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**Postmodern Politics: Feminism, Identity, and Gender
in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*, *Nights at the Circus*,
and Other Selected Works**

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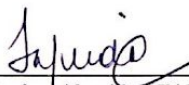
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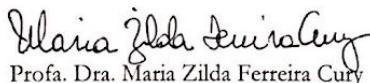
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“Strategies of writing and of reading are forms of
cultural resistance.”

— Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*

“She’s much too big for any single book to
contain.”

— Edmund Gordon on Angela Carter, *The
Invention of Angela Carter*

Abstract

This thesis examines the fiction of Angela Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, *Nights at the Circus* and other selected works, to shed light on the relation between feminism and postmodernism in her writings. I compare a selection of fictional works by Carter in order to analyze the evolution of her approach to feminist theory. I argue that a progressive enrichment of Carter's discussions of feminism and gender is verifiable, as well as her gradual transition into more postmodern theorization and aesthetics. For the analysis of identity in line with feminist and postmodern criticism, I rely mostly on Susan Stanford Friedman's notion of identities as continually constructed, profoundly marked by temporal and spatial axes, and shaped by a number of constituents together with gender. In view of the growing number of critical readings of Carter that resort to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, I seek to investigate not only the similarities between Carter and Butler but also their divergences. I contend that Carter's and Butler's conceptualizations of gender differ in the former's stress on the sexed body as important for feminism, which is notable in *Nights at the Circus*. In this sense, Carter is better placed together with gender theorists who, unlike Butler, embrace levels of strategic gender essentialism as reaction to the advances of postmodern relativization. As to desire, I adopt a Lacanian perspective for *The Magic Toyshop* that reveals desire in the novel as culturally, rather than organically, experienced, and I argue that *Nights at the Circus* challenges compulsory heterosexuality and reflects upon the possibility of more equal heterosexual relationships.

Keywords: Angela Carter; postmodernism; feminism; gender; identity; subjectivity; performativity; essentialism.

Resumo

Essa dissertação examina a ficção de Angela Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, *Nights at the Circus* e outras obras selecionadas, para iluminar a relação entre feminismo e pós-modernismo em sua obra. Comparou-se ficções escritas por Carter a fim de analisar a evolução de sua abordagem à teoria feminista. Argumenta-se que há um progressivo enriquecimento das discussões de Carter acerca de feminismo e gênero, bem como uma gradual transição estética e teórica em direção ao pós-modernismo. A análise de questões de identidade baseou-se centralmente no trabalho de Susan Stanford Friedman, que retrata identidades como sendo continuamente construídas, profundamente marcadas por elementos temporais e espaciais, e moldadas por uma série de constituintes além de gênero. Em vista do crescente número de leituras críticas de Carter que recorrem à teoria de performatividade de gênero de Judith Butler, buscou-se investigar não apenas as correspondências entre Carter e Butler, mas também suas divergências. Defende-se que as concepções de gênero de Carter e Butler diferem quanto à ênfase da primeira no corpo sexuado como elemento importante para o feminismo, o que é notável em *Nights at the Circus*. Nesse sentido, Carter é mais adequadamente associada a teóricos de gênero que, ao contrário de Butler, fazem uma reflexão sobre o essencialismo estratégico de gênero como resposta aos avanços da relativização pós-modernista. Quanto ao desejo, utiliza-se uma fundamentação Lacaniana que revela o desejo em *The Magic Toyshop* como cultural, e não organicamente, vivenciado, e argumenta-se que *Nights at the Circus* questiona a heterossexualidade compulsória e reflete acerca da possibilidade de relações heterossexuais mais igualitárias

Palavras-chave: Angela Carter; feminismo; pós-modernismo; gênero; essencialismo; performatividade de gênero.

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Introduction

Feminism has hardly been a peaceful and homogenous affair. In Sarah Gamble's words, it has always been "a dynamic and multifaceted movement," so that "to read feminism's history ... is to uncover a record of debates, schisms and differing points of view" (*Routledge Companion* viii). In the 19th century, for example, feminists battled for equal rights in relation to white men while remaining generally unbothered by racial inequality and the predicaments of women of color. Twentieth-century feminism was particularly marked by the division into liberals and radicals and a growing awareness of the need for plural feminisms, reinforcing the movements' tendency towards ideological and/or strategical partitions. Separations and multiplications have so recurred that, in the present century, the word "feminist" may be preceded by a dizzying number of labels — liberal, radical, black, Chicana, Asian, indigenous, socialist, conservative, intersectional, eco-, trans-; the list goes on.

Postmodern thinking has greatly contributed to the expansion of this list. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard characterizes postmodernity as a condition of knowledge marked by "incredulity towards metanarratives" (xxiv) of legitimation — also called grand or master narratives — massive theories, philosophies or doctrines that attempt to contain the whole of human history. For Lyotard, the postmodern search for knowledge relies instead on the "little narrative" or "*petit récit*:" (80) small narrative units that describe phenomena perspectively, no longer dependent on universal validation as long as they function "locally" (61). It is a mindset that, in his words, "refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (xxv); the postmodern subject stares "in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species" (26) in face of which it becomes senseless to lament the abandonment of comforting but deficient metanarratives.

When the analysis of the feminism/postmodernism relation is extended into the realm of literature, Angela Carter is a name sure to emerge. A self-entitled feminist and one of the most prominent British writers of the 20th century, her work comprises nine novels, several short stories, essays, radio plays, screenplays, television scripts, journalism, and a collection of verse. Outstanding among the overwhelming vastness of her themes — folklore, mythology, religion, monstrosity, psychoanalysis, politics, economics, affective spaces, film, food, fashion — is her examination of feminist concerns such as identity, gender, and gendered logics of oppression. However, many elements of her writing have made feminist readers puzzled and distrustful over the decades.

Aesthetically, the fantastic, surreal disposition of her fiction leaves it vulnerable to accusations of retreating too far into immateriality to retain any political potential. Also, her allusions to conventions generally attributed to the male canon or associated with gender oppression — fairy tales and folklore, mythology, Elizabethan poetry, to name a few — have resulted in claims that she praises rather than criticizes the cultural manifestations of patriarchy. Her very imaginative, ornamented, luscious prose has been called fetishistic and pornographic, and deemed confusing and paradoxical to the point of an elusiveness that does not sit well with political inclinations. The same effect has been found theoretically, as her philosophical experimentation and persistent self-examination may appear to compose a seemingly endless spiral of thought rather than a path towards attainable propositions. In both her fiction and non-fiction, she is perceived by a number of critics as rather controversial, even contradictory, in her treatment of several issues pertaining to feminist theory: gender conceptualization, transgenderism, biological essentialism, subjectivity, domestic abuse, sexual harassment, sex work.

Carter's polemical stances and her postmodern aesthetics and theorization complicate the process of placing her within the feminist spectrum. Critics have long fueled the debate on an apparent contradiction between her professed politics and the tenor of her writings. While Carter herself has aligned her politics with "an absolute and *committed materialism*," ("Notes" 38, emphasis in original) her detractors generally regard her precisely as alienated, relativistic, ethereal, with some even questioning whether she should be called feminist.

The initial purpose of this thesis was thus to constitute yet another standpoint regarding whether Carter is a feminist, and of what kind. But the research process resulted in a closer intimacy with writings by and about Carter, as well as a deeper understanding of the heterogeneity of feminism and the tortuousness of its history that have contributed to alter my main purpose. In this thesis, I attempt to identify the ways in which Carter's writings, over the decades, communicate with the discussions and transformations taking place in feminist theory during the convoluted second wave and amidst the rise of postmodernism. Starting from the conviction that political theory and practice is a continuum, both personally and collectively, I focus on comparing selected fictional pieces, ranging from 1966 to 1984, as to examine the evolution of Carter's feminist ethos. I look particularly into a few questions: which feminist debates she gradually incorporates in her writing, and what her writing suggests about her position; to what extent postmodern thinking and aesthetics appear to influence her writing and theorizing modes, and how this influence is manifested in her approach to the concepts of gender and identity; to what extent her fiction considers the differences among women that were rapidly gaining importance among feminist theorists of her time, and whether this discussion significantly impacts her construction of subjectivity; whether and how her representations of gender change throughout these almost twenty years.

In chapter one, “Between Myth and Materiality: Angela Carter’s Feminisms,” I better explore the political controversies indicated by Carter’s hostile critics, and I examine the diversity of feminist discourses in her fictional oeuvre, their unfoldings and eventual contradictions. My overview of Carter’s writings includes the novels *Shadow Dance* (1966), *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) and *Nights at the Circus* (1984), as well as the short-story collections *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces* (1974) and *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), comprising most of Carter’s writing span. I briefly summarize these volumes and their representations of gender, although rather superficially as the extension of the chapter’s corpus unfortunately requires. Two of Carter’s non-fictional pieces, the study *The Sadeian Woman* (1979) and the essay “Notes from the Front Line” (1983), are also fundamental for this analysis, as they constitute straightforward pronouncements by Carter on gender, feminism, and related politics of representation. Through a comparative reading of these selected works, this chapter reinforces Carter as an experimental writer and feminist for whom political stances are to be fearlessly and persistently challenged, reexamined, reshaped.

The selection of books for chapter one considers the richness and originality of their discussions on my topics of interest; in general, I maintain those that I see as more transformative moments in Carter’s timeline. My opinion is that this selection suffices to illustrate the major points of Carter’s trajectory, allowing for a clear sense of aesthetic and theoretical progression, although I do not dismiss the possibility that the present endeavour is enriched by the inclusion of other works. Moreover, I choose to write about Carter’s feminisms, in the plural, for two main reasons, the first being the plurality of the movement itself. The second reason is the sense of an eclectic theoretical trajectory of Carter’s that I wish to delineate, as opposed to assigning the sum of her beliefs to a given feminist strand. I

choose this approach mainly because Carter herself was evidently aware of and sympathetic to such plurality, and seemingly unperturbed by whether her convictions transitioned with time or conformed to the framework of any particular feminist currents.

Chapter two, “Juggling with Being: The Politics of Representation in Angela Carter’s Geographies of Identity,” is an examination of Carter’s treatment of the concept of identity, or subjectivity, realized through a postmodern/poststructuralist framework. I examine the ways in which Carter’s fiction is aligned with Susan Stanford Friedman’s conceptualization of identity as fluid, situational, contradictory, and determined by several axes: class, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, etc. A major theoretical source for this chapter is Friedman’s 1998 *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, but also Gilles Deleuze’s notions of difference from *Difference and Repetition*, and Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s theory of becoming from *A Thousand Plateaus*. My choice of Deleuze is greatly inspired by Eva Aldea’s book *Magical Realism and Deleuze*, also vital for this chapter. Aldea’s compelling reading of *Nights at the Circus* shows how the Deleuzian discourse might help attune gender and identity studies to notions of difference and provisionality. My objective is therefore to expand Aldea’s reading and to thicken the bulk of Carter’s Deleuzian criticism, as it strikes me as a promising yet underexplored terrain. In chapter two I also consider some notions by Roland Barthes, which I take from his autobiography *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* and from his *Image, Music, Text*, mostly pertaining to the textuality of the subject and cultural modes of reading. Sigmund Freud’s concept of Uncanny is also explored, mainly in my investigation of the protagonist’s sense of self in *The Magic Toyshop*. From this chapter on, I narrow my corpus down to *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus*.

Chapter three is titled “‘Flesh Comes to Us out of History’ — Sex, Gender, and Desire in *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus*,” and concentrates on the representations of the sex/gender relation, sexuality and desire in these two novels. My main concern in this chapter is to grasp Carter’s position towards the concept of gender during her career, a trajectory that inevitably cuts across the issue of sexuality and notions of the sexed body and gender essentialism. For my overview of the issue of gender essentialism within the feminist debate, I have considered a number of crucial writings including Alison Stone’s comprehensive essay “Gender Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Philosophy,” Judith Butler’s 1990 *Gender Trouble*, and Iris Marion Young’s 1994 essay “Gender as Seriality.” The analysis of gender in *The Magic Toyshop* is very much informed by Elizabeth Gargano’s outstanding essay “The Masquerader in the Garden,” and the investigation of desire in *The Magic Toyshop* relies mostly on the life-long theorizations by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan of the relation between culture and sexual attraction. This chapter also draws heavily on the definitions of literary carnival outlined by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*; I am especially interested in how the similarities between *Toyshop*’s plot and Bakhtin’s notion of carnival might illuminate the novel’s open ending, commenting thereby on gendered relations of power.

I choose to focus on *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus* in chapters two and three for a few reasons. First, reducing the corpus enables the thorough analysis that these chapters require since they aim more specifically at fewer concepts than chapter one, which is notably ampler. Second, the choice of two of Carter’s major, most iconic novels released nearly two decades apart maintain both the relevance of this analysis and a significant interval for comparison. Third, it is important that the novels are not only temporally but also aesthetically far apart: *Toyshop* is a linear single narrative, predominantly pessimistic,

adorned by gothic, folk, and pinches of carnival; *Nights* is a meandering series of interconnected tales alluding to countless media of high and low art, humorous, celebratory, and thoroughly picaresque. Lastly, my review of what has been written about these two novels indicates they are usually read under very different lights and analyzed through very contrasting theoretical frameworks. This is unsurprising considering the multiple gaps between them; *Toyshop* is frequently read together with its dark contemporaries from the 60s and early 70s, namely *Shadow Dance*, *Several Perceptions* (1968), *Heroes and Villains* (1969) and *Love* (1971); *Nights* tends to be paired with its equally whimsical successor *Wise Children* (1991). The question, then, of what could result from approximating these related but rather distinct works strikes me as a very alluring one, opening the possibility for an unexpected theoretical dialogue to arise from under so many superficial oppositions.

This work is thus based on the acknowledgement that the postmodern emphasis on difference and its rejection of universals has therefore enabled a drastic reconceptualization of gender and identity as it strongly encouraged more individualistic modes of construing subjectivities. Inevitably, postmodernism has begotten an increasingly ramified feminist theory. Postmodern theorist Linda Hutcheon, for instance, defends the use of the plural form, feminisms, “for there are many different orientations that are subsumed under the general label of feminism” (*Poetics* 34); she defends that “there are almost as many feminisms as there are feminists” (*Politics* 141). Hutcheon does have a point, as the numerous feminist strands indicate, but her tranquil acceptance of such extreme individuation of the movement may already be too postmodern for a good number of feminist thinkers to abide. Also, the postmodern understanding that social realities are organized discourses signifies a quick theoretical turn to the discursive sphere, a movement often accused of perilously disengaging theory from practice. The embrace of new, diverse discourses described by Lyotard has

encouraged theoretical experimentation to the point of uncertainty as to its material applicability, and feminists who identify with a more materialist edge have often spoken rather harshly about their postmodern/poststructuralist counterparts. While both feminism and postmodernism were undoubtedly two of the major, most transformative political and intellectual currents produced by the twentieth century, the extent to which their encounters have been profitable for feminism seems to remain a constantly reopened question, which often reappears in readings of Carter.

Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman adequately summarize the debate in their introduction to *Materialist Feminisms*. They do acknowledge, as do most feminist theorists, a degree to which postmodern theory has positively influenced gender studies: that postmodernism has “fostered complex analyses of the interconnections between power, knowledge, subjectivity, and language” that have ultimately allowed feminists to rekindle their understanding of gender as a category “articulated with other volatile markings, such as class, race, and sexuality” (1). They concede that some postmodern/poststructuralist thinkers, such as Jacques Derrida and Luce Irigaray, have successfully “exposed the pernicious logic that casts woman as subordinated, inferior, a mirror of the same, or all but invisible” (2), and claim that the strength of postmodern feminism is its unveiling of Western thought as an amalgam of dichotomies — “culture/nature, mind/body, subject/object, rational/emotional” (2) etc. — primarily informed by the male/female dichotomy.

Postmodern theorists have further warned against the desire to simply reverse these dichotomies, arguing instead that the dichotomies themselves should be deconstructed. This, I would add, is exemplified by Judith Butler, possibly the most iconic postmodern thinker of gender, when she sustains that “the identity categories often presumed to be foundational to feminist politics [and] necessary in order to mobilize feminism as an identity politics,” by

which she means mainly binary notions of gender, “simultaneously work to limit and constrain in advance the very cultural possibilities that feminism is supposed to open up” (187). Rather than equaling gender rights or even reversing the hierarchy, a more advantageous goal would be the deconstruction of gender as an identity category.

The problem, Alaimo and Hekman continue, is the one dichotomy that postmodernism seems unwilling to undo: language/reality. “Postmoderns are very uncomfortable with the concept of the real or the material” (2), they write, so that materiality for postmoderns seems to be a mere product of language and to exist only within language. They argue that the postmodern apprehension of the linguistic and textual as the only sources of the real, material, and social had led postmodernism to focus too exclusively on discourse, in a “retreat from materiality” that they see as seriously harmful for feminism (2). Postmodern feminism has been sternly charged with dismissing important components of women’s lived experience as cultural constructs subvertible by discourse.

The body, for instance, is a concept that postmoderns have been oftentimes accused of evading. Alaimo and Hekman note that, “ironically,” in spite of “tremendous outpouring of scholarship on ‘the body’” during the seventies and eighties, nearly all of it consisted of an “analysis of discourses *about* the body” (3, emphasis in original) that disregarded its materiality. Postmodern feminists and gender theorists have been repeatedly criticized for their dismissal of the body’s materiality, with its factual implications in lived practice, in an attempt to utterly deconstruct gender. Materialists such as Alaimo and Hekman oppose this movement:

women *have* bodies [that] have pain as well as pleasure ... We need a way to talk about these bodies and the materiality they inhabit. Focusing exclusively on representations, ideology, and discourse excludes lived experience, corporeal practice, and biological

substance from consideration. It makes it nearly impossible for feminism to engage with medicine or science in innovative, productive, or affirmative ways—the only path available is the well-worn path of critique. (4)

Martha Nussbaum writes similarly: “we might have had the bodies of birds or dinosaurs ... but we do not; and this reality shapes our choices. Culture can shape and reshape some aspects of our bodily existence, but it does not shape all the aspects of it” (8). In her review of Butler, Nussbaum finds the postmodern project of subversion utterly impractical “for women who are hungry, illiterate, disenfranchised, beaten, raped” (11). Remarks such as these reveal that the feminist suspicion of postmodernism is based on a distinction between theory and practice, lest postmodern thinking should neglect the latter in favor of the first. The fear is that a postmodern mindset might ignore the material urgencies of women, mainly underprivileged ones, while reveling in circular theorizations of nihilistic relativism. This is the main debate orienting my discussion of postmodern feminism throughout this thesis.

