be viewed as one small means of resistance that Porter's story foregrounds through its concentration on Debbie's perspective of events.

Further moments of resistance to the economic structures and gendered discourses that seek to contain the young women in their role as "shop girls" emerge when Mr. Marshall chastises Debbie for what he sees as her carelessness over Mrs. Allen's missing shopping. Through their exchange, Porter also establishes a difference between various forms of silence. Debbie's lack of verbal response to Mr. Marshall's announcement that he has received a complaint may be a deliberate refusal to defend herself in the face of

Mr. Marshall's authority, or a silence enforced by the power that he has over Debbie as her boss. However, her hastily revised reply when he asks whether she packed Mrs. Allen's groceries constitutes a deliberate evasion, a silence that protects a co-worker: "That's right. I did. Tommy was...he was busy doing something else" (103). After Mr. Marshall warns her "to be more careful [because] the store can't afford to lose money like that," Debbie has to force herself to keep quiet (103). This time, Porter enters her consciousness in order to explain why Debbie does not defend herself:

Debbie held her lips tightly together as Mr. Marshall walked back towards the boys who were stocking the shelves. She was finding it harder and harder, lately, to keep from answering back. But she couldn't afford to lose her job, at least not until she finished her typing course. (103)

Here, Porter suggests the tension between agency and restraint that results from Debbie's position as a check-out girl and her desire to improve her economic and educational circumstances. Remaining silent in the face of Mr. Marshall's harsh accusations initially strikes the reader as a passive and accommodating reaction to the manager's power over his worker. However, Debbie's response is more complex than that. She recognises her boss's authority and her dependence on him for employment, but the necessity of retaining her job is a product of her determination to pursue a better opportunity, a project that she has already initiated during her "leisure time." Significantly, Debbie's silence is broken by laughter, caused by Phyllis imitating Mr. Marshall. Together, the two women use humour against their boss as a safe way of expressing their disagreement with his judgement and their anger at his abuse of his power over them.

Through these exchanges and her entrance into Debbie's thoughts, Porter alerts her reader to the significances and possible complexities of verbal and non-verbal responses within her story. She also establishes how physical appearance plays

an important part in her characters' treatment and judgement of each other. Porter complicates the exercising of a double standard by Mr. Marshall by indicating the extent to which Debbie and Phyllis also refer to dress as a means of classifying people, a process which determines their attitude towards them. Debbie, for instance, compares Mrs. Allen to the "pale skin" and "slight frame" of the girl who preceded her into the store: "No Monday morning disarray for her. Every carefully-coloured hair was in place; her face looked like an advertisement for 2nd Debut" (104). The association of Mrs. Allen with an advertisement registers the distance that Debbie believes exists between the Allen family and her own. Christina Allen, a childhood friend of hers, "had the kind of bedroom that Debbie used to think belonged only to girls in old television shows like *Happy Days* and *Who's the Boss*" (103). To Debbie, the Allens seem to represent desirable but unattainable material comfort that Debbie knows only from the television.

Furthermore, Porter portrays Debbie as being reluctant to credit Mrs. Allen with any sincerity: she smiles at her stiffly, stays silent when Mrs. Allen enquires about her prospects, and only relaxes when the older woman refers to her daughter's news and questions about Debbie. In this way, Porter suggests that Debbie's resentment about being blamed by the manager for Mrs. Allen's lost shopping clouds her judgement. In fact Debbie knows the mother of her best school friend quite well, but the incident clearly informs her cool and distant behaviour towards Mrs. Allen. Whilst the older woman's attitude towards Debbie does strike the reader as patronising, her persistent efforts to make a connection with Debbie via the relationship with her daughter hint at a genuine kindness. The extent to which Debbie's low paid work, her treatment by Mr. Marshall and her family background mar and affect even basic daily interactions, is indicated by Porter here. The exchange between Debbie and Mrs. Allen seems to suggest that even relatively minor economic and class differences create resentments, misunderstandings, envy and condescension that damage relationships between neighbours and friends. It is only when Mrs. Allen relates

Christina's disappointment that Debbie could not share the enjoyment of a university lecture on L. M. Montgomery with her that Debbie recalls the depth of their friendship, their schoolgirl enjoyment of the "Anne" books and shared dream of visiting Prince Edward Island. The memory of this mutual enthusiasm breaks through her scepticism and irritation, and Debbie reflects silently that: "Yes, Christina really would be sorry about that. Sometimes [she] forgot what a nice girl Tina was" (105).

