THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMININE SPECTATORSHIP IN GARRISON KEILLOR’S RADIO MONOLOGUES

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Interest in the role played by cultural texts in subject formation has contributed to the development of the notion of spectatorship, a preferred viewpoint from which to view the world of the text (e.g., Mulvey, 1989; Pribram, 1988). A text, this notion suggests, constructs a position the spectator must occupy in order to participate in the pleasures and meaning of the text. This position requires a participatory cultural experience in order to make sense of the text and is the result of the structures of characters, meanings, aesthetic codes, attitudes, norms, and values the author projects into the text (Kozloff, 1987; Pribram, 1988). Despite its origin in film theory, the notion of the spectator need not be confined to cinematic texts. Gledhill’s (1988) term, “textual spectator” (p. 66), suggests a position that may be held in regard to any kind of text. Mulvey (1989) also suggests that spectatorship occurs in various types of cultural material, both verbal and visual.

Most popular representations structure a masculine position for the spectator; they assume and construct a “male protagonist . . . free to command the stage . . . of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action” (Mulvey, 1989, p. 20). Mulvey explains the results of this masculine spectatorship:

As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. (p. 20)

The female subject in such texts, in contrast, usually is positioned as the object rather than the subject of the gaze—displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men (e.g., Fried, 1988; Kaplan, 1983; Kuhn, 1985; Mulvey, 1989; Root, 1984). As a spectator, the woman positions herself either as a passive recipient of male desire or as a viewer of another woman who is a passive recipient of male desire. Visual pleasure in film, on television, in the press, and in most popular narratives “reproduces a structure of male looking/female-to-be-looked-at-ness” that “reproduces the structure of unequal power relations between men and women” (Gamman & Marshment, 1988, p. 5).

As useful and insightful as analyses of masculine viewing patterns have been in explicating patriarchal ways of looking, “they offer largely negative accounts of female spectatorship, suggesting colonized, alienated, or masochistic positions of identification” (Gledhill, 1988, p. 66). Feminist theorists, particularly film critics, have begun to take up the challenge to move beyond a preoccupation with how women have been constructed as objects to answer questions such as: “Can we envision a female dominant position that would differ qualitatively from the male form of dominance” (Kaplan, 1983, p. 28)? “How have we come to understand
cinematic pleasure . . . as pleasurable to the male viewer, but not the female" (Pribram, 1988, p. 1)? Feminist scholars have sought to discover, in other words, the nature of women's presence in, rather than absence from, the viewing experience—the nature of feminine spectatorship.

The notion of feminine spectatorship is not meant to suggest that it is a vantage point that can be assumed only by women, that its characteristics are natural or essential attributes of femininity, or that women always see differently from men. The term suggests, instead, a repertoire of culturally constructed characteristics likely to be possessed by and/or ascribed to women under present cultural and political arrangements (Brunsdon, 1981; Code, 1991; Schaef, 1981). Construction of a feminine vantage point in a text, then, is the structuring into the text of activities, experiences, and qualities more likely to characterize women's than men's lives.

But many feminist theorists seek larger goals than the identification and explication of the nature of feminine spectatorship. They want to change patriarchal relations of looking, seeking to discover how the patriarchal perspective can be shifted and a female gaze inscribed as an option into cultural life. As Gamman and Marshment (1988) suggest, because women and men are offered the culture's dominant definitions of themselves in popular culture, "[i]t would therefore seem crucial to explore the possibilities and pitfalls of intervention in popular forms in order to find ways of making feminist meanings a part of our pleasures" (p. 2). They aim to discover techniques and forms that could "be used by feminists to 'subvert' dominant meanings about women in popular culture and to create pleasure, surprise, and interest in feminism" (Gamman, 1988, pp. 23–24). Such is our intent in this essay. We are interested in discovering how a feminine reader or spectator is constructed rhetorically in a text and how that construction can be used to subvert dominant meanings about women in popular culture. We will explore this question in the radio monologues of Garrison Keillor and will suggest that he constructs in them a position of feminine spectatorship.

We long have suspected that gender plays a critical role in Keillor's monologues simply because of the line with which his monologues end, "And that's the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong and all the men are good looking," an obvious reversal of traditional gender roles. Not until we focused our attention on the gendered dimensions of his monologues, however, did we realize the full extent to which he creates a preferred spectator position that relies on traditionally feminine competences and is structured to correspond with women's lives.

Garrison Keillor's monologues are part of a weekly radio program, initially called A Prairie Home Companion, sponsored by Minnesota Public Radio. The program was broadcast from St. Paul, Minnesota, on Saturday nights from April, 1974, until June, 1987, when Keillor ended the show to pursue other projects. In 1990, he resurrected the program with a new name, American Radio Company; this new version originally was broadcast from New York City but was moved back to St. Paul in 1993. At the start of the 1993–94 season, Keillor resumed use of the program's previous name, A Prairie Home Companion. The two-hour program consists of music ranging from country and folk to jazz and hymns, interspersed with fictitious commercials for Powdermilk Biscuits, Guys' Shoes, and the Cafe Boeuf. The
highlight of each program for most listeners—and the focus of our interest here—is Keillor’s monologues about an imaginary town in Minnesota, Lake Wobegon, introduced with the line, “It’s been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, my home town.”