As expected of a work heavily based on postmodern theorization, the gendered terminology to be found in these pages does not aim to signify any verifiable natural or biological phenomena. By “femininity,” “masculinity” and equivalent adjectives, I refer to the culturally constructed social roles and behavioral codes assigned to individuals according to biological anatomy. By “female(ness)” and “male(ness),” I refer to the cultural labelling of certain anatomies and bodily features as characteristically belonging to “woman” or “man.” By “woman,” when in quotes, I refer to an ontologically open concept, as in the feminist effort to define this “woman” at the center of its politics while avoiding complicity to faulty and inappropriate notions of “femininity” or “female.” I do, however, employ the word “gender” to refer to, in the words of Teresa de Lauretis, “a symbolic system or system of meanings that correlates sex to cultural contents according to social values and hierarchies,”

and to the investigation of how this system of representations is “intimately interconnected with political and economic factors in each society” (*Technologies* 5). This thesis does not go as far as to question the applicability of the word “gender.”

I would also like to briefly introduce Friedman’s theorization from *Mappings*, as it will be referred to throughout my entire work. She claims that, for the purposes of feminism and feminist literary criticism, one’s subjectivity consists of a combination of numerous constituents — age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationality, financial conditions — each of which having a certain weight in different situations. For Friedman, subjectivity is multiple, fluid, and even contradictory, rather than a fixed or even linear mode of being, for a subject may be found required or able to express the self differently in different occasions, especially with regards to power relations. Friedman calls “geographics,” or “cartography,” an approach to identity that “involves a move from the allegorization of the self in terms of organicism, stable centers, cores, and wholeness to a discourse of spatialized identities constantly on the move,” (19) with an emphasis on “how different times and places produce different and changing gender systems” (5). She identifies her approach as turning to the postmodern discourse and rendering identity “a historically embedded site, a positionality, a location, a standpoint, a terrain, an intersection, a network, a crossroads of multiply situated knowledges” (19). She calls “locational” a feminist epistemology that relies not on “static or abstract definition” but on “the assumption of changing historical and geographical specificities that produce different feminist theories, agendas, and political practices” (5).

Friedman’s proposition of a geographics of identity pairs with the idea of postmodern feminists such as Linda Nicholson and Nancy Fraser of a “postmodern-feminist theory” that includes “treating gender as one relevant strand among others” so that also “class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation,” (35) substituting “unitary notions of woman and

feminine gender identity with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity” (34-5). “Positionality” then, a term to recur in this thesis, implies notions of identity like Friedman’s and Nicholson and Fraser’s. Other names of locational politics are Adrienne Rich, who proposes political awareness of positionality by claiming that “a place on the map is also a place in history,” (212) or Linda Alcoff’s 1988 defense of “positional definition[s]” of categories such as “woman,” as these definitions would focus less on a person’s internal attributes and more on the external context in which these attributes relate to a constantly shifting network of elements, similarly to a chessboard (433).

Also drawn from Alcoff’s work is my usage of the related terms “identity” and “subjectivity.” In *Visible Identities: Rage, Gender, and the Self*, she articulates that, “by the term identity, one mainly thinks about how we are socially located in public, what is on our identification papers, ... Census and application forms and in the everyday interpolations of social interaction,” so that “identity” may be defined as “our socially perceived self within the systems of perception and classification and the networks of community” (92-3). She then distinguishes it from “a lived subjectivity, not always perfectly mapped onto our socially perceived self” and which can therefore “be experienced and conceptualized differently” (93). “Subjectivity” then is “who we understand ourselves to be, how we experience being ourselves” (93). Alcoff also notices that although “public identity and lived subjectivity ... are generally seen as corresponding to ‘interior’ and ‘exterior’ aspects of selves,” (93) one should acknowledge their “constant interplay and even mutually constitutive relations” (93). This thesis adopts Alcoff’s definitions, which distinguishes “identity” and “subjectivity” while allowing the terms to be used interchangeably when these “mutually constitutive relations” are taken into account.

As for the ambiguity of the category “postmodern,” what my study characterizes as a postmodern mode of thinking or theorizing is along the lines of Lyotard’s aforementioned postulations from *The Postmodern Condition*: an interest in discourses that is appreciative of difference and philosophical experimentation. Regarding cultural manifestations, the approach that I imply by my usage of the term is mainly Linda Hutcheon’s, whose theorization of artistic postmodernism draws from several major names attributed to postmodern thought. In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon describes postmodern art as markedly “self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining,” (1) whose primary aim is “to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life,” to suggest that “those entities that we unthinkingly experience as ‘natural’ ... are in fact ‘cultural’; made by us, not given to us” (2). Some such entities she mentions are capitalism, patriarchy, humanism and even nature (2). This de-naturalizing project Hutcheon also calls “de-doxification,” in reference to Roland Barthes’s “doxa,” or the general opinion, in *Image-Music-Text* (158).

To “de-naturalize” or “de-doxify” is the central purpose of Hutcheon’s postmodernism, and its main method is what she terms “complicitous critique,” the postmodern parodic mode that combines “reflexivity and historicity” in a way that “at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth-century Western world” (11-12). It is necessary to revisit the past as to subvert it, to reveal conventions as culturally and historically produced rather than found, to dissolve “any sense of the seamlessness of the join between the natural and the cultural, the world and the text” and to shed light on the “irreducible ideological nature of every representation — of past or present” (53). The paradox in fact inherent to literature as an instrument of cultural critique, as literature itself is a cultural convention and cannot comment on these conventions from anywhere but within. Derrida prominently expresses this logic in a

1989 interview entitled “This Strange Institution Called Literature:” “literature [is] a place at once institutional and wild, an institutional place in which it is in principle permissible to put in question, at any rate to suspend, the whole institution. A counter-institutional institution can be both subversive and conservative” (*Acts* 58). Therefore, postmodern politics is essentially problematic as it is, in Hutcheon’s words, “politically ambivalent,” “doubly coded,” that is, “both complicitous with and contesting of the cultural dominants within which it operates” (142).

Hutcheon’s postmodernism also relies greatly on “the ex-centric, the marginal, the borderline,” (86) in an echo of Lyotard’s favoring of *petit récits* (86). Hutcheon identifies in postmodern fictions “the aggressive assertion of the historical and the social particularity of [their] fictive worlds,” and a desire to unveil “all those things that threaten the (illusory but comforting) security of the centered, totalizing, masterly discourses of our culture” (86). In what Hutcheon considers postmodern writing thus these ex-centric, marginal elements can be seen as fictive representatives of Lyotard’s “little narratives.”

It is no wonder that Hutcheon is a devout reader of Carter; Hutcheon’s studies of postmodern fiction feature a number of Carter texts as specimens of her definition. She mentions Carter’s writing as an example of how “postmodern parody has become one of the means by which culture deals with both its social concerns and its aesthetic needs,” and evidential of the relation between the social and the aesthetic (8). She also lists Carter as illustrative that “de-doxification” is “as inherently a part of feminist as it is of postmodernist discourse” (20). Hutcheon compliments Carter’s fiction on its challenging of male discourses (145) and of “our mimetic assumptions about representation ... its transparency and common-sense naturalness” (32). These mentions disclose the compatibility between

Hutcheon's conception of postmodern politics and Carter's mode of speaking politically through literature.

Anna Wattz sensibly claims that "the charges against Carter of patriarchal collusion are based on serious misinterpretations of her narrative strategies," (17) and I see in Hutcheon's solid theory of postmodern politics a safe path towards a justification of Carter's controversial techniques. Hutcheon bridges the gap between the self-reflexivity of postmodern discourse and the urgent, material, and collective character of the political, by calling attention to their shared ground of historicity; of material conditions as historically produced and the discursive as that which can revisit, re-examine, and attempt to rewrite history even as it is produced by it. Hutcheon's postmodernism reveals how, to use Carter's words, "language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation," ("Notes" 43) so that the linguistic and the social/political can never be fully separated. Illuminated by a theory of postmodernism that explores the discursive while retaining the political, Angela Carter's fiction stands as an area where impasses, contradictions and improbable encounters can be experimented with, and from where new possibilities may emerge.

Chapter One

Between Myth and Materiality:

Angela Carter's feminisms

"Literature is important for feminism because literature can best be understood as the place where impasses can be kept open for examination, where questions can be guarded and not forced into a premature validation of the available paradigms. Literature, that is, is not to be understood as a predetermined set of works but as a mode of cultural work, the work of giving-to-read those impossible contradictions that cannot yet be spoken."

Barbara Johnson

As far as Angela Carter is concerned, gender is a virtually inescapable debate. While her work touches a staggering diversity of topics, “woman” is probably the most substantial of its many pieces. Most of her protagonists are women, and her perception of gender oppression and commitment to women’s emancipation are made clear throughout. In “Notes from the Front Line,” (1983) she straightforwardly embraces the title of feminist writer: “I’m a feminist in everything else and one can’t compartmentalise these things in one’s life” (37). She further declares that it is “enormously important for women to write fiction *as women*” (42, emphasis in original), and establishes her reader, too, as a woman: “I write fiction ... and ... leave the reader to construct her own fiction for herself” (37). She writes, then, about women, as woman, and for women, disclosing clear affection for the idea of her writing promoting a critical gender-oriented conversation among sisters¹.

But such assertiveness and passion were not enough to avert all levels of negative criticism from feminists themselves towards both her fiction and non-fiction. Where this hostility derives from is not a simple question to tackle, mostly because throughout her 25-year fiction-writing span, from *Shadow Dance* to *Wise Children*, there is notable diversification — and a progressive enrichment — of her themes, aesthetics, and approaches to feminism and gender theory. While such broad theoretical and literary range leaves room for considerable controversy, it is nevertheless valuable for a number of reasons of which I

¹ The notion of sisterhood was popularized during the Women’s Liberation Movement, mainly by Robin Morgan’s anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful*. It praises women’s union and mutual support against patriarchy, their common oppressor, therefore universalizing women’s experiences and overlooking the specific oppressions associated with other social traits. It was challenged by a number of thinkers, mainly black feminists such as bell hooks who views the concept as “informed by racist and classist assumptions about white womanhood” (128) and grounding female bonding on victimization, which she argues “directly reflects male supremacist thinking” (128). Although Carter expresses varying degrees of cynicism over her career towards sisterhood, she does often refer to her fellow feminists as “sisters.” Some examples are a 1979 interview quoted by Edmund Gordon in *The Invention of Angela Carter: A Biography* (215), and the essay “Notes from the Front Line,” which greatly orients this chapter, in which she writes: “I get messages through from the front line that fills me with grief and fury for my sisters out there...” (39).

would highlight two. Firstly, her oeuvre is exemplar of several distinct feminist currents, concerns, and debates taking place in 20th-century England, hence an extremely fertile soil for the feminist literary critic. Secondly, it affirmatively demonstrates Carter as a feminist who openly embraces theorization, a position I argue does justice to the plurality within feminism and the indeterminacy of “woman.”

To call Carter a theorist is not to say that she dismissed feminist praxis, or overlooked women’s lived experiences, nor that she considers herself part of a privileged group of intellectuals working on masterplans in the ivory tower while the less gifted group takes action down on the battlefield. In sum, it does not mean that she argues — or that I here argue — for theory and politics as separate realms but rather that she appears to endorse an epistemological approach to the development of feminist strategies. This thesis follows views such as Sara Ahmed’s that regard theorization as an essential component of, and therefore indissoluble from, political practice. In *Differences That Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism*, Ahmed elaborates on the relation between feminist theory and praxis, grounded on what she calls “explicit theorising,” that is, thinking through the necessity and possibility of social change. It is about justifying the decisions we make, the language we use, how we read, how we speak to each other, and the very forms of our political organisation. I ‘do theory’, not because I lack any immediate concern for ‘the political’, but because my concern for the political forces me to question the knowledges and formations of feminism itself — to question rather than assume what the identification ‘feminist’ will mobilise at all levels of political struggle. Theory does not suspend political conviction — it makes sense of it. (18)

The conflict signaled by Ahmed between theory and practice has persisted in feminist debates over the decades, and as to Carter's position, it seems clear to me that she would also prefer "to question rather than assume."

As example, when reflecting on her own writings from her early twenties, Carter makes a momentous confession:

Especially in the journalism I was writing then, I'd — quite unconsciously — posit a male point of view as a general one. So there was an element of the male impersonator about this young person as she was finding herself. For example, in a piece about the suburb of Tokyo I lived in 1969, I described the place thus: 'It has everything a reasonable man could want....' I used the phrase, 'a reasonable man', quite without irony...

When the piece was republished in a collection of essays last year, I wondered whether to insert 'sic' in brackets after that 'reasonable man' but then I thought, no; that's cheating. Because my female consciousness *was* being forged out of the contradictions of my experience as a traveller, as, indeed, some other aspects of my political consciousness were being forged. ("Notes" 38-39, emphasis in original)

The word "forged" here may be problematic, since especially in a past tense it can entail that one's political consciousness should eventually become final. However, it is noteworthy that she feels strongly about exposing the shaping of her political convictions as a self-critical work in progress, if only to a certain point, denoting a greater interest in acknowledging the complexity of the debate rather than in sounding authoritative in it. One reason she is often described as ideologically borderline may be her fearless self-examination, the willingness to reconsider and rewrite herself renouncing the comfort of stable political markers.

But the passage above also interestingly expresses, through its emphasis on the linguistic level, Carter's awareness of the system that Derrida terms phallogocentrism: "a

certain indissociability between phallogentrism and logocentrism” (57), that is, the belief that established ideas structure entire discourses, which in turn tend to elect concepts of maleness and masculinity as the norm. As Carter discerns her political greenness as causing her to unconsciously masculinize her discourse, she exposes the discursive as a key element in a gendered social system that downgrades women and all things female or feminine. The whole of Carter’s work resolutely points to the discursive — encompassing linguistics, culture, and history — at the center of social dynamics, and she grows passionate about the idea that gendered power structures be challenged from within, that is, through discourse.

The Sadeian Woman is an important piece in this regard. This 1979 book-length essay examines the work of the Marquis de Sade as to uncover the role of the discourses of femininity, which she calls “myths,” in the system of women’s oppression. Her analysis focuses on female sexuality within heterosexual dynamics as portrayed by Sade’s tales *Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue* and *Juliette*. Virtuous Justine is repeatedly raped, beaten, and robbed; her story is one of apparently endless abuse. Her virtue, Carter writes, is passivity: “upon her lovely and innocent head fall an endless stream of the ghastliest misfortunes and her ... passive virtue of a good woman ensures she can never escape them” (53). For Carter, the myth of passive virtuousness and sexual morality embodied by Justine ultimately equals sexuality with abuse. Justine cannot have “one moment’s gratification in any of her numerous, diverse and involuntary erotic encounters,” Carter argues, because after being raped out of her virginity, her chastity can still exist in the form of frigidity. Since she herself denies the violence of her own desires, all her sexual encounters become for her a form of violence because she is not free to judge them. The fluids of her orgasm are the tears that are an implicit invitation

to further rapes. For she does not fear rape at all ... but seduction ... and the loss of self in participating in her own seduction. (55-6)

In general, the study's reception was mixed, but considerably exasperated antipornography feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Susanne Kappeler. Dworkin's condemnation of Sade in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* mentions *The Sadeian Woman* a "pseudofeminist literary essay," (85) and Kappeler's *The Pornography of Representation* accuses Carter of "withdrawing into the literary sanctuary" (134) and treating Sade as artefact, forsaking feminist criticism.

But Carter reads Justine and her sister, Juliette, as two polarized yet equally harmful female archetypes, the binary opposition of virgin and whore². Juliette is Justine's opposite, a nymphomaniac, a self-centered and ruthless murderer. And as much as Carter's essay repudiates Justine, it does not praise her sister either: if sex is suffering for Justine, for Juliette it is "an instrument of terror," (127) and equally bad. She identifies Juliette as being, together with her sister, a male fantasy, a discourse belonging to a superstructure of male domination, repression, and abuse of women. These myths of "woman" Carter's essay generalizes as "the goddess," and the conclusion is that Juliette, however "secularised," is nevertheless "in the service of the goddess, too, even if of the goddess in her demonic aspect, the goddess as antithesis" (127).

The message is clear: Carter is adamant against all essentializing myths of woman, without exception. "From [that] of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother," she argues they are but "consolatory nonsenses," (5) for "if [myth gives] women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life" (6). She identifies these essentializing discourses of femininity, spread over all types of

² This was a particularly popular critical approach at the time, as indicated by Jill LeBihan in "Feminism and Literature" (130).

cultural manifestation, as the origin of the problematic representations of women in pornography. In other words, the problem is not intrinsic to pornography, but with the social dynamics it inescapably reflects. It is an inner issue of representation resulting from an outer reality of gender inequality: “a male-dominated society produces a pornography of universal female acquiescence [sic]” (23).

The archetypal whore, because she is also a male creation, is in no advantage. Even the sadistic dominatrix exerts no real control since “she is not cruel for her own sake, or for her own gratification,” but her client’s, so that “she is most truly subservient when most apparently dominant” (23). This paradox Carter connects with the financial component of women’s subordination: while the whore’s cruelty is “a holiday” for her client, it is for her “an economic fact” (23). After all, Carter believes gender relations to be “determined by history and by the historical fact of the economic dependence of women upon men” which, although truer in the past and even then only true for certain groups of women, persists as “a believed fiction” that implies “an emotional dependence ... taken for granted as a condition inherent in the natural order of things” (7).