Through her representation of Debbie's changing responses to Mrs. Allen's enquiries, Porter demonstrates that Debbie certainly does not know or understand everything about her own situation. She detects Mrs. Allen's snobbery in the woman's comments about the local university being "a dive...full of drug pushers and other strange types," but it is much harder for her to accept and interpret Mrs. Allen's genuine concern (105). Porter also portrays Debbie's relationship to popular culture as being a complex one. References to television shows, teenage magazines and the "*Anne of Green Gables* books" enter Debbie's thoughts and day-dreams, but seem to serve a number of different functions. As suggested above, the "Anne books" remind her of a valuable friendship and period of happiness when the two girls shared aspirations, as well as their pleasure in reading the same stories. However, her association of Christina with the girls in television shows and magazines seems to highlight the gulf that Debbie feels exists between their family backgrounds and economic situations. That this feeling runs deep is evident from Debbie's thoughts as she watches Mrs. Allen drive away in her smart car: "She thought of Tina in her third year at the University in Toronto. Just like the girls they used to read about in *Seventeen* and *Flare*" (107). To some extent, Debbie's association of Christina with the "glamorous" world promoted in magazines is a means of registering and making sense of the material differences in their lives and her own comparatively limited choices and opportunities. She knows that her existence is not sufficiently attractive to be represented within the media that offers such images: "Debbie had never in her whole life read a

story about a girl who worked in a supermarket" (107). At the same time, however, Porter refers her reader back to Debbie's earlier assumption that the "university crowd" have "got an easy life ahead of 'em" (102), an oversimplification of "reality" that equals those on offer in the magazines that Debbie used to read. The magazines present Debbie with a repository for her dreams and aspirations, but they also co-opt her into escapist narratives that, whilst they may temporarily relieve her from the drudgery of her monotonous working life, do not suggest any means of enacting change or pursuing her aspirations. They also appear to blur her ability to critique and complicate "realities" that are different from her own.

Similar examinations of her characters' complicated relationship with popular culture recur throughout Porter's fiction and she is explicit about her interest in it: "I think what I'm trying to say is: why is this stuff so seductive to a lot of people and maybe even more so to people who are sort of on the fringes?" (Porter 1993, 119). In writing "Meat," Porter supplies exactly the type of narrative that is missing from Debbie's reading: "a story about a girl who worked in a supermarket" (1991, 107). Part of her purpose in writing such stories is to debunk the "happy endings" and easy resolutions on offer in the magazine stories:

[A] thing that I've addressed in some of my writing is people being "happy at last" - that's a real *People* magazine thing. You might find somebody that's been through absolute hell but at the time that the story is written, she's happy and the rest of her life is going to be perfect? They never admit that maybe that means they're going to be happy for a couple of weeks. (1994)

By contrast, Porter's narratives tend to end far more cautiously, with a sense of the constraints surrounding a character's life as evident as any kind of agency that they may be able to demonstrate. Any "happiness" achieved is tentative and temporary, and emerges from the daily actions, tensions and relationships within which Porter's characters are situated. Debbie's snatched moments

of self-reflection, for instance, are curtailed by her awareness that she is being watched by Mr. Marshall.

These brief interludes add further layers to Porter's narrative and prepare the reader for Debbie's explicit challenging of Mr. Marshall's authority and her demonstration of solidarity with Mrs. Molloy, whose honesty the store manager questions. In the exchange between the manager, Mrs. Molloy and Debbie, Porter uses glances, eye contact and silence to indicate moments of resistance, affinity and difference. Mr. Marshall comes over to watch Debbie checking through Mrs. Molloy's groceries, glances at Debbie, and then turns to Mrs. Molloy in order to question the amount of shopping she has "lost." His turning towards Mrs. Molloy in this way reinforces his authority as the store manager and his command of the situation confirms his position as the one who can determine who is honest, who is a "lady" and who a "cheat." Mrs. Molloy detects this assertion of authority and Mr. Marshall's opinion of her, and she replies to him on this first occasion without looking at him. When he asks Debbie if she served Mrs. Molloy on Saturday, the older woman "looked at [her] and then glanced quickly away" as if seeking support from Debbie who is similarly subject to Mr. Marshall's scrutiny and judgement (108). Debbie also reads his gestures and tone of enquiry as sceptical, and she gives Mr. Marshall an evasive answer that may or may not be the entire truth: "I had a busy evening, Mr. Marshall. I can hardly remember" (108). This is matched by a similarly vague reply from Mrs. Molloy that prompts Mr. Marshall's direct challenge of her honesty. As he questions the amount of replacement items that she has taken, he leans towards her and speaks "softly," as if to invite a confession.

It is at this point in the scene that Porter develops the potential for affinity between the two women and that she traces their gradual movement towards a moment of solidarity that temporarily silences Mr. Marshall and dampens his superiority over them both. Firstly, she notes that "Debbie realized that she was holding her breath as she waited for Mrs. Molloy's answer," then she has

Mrs. Molloy reply with increasing confidence that "You never asked that other woman what she picked up on Saturday"(108). This sudden burst of courage on Mrs. Molloy's part encourages Debbie to challenge Mr. Marshall as well. When he asks her to "take a few minutes" to remember Mrs. Molloy's groceries, she replies immediately and looks her boss "straight in the eye" (109). By meeting Mr. Marshall's gaze, replying without hesitation and resourcefully corroborating Mrs. Molloy's version of events, Debbie manages to reassert her own confidence in her capabilities as a worker, capabilities that are being questioned once again by Mr. Marshall. Whereas previously she had remained silent in the face of his accusations, here she issues a direct challenge:"Of course I'm sure, Mr. Marshall. And if you're not going to believe me, why did you bother to ask?"(109). That Debbie's act of resistance to Mr. Marshall is both effective and significant is underlined by the contrast with her previous response at the beginning of the story. Porter's description of the reactions that the challenge provokes further emphasises its importance: Mr. Marshall is rebuffed and walks away, "his back very stiff," whilst Mrs. Molloy first stares at Debbie, then thanks her before "look[ing] away again."