To analyze Keillor’s monologues, we drew on observations developed from regular listening to A Prairie Home Companion from 1982 through the conclusion of the show in 1987 and to American Radio Company from 1990 to the present. We specifically taped 25 monologues from A Prairie Home Companion and 10 from American Radio Company from which to draw for specific examples and illustrations. We also analyzed the six tapes in the News from Lake Wobegon (Keillor, 1983) and Gospel Birds and Other Stories of Lake Wobegon (Keillor, 1985a) collections, recordings of monologues by Keillor that have been packaged and sold by Minnesota Public Radio. Keillor’s (1985b) book, Lake Wobegon Days, provided background information about the imaginary town and its inhabitants to supplement the monologues.

We turn now to an analysis of the rhetorical processes Keillor uses to create a feminine spectator stance. We will suggest that this construction occurs through Keillor’s refusal to privilege sight, dismantling of the male gaze, creation of Lake Wobegon as a feminine setting, and feminine speaking style.

**REFUSAL TO PRIVILEGE VISION**

Keillor’s choice of radio as his medium of communication is a strong indication of his rejection of sight as a dominant way of approaching the world. His eschewal of vision as a means of coming to knowledge and understanding does not falter even when the show has been videotaped for airing on PBS and the Disney Channel (Bianculli, 1986, June 26; Ostrow, 1986, June 22; Barron, 1991, November 29). The programs that are videotaped are “still a show for the ear, not the eye” (Barron, 1991, November 29) in that they are unaltered for television viewing. The backdrop for the show is the red brick wall at the rear of the stage, and the performers make no accommodations to the television medium, as Keillor explains:

> Nobody ever told us, “Look to Camera 3 here when you’re doing this song,” or “Walk upstage to your right.” There were no chalk marks for us to hit. It’s a television show of a radio show. It’s all done as a radio show, sort of absentmindedly, nearsightedly, bumbling around on stage. (Barron, 1991, November 29)

In his lack of adaptation to the visual dimension of television, Keillor highlights the reliance on sound that both radio and television share. Altman (1986) claims that the intermittent spectatorship that characterizes television viewing requires that the sound track carry the significant information to be conveyed because it “alone remains in contact with the audience” (p. 44). Television’s emphasis on the “message-carrying ability of the sound track” (Altman, 1986, p. 44) is consistent with Keillor’s reliance on sound to communicate with his listeners, even when the medium is television. Although the medium offers the possibility of the privileging of sight, Keillor refuses to take advantage of the option.

By refusing to privilege vision, Keillor disrupts the modern notion that seeing is believing—that vision “goes without deliberation” (Minh-Ha, 1991, p. 25). In his rejection of the notion that what is presented visually constitutes good evidence and is sufficient for knowledge, Keillor also rejects the view that vision is superior to the other senses, a claim supported by vision’s detachment from objects and the purely
theoretical relationship it adopts to them. Such a view of vision suggests the possibility, although fictive, of an objective distance from the world and of access to an objective truth about the world (Crary, 1988).

Although Keillor creates the world of Lake Wobegon in part through visual references, he does not posit vision as a privileged means of access to knowledge; he encourages his listeners to experience Lake Wobegon in terms other than sight alone. In one monologue, he privileges smell as capturing the essence of a family:

> Every family, I think, has their characteristic smell. It's how we know each other, and it's a smell that puts us at ease and makes us comfortable. The smell that says to us, "You don't need to be smart in front of these people, they know you. You just be yourself." A wonderful smell that we wash off every morning when we take a shower so that we get nervous and can go to work. (Keillor, 1986, June 14)

In another monologue, the sense of touch is his focus as he describes the sensation of climbing into bed, of crawling "into your cool, clean envelope of sheets" (Keillor, 1993, July 3).

Because the senses other than sight cannot be reduced to the mere collection of information but involve a more direct experience of the environment, Keillor grounds his monologues in the materiality of the body and creates a nearness to the object or person he seeks to know and understand. He throws off his authority as an objective observer who remains distant and withdrawn from what he observes. He centers understanding instead in the subjective, individual experiences of his listeners and in their participatory involvement in the world through an array of senses—not just sight (Frampton, 1983; Jay, 1988).

That vision is not a privileged route to knowledge is evident in Keillor's monologues in that sight often does not provide access to truth—it may not result in insight or understanding. Temporary blindness or a blockage of sight on the part of characters in his monologues frequently foils the advantages vision is presumed to bring to the observer. Sometimes, the residents of Lake Wobegon actually are prevented from physically seeing, as when the rain is "falling in the lake and mist out on the lake so that you can't see to the other side" (Keillor, 1987, June 13). Ella Anderson's efforts to gain knowledge through sight are blocked when "a mosquito landed right on her eyeball" (Keillor, 1986, May 31), and a group of men hunting bear at night find their vision limited: "They drove to the edge of the woods. They aimed their headlights in. They couldn't see very far in" (Keillor, 1993, July 3). On other occasions, the characters in Keillor's monologues are themselves responsible for obstructing their own sight, as when "the Luther Leaguers put their hands over their eyes" in embarrassment as they listen to their parents singing" (Keillor, 1987, November 14).