She suggests a proper solution would be not to ban representations of erotic heterosexual encounters, but to deeply transform them. What she envisages is the rise of a “moral pornographer,” that is,

an artist who uses pornographic material as part of the acceptance of the logic of a world of absolute sexual licence for all the genders, and projects a model of the way such a world might work. A moral pornographer might use pornography as a critique of current relations between the sexes. His business would be the total demystification of the flesh and the subsequent revelation ... of the real relations of man and his kind. Such a pornographer would not be the enemy of women, perhaps because he might begin to

penetrate to the heart of the contempt for women that distorts our culture even as he entered the realms of true obscenity as he describes it. (22)

The “total demystification of the flesh” is but the death of “the goddess:” the deconstruction of any universalizing, moralizing, or consolatory narratives of “woman” that serve to legitimize gender oppression and to repress female sexuality. Carter’s premise, of course, assumes that the discursive and the material renewal run side by side. *The Sadeian Woman* is an intricate cultural study shedding light on the interplay between the semiotic, the ideological, and the material.

Regarding Dworkin and Kappeler’s flak, I side with critics such as Maggie Tonkin for whom these antipornography thinkers did not share Carter’s notion of feminism as striving for “equal access to power for all human beings regardless of gender, rather than the romanticization of powerlessness” (7). Carter’s concern with deconstructing the myth of the virtuous victim is, as Tonkin puts it and I subscribe, “radically at odds with Dworkin and Kappeler’s essentializing brand of feminism that enshrines the moral superiority of woman-as-victim” (7). In “Pornography, Fairy Tales and Feminism,” Robin Ann Sheets recalls how badly the issue of pornography polarized feminism at the time: Robin Morgan, for one, contended that women who opposed the antipornography movement should not consider themselves feminists, and called them “Sade’s new Juliettes” (qtd. in Sheets 636). Sheets recounts the period as an “acrimonious debate ... of rigid oppositions,” in which one side would invariably perceive the other as falling back into the oppressive discourse (636). The publication of *The Sadeian Woman* during the rise of the antipornography movement is telling of Carter’s resolve to theorize against the grain. Moreover, her opposition to the movement seems justified by an alignment with the postmodern project of undoing grand narratives and, alert to the weight of discourse, subverting it from within — to retake the

Derridean logic. Carter's "demystification," also called "the demythologizing business" in "Notes" (38), is equivalent to the "de-naturalizing" or "de-doxifying" intention of Hutcheon's postmodern literature.

As Edmund Gordon notes and *The Sadeian Woman* reinforces, "though [Carter] described herself for a while as a 'radical feminist,' her politics always had as much in common with the libertarian and socialist tendencies. She never saw the oppression of women as categorically different from other forms of oppression" (215), so that the rejection of woman-as-victim noted by Tonkin is in fact a trademark of her feminist sensibility. As example, in a 1977 letter to literary critic and her personal friend Lorna Sage, Carter recounts her meeting with writer Elizabeth Smart, author of *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*. The book is the sorrowful story of a miserable woman's abusive heterosexual relationship, written in poetry-prose and largely based on Smart's personal experience. According to Carter, Smart told her in their encounter that "it is hard for women," about which Carter confides to Sage:

It was a very peculiar experience because she clearly wanted to talk in polished gnostic epigrams about anguish and death and boredom and I honestly couldn't think of anything to say. Except that I understand why men hate women and they are right, yes right... I am moved... by the desire that no daughter of mine should ever be in a position to write: *By Grand Central Station I sat Down and Wept...* (By Grand Central Station I sat Down and Tore His Balls Off would be more like it, I should hope.) (qtd. in Sage, *Angela Carter* 32)

In the intimacy of her friendship with Sage, she responds quite belligerently to the figure of the victimized woman, which she understands favors oppression. What Carter seems to suggest, both in this letter and in most of her work, is that such a stereotype results in a closed system of oppression, in which men feel entitled to degrade women because women degrade

themselves in the first place by accepting the role of victim: “self-inflicted wounds,” she tells Sage (32).

Carter’s refusal to adopt “anguish and death and boredom” as inherently female themes is a movement at once extremely important and highly dangerous. It is important if we recall Justine’s suffering and the role of these narratives in the legitimization of abuse which, I understand, is what Carter means by “self-inflicted wounds.” She suggests that, when women reinscribe discourses of this kind, they end up actively validating the structure that inferiorizes them. Her wording, on the other hand, skirts socio-political detachment and rhetorical oversimplification, as if she is oblivious to the series of elements trapping women into violent heterosexual relationships and positions of inferiority. Her understanding of men’s hatred of women and her remark that men are “right” sound harshly punitive, insensible, even unrealistic.

It should be noted, however, that the passage above refers directly to a writer and her work, as well as *The Sadeian Woman* is openly and clearly concerned with literature and the media. Although Carter often writes in ways that understandably leave her work open to charges of alienation, superficiality, and complicity with the patriarchal discourse, these critiques must not overlook the fact that Carter’s primary concern is with representation and its liberating power. I do not see Carter as saying that the poor and domestically abused woman should simply leave, or reciprocate violence; it seems quite clear to me that she writes instead on the woman artist’s responsibility to help dismantle the predominant discourse that primarily naturalizes violence. As I will demonstrate shortly, Carter’s fiction is in fact filled with distressed women characters who cannot easily walk out on their abusers. Whether their stories end up naturalizing or even romanticizing their pain is a very different question; I will argue that they do not.

Maggie Tonkin's *Angela Carter and Decadence* includes some of the most notorious critiques of Carter's fiction. As her book is mainly focused on Carter's affiliation with Decadence, Tonkin explains that "[Carter's] tendency to make intertextual allusions to those strands of the male-authored literary canon ... saturated by a fetishistic iconography of femininity ... compounds her offence in the eyes of many feminist critics" (2). She mentions Christina Britzolakis's article "Angela Carter's Fetishism" as a subtle commentary that in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* Carter "comes perilously close to participating in the masculine scenarios of fetishism that she is purportedly critiquing," (Tonkin 2) and Patricia Duncker's article "Re-imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's Bloody Chambers" as a more severe accusation that Carter "ends up reproducing rather than altering" eroticized sexual violence (2).

Duncker, I would add, is particularly committed to the disavowing of Carter's feminist project. In a much later article, "Queer Gothic: Angela Carter and the Lost Narratives of Sexual Subversion," Duncker states that

Carter's frolics in the exotic world of the weird conclude by domesticating, diminishing or even denying the dangers of difference. I have heard her work described as dangerous, subversive, radical, and most fashionably of all, transgressive... Carter and her advocates may say that she boldly goes where no woman writer has gone before, but the frontiers she transgresses are, for some of her readers and many other woman writers, not even on their map. (66)

Duncker is here advocating for queer theory,³ and criticizing the absence of "queer subjectivity" in Carter's fiction (67).

³ The term was introduced into gender studies by De Lauretis in "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities" and generally refers to a critical approach that focuses, in Annamarie Jagose's words, on "gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire" (3).

Avis Lewallen,⁴ Maggie Tonkin continues, “acknowledges the ironic discourse that Carter sets in motion” but “contends [Carter’s stories] ultimately reinscribe the Sadeian dualism of victor/victim” (2-3). Tonkin also briefly includes Robert Clark’s well-known essay “Angela Carter’s Desire Machines” that accuses Carter’s intertextuality of making her “parasitic upon ... empty styles” (Clark 156). Clark further argues that Carter’s writing has no “outside,” no “positively knowable (untheatricalized) reality or metanarrative on the basis of which one can develop a critique” (156). He calls Carter’s style “a feminism in male chauvinist drag, a transvestite style,” which he attributes to her “primary allegiance is ... a postmodern aesthetics that emphasizes the non-referential emptiness of definitions” (158).

I partially agree with Clark; indeed, most unfavorable readings of Carter’s fiction seem to derive from a rejection of postmodernism itself, mainly in regard to its political potential. It is understandable that such readings abound, considering the essentially paradoxical character of postmodern politics. To quote from Hutcheon, is [postmodern politics] neoconservatively nostalgic or is it radically revolutionary? ... both and neither: it sits on the fence between a need (often ironic) to recall the past of our lived cultural environment and a desire (often ironized too) to change its present. In Anne Friedberg’s parodic terms, there is here a paradox worthy of Dickens: ‘it was conservative politics, it was subversive politics, it was the return of tradition, it was the final revolt of tradition, it was the unmooring of patriarchy, it was the reassertion of patriarchy’ (Friedberg 1988: 12). This is the paradox of art forms that want to (or feel they have to) speak to a culture from inside it, that believe this to be the only way to reach that culture and make it question its values and its self-constructing representations. (13)

⁴ Tonkin refers to Lewallen’s 1988 article “Wayward Girls But Wicked Women? Female Sexuality in Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*.”

I regard Carter's work as an epitome of what Hutcheon describes in this passage. She shrewdly uncovers an aspect of Carter that I believe comes close to contiguously answering Tonkin's question, that of why so many critics who shared Carter's political convictions found her writing so alienating in both content and style (2): mainly because the politics/aesthetics relation Carter construes is essentially underpinned not by a limpid concept but a genuine paradox. The feminist hostility towards Carter is in many ways hostility towards the postmodern apprehension of "complicitous critique" as a valid political aesthetics; or even, as suggested by Clark's mention of a "non-referential emptiness of definitions," the suspicion that postmodernism's de-doxification might ultimately result in a celebration of endless groundlessness.

I believe criticism like the above, which represents most of the unfavorable commentary Carter receives, to result from her production being extraordinarily reflective of its turbulent theoretical and artistic zeitgeist. The 1960s and 70s were the decades of second-wave feminism, which vastly broadened the movement's concerns around the globe, and was characterized by intense division. It was a moment of flux for feminist theory's energetic discussion of contradiction and difference, laying the ground for the forwarding of intersectional feminism⁵ and queer theory in the 80s and 90s, and the rise of transfeminism⁶ in the 2000s. Many of Carter's representations of gender found polemical or bizarre by her contemporaries are now effortlessly discernible as an early and growing interest in issues that

⁵ The term was coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989 and proposes an epistemology that considers the interplay between constituents of identity with an emphasis, however, on the mechanisms of social injustice and discrimination.

⁶ The movement emerges in the 21st century and is, according to Emi Koyama, "primarily ... by and for trans[exual] women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond," (162) while remaining open to "other queers, intersex people, trans men" (162) and non-trans individuals. Its major principles are that every person has the right "to define her or his own [gender] identity and to expect society to respect it," (163) and the right to "make decisions regarding [one's] own bodies" above all "medical, political, or religious authority" (163).

were only on the onset of accommodation by feminism and gender studies. For instance, Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton identify what they term the “Butlerification” (19) of Carter criticism; a recent tendency to examine Carter’s critique of the gender essentialism of 70s feminists through Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity from *Gender Trouble*. Indeed, Carter’s treatment of gender is largely based on a notion of performativity, strengthened by ubiquitous imagery of theater and film, that still lacked theorization during her lifetime. Friedman’s 1998 conceptualization of cartographies of identity, as I will argue in the next chapter, is also readily applicable to the fiction Carter was writing nearly three decades before.

Concomitantly, the rise of postmodernism in the second half of the 20th century marked not only philosophy and feminist theory, but also the arts. Just as Carter’s political thinking becomes progressively more postmodern, so does her aesthetics. Literary techniques associated with a postmodern mode of writing already appear in early novels such as *The Magic Toyshop*; as example, the novel’s allusions to all kinds of cultural conventions, including film, painting, sculpture, literature, fairy tale. In later publications, such as *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*, postmodern aesthetics are glaring, featuring embedded and often non-linear narratives, belabored metalanguage, shifting perspectives, abundant parody, utter absurdity.

Allusions grow aligned over time with postmodern parody: Carter admits, for instance, having alluded to earlier genres — mythologies, specifically — before *The Bloody Chamber* “quite casually, because they were to hand,” (“Notes” 39) but states later that she “[feels] free to loot and rummage in ... a literary past” because besides “this past [having] important decorative, ornamental functions” in her prose, it is also “ a vast repository of outmoded lies, where you can check out what lies used to be à la mode and find the old lies

on which new lies have been based” (“Notes” 41). What Carter has famously described as “putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode,” (“Notes” 37) is parallel to Hutcheon’s “complicitous critique:” critical resignifications of old texts that seek to subvert what they prescribed.

Carter also expresses a characteristically postmodern view of reading: “the reader is doing a lot of the work,” she states in a 1982 lecture, in which sense “reading a book is ... a recreation of it” (“Fools Are My Theme,” 33). Her position is clearly consonant to Barthes’s much-quoted postulation that “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination ... the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (“Death” 148). Barthes’s “text” is “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash ... a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (146). Analogously, the Carteresque “text” is “*bricolage*.” Western Europe, the cultural site where she writes, is “a great scrap-yard from which you can assemble all sorts of new vehicles,” whose content “is in fact what gives reality to our own experience, and in which we measure our own reality” (Haffenden 92). Her defense of a Barthesian mode of reading legitimizes her revisionary project and sets her own text in circulation while acknowledging its limits.

In short, I particularly see Carter’s work as the judicious combination of a powerful political sensibility, postmodern thought and aesthetics, theoretical boldness and elasticity, and a notable willingness for self-criticism and self-betterment — not to mention her marvelous use of language and remarkable creativity. I will hereafter overview, in chronological order, a selection of her fiction works as to examine the unique product of this rare combination, its evolution and unfoldings. In other words, I seek to investigate not only the discernible dialogues between her work and feminist and postmodern theories, but also

the way her texts communicate with one another in terms of their treatment of these theories. By the end of this chapter, I expect to have exposed a clear panorama of the evolution and interplay of Carter's theory, politics, and aesthetics.

1.1 "It felt like Year One" — *Shadow Dance*

Marc O'Day was the first to group *Shadow Dance*, *Several Perceptions*, and *Love* under the name of Bristol trilogy, and several critics have embraced the term since. Carter wrote all three while still an undergraduate student at the University of Bristol, and although their setting is never really disclosed as the bohemian city, there is striking resemblance in the novels' aura of that milieu, with its strong 60s counterculture and intellectual steam. Most importantly to my purposes here, and borrowing from O'Day, these three novels distinctly reflect "how the sixties were a laboratory — or perhaps, rather, a battlefield — in the relativisation of all kinds of values: aesthetic, moral, spiritual, economic, political" (75). Far into the 80s, Carter looks back upon the 60s along similar lines:

I was a young woman during the 1960s ... when, truly, it felt like Year One, that all that was holy was in the process of being profaned and we were attempting to grapple with the real relations between human beings ... we were truly asking ourselves questions about the nature of reality ... I can date to that time and to some of those debates and to that sense of heightened awareness of the society around me ... my own questioning of the nature of my reality as a *woman*. How that social fiction of my 'femininity' was created, by means outside my control, and palmed off on me as the real thing. ("Notes" 37-38)

The Bristol Trilogy mirrors precisely this 60s urge to acknowledge, unveil, and question social fictions.

Furthermore, her mention of the “nature of reality” in this passage from “Notes from the Front Line” helps tracing an essential parallel between postmodernism and feminism: one way in which the first is useful for the second is that the postmodern tendency to challenge our assumed realities allows for a feminist examination of the fiction of gender, of the prescribing myths of femininity and gender-related social norms that maintain male domination and abuse. I will concentrate my overview of the Bristol Trilogy on *Shadow Dance* because in my view it represents the richest, most interesting example of the trilogy’s approach to gender relations, sexual politics, and “woman.”

Shadow Dance introduces antique collector Morris Gray and his friend and business partner Honeybuzzard, and it is narrated mostly from the first’s perspective through free indirect speech. Morris is insecure, passive, socially awkward, prone to fantasy and endless self-doubt; Honey is bold, voracious, charismatic, and self-assured. While Honey is single and sexually predatory, Morris is married to a woman he despises, whom he believes would “have aged into a cat-spinster in a bed-sitter” (23) if not for their marriage, and to whom he is unfaithful in spite of being sexually impotent. Edna is deeply in love with Morris, to the point of contemplating murder out of jealousy: “If you ever go near that woman again,” she tells Morris, “I shall kill her, for I love you” (7). Morris cannot understand her devotion to him, a penniless unskilled painter who regards himself as weak and useless: “why did she love him? Why did she go out to work to earn money to keep him? ... Why, why,” (21) he ponders. Another woman in the novel is Emily, Honeybuzzard’s girlfriend; she initially seems passive towards him but occasionally shows strength and resolve, even calling the police after Honey murders Ghislaine.

Ghislaine is the central female character, young and beautiful but badly scarred in the face. As perceived by Morris, before the scar “she used to look like a young girl in a picture

book, a soft and dewy young girl ... the sort of young girl one cannot imagine sitting on the lavatory or shaving her armpits” (2). Morris desires Ghislaine but feels diminished by her, for which he believes she should pay; unwilling, however, to carry out her punishment himself, he tells Honey to “take her and teach her a lesson” (37). Honey mutilates her face with the knife he carries around, utterly disfiguring her:

the scar went all the way down her face, from the corner of her left eyebrow, down, down, down, past nose and mouth and chin until it disappeared below the collar of her shirt. The scar was all red and raw as if, at the slightest exertion, it might open and bleed; and the flesh was marked with purple imprints from the stitches she had had in it. The scar had somehow puckered all the flesh around it... the scar drew her whole face sideways and even in profile, with the hideous thing turned away, her face was horribly lop-sided, skin, features and all dragged away from the bone. (2-3)

Morris later tells himself he “never meant to hurt her,” that his request to Honey was “a sort of joke” (37). He repeatedly tries to reassure himself that he is not responsible for Honey’s deed, but his difficulty to believe his own words puts his innocence at stake.

While some critics — like Jennifer Gustar, whose article I will address later — comment on the resemblance between the scar and the *vagina dentata*, I find it also very consonant to a scarlet-letter-like mark, as if the knifing was Ghislaine’s deserved punishment for a series of behaviors on her part that are perceived by Morris as improper:

She had always been a very embarrassing girl. She would say things like: ‘Why does your mouth look so dead, Morris?’ or, intensely, ‘Why are you always acting a part, Honeybuzzard?’ in a shockingly brutal and frank way...