Porter further complicates this small moment of triumph by describing Debbie's struggle to overcome the embarrassment that she feels at having supported Mrs. Molloy "against" her boss: "Debbie felt uncomfortable, no, not uncomfortable, embarrassed" (109). Debbie does not necessarily understand her feelings here, but she is certain that she has done the right thing, and as she continues to pack her groceries, "she caught Mrs. Molloy's eye and they smiled at each other" (109). In this non-verbal exchange, an unarticulated sense of understanding and solidarity passes between the women that they are unable or unwilling to speak of out loud. Their mutual challenge of Mr. Marshall, and the way that they have both momentarily overcome an internalization of feelings of inferiority and lack of power, form the note of optimism at the story's close. Porter leaves it unclear whether or not Debbie has lied to support Mrs. Molloy and defend herself, by having Phyllis

say "You let her get away with it" (109). Debbie denies the implication that she has lied, but is unsure how to interpret the subtext of her friend's comment: "Although Phyllis' voice was mocking there was another note in it too. Understanding? Appreciation? Or just plain amusement?" (109). In the context of their friendship, however, the exact meaning of Phyllis's comment does not matter, and Porter ends the story by re-establishing the intimacy and ease of their relationship as they chat about their plans for the evening. Debbie's declaration that she does not "feel so bad now" and her comment that "some days are worse than others," points to the fatiguing nature of their working day and the fact that tomorrow will see them at their check-outs once again (110). However, it also indicates that for Debbie, this day has included something out of the ordinary, and as she walks home "briskly down the road," "her purse swinging," the reader recognises the change in her mood from the depression and pessimism that marked the opening of the story (110).

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Porter's ability to examine a "day in the life" of a particular character in this microscopic manner, capturing something of the ambiguities of everyday life as well as its repetitions and routine structure, emerges from her keen observance of her local community. From the realities that she perceives, Porter constructs narratives that focus on commonplace events in order to examine the motivations, material conditions, constraints and desires that inform women's actions and responses in apparently non-dramatic situations. She draws her reader into her stories by recreating and then building on encounters or experiences that are common to many women's lives, but then she uses her attention to the specificities of a particular situation to disturb our assumption that something as "simple" as shopping in a supermarket is always the same each time we do it, no matter who we are. Porter's stories, like the lives and events that she depicts in them, are deceptively simple, and frequently her dialogue is so utterly convincing that it is as if she has transcribed it from talk that she

has overheard. However, as I have noted in my analysis of "Mainly Because of the Meat," Porter's fictions are deftly constructed, layered narratives that deliberately explore the small contradictions, assumptions and resistances that constitute "real life." She employs fictional narrative as a form of political and social investigation, but the critique that she offers is never transparent or trite because her stories refuse easy resolutions in favour of more complex representations of "survival." In reading her stories, the reader is prompted to reassess how she understands "ordinary" happenings within her own life, whilst being encouraged to view the everyday from a standpoint that may be quite different from her own.

My analysis of Helen Porter's work supports the idea that literary stories form a crucial aspect of feminist attempts to re-imagine daily life from the standpoints of people who are disempowered within contemporary society. As I suggested above, Porter's success in engaging the attention of both local and non-local readers results not only from her in-depth knowledge of the community that she writes about, but also from her adept use of the conventions of literary realism. To illustrate this, I have highlighted some of the narrative strategies commonly associated with that genre. I have discussed, for instance, how Porter opens her story by rapidly establishing the personalities of her protagonists and their relationships with each other through the use of dialogue. I have also examined the way that she uses Debbie as focaliser to engage the reader's empathy for her, but suspends a total identification with Debbie's point of view by portraying her in a number of short scenarios in which her differing responses are not fully explained within the narrative. This invites the kind of interpretative work that readers of realistic fiction expect to do and, indeed, the ambiguities that are built into the story help to sustain our interest and enjoyment of it. Furthermore, Porter adopts a familiar fictional structure in which the narrative moves through recognisable stages: setting the scene, presenting a problem or dilemma that leads to a crisis, and results in a denouement and some form of resolution. Porter relies on her reader's acquired

knowledge of this pattern and exploits it by making internal references within her story so that, for instance, the reader is encouraged to compare the opening dialogue between Phyllis and Debbie as they open up their check-outs with their closing conversation as they prepare to go home. In this way she poses the question, what - if anything - has changed? This is a question that not only emerges from a specific social, geographical and political location, but one that is situated within the generic codes of literary realism and Porter's creative use of them. Answers can therefore begin to be articulated by a form of literary analysis that acknowledges

how a writer's immediate community might evaluate her text and understand the questions that it poses. Clearly, such an approach has important implications for the way that academics research and teach literary texts. A discussion of those implications goes beyond the scope of this particular paper, but I hope that I have demonstrated why I think they are worth pursuing

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