In other instances, characters in Keillor's monologues witness phenomena that are not physically real, suggesting that sight can deceive. When a boat carrying Lutheran ministers begins to sink in the lake so the ministers appear to be walking on water, "to the people standing on shore, it looked like a genuine miracle before their eyes" (Keillor, 1986, July 19). The Reverend Neeley also sees what is not present when he "fell down on the rocks, speaking in tongues and seeing visions" (Keillor, 1986, July 12). Vision as a path to knowledge is questioned, as well, by Daryl Tollerud, who cannot interpret or trust what he sees after a tractor accident:
“He could see everything, but it looked strange. It looked as if it were not real. Nothing looked real to him, and he did not feel real” (Keillor, 1987, November 14).

A view of vision as objective and thus superior to other avenues of perception derives from the Cartesian model of vision. The Cartesian schema succeeded in becoming the reigning visual model of modernity because it best expresses the “natural” experience of sight established by the scientific world view (Jay, 1988; Lindberg, 1976). The Cartesian stance can be conceptualized as a lone eye looking through a peephole at the scene in front of it; the view is static, unblinking, and fixed. The Cartesian stance also requires, of course, the withdrawal of the observer from the object depicted.

But other scopic schemata have existed alongside the Cartesian. The one Keillor selects for the vantage point of his monologues is the Baroque, a mode that is dynamic, conveys the idea of space being progressively dilated, and produces indeterminacy of effect in its play of solid and void, light and dark (Eco, 1989; Jay, 1988). In his rejection of the Cartesian schema in favor of the Baroque, Keillor chooses the glance over the gaze. Whereas the act of viewing in the Cartesian model is that of the observer who gazes, arresting the flux of phenomena (Bryson, 1983), the Baroque model never allows a privileged, definitive, frontal view; rather, it induces the spectator to shift his position continuously in order to see the work in constantly new aspects, as if it were in a state of perpetual transformation. (Eco, 1989, p. 7)

In the glance that characterizes Baroque vision, the viewer’s looks are fleeting, dynamic, flickering, and mobile. Keillor’s monologues follow such a pattern, consisting largely of fragments or units immediately linked with each other, suggestive of an eye shifting from one thing to another. In one monologue, for example, Keillor moves from discussing a cold night in June to tomato growing to Roger Hedland’s daughter’s new kitten to his self-pitying Aunt Marie (Keillor, 1986, June 14). His eye traverses the scene, and the irregular, unpredictable, and intermittent path of movement means that only one area of the image is clarified at each moment. Each glance momentarily consumes Keillor as he focuses in minute detail on one seemingly mundane object or process after another.

Because various details capture Keillor’s attention, the picture of Lake Wobegon emerges a bit at a time rather than as a coherent and complete landscape. Bryson (1983) describes this postponement of “the apprehension of the compositional order . . . until more information . . . will have been admitted” (p. 121) as a natural consequence of the glance. The larger picture emerges only as a result of repeated exposure to Keillor’s monologues. One listener new to the show described the attention to seemingly disconnected details and the overall lack of coherence that is apparent to new listeners not yet used to Keillor’s glance: “Yeah, well, this guy was talking about guilt and death, and he went on and on, . . . and then there was some music, people from Lapland or someplace singing about I guess it was reindeer milking” (Skow, 1985, November 4, p. 70).

In his rejection of the Cartesian scopic regime and, concomitantly, rejection of an objectifying gaze “that goes forward and masters” (Owens, 1983, p. 66), Keillor refuses the masculinity with which the Cartesian regime has been associated. The glance most closely approximates the female experience of and attention to detail,
the accumulation of information through interaction, and the valuing of relationship over objective, static knowledge. The refusal to privilege vision creates a more comprehensive, subjective, and relational orientation to the text.

**DISRUPTION OF THE MALE GAZE**

Unwilling to allow his listeners to assume a typical masculine position of spectatorship in terms of scopic schemata, Keillor further dismantles male spectatorship and replaces it with a feminine one by refusing to prescribe any one vantage position as the appropriate one. He deflects the single scrutinizing gaze and creates a multiple narrative structure in which the events of Lake Wobegon are recounted through the eyes of many different characters. He provides multiple options for spectatorship in a restlessness or instability of vantage point described by Mulvey (1989) as the mobile position of the female spectator. The place Keillor creates for the spectator of events elides typical divisions among narrator, characters, and audience and requires an ability to move among and acknowledge different viewpoints at once.

At times, Keillor takes the perspective of characters in his monologues, experiencing the world from those characters' points of view. In this mode, Keillor's listeners look out through the characters' eyes, feeling their feelings and thinking their thoughts. Listeners experience with Carl Krebsbach, for example, the sense of security that overtakes him as he walks home across the ice from his fish house in the middle of Lake Wobegon:

> It was dark—clear sky, billions of stars in the sky. The lake was white, shiny, and straight ahead; just above the line of dark trees, the lights of the town, like stars in the sky. And one of them was his house, where people were waiting for him and would be glad to see his face. (Keillor, 1986, March 1)

At other times, Keillor positions himself as a character in his monologues—as a resident of the imaginary Lake Wobegon—thus assuming a second vantage point. He presents himself as having grown up in Lake Wobegon, as someone who knows the people intimately, and who continues to visit the town and talk on the phone with its residents. Assumption of this viewing position was particularly evident when Keillor married in real life and told of his marriage in a monologue that involved Lake Wobegon residents' participation in the celebration. They supposedly mailed him a toaster for a wedding present, "addressed to a person formerly of Lake Wobegon who was getting married toward the end of December in Copenhagen" (Keillor, 1986, January 11). This vantage point of Keillor as a character sometimes has the added qualities of distance and reflection because it embodies Keillor as the sophisticated urban dweller who has left Lake Wobegon and now has a different view of the town from those who currently live there. Keillor acknowledges this outsider status explicitly in one monologue:

> I got kind of a cold silence when I called up there to talk to the folks here this last week, trying to get the news in town. Got hold of Elizabeth at the telephone exchange, of course, and once she recognized my voice, there was a long stillness and . . . she said, "All you're trying to do is get some dirty linen so you can go tell it to all your swell friends down there and make fun of us and make us the laughing stock." (Keillor, 1983, Spring, 1)

Keillor sometimes tells his monologues from a third vantage point—that of the
listener. He moves into this spectator position through the use of the second person pronoun, you. In the following example, he is describing his experience of sitting in a classroom as a boy in Lake Wobegon on a sunny Monday after a rainy weekend. In mid-sentence, Keillor moves from a description of his perspective to assumption of the vantage point of his listeners and their perspectives: “But it just is a matter of tremendous indifference to me as I get older and you learn to enjoy everything of life—the sun and the kind of elation that comes with it and excitement and you also learn to enjoy gloom and depression and grief” (Keillor, 1993, April 3). Keillor’s description of the feeling of leaving the cool darkness of the Sidetrack Tap on a hot day also exemplifies this stance: “To open that door, the sunlight hits you like a two-by-four. And as you walk down the street, the beer in your brain begins to rise like a lump of bread dough inside its small, cardboard carrying case” (Keillor, 1986, July 19). Kacandes (1993) explains that “‘you’ implies an ‘I/you’ pair and concomitantly relationship and communication” because the presence of a you “cannot be conceived without an I” (p. 140). She suggests that such a use of you invites an identificatory response and that “we feel compelled to respond to the second person” (p. 139).

Not only does the construction of multiple perspectives prevent assumption of the conventional male spectator position, but it references a conventional feminine experience of self. In contrast to the masculine experience of self, rooted in a fundamental separation of other from self and characterized by objectivity and impartiality, the feminine experience is based on a blurring of boundaries between self and other. It is characterized by response and connectedness within a framework of relationships (Byars, 1988), which Keillor accomplishes by merging the narrator, his characters, and his audience into overlapping roles.

But Keillor’s dismantling of the male gaze does not depend on multiple perspectives alone. He frequently gives women control over the gaze, thus actually reversing the expected roles of male viewer and female object of the gaze. In Keillor’s monologues, women look at men, in contrast to the more common gazing by men at women. This observational stance is highlighted in the closing line of each monologue, where Keillor states that Lake Wobegon is a place where “all the men are good looking.” Granted, the men who are the objects of women’s desire in Keillor’s monologues are not depicted as explicitly sexual—after all, this is Lake Wobegon, populated by reserved Norwegians—but men are subjected to visual scrutiny of various kinds. Keillor himself is the object of a woman’s look when he recounts how, as an adolescent, he would ask his mother, “‘Am I good looking?’ ‘You’re nice enough looking,’ ” his mother would reply (Keillor, 1983, Spring, 1). Daryl Tollerud, in fact, knows he is alive (after a near-fatal tractor accident) by his wife’s look: “And it was not until she looked out the window and saw him coming and ran out to meet him . . . that he knew he was alive” (Keillor, 1987, November 14).

In other instances, the look of women includes the pleasure and desire typically associated with the male gaze directed by men toward women. “Oh, you good-looking man. Oh, my goodness, are you handsome,” says Arlene Bunsen to her husband, Clarence, upon his return from a trip to St. Cloud. “Let me feast my eyes on you” (Keillor, 1987, April 4). Mildred Winblad is similarly interested in looking: “Mister,” she says when she first meets her future husband. “I’d like to get somewhere where I could get a closer look at your features” (Keillor, 1986, July 12).
When men do look at women in Keillor’s monologues, they deliberately avoid looking at those parts of women’s bodies that typically receive attention from men, or they first notice other features they apparently consider to be more important. When Matt McKinley meets Mildred for the first time, he “took one look at her and he said, ‘Woman, you are the strongest woman I ever saw in my life’” (Keillor, 1986, July 12). Women’s strength, rather than their physical appearance, also is the focus of Keillor’s closing line of his monologues, where he describes Lake Wobegon as a place “where all the women are strong . . .”. When the Norwegian bachelor farmers look at pictures of women in magazines, they reject the typical physical appeal of such women, contributing to Keillor’s challenge to the male gaze:

Old bachelor farmer sitting down in the barber shop, . . . looking at pictures of women in a magazine, saying, “You know, I wouldn’t have a woman like that if she come beg me, if she come up to my front door on bended knees and begged me, I wouldn’t have a woman like that—she just complicates your life.” (Keillor, 1986, June 21)

Yet another way in which Keillor disrupts the traditional masculine spectator position is through his recognition of and empathy for the discomfort involved in being watched. Carl Krebsbach, for example, delights in harming a squirrel that was eating food he put out for the birds, but his glee changes to guilt and self-consciousness when he “realizes his daughter has seen the whole thing from the upstairs window” (Keillor, 1986, March 1). After he climbs a tree and is watching youngsters play below, Clarence Bunsen wonders: “What if they look up here, see a 55-year-old-man sitting in the tree” (Keillor, 1983, Spring, I)? The discomfort frequently felt by women subject to the male gaze is felt by Lake Wobegon residents, including Keillor. He shares his own uneasiness with being watched when he describes his feelings upon leaving the theater after his radio show—an uneasiness he associates with sneaking into movie theaters as an adolescent, hoping not to be seen because movies were forbidden by his religion: “Makes me nervous that as I go out the door, someone is going to see me come out” (Keillor, 1987, October 24).