She would say: ‘I lost my virginity when I was thirteen,’ conversationally, as she lit a cigarette, or she would complain of the performance of her last partner, or she would ask

you if your wife satisfied you sexually... or she would describe her menstrual pains...

(9-10)

Morris's reminiscence of her "embarrassing" lack of modesty is immediately followed by his impression that "the scar ... might suddenly open up and swallow her into herself, screaming, herself into herself," (10) as if her laceration was in a way self-inflicted through her non-conformity to the male ideal of the virginal, amiable, acquiescent woman. As Morris once asserts upon looking at her pre-scar photographs, "decency dictated that she should be destroyed" (17). And once Ghislaine is marked, she is turned into an outcast: "The bar was full of her friends but none of them would say a word to her... they were all staring at her but nobody greeted her. Cruel backs pushed past her and sharp elbows dug into her" (6).

Shadow Dance plainly suggests that the male hate of women stems from an actual fear of women, and the related impulse to preserve male privilege. Together with the numerous associations between femaleness and monstrosity, such as Ghislaine's Medusa-like "yellow hair writhing over the pillow like crazy snakes" (7) and the aforementioned connection between her scar and the *vagina dentata*, there are also Morris's oddly mixed feelings about Ghislaine. She infuriates and fascinates him at once, and there is certainly an element of intimidation to his fury: "he could best accommodate the thought of Ghislaine as the subject for a painting... that way, she became somehow small enough for him to handle, she dwindled through the wrong end of the telescope of art" (20). This brilliant image explores not only a male need to reduce women, turning them into passive objects so that they can be "handle[d]," but also how this is accomplished through representation; or misrepresentation, since women are looked at from the "wrong" perspective, as they are created by ill-affected men instead of creating themselves. The scar is in fact an ambiguous

symbol, as that which it symbolizes is the male ambiguous perception of women: it establishes Ghislaine as victim and perpetrator at once.

All these themes — female monstrosity, male misrepresentations of women, the ambiguity in gender relations and of concepts of gender — were to become some of the pillars of Carter's feminist discourse for decades to come. References to other art forms, like paintings and photographs, and instances of literary intertextuality are also as abundant in *Shadow Dance* as they were to be in all of Carter's novels, functioning as vehicles for her musings on materiality and on the material power of representation. And the whole atmosphere of *kitsch* installed from the first line — “the bar was a mock-up, a forgery, a fake” (1) — combined with Honeybuzzard's sustained artificiality and extravagance — “[he] liked to wear false noses, false ears and plastic vampire teeth,” (16) “military boots and a brocaded hat; rhino whips; clanking spurs; a stag's head; a dappled gilded, flaking fairground Dobbin from some dismantled roundabout” (17) — prefaces Carter's enduring project of identity as performed, textual, highly self-created; that the self is manipulable, assembled from bits and pieces picked up along the way. Honeybuzzard exerts absolute control over all around him because he recognizes the instability of truth and masters the art of creation: like a painter, he designs his own reality as he envisages it. Ghislaine, on the contrary, passively accepts his truths and is ultimately obliterated by her “master.”

Shadow Dance largely revolves thus around the notion of the male gaze. As theorized by Laura Mulvey in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” the term “male gaze” implies the notion that “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (837). Mulvey's important concept

originally refers to cinema,⁷ but is useful for the analysis of a number of discourses, media, and women's lived experience as determined by male expectations towards their appearance and manners.

The authority of the male gaze is a central theme in Carter's fiction, explaining the notable recurrence of one of her motifs: women seeing themselves through men's eyes. When Morris and Ghislaine first meet after she gets her scar, she inquires him about its appearance: "don't try and tell me you can ignore it. I can see it in your eyes, as if it were reflected. Is it so very bad? Is it as bad as it seems, when I see it in your eyes?" (8) Soon after, Ghislaine concludes that she does not want to look in Morris's eyes, afraid of what she might see (9). While she seems somewhat aware that her mark might not be "as bad as it seems" — that Morris's eyes might be only one way of looking at it —, she is still terrified of it. Carter's fiction often features women searching into men's eyes for definitions of themselves, often when in extreme distress, and becoming confused or even frightened at their distorted, oblique reflections.

The novel culminates on Ghislaine's rape and murder by Honeybuzzard, which she does not attempt to prevent: "I've learned my lesson," she utters shortly before her death, "I can't live without you, you are my master, do what you like with me" (166). The destruction of her face was already her death sentence, as for the men in *Shadow Dance* the whole value of a woman comes down to beauty. Without it, there is no exit for Ghislaine; the murder is merely the confirmation of Honey's total authority over her, symbolized by his phallic knife.

⁷ Carter's literary adaptation of Mulvey's concept is actually unsurprising; she was a notable enthusiast of film studies, having published many cinematic reviews as a journalist and closely participating in the adaptation of two of her stories to film, *The Company of Wolves* and *The Magic Toyshop*. References to film aesthetics and to the cultural importance of cinema are also abundant in her fiction and most expressive in *The Passion of New Eve*. Mulvey herself has analyzed Carter's film adaptation and the cinematic character of her literature in an essay entitled "Cinema Magic and the Old Monsters: Angela Carter's Cinema," featured in Lorna Sage's collection *Essays on the Art of Angela Carter: Flesh and the Mirror*.

Shortly, Honeybuzzard's being a man — and acknowledging his position, as a man, as author of the social fictions that shape materiality — grants him complete control over Ghislaine's fate.

Shadow Dance is shockingly dark and gruesome, a tone I view as properly engendered by Carter's choice of a male point of view. I believe the male perspective to have been an especially wise move by Carter, for the narrative therefore communicates not only a sordid male perception of women but, equally importantly, the very male privilege in relation to the narration — the creation — of “woman,” the “social fiction of ... femininity.” In general, the reader is allowed very little access to the novel's female characters; we can only know Morris's Ghislaine, not Ghislaine's Ghislaine, because our accessible and accepted representations of women are also dominantly male. Morris having more voice on Ghislaine than Ghislaine herself is representative of men having more voice than women on the matters of women and of “woman.” All in all, Morris recounts the story of Ghislaine because men recount the history of women; of both women's “social fictions” and, as result, material practice.

Shadow Dance is a bitter and painful register of a misogyny capable of condoning the humiliation, mutilation and ultimate obliteration of a free, assertive, independent woman so as to pamper the ego of a weak and mediocre man. It exposes the extreme imbalance and injustice within gendered structures of power. I am very much fond of Jennifer Gustar's association of Carter's feminist politics in *Shadow Dance* with Gilles Deleuze's notion of literature as diagnosis.⁸ In “‘Second Hand’ and ‘Hardly Used’: Gendered Violence and Rape Culture in Angela Carter's *Shadow Dance*”, Gustar presents the novel as

⁸ Deleuze's “critique et clinique” project claims that authors and artists work as symptomatologists of social diseases: “artists are clinicians, not with respect to their own case, nor even with respect to a case in general; rather, they are clinicians of civilization” (*Logic* 237).

a clear diagnosis of the ways in which upholding masculine privilege distorts gender relations and engenders violence ... Carter offers no explicit cure for this virulent misogyny ... [but] she does quarantine the danger in the shadows... we cannot inoculate ourselves against gender violence unless we begin to refigure our inheritance... at this moment in her personal history she needed to understand the disease that plagued men and women alike. (423-24)

Gustar fitly opposes this moment of Carter's career to the 70s and 80s when she "engage[s] this project of resignification with a vengeance," (424) that is, not only affirming the need for women to subvert the male fiction of femininity but actually doing so herself. I agree with Gustar that *Shadow Dance* — together with *The Magic Toyshop*, I would add — differs from her later novels in that it is somewhat restricted to describing the oppressive logic as perceived by Carter, rather than offering models of liberation. The latter is better accomplished by her writings from *The Bloody Chamber* onwards, and of which *Nights at the Circus*'s larger-than-life Fevvers is an emblem.

1.2 "A new territory lay there, in which she must live" — *The Magic Toyshop*

The Magic Toyshop was Angela Carter's second published novel, appearing in between *Shadow Dance* and *Several Perceptions*. It is not considered part of the Bristol series, however, for it does not aim at reflecting Bristol and the 60s aura. *Toyshop* was in fact largely based on Balham, the South London neighborhood where Carter grew up, and mirrors in turn Carter's own teenage years. She says in interview that she was impressed, after rereading it, "with the intense sense of adolescent longing it it, an extraordinary sexual yearning," which she found reminiscent of "endless afternoons alone in a room smelling of

sun-warmed carpet, stuck in the Sargasso Sea of adolescence when it seems that you are never going to grow up” (Gordon 31).

The novel also introduces a few elements into Carter’s feminist project and in regards to which it differs greatly from her first novel, in spite of the very short gap between them: the weight of financial conditions in female positionality, the fairy-tale as a favorite Carteresque aesthetic and social and political instrument, the recurring trope of the male puppeteer, and a parallel between food deprivation and gender oppression. The latter is especially significant in Carter considering her own past with anorexia and the many texts in which she associates her disorder with the beauty standards of her sexist surroundings.⁹

I argue that *The Magic Toyshop* and *Shadow Dance* being so dissimilar while only one year apart is telling not of a sudden change in Carter’s mindset but of her proneness, from the very beginning of her career, to looking at reality from several different angles at once and to experimenting with aesthetics. While later writings such as *Nights at the Circus* excel in conflating a profusion of concepts and concerns, it is a mistake to believe that this richness was absent from earlier publications. That a heavily psychoanalytic fairy story like *The Magic Toyshop* has emerged right amidst the Bristol trilogy is already indicative of Carter’s remarkable literary and theoretical liveness that would later astound and puzzle her critics.

The novel starts off by describing fifteen-year-old Melanie’s sexual awakening: “the summer she was fifteen, Melanie discovered she was made of flesh and blood” (1). Melanie and her two younger siblings live in the English countryside, in a graceful large house that “[smells] of lavender furniture polish and money” (7). Suddenly, a telegram informs that her

⁹ *Shaking a Leg* features a few of her essays that address anorexia. In “Fat is Ugly,” which vaguely describes her entrance into the disease, she argues: “I would not say that Women’s Lib afforded me the final therapeutic strength to cope with my own residual anorexia, but it certainly helped” (57).

parents died in an airplane crash. All three children are left penniless, since their parents had no savings. As the older child, Melanie feels she “must be a little mother” (28) to her younger brother and sister. She calls herself “the girl who killed her mother,” (24) feeling personally guilty for the plane crash because she had secretly gone into her mother’s bedroom the night before and donned her precious wedding dress.

The orphans are sent to live in South London with their maternal uncle, Philip Flower, a gifted toymaker who runs a toyshop. Uncle Philip’s house is an icy, filthy, forlorn place, with no hot water, no mirrors, no books, no toilet paper. All is fetid and crumbling, in sharp contrast with the modern, luxurious world of her former life. Philip Flower himself is an appalling figure, embodying despotic patriarchy as he sits regally over the dining room table wielding his mug with the word “Father” written on it (73). He is cold, ill-tempered, verbally and physically aggressive, and only learns Melanie’s name halfway through the tale, probably weeks or even months after her moving in. Although the home is decaying, nothing is given of Philip’s income except for his professional skillfulness and the abundance of food suggesting that it may be substantial; the absence of luxury might be merely due to his neglect. He has so complete control of the finances that even the grocery shopping, done originally by Aunt Margaret and later by Melanie, is credited directly by Philip. The women only see money as they work at the toyshop’s register.

A superb artist and puppeteer, Uncle Philip is essentially a recreation of Honeybuzzard, the male figure with an ability to reduce subjects to diminutive representations, hollow automata, manipulable marionettes. Melanie’s relocation to her uncle’s house is obviously allegorical of her entrance into the direness of womanhood: submission, discomfort, and financial restraint. When she steals her mother’s wedding dress

and symbolically replaces her, becoming “woman,” she embarks upon the process of understanding that being a woman is being second-class.

Melanie becomes an assistant cashier at the toyshop, and discovers she is most probably not returning to school because her uncle will not allow her. Uncle Philip’s wife, Aunt Margaret, is an adorable figure, but mute: “it came to her on her wedding day, like a curse. Her silence” (37). She communicates through writing with chalk on a small blackboard, which she does compulsively in spite of the effort — her fingertips are thickened with chalk, Melanie notices — and Melanie wonders just how talkative she would have been if she had a voice. Aunt Margaret has married Uncle Philip and taken her two younger brothers, Finn and Francie, into the household after the death of their mother; she marries out of the necessity that her brothers, to whom she also becomes “a little mother,” have a home. A bridge between malnourishment and female passivity is built mostly upon Aunt Margaret, who cooks plenty of delicious food every day for her husband to gulp down but barely eats anything herself.

Krista Cowman and Louise A. Jackson recall that 20th-century feminists worldwide saw “a common need to search for their past,” for “the history of women,” although “the geographical specificities of particular national feminisms directed these histories down different roads” (36). In Britain, they note, the “national feminism” that developed was particularly akin to socialist history (36). Indeed, Carter’s materialist claims in *Toyshop* are notably aligned with those of socialist feminists in the novel’s portrayal of the home as the site of women’s exploitation, unveiling the oppressive link between gender and class. To quote from Linda McDowell,

in the language of socialist feminism, the home is the site of patriarchal relations, the appropriation of women's labour by men in order to enable the daily maintenance of the household members and the reproduction of their labour power on both a daily and a generational basis, since the home is also the location of a large proportion of the activities of early child-rearing. (15)

Victoria stands for the biological child that the couple does not have, and Aunt Margaret lovingly nurses her baby. Aunt Margaret's main duties in the home are cooking — feeding the home's working-class men — and having sex with her husband every Sunday, a task she dismally undertakes.

McDowell adds that, as feminists of colour have written, this is “a singular reading based on the specific position of middle-class, white women in industrial societies around about the middle decades of the twentieth century,” (16) and stresses the gap between this experience and that of the lower-class women of color who did domestic work for wages. A limited reading indeed, but quite appropriate for Aunt Margaret and revealing of Carter's affiliation with a socialist mode of thinking gender. The dynamics of the Flower household powerfully illustrate the shared nature of the housewife's domestic labor and man's industrial labor. Considering that Aunt Margaret marries Uncle Philip solely to raise her brothers after their orphaning, she symbolizes what Carter later refers to as “wives of necessity [who] fuck by contract” (9) in *The Sadeian Woman*.

Melanie looks down on her subdued aunt at first, while still carrying fresh memories of the freedoms and luxuries of her parents' home, but grows fonder of Aunt Margaret as she too becomes familiar with and similarly destitute by Uncle Philip's tyranny. She eventually comes to understand that she is no longer different from Aunt Margaret and in fact never was

— that her past life was a matter of lucky privilege rather than inherent superiority — and that they are best united in enduring their now shared predicament. Aunt Margaret eventually writes on her chalkboard, to Melanie: “I don’t know how I coped before you came. It is lovely to have another woman in the house” (123); her note is very aligned to the period’s burgeoning notion of sisterhood. It praises their union as a coping mechanism while stressing gender as the single commonality that assigns both a low status in that home, regardless of their differences.

But the characters’ relation explores the concept of sisterhood more interestingly than merely echoing Carter’s contemporaries. Melanie’s initial dislike for her aunt exposes the potential for indifference among women whose hardships in life differ, in a possible dialogue with the feminist discourses that urge socially and financially advantaged women to recognize their privileged, non-normative positionality and to not disregard the struggles of their poorer, more vulnerable counterparts; even if those women must unpleasantly reckon the fictive, frail nature of their privilege. At the novel’s beginning, for instance, Melanie visualizes death “as a room like a cellar, in which one was locked up and no light at all,” and finds it “inconceivable,” (6) for she cannot assimilate the annihilation of her highly valued self. It is not long until her sense of selfhood is almost entirely annihilated by Uncle Philip’s endless prohibitions, trapped into the autocratic dynamics of his household with no perceivable possibility of an escape, no visible outside. A sense of sisterhood is encouraged through an emphasis on their acquired similarities, but simultaneously challenged by stressing their initial difference and exploring the limits of empathy.

Carter is as concerned here as in *Shadow Dance* with describing the mechanisms of gender oppression, but while she retains the discussion on representation through the image of the toymaker and the many references to painting, photography, film, and sculpture, in *The*

Magic Toyshop she incisively adds class to the mix by exposing the ways in which the subjugation of women may operate financially, by means of establishing women's dependence on men. Melanie's moving into her uncle's house deprives her of her own self-image, as there are no mirrors — she can only see herself through distorted reflections, like in Uncle Philip's crystal ball or, again, in the eyes of a male —, and of critical thinking, for there is not one book in the house and no access to education whatsoever. With time, she becomes unable to tell reality from forgery, good from bad; she no longer knows what she should trust or like. The conflict between what is and what is not is a repeated motif in the novel. The whole dream-like atmosphere of the toyshop – a *magic* toyshop, in an immediate interruption of logic – contributes to this effect. The logic is very resonant of Virginia Woolf's in *A Room of One's Own*:

it is remarkable ... what a change of temper a fixed income will bring about. No force in the world can take from me my five hundred pounds ... the greatest release of all... which is freedom to think of things in themselves. That building, for example, do I like it or not? Is that picture beautiful or not? Is that in my opinion a good book or a bad? Indeed my aunt's legacy unveiled the sky to me, and substituted for the large and imposing figure of a gentleman, which Milton recommended for my perpetual adoration, a view of the open sky. (44-45)

By “fixed income” Woolf refers to her heirloom granted by an aunt, and she reflects on how the financial independence allowed by this money enabled her intellectual autonomy: because she depends on no “gentleman,” she is authorized to look at things for herself.

What Woolf's text and Carter's novel both suggest is that, in a society ruled by money, financial power essentially allows existence, so that economic hindrance becomes the

most efficient instrument in the subjugation of women. If money is what grants one access to virtually anything there is, its deprivation then withdraws one's access to anything but the perspective thrust upon one. Therefore, Melanie's financial dependence on her uncle deprives her not only of cosmetics and similar small treats; slowly, as it incarcerates her within the walls of Uncle Philip's settlements, it obscures her judgement and sense of self, making her progressively less capable of altering her situation. Woolf's major argument is that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (4); the parallel between Melanie's predicament and Woolf's argument stresses the financial as a major concern of gender politics and reminds the reader, by analogizing Woolf's fiction writing with Melanie's subversive potential, that women's subordination is legitimized not by demonstrable facts but fictions. *Toyshop* therefore connects the postmodern claims on the ideological functions of representation to the materialist concerns that long characterize the British feminist model.

Carter also begins to explore the different axes of subjectivity through the character of Jonathon, Melanie's younger brother who seems to withstand unharmed the exact same circumstances. He is a small Uncle Philip, detached and unreachable, and his uncle seems even somewhat akin to him for their shared talent for miniature-making; Jonathon is obsessed with, and very talented at, crafting model boats. He is severely myopic and wears thick glasses, a frequent symbol in Carter's fiction for dubious stances. I will return to this in chapter three, so that this is solely to introduce that the gender/class relation in *The Magic Toyshop* transits both ways: while Melanie's financial condition frames her experiences of gender, gender frames Jonathon's experience of impoverishment in a safeguarding mode. Even in poverty Jonathon is still a higher-class citizen than his sister in the patriarchal logic. Victoria, the baby sister, is a being without a past: "she had forgotten anywhere else because

she lived from day to day” (88). She adapts quickly and easily to the new environment and seems only occasionally perturbed by Uncle Philip’s austerity. I will also return later to Victoria, for I believe she functions as a commentary on the importance of uncovering and examining the past, a practice to which Carter is seriously committed from end to end. Because Victoria has no recollection of her past, she cannot grasp the ugliness of her present. She does not suffer like her older sister because she is unable to reason critically and visualize worthier possibilities.

Fairy-tale imagery is plentiful but rarely seems intended as more than adornment. As I said before, Carter’s fairy universe does not become solidly political until *The Bloody Chamber*. There are nonetheless scenes in *The Magic Toyshop* that can be viewed as drafts of her Bloody Chamber insights, like Aunt Margaret’s aching choker that Uncle Philip gifts her with and forces her to wear, a Bluebeard reference to be repeated in “The Bloody Chamber.” The psychoanalytic model of storytelling and re-reading that she embraces in the 80s is already palpable in the novel, mostly through Freud’s concept of the Uncanny¹⁰ being repeatedly referred to through the several lifelike puppets, paintings, miniatures, and masks that effectively baffle and disturb Melanie and the reader. The Uncanny is a major vector through which notions of gender and identity performativity are transported — I will expand this reading in chapter two.

¹⁰ The Uncanny in Freudian theory refers to that which causes perturbation because it is at once strange and familiar. As he formulates, “the ‘uncanny’ is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar ... what is ‘uncanny’ is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar” (1-2, emphasis in original). His 1919 text became germane for literary criticism due to his reading of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s short story “The Sandman;” Freud applies his Uncanny to the protagonist’s fixation with an automaton mistaken for a living girl. The Uncanny is thus frequently associated with automata that obsess and puzzle for their lifelikeness, shaking thereby one’s confidence in telling real from fake.

Also notable in *The Magic Toyshop* is the role of geographical location and transition over Melanie's identity, the mirror relation between her setting and her sense of self: she perceives her new, ominous circumstances as "a new territory... in which she must live," (58) and her passage from naive childhood to painful womanhood is perhaps mainly represented through the contrast between the settings of each and marked by the train journey connecting both. It was Carter's first clearly positional expression of identity.

The novel ends with the house burning to the ground with Uncle Philip inside, while Melanie, Aunt Margaret, Francie and Finn — with whom by now Melanie is somewhat romantically involved — manage to escape. Melanie and Finn watch the fire engulf the house and then look at each other "in a wild surmise" (199). The narration does not reveal what will happen to Melanie now that she is liberated from her uncle, but the possibility exists that she will merely be transferred to Finn as a possession and perhaps find herself in not so different a scenario. The ending remains open nevertheless, allowing for the hopeful reading that *Shadow Dance* consistently denies. Perhaps Melanie will bounce back, retake her education and devise a path towards some independence; perhaps she will live happily ever after with her kind new family she has learned to love. Or perhaps she and Finn will simply replicate her uncle and aunt's marriage, but at least for her there is the moment of "wild surmise," of "examining the possibility of her own tomorrow" (184) that Ghislaine never gets to have.

1.3 "I was the subject of the sentence written on the mirror" — *Fireworks*

Fireworks, a short-story collection, was carved out of Carter's experience of living alone in Tokyo, Japan, where she headed in 1969. Although not much is known about her affairs in the archipelago, she refers to her three years in Japan as that which turned her into a

radicalized feminist (*Nothing* 28). Her apprehension of the patriarchal dynamics of Japanese society are made clear in the book's first story, "A Souvenir of Japan":

The word for wife, *okusan*, means the person who occupies the inner room and rarely, if ever, comes out of it.

As they say, Japan is a man's country... in a society where men dominate, they value women only as the object of men's passions. (3-7).

What astounds the narrator is how the social difference between men and women is made explicit in Japan: "at least they do not disguise the situation. At least one knows where one is. Our polarity," the narrator observes about her relationship with a Japanese man, "was publicly acknowledged and socially sanctioned" (6). This condition, together with her unmistakable foreignness, leads to a much particular perception of herself: "I had never been so absolutely the mysterious other... I was an outlandish jewel. He found me, I think, inexpressibly exotic" (7).

What I find most thought-provoking in *Fireworks*'s representations of gender relations is a perceptible inversion of the roles of men as creators and women as created found in earlier writings. In two of the stories, "A Souvenir of Japan" and "Flesh and the Mirror," the female narrative voice admits to having "created" her male lover in relation to herself, as opposed to, for instance, Ghislaine and Melanie who are created — by means of having their fates determined and, in Ghislaine's case, her story told — by the men around them. I endorse Marina Warner's statement that the experience of being an Englishwoman in Japan provided Carter with "a way of looking at her own culture which intensified her capacity to conjure strangeness out of the familiar" (qtd. in Gamble, *Angela* 114): the detachment she acquires as "an outlandish jewel" in Japan enables her to assume a different position in relation to her experience of gender in her home country. Curiously, Warner's

phrasing reinforces the applicability of Freud's Uncanny to Carter's socio-political expression.

In "A Souvenir of Japan" the narrator introduces her lover as a Japanese man named Taro, and moves on to recall a book she once read in a toyshop about a boy called Momotaro, born from a peach. She then compares her lover to the boy from the story, declaring that "he, too, had the inhuman sweetness of a child born from something other than a mother" (5). Again, the "inhuman sweetness" of Taro/Momotaro recalls Freud in that he seems simultaneously human and inhuman. Plus, the narrator's encounter with the character of Momotaro in a toyshop recalls Carter's 1967 novel and reinforces the ludic environment as fostering cultural-historical suspension and conceptual re-assessment.

Later, however, the narrator confesses: "His name was not Taro. I only called him Taro so that I could use the conceit of the peach boy, because it seemed appropriate" (9). This passage strikes me as an almost complete transposition of *Shadow Dance*: in the 1966 novel the reader can only get to know Ghislaine as moulded by Morris and Honey, whereas the reader of "A Souvenir of Japan" is explicitly warned that Taro can only be known as the narrator deliberately chooses to disclose him. In the short story, the woman is the one controlling the story of a man, pulling his strings, and she openly chooses to narrate whatever fits her own story better: "I knew him as intimately as I knew my own image in a mirror. In other words, I knew him only in relation to myself... at times, I thought I was inventing him as I went along, however, so you will have to take my word for it" (8). For Sarah Gamble, Taro is but "a speech effect... 'a conceit' around which [the narrator] can structure a story that ultimately is about nothing but her *own* desire" (*Angela* 111, emphasis in original). That is, in "A Souvenir of Japan" Carter not only reverses the storytelling logics of *Shadow Dance*, using man as an accessory in a woman's story, but makes clear to the reader that she

is doing it — that the roles can, to some extent, be challenged or even reversed through narration. The story argues for the possibility for women to command their own narratives through understanding and engaging with the cultural manifestations that create “woman.”

The narrator of “Flesh and the Mirror” speaks similarly about herself — “I was the creator of all and of myself, too... walking through the city in the third person singular, my own heroine” (62) — and her lover — “I created him solely in relation to myself, like a work of romantic art” (67). Overall, in both stories, it is the mysteriousness of the narrators’ foreignness that establishes them as characters in Japan, blank sheets of paper to be filled in, a realization that allows them to become the tellers of their own yet untold stories. Ethnicity and origin, then, become significant factors for the experience of gender, and although Carter’s narrators are not revealed to be diasporic subjects, the appearance of migration as a powerful constituent of identity recalls Friedman’s theory of hybridity as a discourse of positionality. Friedman writes:

As a discourse of identity, hybridity often depends materially, as well as figuratively, on movement through space, from one part of the globe to another. This migration through space materializes a movement through different cultures that effectively constitutes identity as the product of cultural grafting. Alternatively, hybridity sometimes configures identity as the superposition of different cultures in a single space often imagined as a borderland, as a site of blending and clashing... In either case, identity is not “pure,” “authentic,” but always already a heterogeneous mixture produced in the borderlands or interstices between difference. Such grafting often takes the form of painful splitting, divided loyalties, or disorienting displacements. Sometimes it leads to or manifests as regenerative growth and creativity. Moreover, this discourse frequently moves

dialectically between a language of diasporic loss of origin or authenticity and a language of embrace for syncretic heterogeneity and cultural translation. (24)

In these two stories from *Fireworks*, it is in “the interstices between difference” that the narrators are able to perceive themselves no longer as mere objects of men but as subjects and, simultaneously, their own objects: “I was the subject of the sentence written on the mirror. I was not watching it” (“Flesh” 65).

Speaking of mirrors, they are another of Carter’s dearest images: from *Shadow Dance* to *Wise Children*, there is rarely a story that does not feature a mirror or similar reflecting surface portraying the characters’ degree of self-perception and agentetic level. Broad, proper mirrors, like the ceiling one in “Flesh and the Mirror,” usually hint at one’s control, or seeming control, over one’s situation and psyche. Melanie’s former bedroom, for example, features a long mirror with which she admires her pubescent body all day long. The mirror is shattered when her parents pass away, and Uncle Philip’s home has no mirrors whatsoever. As I have written, Melanie can only capture her own image through distorted reflections, as in Finn’s eyes. In *Shadow Dance*, Ghislaine laments that she is not given a mirror at the hospital after Honey mutilates her, representing his complete appropriation of her. Eyes, broken mirrors, water, and other oblique, distorting surfaces are symptomatic of characters’ self-doubt and distress, and there are no mirrors at all when they are most seriously deprived of their agency. As Cristina Bacchilega notices in “Cracking the Mirror,” Carter’s mirror trope seems deeply aligned with Luce Irigaray’s argument that “to play with mimesis is... for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse” (Irigaray 76). The “play with mimesis” is carried out by Carter not only through her tortuous representational strategies, but also through the recurring image of the mirror itself; her characters’ need for mirrors expresses their desire to “recover the place of [their] exploitation” through the

understanding of the “ideas’... about [themselves] that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic” (Irigaray 76).

1.4 “Myth is a made thing, not a found thing” — *The Passion of New Eve*

As the title promptly indicates, *The Passion of New Eve* also addresses Carter’s overstated concern with myths of “woman,” but diverges from most of her other novels mainly in genre — it is by and large a science fiction — and in that it introduces the transgendered individual into her writing. *New Eve* is central to the “Butlerification” of Carter’s criticism as, through a science-fiction approach to transgenderism, it goes beyond the urge that women engage with the production of gendered discourses — or myth, as Carter usually writes — as to more deeply explore the origins of these discourses and the mechanisms of their incorporation into practice. In this sense, the novel’s project seems rather aligned to Butler’s claim from *Gender Trouble* that

it is not enough to inquire into how... feminist critique ought also to understand how “women might become more fully represented, the category of “women,” the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought. (2)

Butler’s theory describes what she perceives as “the compulsory order of sex/gender/desire:” a body culturally identified as female, for instance, is expected to behave in ways culturally labelled feminine and to experience attraction and sexual desire only for that which is labelled male/masculine. She argues against the apprehension that this order is natural, organic, as it results in the reprobation of experiences that deviate from it. Butler proposes that this order is rather an effect produced by the repetition of stylized acts, which she

famously terms gender performativity. As I expect this thesis to demonstrate, the similarities between Carter's and Butler's treatment of gender and sexuality — that the first is a cultural construct and the second needs not adhere to the first — are vividly manifest.

Joanne Trevenna, however, albeit acknowledging the usefulness of Butler's theory for the Carter reader, shrewdly highlights a substantial distinction between the two: that Butler's gender is "performative," and Carter's gender is "performance." This means, in Trevenna's words, that

while Butler claims that gender is thoroughly naturalised and therefore ultimately unlike the process of an actor taking a role, Carter theatrically presents the process of gender acquisition as being like that of an actor playing a role and thereby suggests a subject position prior to gender acquisition and maintains a sex/gender division which is also rejected by Butler. (269)

I find Trevenna's differentiation quite sensible. However committed to the project of demythologizing "woman" and exposing gender as culturally constructed, Carter seems many times resistant to fully deconstructing the sex/gender relation to the Butlerian degree. As Trevenna indicates, the abundant elements of theater and cinema in Carter's fiction — generally read as links between Carter and Butler — ironically constitute, in fact, an important differentiator between the two. I will retake this discussion in chapter three, in my examination of gender in *Nights*, but *New Eve* might be, intentionally or not, an earlier instance of this tension.

The Passion of New Eve is narrated by Evelyn, an English professor who is invited to teach in New York. The scenery is dystopian, chaotic, and Evelyn ends up unemployed after a group of rebels overtakes the university. Poor and disoriented in New York, he eventually meets Leilah, a seventeen-year-old black cabaret dancer with whom he moves in and

develops an oddly abusive relationship. She becomes pregnant with Evelyn's baby and is sent by him to a voodoo abortionist who performs poorly, leading to a severe infection that causes Leilah to be hospitalized and lose her womb. Meanwhile, Evelyn learns that he has received a generous inheritance from a deceased relative; he rents a car and drives to the desert, "abandon[ing] Leilah to the dying city" with his money phallically "stowed between [his] legs" (33).

But he becomes lost in the desert and is taken by a mysterious figure to an underground city called Beulah, a city of women. It is a matriarchy run by Mother, a female goddess who has shaped herself surgically. Mother rapes Evelyn, collects his semen, and exposes her plan: to operate him and turn him into a woman, "a complete woman... tits, clit, ovaries, labia major, labia minor" (65); then, to impregnate him with his own semen. Evelyn is appalled but unable to escape. While recovering from the multiple surgeries, he is locked in a cell and exposed to all kinds of visual representations of women, from silent films to ancient paintings of the Virgin Mary. He is injected with female hormones and lectured on the history of women. From the surgery on, his name becomes Eve — symbolically "diminutive, Eve, the shortened form of Evelyn," (68) — and is referred to in female pronouns.

However, the transformation is not perfectly accomplished: notwithstanding Mother's surgical success, the "psycho-programming" (71) appears to fail. Eve looks in the mirror and feels like "a stranger in the world as she was in her own body" (74). The Uncanny is again invoked as the aesthetics of discursive challenge when Eve contemplates her own reflection and feels that she is conducting "the unfamiliar orchestra of [herself]," (71) perceiving "a strong family resemblance to [herself]" but still unable to fully acknowledge the reflection (71). In Gamble's words, Eve/Evelyn is "compelled to recognise how femininity, like myth,

is ‘a made thing, not a found thing,’” (*Angela* 149) since a female shape is not enough to establish her as “woman” — even if combined with careful teachings of femininity.

In “Angela Carter: Supersessions of the Masculine,” David Punter acutely remarks about the mirror scene that

what, it seems, the new Eve does is experience, on behalf of the world, the wrench and dislocation which is at the heart of woman’s relationship with herself in a world riddled with masculine power-structures: inner self forced apart from the subject of self-presentation, an awareness of hollowness, a disbelief that this self-on-view can be taken as a full representation of the person alongside the bitter knowledge that it will be, that at every point the woman is locked into the metaphysical insult of the masculine gaze.

(216)

Eve is indeed “locked into the ... masculine gaze,” which is curiously her/his¹¹ own. Looking in the mirror, s/he perceives her/himself as “the object of all the unfocused desires” of her/his own mind, her/his “own masturbatory fantasy,” (71) expressing a disturbance of the sex/gender/desire order; the sex transformation, and the attempted gender transformation, do not succeed in transforming desire. Eve/Evelyn ultimately embodies the disruption of the cultural sex/gender/desire order.

¹¹ The protagonist largely adopts female pronouns for his/her postsurgical self and maintains male pronouns for presurgical recollections. For the critic, *New Eve* is a especially slippery floor for one’s very pronominal choices may be seen as constituting a stance towards the sex/gender/desire relation, or even raise a discussion on the role of language in gendered structures and the need for neutral pronouns. I choose to follow critics like Trevenna and maintain a double pronominal pattern for the postsurgical Eve/Evelyn, even if it disturbs the reading somewhat. In my view, this choice avoids legitimate but tangential discussions while emphasizing the very in-betweenness of Eve/Evelyn that is essential for the novel’s challenge of the order perceived by Carter and theorized by Butler.

S/he also cannot dismiss “the void, the insistent absence, like a noisy silence” (71) of the amputated genitals, immediately recalling Freud’s concept of penis envy.¹² Eve cannot unlearn that the female organ for Evelyn has always meant absence, “the exquisite negative of ... sex,” (23) an ideology so firmly ingrained that it refuses to recede even as s/he becomes its own victim. This reasoning would be echoed in *The Sadeian Woman* when Carter concludes about the dominant symbolisms of sexual representations that “the male is positive, an exclamation mark. Woman is negative. Between her legs lies nothing but zero ... that only becomes something when the male principle fills it with meaning” (4). It is very possible, however, to read Eve/Evelyn’s experience of penis envy ironically as a commentary on the phallogentric character of Freud’s postulation; that s/he experiences anxiety towards the lack of a penis is telling that such a feeling may be characteristic of an individual socialized as “man” trying to grasp female socialization, much like Freud’s highly gendered mode of theorizing women’s sexuality.