Keillor also dismantles the male gaze in his depiction of individuals’ assumption of both subject and object roles. The capacity to assume the roles of both spectator and object of the gaze is common to women’s viewing within patriarchy. In the traditional construction of the gaze, men look at women, while women watch themselves being looked at. Thus, women turn themselves into objects of vision—a sight—and they survey themselves just as men survey them: “A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself” (Berger et al., 1973, p. 46). The result, as Minh-Ha (1991) describes, is that the woman “necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside” (p. 74).

With striking frequency in Keillor’s monologues, he and his characters are simultaneously the subject (masculine) and the object (feminine) of beholding. On Flag Day, for example, the residents of the town don red, white, and blue caps to form a living flag and then one by one take turns going up to the top of the Central Building to look at it: “Then somebody got out from the living flag who had a red cap on—he was part of a stripe—and he ran up to the top of the Central Building ‘cause he wanted to see it, and then, of course, everybody had to do it” (Keillor, 1987, September 5). In another monologue, Dale Eaker observes himself, seeing himself both as the subject and object of his own gaze. As “he walked down the stairs,
he saw himself in the mirror. He didn’t have a shirt on, and he was kinda admiring himself. He looked pretty good” (Keillor, 1986, June 21). The privileged position of the observer cannot be assumed by Keillor’s characters because they are aware of themselves as “others” among others (Owens, 1983), as displaced from the observational center at the moment that they, themselves, become the objects of the gaze of others.

As a result of this subject-object spectator position, Keillor, his characters, and his listeners experience double vision, which develops from the need of subordinated groups to learn the language and ways of the dominant group while staying attuned to their own authentic perceptions (hooks, 1992; Spender, 1980). Such a position is in contrast to the vision of the master, the one in the privileged position, whose “vision is a one-way street; his privileged position hasn’t allowed him to benefit from that double vision” (Minh-Ha, 1991, p. 123). But the dual position of insider turned outsider has disadvantages as well as advantages: “Not quite the Same, not quite the Other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. . . . [H]er intervention is necessarily that of both a deceptive insider and a deceptive outsider” (Minh-Ha, 1991, p. 74). This double vision, with its possibility for insight and deceit, is best illustrated in the town’s name, Lake Wobegon, meaning both bedraggled in appearance and the disappearance of one’s woes, as in “woe be gone.”

The double vision that results from the assumption of multiple perspectives and, in particular, from adoption of a simultaneous subject-object position also can be seen in Keillor’s refusal to see his own perspective as superior to others. The spectator who sees from multiple perspectives recognizes both the value in and limitations of those perspectives. “As we become aware that our . . . commitments slowly reveal themselves as postures,” Gergen (1991) suggests, “we can . . . hardly advocate our own beliefs, reasons, and passions above all others, for the very effort attests to the hollowness of their bases” (p. 256). The result is an irony and a playfulness that come to characterize the spectatorship as Keillor appears to “play with the truths of the day, shake them about, try them on like funny hats” (Gergen, 1991, p. 189). The irony that emerges as Keillor describes Lena Johnson’s horror at her granddaughter’s christening party, which her son and daughter-in-law have had catered, is typical:

Bunch of people standing around, eating food off tiny plates, holding beverages in their hands. My gosh! If Merlette didn’t have room for all these people at her dining room table, the least she coulda done was bring out the TV trays and so people’d have a place to sit and eat! (Keillor, 1986, July 26)

The playfulness and irony that result from Keillor’s multiple vantage points invite the audience to “join in the fun. Because no one is ultimately in control in this game, everyone can play” (Gamman, 1988, p. 1).

LAKE WOBECON AS A FEMININE SETTING

The small-town setting of Lake Wobegon, Keillor’s discursive site, also contributes to the creation of feminine spectatorship because Keillor suggests that, in many ways, it is a feminine place. Lake Wobegon is, literally and figuratively, a homeplace, the nostalgic place that continues to serve as the American ideal of home. In such a
home, women traditionally have been relegated "the task of creating and sustaining a home environment . . . to construct domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance" (hooks, 1990, p. 42).

Part of the traditional image of home is that it is a private place; in fact, concern with the private sphere often is cited as a feature associated with the feminine gender (Elshtain, 1981; Kelley, 1984). Lake Wobegon is presented as primarily a private world, focused on interior spaces and thoughts and on intimate details of personal lives; rarely do public issues of "political" importance intrude. Keillor tends to capture the residents of Lake Wobegon in moments of relationship with each other, an emphasis equated with a feminine orientation (e.g., Gilligan, 1982; Schaeff, 1981). The narrative suspense of his monologues is not built on the expectations of a significant event or a socially momentous act but rather on the contemplation and dissection of the nature of relationships among and between individuals.