These possible, subtle ironies are what, in my view, renders *New Eve* a considerably tortuous discussion of gender. Another instance is Mother’s two-part project of transformation, including not only an education in femininity but a sex reassignment surgery; its emphasis on anatomy stresses what Carter perceived as “the unarguable fact of sexual differentiation” (*Sadeian* 6). While the novel might initially appear to side with essentializing brands of feminism that consecrate some sort of divine femaleness, or even to encourage the reversal of patriarchy into matriarchy, it soon enough becomes an ironic condemnation of such beliefs as, for Mother, “myth is more instructive than history” (65). “Oh, the dreadful symbolism of the knife,” cries Evelyn before the surgery, “to be castrated with a phallic symbol! (But what else, says Mother, could do the trick?)” (67). The characterization of the

¹² As theorized by Freud in his 1905 *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, it is a stage of young girls’ psychosexual development characterized by anxiety upon realization of the lack of a penis.

castrating impulse as “phallic” denounces, at once, both the underlying acquiescence of mythic feminisms to the phallogocentric structure — to recall Carter’s claim that all myths are “consolatory nonsenses” (*Sadeian* 5) — and the ineffectiveness of a feminist project that aims simply at reversing the oppressive logic rather than dissolving it, in which sense the possession of the phallus equates the power to oppress. In short, the castrating tool is a phallic symbol because the whole ideology of Beulah is, ironically and maybe unclearly to its women, a byproduct of phallogocentric discourse. Also, the failure of Mother’s plan reveals that femininity and masculinity are “separate” from sex and “only partially derived from it;” (*Sadeian* 6) the novel does not delineate, however, the extent to which gender indeed derives from sex.

The discussion is further complicated when Eve/Evelyn’s describes her/his education in femininity as complemented by rape. S/he is eventually captured by a polygynous poet named Zero, the first man s/he meets after the surgery, and brutally raped: “he raped me unceremoniously in the sand ... after he dragged me from the helicopter, while his seven wives stood round in a circle, giggling and applauding” (83). After three months as one of Zero’s wives, s/he concludes: “it was as savage an apprenticeship in womanhood as could have been devised for me... the mediation of Zero turned me into a woman” (104). His/her claim that Zero’s rape is more efficient than Mother’s psycho-programming in turning her/him into a woman is ultimately ambiguous: it can either refer to the myth of the victimized woman — the discourse that women are supposed to suffer — as the predominantly accepted of all women myths, or stand straightforwardly as an argument that “woman” is a category defined by suffering and submission.

The latter is problematic in a few ways. First, it would ironically align Carter’s conceptualization of “woman” to that of some radical feminists she criticizes, such as

Dworkin, which defines womanhood as a position of subservience. Also, a conception of “woman” as suffering may arise questions as to the real power of women’s agency. Moreover, it can also be read as a perilous critique on the discourse of transexuality, as it potentially excludes from the category “woman” those whose transition into it would rely on a sense of physical and/or behavioral identification with femaleness/femininity. Similarly, Eve/Evelyn’s difficult transition echoes Kate Bornstein’s proposition, recalled by Butler in *Gender Trouble*, that “a transsexual cannot be described by the noun of ‘woman’ or ‘man,’ but ... through active verbs that attest to the constant transformation which ‘is’ the new identity or, indeed, the ‘in-betweenness’ that puts the being of gendered identity into question” (xi). His/her prolonged state of gender in-betweenness may imply that the transition results not in a “man” becoming a “woman,” but in “a man who becomes a woman,” a third category uncontained by the traditional binary. The idea is paradoxical, as the emergence of new gender categories undoes the gender binary, reinforces the fluidity of identity, and ultimately challenges the very consistency and relevance of the category “gender,” while simultaneously reinscribing gender as an important component of one’s identity for which appropriate and sufficient categories are needed.

By *New Eve* Carter is still, in Jean Wyatt’s words, “unwilling to compromise or soften... her depiction of woman’s structural position within patriarchy,” the idea that “becoming a woman requires... an alienation of... subjective agency that amounts to a mutilation,” (77) still in keeping with Ghislaine’s and Melanie’s stories. This is shown at first through Evelyn’s shockingly abusive treatment of Leilah, featuring constant beatings and a forced abortion, but is later reversed to Eve herself when she is so brutally raped by Zero that she comes to fear she will die (104). But *New Eve* is already much more complex in its representations of gender than its predecessors as it thoroughly examines the cultural basis of

femininity, the sex/gender/desire relation, and appears to offer readers more questions than answers.

1.5 “She knew she was nobody’s meat” — *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*

The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories is certainly the most outstanding of Carter’s short-story collections among her critics; writer Salman Rushdie, Carter’s personal friend, calls it “[her] masterwork” (ix). It consists of ten lusty, audacious re-readings of canonical European fairy tales, such as Snow White, Beauty and the Beast, Little Red Riding Hood, Bluebeard, and folk tales like the Erlking. The vastness of its allusions grants the richness of its themes, motifs, and diverging viewpoints.

“The Bloody Chamber,” a retelling of the Bluebeard folktale, is the opening story of the book and its longest. The narrator weds the cryptic Marquis against her will, and becomes gradually aware of his sexual sadism. Eventually, she discovers the bodies of his previous wives, whom he murdered, in a forbidden chamber in the castle. The Marquis returns from a trip and discovers that she has entered the chamber; he is about to behead her when her mother appears and shoots the man in the head. The story grants the reader an inspiring female model through the character of the mother:

You never saw such a wild thing as my mother, her hat seized by the winds and blown out to sea so that her hair was her white mane, her black lisle legs exposed to the thigh, her skirts tucked round her waist, one hand on the reins of the rearing horse while the other clasped my father's service revolver and, behind her, the breakers of the savage, indifferent sea, like the witnesses of a furious justice...

On her eighteenth birthday, my mother had disposed of a man-eating tiger that had ravaged the villages in the hills north of Hanoi. Now, without a moment's hesitation, she raised my father's gun, took aim and put a single, irreproachable bullet through my husband's head. (39-40)

Described as a fierce and fearless vigilante, the mother challenges the traditional, stereotypical representations of 'woman' as docile and submissive found in the original fairy tales selected by Carter. Moreover, "The Bloody Chamber" is a rare register of a positive relationship between mother and daughter in Carter's work: her mothers are often detached, enigmatic, or completely absent. In this sense, the story's particular mother/daughter relationship tangentially promotes a reflection on the need that women stay united against patriarchy.

But the celebration of women's union is shaken by other stories, like "The Werewolf" and "The Snow Child". In the first, Little Red Riding Hood encounters a werewolf on her way to her grandmother's house, but this wolf does not talk to her: it immediately attacks her and has its paw chopped off by the girl with her father's hunting knife. She puts the paw in her basket and, in the grandmother's cottage, discovers that the paw has turned into a hand which by a wart, she recognizes as her grandmother's (109). The old lady, who was feverish in bed when the girl arrived, suddenly starts "squawking and shrieking like a thing possessed," (109) and the girl flees and screams until the neighbors come to rescue her. They stone the grandmother to death, as custom dictates should be done with witches, and the girl goes to live in her grandmother's house and "prosper[s]" (110). Here, Carter draws on psychoanalysis to make two substantial suggestions: that the enemy of women in a phallogocentric order can be women themselves who embrace and reproduce the symbols of such order; that women who understand and master such symbolic order are able to "prosper"

in it. Kimberly J. Lau offers an eloquent reading of this tale: because the wolf is essentially male, as “the Old English ‘wer’ or ‘were’ means ‘man’ as a biological category,” Carter creates a “phallic mother... [the child’s] eventual initiation into language and the symbolic order” (82). In killing and successfully replacing Granny because she knows how to use her father’s knife — she is aware and in control of phallic symbols — the young girl “opens up a range of possibilities in which girls, women, might exist in the symbolic order, might even ‘prosper’ there. No longer subject to the aggressions of the phallic mother — the predatory moves that a phallogocentric language in wolf’s clothing make on a young girl” (83).

The young girl in “The Snow Child” is less lucky. This morbid rendition of Snow White¹³ opens with a Count and his Countess riding through the snow. The Count utters to his wife that he wishes to have a girl “as white as snow... as red as blood... as black as that [raven’s] feather,” (91) and a girl magically, immediately appears in the middle of the snow, “white skin, red mouth, black hair and stark naked; she was the child of his desire and the Countess hated her” (92). As the Count sits her on his saddle, the Countess wonders: “How shall I be rid of her?” (92) She tries to drown the girl and to leave her behind, but the Count protects his snow daughter and goes as far as to strip his wife and dress the girl up with her clothes. The Countess orders the girl to pick a rose for her, which the Count allows; “the girl picks a rose; pricks her finger on the thorn; bleeds; screams; falls” (92). The Count, crying, rapes the girl’s dead body while the Countess waits, watching “narrowly” (92). The snow child melts down and disappears, so the Count hands his wife the flower that the girl had picked for her, but she drops it: “it bites” (92).

Through the astounding level of symbolic detail that Carter embeds in this disturbing two-page story, she comments mainly on the harmful effects that the reduction of women to

¹³ The story also recalls Sleeping Beauty through the girl’s death from a pricked finger.

the status of a man's possession — the Countess is introduced as “[the Count's] wife” — have on the relationships among women themselves. Unlike Snow White from the Grimm tale, who is born out of her mother's wishes, the snow child is a product of male desire: she is exactly what the Count wants and he prioritizes her over the Countess to the point of leaving his own wife naked in the snow so that the girl will be clothed. The Countess, by losing her “glittering pelts of black foxes [and] high, black, shining boots with scarlet heels” (92) to the newcomer, loses not only her husband's preference but her notable social status. However, when she touches the rose with which she kills the girl, she notices that it hurts her too — while the Count, picking the rose up, feels nothing. The “bloodstain... like the trace of a fox's kill on the snow” (92) associates the Countess with and holds her guilty for the girl's death, maintaining her responsibility for the harm she has caused another woman regardless of her reasons. “The Snow Child” is therefore a disquieting allegory of female rivalry, — in Salman Rushdie's words, the story shows that “[t]he battle of the sexes is fought between women, too” — exposing its potentially deadly effects on women and how men may end up unharmed.

These stories make *The Bloody Chamber* possibly Carter's most incisive representations of tensions among women. But *The Bloody Chamber* itself stands out with regards to postmodern writing in the ways it realizes Hutcheon's “complicitous critique”. Carter's choice to work with fairy tales is not oblivious to their role in the phallogocentric order but, on the contrary, sensibly aware of it. The purpose is precisely to reflect on how fairy-tale conventions and ideology have worked to maintain male dominance, and not always does this take place through the offering of an optimistic, empowering alternative denouement to the original stories. Several scenes of brutal sexual violence serve the effect of heightening one's awareness of their obscured presence in the original tales. Little Red

Riding Hood, for instance, is but a tale of rape;¹⁴ even after the Grimm brothers soften the story in the 19th century, it persists as a warning that girls had better stay indoors. The strategy recalls that described by Derrida: a writer who “stages a hyperbolically phallogocentric discourse or mode of behavior” in literature “does not subscribe to it by signing the work” but, rather, “describes it” and “by describing it as such, ... exposes it, displays it” (58). What Carter achieves by making her rereading clearly sexual is not random pornographication, but the uncovering of the underlying sexual intent of the original stories. This critique, of course, requires a great degree of allusive complicity to retain its literariness, a paradox lying at the heart of postmodern aesthetics and politics.

The book’s most powerful story in this regard is, I argue, “The Company of Wolves,” which furthermore represents in my view Carter’s most successful experimentation with her own project of “moral pornography” from *The Sadeian Woman*. In this sensuous rereading of Little Red Riding Hood, the teenage protagonist recognizes that the werewolf’s eagerness is not for dead meat, but for flesh, and manages to escape his devouring jaws by having sex with him. While on the surface it may seem very much like rape, the underlying yet unmistakable psychoanalytic framework allows for a much different interpretation.

The wolf in “The Company of Wolves” is soon enough flagged as a symbol: “fear and flee the wolf; for, worst of all, the wolf may be more than he seems” (130). He is “carnivore incarnate,” (129) an unstoppable beast who “cannot listen to reason,” (130) and “once he’s had a taste of flesh then nothing else will do” (129). He is sheer instinct and death drive. At the same time, when the lycanthrope wants to become a wolf, he has to “[strip] stark naked;” the act of stripping before attacking his victim evokes rape instead of literal preying, mixing

¹⁴ Jack Zipes, for one, thoroughly examines the history of the tale in *The Trials & Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, contending that it has always served the purpose, overtly or not, of regulating female sexuality through the threat of rape.

Eros with Thanatos and resulting in a precise representation of Sigmund Freud's theorized id.

¹⁵ Like the id, Carter's werewolf needs an "external mediator," (131) the ego, which is the role of the girl. She meets the lycanthrope in the woods in his human form, finds him "a very handsome one" and "disingenuously" (134) wagers a kiss if he arrives at her grandmother's house before she does. There, the werewolf devours the grandmother — symbolically as well, as "the last thing the old lady saw in this world was a young man, ... naked as a stone, approaching her bed" (136). He hides her bones under the bed and waits for the girl. She arrives at the cottage and immediately notices what she is dealing with, but is unafraid. On the contrary, she leads the act, as expressed by one of the book's most emblematic lines: "The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody's meat. She laughed at him full in the face, she ripped off his shirt for him and flung it into the fire" (138). They have sex while "[the grandmother's] old bones under the bed set up a terrible clattering" but the girl "[does] not pay them any heed" (138). The grandmother, with her Bible and apron she "thought ... were a sure prophylactic against [those] infernal vermin," (135) stands for the superego, fighting the eager demands of the id with her throwing of social norms and moral codes against the beast. The girl, however, chooses the id and becomes one with it: she embraces rather than represses her sexual drive, against all norms of the patriarchal society she lives in.

"The Company of Wolves" stands thus as a valuable instance of a tale that apparently eroticizes sexual violence, but which can in fact be read as to subvert myths of "woman," allowing women higher agency levels. As Lorna Sage puts it, *The Sadeian Woman* and *The*

¹⁵ In Freud's theory, the human psyche consists of three drives: id, ego, and superego. The id is what follows the pleasure principle, the force within us that strives for the satisfaction of our basic needs and impulses, which includes the libido. The ego is a mediator between the id's exaggerated demands and the limited external world, seeking for pleasure while considering social adequation. But it does not know what is right or wrong; that is the role of the superego, our moral code, the representative of all moral restrictions. More on these postulations is found in Freud's *The Ego and the Id* and *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

Bloody Chamber and Other Stories represent the moment when Carter “explained herself, unpacked her gifts, played her own fairy godmother” (“Angela Carter: The Fairy Tale” 52). That is, in my view, what Carter aims to do in her exegesis of Sade: she recognizes his misogyny, but simultaneously interprets Justine and Juliette as myths of femininity that he satirizes and exposes as instruments of control. Read this way, his stories function as a critique on heterosexual inequalities of power. Carter’s Red Riding Hood is neither a Justine nor a Juliette, for she does not suffer or causes suffering, though she would have been a Justine had she attempted to fight the werewolf with Bible and apron like the grandmother — that is, had she attempted to repress her sexuality in the name of the moral codes imposed on her. She would have been devoured, just as Justine is constantly abused. I agree that it was an extremely meaningful point in her career as she laid open two of the most prevalent elements of her personal feminist ethos, to which her resistance to the antipornography movement strongly relates to: her rejection of the figure of woman as victim and the importance of sexuality for women’s sense of identity.

At last, sexuality alone plays a vital role in *The Bloody Chamber*. Published in the same year of *The Sadeian Woman*, it reveals Carter as more determined than ever to unflinchingly explore the post of female sexuality within the male-dominated ideology, which she performs in a variety of modes. While stories of sexual violence like “The Bloody Chamber” and “The Snow Child” bring oppressive logics to the surface, others like “The Company of Wolves” can be seen as celebrative and demythologizing of female sexuality, speaking for a feminist resistance that acknowledges sexuality as an organic, legitimate portion of the self and authenticating sexual license as a key element in Carter’s feminist agenda. Reinscribing the sexual tenor of their original folk stories so as to build her critique,

Carter swims in the countercurrent of the antipornography movement that gained shape while she worked on *The Bloody Chamber*.

1.6 “Is she fact or is she fiction?” — *Nights at the Circus*

Nights at the Circus is generally billed as Carter’s *magnum opus*. The book evades definitions: as Dani Cavallaro writes, *Nights* is “arguably the most joyfully unclassifiable of Carter’s novels... Picaresque, Gothic, Decadent, Satirical, Baroque, Postmodern and Metafictional... neither these nor other terms... may even begin to exhaust its inebriating richness” (13). Its profound intertextuality testifies to Carter’s wholehearted embrace, by the 80s, of postmodern aesthetics.

It begins with a third-person narrator describing the spectacle of Fevvers, an allegedly winged woman who has been making her way through Europe as a trapeze artist. It then shifts to the perspective of Jack Walser, a US journalist who arranges an interview with Fevvers as to unleash her secrets and write a major piece revealing her as a fraud. During the interview, Fevvers assumes the post of the narrator while she weaves the story of her childhood and adolescence in a Londonian brothel. In the remaining chapters the third-person narrator prevails, but all the while with constantly shifting perspectives through free indirect speech. From Part III on, the narrative voice becomes a confusing mix of the third-person narrator and that of Fevvers herself.

Feminist readings of *Nights at the Circus* typically focus on the protagonist as a symbol of the turn-of-the-century woman, no longer bound to the ground, a mighty female figure who gulps food and alcohol and depends on no man — the contrast with Aunt

Margaret, for instance, is apparent, and consumption is again related to women's agency¹⁶. Fevvers eats and drinks more voraciously than any man in the novel, and her eating is described as nearly aberrant: "She gorged, she stuffed herself, she spilled gravy on herself, she sucked up peas from the knife; she had a gullet to match her size and table manners of the Elizabethan variety ... until at last her enormous appetite was satisfied; she wiped her lips on her sleeve and belched" (22). Along these lines, Fevvers is indeed Carter's most outstanding answer to the repeated critique that her writing would only prick the wound of gender oppression without offering it any ointment.

One element making the story's shifting perspectives work so efficiently is the outstanding number of female characters and their marvelous diversity. Fevvers is far from being the story's only significant woman: there is Lizzie, her surrogate mother and a former prostitute; Mignon and the Princess of Abyssinia, Fevvers's fellow circus performers; the women "freaks" in Madame Schreck's House of Horrors, and the atrocious Madame Schreck herself; the Russian prisoners in the panopticon and their chief, Countess P.; the Siberian young mother abandoned in a cabin in the woods. Many of these women are circus artists or aberrations, clarifying the decentered tendencies of the novel in regards to women's experiences. In general, their stories serve to embody the many faces of sexist abuse: Lizzie and her strong, practical Marxist tendencies, acquired through decades of prostitution; Mignon's frail and bruised body, and her short memory that repeatedly forgives and laughs

¹⁶ Margaret E. Toye's 2007 essay "Eating Their Way Out of Patriarchy: Consuming the Female Panopticon in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*" is a wonderful analysis of consumption in *Nights*, discerning food as a key theme and consumption as a recurring symbol of agency. She explores, for instance, the importance of consumption in the prisoner's escape from the panopticon, as the secretly exchanged letters through which they articulate their rebellion are hidden in their morning bread rolls. Toye calls attention to a growing interest among Carter's major critics in focusing on consumption as they perceive it to successfully connect many aspects of Carter's life and work, from her interest in instances of visual consumption — the male gaze, exhibitionism, film, pornography — to her food journalism and personal history of anorexia (481).

trauma away; Sleeping Beauty's growing inertia and perennially closed eyes, an image of passivity; the Wonder, a woman in miniature, painfully discredited throughout her life; the Russian convicts, sentenced to life in a panopticon for having murdered their own husbands; and the Siberian mother, sent to a cabin with her newborn baby by a Shaman, denouncing the historical hatred for women found in ancient superstition. In turn, Madame Schreck and the Countess, because of their superior status and financial condition, further illustrate the relevance of class and suggest that gender oppression may also be perpetrated among women themselves, once more challenging utopian notions of sisterhood.

In fact, Fevvers also contributes to the novel's sense of diversity and instability. She spends her early life in a brothel and moves later to a house of horrors, caged under the male gaze in both environments. After a series of predicaments, she eventually becomes the confident *aerialiste*; successful and financially independent as a circus spectacle, she represents an alternative of negotiation to an order dominated by the male gaze. After her train crashes and she has to wander in Siberia, deprived of her audience and of Walser, she is reduced to misery and impotence. She only regains her confidence after being reunited with Walser, on whom her self-image depends greatly by this point. This is to say that, if the plurality of female characters entails that female experience is not universal but local, Fevvers's shifting self-image and agency levels make matters further relative: individual experience is not fixed, but fluid and highly situational. Identity in *Nights* is therefore complicated by elements that explore not only its complexity but its fluidity. Other elements contributing to this effect are the geographical diversity of the plot — the tripartite division is in fact organized geographically, with each section referring to a place on the map — a sense of continuous transitionality as indicated, for example, by the very itinerancy of the circus, and the many parallels traced between the characters' sense of self and the geographical

features of the sceneries around them. Also important in this sense is the story's repeatedly stated historical location at the end of the 19th century. The novel's temporal and spatial specificity recalls Adrienne Rich's urge, in the same year, for a politics of location, and matches Friedman's later proposition of a locational feminism.

The novel's project of "complicitous critique" is divulged in the first lines as Fevvers reveals her sobriquets: "Cockney Venus," in reference to the Roman goddess, and "Helen of the High Wire" as she, "like Helen of Troy, was *hatched*" (7, emphasis in original). In their very phrasing, these nicknames inevitably reinscribe notions of "woman" derived from myth as they simultaneously estrange them by reformulation, announcing the emergence of a new concept however based on the old ones. Allusions are to be spotted everywhere in the novel and seems to not distinguish between high and low culture, including ancient mythology and Christianity through sculpture, film, theater, painting and contemporary literature.

Although it is not the last of Carter's novels — *Wild Children*, released in 1991 and shortly before her death, was her fictive farewell — I choose to conclude my overview of her oeuvre with *Nights* because of how it ingeniously encapsulates and advances many aspects of Carter's multilayered feminist project that are found scattered through earlier novels. The denouncement of phallogentric and patriarchal structures of domination, to which she was so initially committed in *Shadow Dance*, *Toyshop* and *New Eve*, is still made present throughout but harmonized with numerous propositions for negotiation; Fevvers is the exaggerated epitome of the discursively and materially agentetic woman character initiated mainly in *Fireworks* and *The Bloody Chamber*. Consumption is also retaken as a feminist theme but not in *Toyshop*'s images of food deprivation, repression and weakness; rather, it is exacerbated as a symbol of power, pleasure, and liberation.

Carter's treatment of the intricacies of identity and subjectivity starts in *Toyshop*: its socialist inclinations produce an interesting register of the relation between gender oppression and class exploitation, and uncovers the way patriarchal domination operates financially. *Nights* is probably Carter's theoretical apex in this regard, with the blending of several constituents of identity beyond gender in her representations of the self, and the weaving together of an outstanding number of ex-centric "small narratives." The sense of a geography of identity, also started in *Toyshop*, appears in *Nights* noticeably enhanced and manifold.

While this is severely abridged a survey of Carter's publications, I expect it helps demonstrate the immense myriad of concepts that she incorporates into her investigation of gender and her theorization of feminism. As Elizabeth Gargano's interestingly remarks, "[Carter's] feminist theoretical stance emerges as a work in progress. In fact it is more a dance than a 'stance', more a deft series of adjustments in relation to changing conditions than a fixed position" (57). Carter's representations of gendered structures of power reveal a complex cooperation between myth and materiality — subordinated women as a predominant discourse that is reinforced by material markers such as biology and financial exploitation — in which one side is simply unthinkable without the other. The nuanced and situational interplay between these two poles result in a variety of possible feminist discourses that Carter embraces, making the issue of "woman" for her never a fixed dot or even a straight line but rather a multifaceted prism that her fiction incessantly rotates so as to, sometimes vertiginously, display all its different angles.

I have opened this chapter with Barbara Johnson's words on the importance of literature for feminism because it closely communicates with Carter's approach to a feminist mode of fiction production: "literature can best be understood as the place where impasses

can be kept open for examination, where questions can be guarded and not forced into a premature validation of the available paradigms” (13). Feminism, because its central subject is to great extent a product of the very structure it acts against, is in itself a conceptual contradiction; “woman” is a stratified construct that cuts across the social, the economic, the discursive, the biological, the ethnic, the geographical. In Diane Elam’s words, “we do not yet know what women *are*... there are neither epistemological nor ontological grounds which would settle the issue once and for all” (27). For Elam, “shorthand definitions, while practical at times, can easily lead to caricature, dismissal, and unnecessary limits placed on thought” (5). That seems to be precisely what Carter’s fiction aims at combatting; that feminism backfires by resigning to simplistic truisms of gender and power relations, mostly through ignoring the dynamics of the symbolic order that dominate Western representations, in favor of an agenda that would appear more material, dydactical, or straightforwardly political. She plays thus with symbols and systems of representation in an aesthetically destabilizing manner so as to uncover their very political, social, and material instability, and postmodern thought and aesthetics of decentralization, de-doxification, and complicitous critique lend Carter the literary techniques that her challenging enterprise requires.

In the following chapters, I will concentrate on *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus* as to better examine the ways in which Carter’s postmodern project renders these novels studies on the intricacies of gender categorization and the heterogeneity of feminist thought.

Chapter Two

Juggling with Being: The Politics of Representation

in Angela Carter's Geographics of Identity

“But I never looked like that!” —How do you know? What is the ‘you’ you might or might not look like? Where do you find it—by which morphological or expressive calibration? Where is your authentic body? You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image: you never see your eyes unless they are dulled by the gaze they rest upon the mirror or the lens ... even and especially for your own body, you are condemned to the repertoire of its images.”

Roland Barthes

In the *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories*, Kwok Wei Leng explains that “difference as a concept appears in early texts of [second-wave feminism] to signify women’s difference from men,” in a desire to outline “women’s common identity” (135). But more recent uses of the term tend to accentuate mainly the differences among women, emphasizing the axes of class, ethnicity, age, sexuality, ability, and others. Needless to say, this shift hits feminism with force since, in Leng’s words, “through difference, feminist thinking is forced to reassess some of its most foundational premises,” (135) that is, the definition of the very grouping at the end of its efforts. When differences within the category of “women” become central an issue, feminist theory is posed with new, rather troublesome dilemmas to tackle: if sex/gender alone do not constitute identity, what does? If “woman” is no longer a reliable social and political category, how can feminism go about delineating its subject? How, exactly, does one properly define a subject?

“Identity” and “subjectivity” have long been increasingly problematic terms. Regina Gagnier lists a range of senses commonly entailed by the single term “subjectivity,” and sheds light on its many theoretical layers. “First,” she writes, “the subject is a subject to itself, an ‘I,’” and simultaneously “an ‘Other’ to others, which also affects its sense of its own

subjectivity;” it is a subject of knowledge, mostly in relation to the “social institutions that circumscribe its terms of being;” it is a body separate from any other and dependent on its environment; there is “subjectivity in its common Cartesian sense ... [as] opposed to objectivity;” at last, “in writing or self-representation ... the I is the self-present subject of the sentence as well as the subject ‘subjected’ to the symbolic order of the language in which one is writing” (8-9). Gagnier’s overview comprises, in fact, centuries of philosophy on subjectivity, and reveals the multiplicity of approaches enabled by the single term.

Such plurality is the reason why, in the sensible words of Kobena Mercer, “sometimes ... it is obvious that people are not even talking about the same thing” (43) when identity is at stake. Mercer adds that identity clearly “only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty” (43). In this sense, she continues, the postmodern eagerness to discuss identity “is symptomatic of the postmodern predicament of contemporary politics:” (43) the contradictory postmodern challenge to define the central subjects of its politics while on the other hand seeking to avoid totalizing definitions. In postmodern politics, therefore, identities occupy a deeply paradoxical position.

Angela Carter’s penchant for the multifaceted is made conspicuous in her treatment of identity and subjectivity. Both within the universe of each of her fiction works and progressively throughout her career, her representations of “subject” is as collective and labyrinthine as Gagnier’s overview reveals it to be in the realm of theory and in individuals’ lived practice. Carter explores the philosophical deconstruction of the subject while firmly maintaining the weight of materiality, its bodies and institutions, with an air of experimentation. One recalls her words in “Notes from the Front Line”: “what I *really* like doing is writing fiction and trying to work things out *that way*” (43, emphasis in original).

She writes about the self, about becoming, being and appearing to be, seemingly grounded on a vast theoretical framework that may include the work of a number of French poststructuralists — Lyotard, Deleuze, and Barthes are examples — and in a way that can be profitably read under the light of several more recent theories among which Judith Butler's certainly stands out.

As I have acknowledged in the previous chapter, much of Carter's writing has been successfully linked to Butler's theory of gender performativity, as well as Mulvey's notion of male gaze, or "woman as image, man as bearer of the look," female as passive and male as active in representational dynamics ("Visual" 837). Noteworthy, however, are the lengths to which Carter's exploration of identity move beyond gender, a movement intensified with time. "Identity" in Carter is therefore greatly consistent with discourses of positionality such as Rich's, Alcoff's, and Friedman's, that recognize gender as insufficient a category for identity analyses and urge for a consideration of the interplay between a number of elements — class, race, age, sexual orientation, ability — shaping one's material conditions.

This is not to say that she comes to disregard gender: on the contrary, her last two novels, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*, are still infused with discussions on femininity and femaleness. But by her last years Carter appears to have somewhat outgrown her early apprehension of identity, considerably dependent upon gender binaries and women as distinct victims of male (mis)representation, towards a more decentered and intricate construction of subjectivity, its representations and interpretations. She becomes notably abler to look, in Marcela de Oliveira e Silva Lemos's words, at "gender and beyond" (13). I choose Lemos's phrasing for its successful emphasis on that, in this approach, gender

remains a key constituent of subjectivity although no longer exclusively sufficient for its analysis, a claim that Friedman also exposes.¹⁷

Mainly in her later fiction, Carter seems adamantly opposed to the Cartesian “*Cogito ergo sum*” mentioned by Gagnier, and committed to unveiling identity as completely dependent upon a regulating context. It is context — geographical, social, temporal, corporeal — that concedes not only the options from which the bits and pieces of one’s performative, provisional identity might be chosen, but the codes through which the product is interpreted by others. As Naomi Scheman notes, we possess “emotions, beliefs, abilities and so on only in so far as they are embedded in a social web of interpretation that serves to give meaning to the bare data of inner experience and behavior” (qtd. in Jaggar 43). Scheman highlights that our states and behaviors are questions of meaning and interpretation, a position akin to Carter’s stress on the shaping force of discourse. For feminism, this challenge of some sort of organic authenticity opposes not only gender essentialism, but all essentializing notions of subjectivity that ultimately lead to abstract individualism and overlook structurally and systematically imposed restrictions to women’s agency.

Carter thus aligns this point of view to a notion of subject construction and interpretation analogous to writing and reading a text. Along Barthesian lines, these are processes restricted to the limitations of the author’s writing apparatus and, simultaneously, utterly liable to the limited interpretative modes of its reader, which are inescapably situated among many contextual axes. As Barthes writes in his autobiography:

Once I produce, once I write, it is the Text itself which (fortunately) dispossesses me of my narrative continuity. The Text can recount nothing; it takes my body elsewhere, far

¹⁷ Friedman does clarify that she uses the word “beyond” “in a special sense,” meaning that the category of gender should be “supplemented” rather than abandoned since “impasses in feminist theory result from their hegemony, not their existence” (10). Nevertheless, my view is that Lemos’s rephrasing dispenses that elucidation.

from my imaginary person, toward a kind of memoryless speech which is already the speech of the People, of the non-subjective mass (or of the generalized subject), even if I am still separated from it by my way of writing. (*Roland* 7)

Barthes's autonomous, capitalized Text does not belong to him but to a "non-subjective mass," the context establishing an interpretive repertoire. His attempt to write himself results not in an imitation of an actual self but in the creation of a (written) self, for the "I" is "imaginary" (59). In his words:

I do not say: "I am going to describe myself" but: "I am writing a text, and I call it R.B." I shift from imitation (from description) and entrust myself to nomination. Do I not know that, *in the field of the subject, there is no referent?* The fact ... is abolished in the signifier, because it immediately coincides with it: writing myself, ... I myself am my own symbol, I am the story which happens to me... (59, emphasis in original)

Along similar lines, in *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus* Carter seems to celebrate fiction over fact in the realm of "subject." In these novels, both reader and characters are denied any sort of access to a factual self, or definition of "self," hidden behind layers of representation. To echo Marina Warner, "Carter's characters have another self in wonderland, through the mirror, a not-self which defines them and gives them vitality, but also serves to mark the absence of the true self and, with that absence, the impossibility of that existence" (262). Ultimately, her characters possess no authentic selves but stories, those they tell and those they are told. These are soaked in allusions for so are fictions and, consequently, identities: different arrangements of assorted bits and pieces of what has already been written, textual "*bricolage*" (Haffenden 92).

Carter's representations of self and individuation also seem affected by Deleuze's postulation of "difference-in-itself," or "object = x" — an object determined by difference,

that “never ceases to circulate” and “seems to be of another nature” (*Desert* 183) —, and his notion of “Being” as a “univocal” (*Difference* 38) junction of “a virtual image and an actual image” (*Difference* 208-9): the actual — that which exists in materiality — and the virtual — that which has the potential to be actualized — woven together constitute the real. Hence, a possibility may be as real as an actualization, a conclusion that helps legitimate Carter’s suggestion of identity creation as analogous to fiction writing, and lying at the heart of her politicized postmodernism.

Deleuze’s repetition and its association with the eternal return are also focalized by the two novels’ endings, which in many ways resemble their starting points. I refer to Deleuze’s postulation that “that which is or returns has no prior constituted identity: things are reduced to the difference which fragments them, and to all the differences which are implicated in it and through which they pass” (*Difference* 67). Especially in *Nights at the Circus*, in which Fevvers stands for object = x from end to end, the final suggestion of an imminent repetition of difference seals the story’s Deleuzian discourse and hints at the subject’s “ceaseless change of fluidity” (19) that Friedman writes about. “Identity,” she argues, “depends upon a point of reference; as that point moves nomadically, so do the contours of identity, particularly as they relate to the structures of power;” (22) these endless shifts appear to be expressed in these two novels through a sense of circularity. As the stories’ endings recall their beginnings, they refuse to depict final and authentic versions of their characters, suggesting rather that other equally complex and eventful cycles, as those the novels describe, are bound to commence. In doing so, they also recall the need for a multiplicity of discourses as they reiterate the limitations of single narratives.

I am aware of comments such as Rosi Braidotti’s in *Patterns of Dissonance*, which Lauretis recalls, on the dangers of a French-poststructuralist theorization of “woman.” As

Lauretis writes in her review of Braidotti's work, in the writings by Deleuze, Lyotard, Derrida, and Michel Foucault on femininity there is a "consistent refusal ... to identify femininity with real women" (23). She accuses their approach of an extreme self-reflexivity that results in the denial of "sexual difference (and gender) as components of subjectivity in real women" and the subsequent denial of "the history of women's political oppression and resistance, as well as the epistemological contribution of feminism to the redefinition of subjectivity and sociality" (24). Braidotti charges these thinkers with "the old mental habit [of philosophers] of thinking the masculine as synonymous with universal," and "the mental habit of translating women into metaphor," (qtd. in Lauretis 24) as she identifies a tendency among them to establish woman as man's Other. While I strongly agree with Braidotti and Lauretis and acknowledge the limitations of these theories for gender conceptualization, I would like to restate that this chapter is concerned with a general conceptualization of identity and subjectivity, of which gender is only one component, so that the considerations to follow seek to contemplate individuals in general rather than "woman" exclusively.