The activities that characterize the lives of Lake Wobegon residents are limited to and oriented around the everyday and the minute, ranging from the worries of tomato growers "wondering if they ought to go out and cover them" (Keillor, 1986, June 14) to singing songs at the Sweetheart Supper "in dim light, with candles in the red polka-dot, cut-glass globes on the table" (Keillor, 1987, November 14) to "taking down all the decorations off the tree, and wrapping them individually in tissue paper" (Keillor, 1986, January 11). This concern for dailiness is another way of locating the feminine standpoint (Aptheker, 1989; Foss & Foss, 1991). Metzger (1977) suggests that dailiness forms a method by which to know about and gain access to the feminine realm: "Each day is a tapestry, threads of broccoli, promotion, couches, children, politics, shopping, building, planting, thinking interweave in intimate connection with insistent cycles of birth, existence, and death" (p. 71).

Keillor's focus on daily life demonstrates the feminine connections with process rather than product: dailiness, by definition, is a process best captured in the details; it is not a product to be arrived at quickly via a linear sequence. Keillor connects with the details that mark the forms of many women's everyday lives—whether family stories, quilts, gardens, poems, rituals, or songs—and creates in Lake Wobegon a world that looks very much like the ones with which women tend to be familiar. The monologues construct, as de Lauretis (1988) suggests about the film, Jeanne Dielman, "a picture of female experience, of duration, perception, events, relationships and silences, which feels immediately and unquestionably true" (p. 178).

The private world of Lake Wobegon is spatially limited, physically confining, and almost secluded in a way that approximates women's confinement to, or at least greater responsibility for, the home. As constricting as this world is, it is an ordered world in which one feels comfortable and safe; to leave this world is to encounter possible danger. The youngsters of Lake Wobegon are frequently told, "don't go off by yourself," a metaphoric suggestion not to leave Lake Wobegon. "See those people out there in the world today? Things like that don't happen to people here in Lake Wobegon," suggests Keillor. "I tell you, they never should have been out there. Stay with the others, stick with the group, don't go off by yourself" (Keillor, 1993, April 5). On another occasion, Keillor says he's going "back there" to Lake Wobegon because "I'm afraid that if I left I would lose my own story. It's kept back there. And when you lose your story, you've lost something that nobody should ever
lose" (Keillor, 1993, February 20). When his characters ignore his advice and venture beyond the city limits of Lake Wobegon, they experience a variety of negative consequences, as does Clarence Bunsen when he goes to St. Cloud for a haircut. It was a disastrous cut that was "about right for a clown, kind of sticking up in strange ways around" (Keillor, 1987, April 4).

The fact that most residents of Lake Wobegon remain in Lake Wobegon and hesitate to leave it to reside elsewhere reinforces the perception of Lake Wobegon as a feminine setting. Wolff (1993) makes the point that "there is an intrinsic relationship between masculinity and travel. (By 'intrinsic', though, I do not mean 'essential'; rather my interest is in the centrality of travel/mobility to constructed masculine identity.)" (p. 230). Enloe (1990) concurs with Wolff's analysis, suggesting:

In many societies being feminine has been defined as sticking close to home. Masculinity, by contrast, has been the passport for travel. Feminist geographers and ethnographers have been amassing evidence revealing that a principal difference between women and men in countless societies has been the license to travel away from a place thought of as "home." (p. 21)

That many of those reluctant to leave the "home" of Lake Wobegon are men only increases the underlying sense of femininity in Keillor's monologues. Florian Krebsbach wants to stay in Lake Wobegon, although his wife is agitating to move to a high rise in St. Cloud. Florian responds by building up his herd of ducks and collecting farm equipment in order to ensure his immobility (Keillor, 1986, May 31).

Furthermore, Lake Wobegon is a feminine place in its eschewal of technology, usually thought of as a masculine invention and activity. In fact, one definition of technology is that "it consists of the devices, machinery and processes which men are interested in" (Kramarae, 1988, p. 4). Technology also is considered masculine in that it "is usually considered 'big world' talk, connected . . . with the 'public' sphere, men, mass media, machines, and market prices" (Kramarae, 1988, p. 5). The residents of Lake Wobegon reject even basic technologies such as air conditioners, with no optimism at all about the value of such devices:

It was luxuries like A/C that brought down the Roman Empire. With A/C, their windows were shut, they couldn't hear the barbarians coming. . . . You get A/C and the next day Mom leaves the house in a skin-tight dress, holding a cigarette and a glass of gin, walking an ocelot on a leash. (Keillor, 1985b, p. 132)

Clarence Bunsen's lament about the coming of technology is representative of Lake Wobegon residents' attitudes toward technology as well:

Like everything else nowadays, they got coffee without caffeine, they got soda pop without sugar in it. . . . They're developing new ways of cultivation. They won't use plows anymore, just kind of a low-frequency sonic boom will do it. Cultivate all of Minnesota in 15 seconds. They're breeding new dairy cows now, new dairy cows down by Chicago someplace—I don't know where, but they're breeding new dairy cows, without legs. Legs just get in the way. Interrupt things. (Keillor, 1987, June 13)

As Lake Wobegon residents reject technology, they also reject the wealth and power that accompany technological development. Lyotard (1984) succinctly describes the connection as "no technology without wealth, but no wealth without technology" (p. 45). Lake Wobegon residents' rejection of technology contributes to
the town’s femininity, then, not simply because women tend not to be associated with technology but because Lake Wobegon residents deliberately espouse a position of low wealth and thus low status and powerlessness—a rejection, of course, of masculine values and standards.

**Feminine Discursive Style**

The feminine gender of Keillor’s spectatorship is reinforced by the narrative style Keillor uses in presenting his monologues. The form and style of his narratives embody features that typically are associated with feminine patterns, including lack of closure, refusal to judge, and feminine speech forms.

Keillor ends many monologues without telling the outcome of the story. Monologues simply end, with the plot of the narrative unresolved, as when Mrs. Beeler struggles with whether or not to destroy the tickets to a rock concert her son stood in line all night to buy. She had read an article about the dangerous effects of rock concerts on youth and wondered: “What should a mother do? Shouldn’t a mother tear them up into little tiny bits? And throw them away? . . . Doesn’t she have an obligation to destroy those tickets? And to save her son” (Keillor, 1985a, 1)? The monologue ends here, with listeners left to wonder about the action Mrs. Beeler decided to take. In another monologue, Senator K. Thorvaldson finally gets up the courage to write to and declare his love for a woman he met while vacationing in Florida. The monologue ends when Thorvaldson receives a phone call; he responds to the caller, “Oh, you sweet lady, oh, you sweet woman. It’s so good to hear your voice” (Keillor, 1987, November 14). Listeners can guess but cannot be certain that the woman responded positively to the letter, and how the relationship progressed from this point is left untold (Keillor, 1983, Spring, 1).

Keillor’s incomplete monologues serve as allegories “of the impossibility of ever finishing in the sense of imposing a single, coherent meaning” on a text or activity (Noehlin, 1988, p. 23). As with many of the tasks traditionally assumed by women—housework, child rearing, shopping—the process is perpetual and unfinished, and the focus becomes the process rather than its end result. Keillor’s monologues, relying as they do on open-ended and continuous processes, embody the kind of rhythm women experience in their daily lives—a rhythm characterized by repetitiveness, interruption, and distraction. Although lack of closure does not provide the relief of an ending, it does contain an invitation to openness—to imaginative possibility—that is not possible when a story is finished. The criteria for interpretation remain open, albeit slippery and fragmentary. By failing to provide narrative closure, Keillor does not grant authority to any single standard of meaning to restrict, integrate, or totalize the monologues.

The feminine vantage point offered by Keillor in his monologues stands in contrast to the textual rhythm of commercials, sports and news programs as well as most other dramatic narratives presented through mass media that emphasize closure. Such texts construct disorder—disequilibrium, excitement, and suspense—for the purpose of providing the pleasures that come from its resolution. The disorder, in other words, is being brought under control (if only temporarily) by sorting out incoherence and containing contradiction (if only partially). This pleasure of closure is typically achieved at the expense of traditionally constructed femaleness—that which is brought into control often is the disruptiveness of female
values or female sexuality. Thus, this kind of rhythm codes the kinds of traits traditionally ascribed to masculinity—the ability to be rational and to have the power to control one's circumstances. Accordingly, the vantage point offered in a textual rhythm of closure implies if not a male viewer at least a traditionally valued masculine approach to the tensions and contradictions of experience (Barbatsis, 1989).

In a narrative style in which process rather than closure is emphasized and the text is seen as offering the rhythms of daily life in which varied interpretations are possible, that Keillor does not make judgments about his characters and their actions is not surprising. Lyotard (1984) aptly describes the stance Keillor adopts in his monologues when he notes that the only rule that applies is the rule that says, "do not prejudge, suspend judgment, give the same attention to everything that happens as it happens" (p. 30).

Keillor's unconditional acceptance of any decision a character makes is exemplified in one monologue in which he describes the carpet in the Tolleruds' bedroom as purple (Keillor, 1986, June 28), but he neither sneers at the color nor applauds its courage. Neither does he moralize about Pastor Ingqvist's lack of enthusiasm for the advent sermons he must preach each Christmas (Keillor, 1992, December 26). Keillor allows listeners to make their own decisions about, and interpretations of, the events he reports, a stance suggested clearly when he describes the talk of groups of men in cafes when it's raining and the land is too soggy to work. He allows spectators to select their own interpretations of these conversations:

Is it a sad conversation or is it funny or does it have a kind of secret elation of its own is really up to you and how you feel about it. To me, it's always been religious, this conversation; it's endless, even when people are silent. This murmur of talk goes on and on, back among my people, and it includes wisdom and useful advice and recollections of cars and trucks and large animals and farms and the people who lived on them and everything that they did. (Keillor, 1993, April 3)

Keillor's manner of speaking reinforces the feminine content of his monologues. Many of the features that are believed—accurately or not—to characterize women's speech (e.g., Bate, 1988; Kramer, 1974; Kramarae, 1981; Spencer, 1980) distinguish Keillor's monologues. His frequent reiterations of words and phrases recall the lengthening of statements and indirectness that have been suggested as characteristic of women's speech. Such repetition is evident when he discusses a local brewery:

A person thinks of this, a guy thinks of all this history when you sit in a dim bar on Tuesday evening and have a bottle of Wendy. You think about all this history of the Dimmers family and you think about that St. Wendell's brewery out there in St. Wendell's, meant to look like a beautiful castle, a Bavarian castle, they intended it to look like and it is sort of a beautiful brick castle about the first two stories but then the brick layers got a little dizzy. . . . (Keillor, 1986, February 22)

In part, the repetitiveness of this style is typical of the storyteller who needs time to think about where to move the story. At the same time, however, it is a style that has been ascribed to and associated with women. Keillor's speech contains adjectives and adverbs as qualifiers, a style also considered feminine. He sprinkles his monologues with words such as "kind of," "sort of,"
and "I think"—indirect speech forms that suggest the stance of someone not expected or allowed to have strong opinions or to make strong statements about the world. An example is Keillor's statement, "Through talk, I think, is how people are intimidating" (Keillor, 1983, Spring, I). This same hesitation surfaces throughout his monologues in phrases such as "a sort of strange kind of virtue" (Keillor, 1986, March 1); "it's kind of a Lake Wobegon holiday" (Keillor, 1987, September 5); and "I think he puts a toenail from his left foot into it or something, I don't know" (Keillor, 1986, March 1). His choice of adverbs and adjectives is similarly conventionally feminine: A classmate of Keillor's in the school choir sings "pretty good" (Keillor, 1983, Spring, I); when describing Father Emil's reaction upon hearing that vacation time and IRAs have been implemented for priests, Keillor responds with, "My gosh," a particularly feminine exclamatory form (Keillor, 1986, March 29). Just as Keillor structures a content that is associated with the feminine, he does so, too, in his narrative style.

A FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY AS A STRATEGY OF INTERVENTION

We have suggested that Keillor's radio monologues create a feminine spectator position through his refusal to privilege sight, dismantling of the male gaze, creation of Lake Wobegon as a feminine setting, and feminine speaking style. By providing an example of how such a position looks and feels, Keillor is able "to ruin certain representations and to welcome a female spectator into the audience of men" (Kruger, 1993, p. 220). But Keillor's presentation of feminine spectatorship goes beyond simply presenting a feminine world view to listeners. The monologues function to introduce listeners to a feminist epistemology—an epistemology that privileges feminine ways of coming to knowledge and understanding.

A nearness or closeness to objects of knowledge is one quality of this epistemology. The close-up perspective that results allows for the possibility of greater understanding of those objects. The refusal to privilege vision and the involvement of senses in addition to sight in the process of coming to know ground the epistemology of Keillor's monologues in materiality, in concrete particulars. Keillor moves away from the molar toward the molecular level, or from the deductive to the inductive, suggesting the specific detail as the gateway to understanding. When individuals consciously attend to information gathered from all of the senses, they have more detailed data on which to base interpretation, knowledge, and understanding.

The feminist epistemology that results from Keillor's feminine spectatorship also suggests a use of personal experiences—the details, processes, and contexts of everyday life—as data for knowing. Knowledge does not come only from external, objective, or authoritative sources but from direct contact with other people and their lives and from the specific experiences of one's own life. The epistemology of Keillor's monologues is rooted in relationship, in the consciousness that emerges from personal participation in events.

Because one experience cannot be judged superior to others, the epistemology offered in Keillor's monologues fosters an openness to multiple interpretations and an awareness of the limitations of one's own perspective, as Le Guin (1989) suggests: "How, after all, can one experience deny, negate, disprove, another experience? Even if I've had a lot more of it, your experience is your truth. How can one prove another being wrong" (pp. 150–151)? With the adoption of myriad perspec-
tives, knowers are less likely to cling to one perspective and are more likely to be open to other possible viewpoints.

A legitimate and useful way of coming to knowledge, Keillor’s monologues suggest, is that typically associated with the feminine—a way of knowing that moves the knower close to the object of inquiry to ground understanding in the particular, values personal experience as a means of knowing, and encourages an openness to multiple perspectives. Keillor legitimizes and accords value to this feminist epistemology in various ways. One is through his own modeling of the feminine spectator position that gives rise to a feminist epistemology. He accords the position credibility simply because he would not be expected to assume it given the other options available to him—he is, after all, a man of celebrity status with access to traditional sources of power and thus knowledge. He also supports a feminist epistemology by revealing it as nonthreatening, comfortable, and safe in his use of the nostalgic and familiar Lake Wobegon setting, his humor, and his relaxed speaking style.

Yet another way in which Keillor’s monologues legitimize a feminist epistemology is that they do not simply present or depict the epistemology but instead enable listeners to experience it as enacted or embodied. As audience members position themselves in the feminine spectator stance suggested by the texts, they actually experience the concomitant feminist epistemology. They come to know through or from within a feminist perspective—they are able to try it on and to discover how it works and feels in their lives. Moreover, because their experience of the perspective is associated with pleasure, interest, and humor, listeners are likely to view the experience as a positive one; they are less likely to evaluate it as negative or to remain detached from and thus unaffected by it.

Keillor’s monologues, characterized by feminine spectatorship and rooted in a feminist epistemology, thus provide a free space in which listeners may experience a feminist perspective in a safe, non-threatening, pleasurable environment—where they are able to discover for themselves the utility of such a perspective and the insights it offers. As such, Keillor’s monologues constitute an emancipatory rhetoric that has the power to disrupt “the dour certainties of pictures, property, and power” (Kruger, 1993, p. 221).

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