For the feminist reader, I reiterate that Carter's postmodern foundation is what renders these novels fertile to Friedman's project of a positionality geographics. In defining her proposal of a "locational feminism," (5) Friedman argues for a "geography" of positionality: this new geography involves a move from the allegorization of the self in terms of organicism, stable centers, cores, and wholeness to a discourse of spatialized identities constantly on the move. Rhetorically speaking, geographics involves a shift from the discourses of romanticism to those of postmodernity, with a stop in between for the metaphors of early-twentieth-century modernism, whose emphasis on split selves and fragmentation looks back to the discourse of organic wholeness and forward to the discourse of spatialized flux ... The new geographics figures identity as a historically

embedded site, a positionality, a location, a standpoint, a terrain, an intersection, a network, a crossroads of multiply situated knowledges. It articulates not the organic unfolding of identity but rather the mapping of territories and boundaries, the dialectical terrains of inside/outside or center/margin, the axial intersections of different positionalities, and the spaces of dynamic encounter—the “contact zone,” the “middle ground,” the borderlands, *la frontera*. Moreover, this geographic discourse often emphasizes not the ordered movement of linear growth but the lack of solid ground, the ceaseless change of fluidity. (19)

In other words, a “geographics” of subjectivity is what enables it to be seen as “positionality,” as a place on the map, as well as the identification of borders and, henceforth, of both distinct territories and their liminal spaces, for “borders have a way of insisting on separation at the same time as they acknowledge connection” (3). Its space-oriented system stresses positionality as capable of and even bound to constant motion rather than the sense of fixity that goes by “identity.”

Friedman’s are precisely the terms in which I find it more advantageous to look at identity/subjectivity in *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus*, as Carter’s theoretical fabric results in a portrayal of identity that challenges and destabilizes far more than it describes or pinpoints. All features of Friedman’s project mentioned in the excerpt above are to be recognized in these two novels, from the understanding of “spatialized identities” to the identification of “spaces of dynamic encounter.”

Interestingly, these novels stress transience not only spatial but temporal. *Toyshop* begins with Melanie’s moving from her parents’ into her uncle’s home and *Nights* takes place first in London, then Saint Petersburg and at last Siberia. similarly, in *Toyshop* events unfold during Melanie’s turn from girl to woman and, in *Nights*, during the overtly marked turn from

the nineteenth to the twentieth century. In other words, these narratives stand at thresholds; both are set in a belabored liminality that is non-coincidental with their characters' shifting positionalities. This feature moreover helps amalgam and experimentation along — theoretical, discursive, aesthetic — since the stories unfold precisely on the borderlines where conventions do not comfortably belong and Carter's energetic de-doxification project is ever the more feasible.

Nicholson and Fraser envision a postmodern feminism that is typically experimental and multifarious, marked by explicit theorization. “Postmodern-feminist theory would be pragmatic and fallibilistic,” they propose, “tailor[ing] its methods and categories to the specific task at hand” and “using multiple categories when appropriate and forswearing the metaphysical comfort of a single feminist method or feminist epistemology” (35). They conclude that a postmodern-feminist theory “would look more like a tapestry composed of threads of many different hues than one woven in a single color;” (35) I argue that the study of identity in Carter well illustrates how her fiction materializes Nicholson and Fraser's project. In the following sections, then, I will examine the novels *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus* as to explore how this explicit and convoluted theorization of identity is developed in Carter's fiction.

2.1 Inherent Selves Versus Synthetic Identities in *The Magic Toyshop*

I have written in chapter one that Carter's earlier novels are generally darker, more pessimistic and, roughly speaking, not as aesthetically and theoretically complex as her later works. This is surely to be attested by a comparison between *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus*. But *Toyshop*, Carter's only second novel, does not lag far behind: while it does

present a simpler plot and fewer characters than *Nights*, I believe it is more dizzying a stride into the terrain of identity and representation than most of its critical readings reveal it to be. For one thing, by firmly factoring in the element of class as a primary determinant of positionality, it complicates the notion of identity and begins to propose a new mode of feminist readership that avoids, in Friedman's words, the "emphasis on sexual difference" and "privileging of gender" that, up until as far the 80s, predominated among feminist scholars (18).

The Magic Toyshop revolves around a violent transition in the protagonist's life. Soon after turning fifteen, Melanie is orphaned literally overnight, taken from her luxurious country home to the precarious South London flat of the Flowers, and hears from the housekeeper that she must become "a little mother" (28) to her younger siblings. Such change of scenery is no peaceful affair for her sense of identity, symbolically exploded through her shattering of her bedroom mirror. "Behind the mirror was nothing but the bare wood of her wardrobe:" (24) her orphaning renders her, temporarily, a no-thing, a tabula rasa to be filled with the yet unknown experiences of the new setting. The sense of identity loss is radical because so is the positionality shift: from daughter to mother, from luxury to deprivation, from freedom to domination, from the remote countryside to the hectic capital. There is no possibility of old Melanie's resistance through such extreme turnaround. She repudiates her transformation, unwilling to accept her new position and her own contingency, but to no success: reflecting upon her total and befuddling change of life after some time with the Flowers, she eventually cries: "but this can never be me, not really me," to which the narrator immovably adds: "but it was" (90).

Melanie's two-fold displacement, both physical and in terms of subjectivity, is stressed by the train depicted as a space of transition, the train journey as a liminal juncture

seemingly detached from Melanie's lived timeline: "The train was a kind of purgatory, a waiting time, between the known and completed past and the unguessable future which had not yet begun" (32). As Lemos observes, these "transitional spaces" — she names train stations and roads — cooperate with analyses of subjectivity such as Friedman's as tokens that "the fluidity, mutability, and relationality of identity go along with geographical movement" (94). The train therefore functions as a symbol of transition paralleling identity and positionality, deeming the first an effect of the latter.

One of Melanie's first inquiries in her uncle's home is how extreme a hindrance to her freedom and authenticity the impending money deprivation would signify: "But—the thought upset her—would there be any spare money, any pocket-money, for her own small, personal needs, shampoos and stockings and perhaps a little face-cream, that sort of thing?" (55) For a teenager who had only recently felt like "she was no longer a little girl" (1) and whose idea of femininity had by then consisted of obsessively imitating paintings in front of the mirror and adorning her own pubescent body, the deprivation of those aesthetic luxuries signifies a profound self-erasure. By extension, Melanie's predicament italicizes the elusiveness of gender as an identity descriptor, for not only does her mirrored femininity swings from gracious pre-Raphaelite models to Toulouse Lautrec's "wicked" (1) women — for femininity may greatly vary even within the same high art medium — Melanie becomes bound to discover, or to be passively presented with, new ways of existing as a female subject, once the means she used to know are absent. There is not, therefore, one "woman" for a given social/economic class, let alone one "woman" which traverses class.

Toyshop reflects upon class as an identity constituent especially through the ways in which financial deprivation restricts Melanie's self-expression, but also on the modes of femininity that are presented to her in these different scenarios. In her former bedroom, she

feels free to experiment with a variety of modes of femininity: from Pre-Raphaelite to Lautrecian women, Lucas Cranach's Venus, D. H. Lawrence's Lady Chatterley, and even "gift-wrapp[ing] herself for a phantom bridegroom" (2) contriving nightgowns out of her curtains. To quote from Linden Peach, at this moment "Melanie begins to explore her different potential identities and the contradictory roles that make up the female subject" (76). But in South London, the only woman in the house stands as a bitterly disappointing model of "woman" in contrast with Melanie's prior sense of possibility. Aunt Margaret, Uncle Philip's wife, is pale and "painfully thin," (40) besides having become mute on her wedding day. Around her husband, she becomes "frail as a pressed flower," appearing "too cowed by his presence even to look at him" (73). Her complete marital subjugation is symbolized by the choker Philip Flower made and forces her to wear every Sunday; a huge, heavy silver accessory in which the woman seems barely able to breathe or move her head (112-13).

In her tragic servitude, Aunt Margaret is an avatar of women's financially-ridden restraint. Uncle Philip's successful toyshop is the family's bread and butter, and he will not allow his wife, nor his niece, any activity leading to independence so as not to jeopardize his control. Because Aunt Margaret depends on her husband to meet her and her brothers' basic needs, she will silently acquiesce to whatever Philip's tyranny dictates. As I remarked in chapter one, Melanie's impression of Aunt Margaret is distinctively negative at first but changes gradually as Melanie perceives herself similarly trapped, until she comes to truly love and understand her aunt (195). Sympathy grows alongside Melanie's slow assimilation that her displacement to the same position as her aunt leads to a subjectivity similar to hers. What she perceives, ultimately, is her lack of an intrinsic self, one immune to the influence of the extrinsic power dynamics; she experiences the dismantling of the Cartesian subject through the recognition of herself as an object within a structure.

Aunt Margaret in turn calls attention for her description, from Melanie's perspective, as a contradictory figure, with her cadaveric face surrounded by blazing red hair, an oxymoronously "garrulous dumb" (48) woman who would have been talkative if she could. However subordinated to Uncle Philip, there is some stressed unreliability to her tameness, the disclosure of a potentiality she carries for a much distinct subjectivity than the one imposed on her by this scenario. Indeed, the last pages reveal that Aunt Margaret has a surprisingly transgressive affair with her own brother Francie: Philip is "a cuckold," Finn says to Melanie, "by his own brother-in-law, whom he never would have suspected" (195). Similarly, during Melanie's first night in the house, she ends up spying on the three siblings late at night and discovers that, when safe by themselves, they play music and dance together in pure joy — Aunt Margaret plays the flute, the phallic quality of which might entail her heightened agency among her siblings. And right before the novel's end, with Uncle Philip away, they all drink and party absentmindedly as if on holiday.

These important scenes reveal the fissure in Uncle Philip's system; the possibility, even if slight, of agency and negotiation within Philip's autocracy, for nothing in the world of Carter is permanent, neither is oppression. Not all is darkness in *The Magic Toyshop*: Carter's unflinching depiction of patriarchal abuse is not without its specks of hope, faint cracks in the master's ball of the world — to recall Uncle Philip "holding the ball of the world in his hand" (125) — through which subversive discourses and imprisoned potential identities might leak out.

Toyshop is markedly psychoanalytic,¹⁸ and the psychic is also central to the present theme. As I have mentioned in chapter one, Freud's Uncanny in *The Magic Toyshop*

¹⁸ For a more detailed reading of the novel's psychoanalytic discourse, see Linden Peach's *Angela Carter*. I will not delve into most aspects of this analysis since they are less connected with my purpose.

reinforces Melanie's psychic distress and growing alienation as her uncle's malignity grows apparent. But the Uncanny here also expresses Melanie's estrangement of herself during a violent shift in positionality, which she notes and resolves to fight against after her first night in the new household:

Melanie decided to adventure downstairs to the kitchen, where she had not been. She wanted to learn the new domestic geography as soon as she could ... She had to make herself at home, somehow. She could not bear to feel such a stranger, so alien, and somehow so insecure in her own personality, as if she found herself hard to recognise in these new surroundings. (58)

But she does not succeed. Soon after Melanie descends to the kitchen, the painting of the family dog is introduced, "an extraordinary painting," "executed with incredible precision," in which "every white hair seemed visible ... and you could see the grainy texture of the nose" (59). Finally, the similitude between the living dog and the painted one begins to frighten her: staring at the dog sat at the top of the stairs, she notices its "uncanny quality of whiteness" and is "very much startled" (83). While the dog watches her without a blink with its red eyes she wonders "insanely" whether that is "the real dog or the painted one" (83).

Apart from the dog, the abundant items of representation adorning the home, like the stuffed birds in the parlor, combined with those in the toyshop and with Uncle Philip's private puppets, produce a growing discomfort in Melanie that does not take long to overwhelm her. "There is too much," she settles, appalled by the sight of a fallen puppet that seems to resemble herself, "long, black hair down to the waist" (67). "This crazy world whirled about her," the observer narrator notes, "men and women, dwarfed by toys and puppets, where even the birds were mechanical and the few human figures went masked" (68). Melanie cannot withstand the force with which the simulacra-cluttered surroundings

destabilize her judgement, discoloring all the assumed truths she had previously believed — about herself, mostly — the inescapable indeterminacy of this new setting where nothing is “ordinary” or “expected” (60). Nothing is unarguably organic, intrinsic, or authentic; all is synthetic.

The above is another of Carter’s multilayered symbols. While it most superficially discloses Melanie’s dread of the new environment, at a deeper level it communicates her dread of the subject’s relativity; mostly her own, of course, but also of those around her who “[go] masked.” In short, it is the utter unreliability of the subject, the absence of solid, organic subjects behind synthetic masks, that Melanie refuses to register. At a yet deeper level, it conveys the unreliability of reality itself, the whole of reality as nothing but a clutter of representations, a series of simulacra with no original. In this sense, *Toyshop* is an early, somewhat modest exemplar of Carter’s Deleuzian tendencies that were to become blatantly pronounced in *Nights*: “things are simulacra themselves,” Deleuze writes, “simulacra are the superior forms, and the difficulty facing everything is to become its own simulacrum, to attain the status of a sign” (*Difference* 67). Melanie feels “withered and diminished” (60) before the realization that there is no stable, essential Melanie and, in this direction, the novel embodies the puzzle resulting from the postmodern refusal of a female essence, the feminist shift from commonality to multiplicity: the challenge to outline a political subject capable of “the status of a sign” in a period of intense relativization of identity.

Finn serves a crucial function in the novel’s discussion of identity and representation. In the first pages, he inquires why Melanie keeps her hair in “tortured plaits” (45) before taking the liberty to undo and comb her hair as he pleases. While Melanie feels “bitterly offended” (46) but cannot understand why, she does notice the “almost overpowering” (46) smell of paint he exhales as he alters her looks, which I read as a typically Carteresque mark

of the male privilege in the representational dynamics that regulate the social. Finn is a skilled artist, whose paintings and miniatures are astonishingly detailed and lifelike — the startling dog painting, for instance, is one of his creations. In that he is a master of representation, like several of Carter’s male characters — Uncle Philip, Melanie’s brother Jonathon, *Shadow Dance*’s Honeybuzzard, Carter’s Baudelaire in “Black Venus,” the puppet-maker in “The Loves of Lady Purple” — he manifests the understanding of human practice as what Carter calls “social fictions,” (“Notes” 38) which grants him power to design Melanie according to his own desire as he would one of his paintings. Finn’s smell of paint also importantly suggests that he, too, is a discursive creation, his identity just as designed as Melanie’s is to be. No more authentic than Melanie, he is therefore not naturally entitled to exert authority over her.

For my purpose, the significance of this scene lies in the way it establishes identity as something to be crafted, not found. But achieving the power to craft identity requires the understanding, in the first place, that it is to be crafted; the embrace of the instability of truth, of the discomfiting lack of an original behind the artwork. In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon concludes her reading of Carter’s “The Loves of Lady Purple” by stating that:

as Carter’s story suggests, there is a more basic objection to [Jean Baudrillard’s] assumption that it is (or was) ever possible to have unmediated access to reality:¹⁹ have we ever known the ‘real’ except through representations? We may see, hear, feel, smell, and touch it, but do we *know* it in the sense that we give meaning to it? In Lisa Tickner’s

¹⁹ Hutcheon explains that, “in an article entitled ‘The precession of simulacra,’ Baudrillard argued that today the mass media have neutralized reality by stages: first they *reflected* it; then they *masked* and perverted it; next they had to *mask its absence*; and finally they produced instead the *simulacrum* of the real, the destruction of meaning and of all relation to reality. Baudrillard’s model has come under attack for the metaphysical idealism of its view of the ‘real,’ for its nostalgia for pre-mass-media authenticity, and for its apocalyptic nihilism” (*The Politics of Postmodernism*, 33, emphasis in original).

succinct terms, the real is ‘*enabled to mean* through systems of signs organized into discourses on the world’ (Tickner 1984: 19). This is obviously where the politics of representation enters for, according to the Althusserian view, ideology is a production of representations. Our common-sense presuppositions about the ‘real’ depend upon how that ‘real’ is described, how it is put into discourse and interpreted. There is nothing natural about the ‘real’ and there never was.... (33, emphasis in original)

On the same basis, in *Toyshop* Carter seems to argue that one major factor imprisoning Melanie in passivity is her stubborn faith in an essential self. In her proud refusal to accept the instability of herself, Melanie cringes at representation, fails to credit the unnaturalness of the “real” and ideology as “a production of representations,” and consequently denies herself the means to engage in the manipulation of the symbolic order enveloping her. Unknowingly, she declines the freedom to paint her own portrait, write her own story, when she refuses to accept her condition as such.

This point promptly establishes *Toyshop* as a precursor of the anti-myth discourse that was to become Carter’s trademark. Melanie’s persistence on intrinsic selves is vividly an instance of the *Sadeian Woman*’s argument that women must not let themselves be consoled by myth, however embellishing they might be. Melanie’s hardships reveal essentializing discourses as falsely comforting and obscurely domesticating.

The novel’s ending is fairly chaotic. Uncle Philip comes home earlier from a business trip and finds his wife in the arms of her own brother. A fire begins in the kitchen while Melanie and Finn flee through the roof. They watch the flames engulf the house and wonder if the others have managed to escape, then look at each other “in a wild surmise” (200). While Carter makes a point of asserting nothing about Melanie’s future, another approaching displacement is announced. The Flower home is gone, and Melanie is bound to find yet

another place to live, a new geography to get used to with new dynamics in which she will find herself positioned. As Uncle Philip may not survive the fire and Melanie and Finn begin to engage romantically shortly before the incident, there is the possibility that she goes to live with Finn, perhaps marry him and become a housewife; or maybe she will return to school, or start a job, and gain some independence from male figures.

Through the ending, one thing only is properly revealed: Melanie's perennial becoming, which brings back Deleuze when he claims that "returning is ... the only identity" (*Difference* 41) and that "becoming is a verb with a consistency all its own; it does not reduce to, or lead back to, 'appearing,' 'being,' 'equaling,' or 'producing'" (*Thousand* 239). "What is real is the becoming itself," Deleuze and Guattari write, "the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes ... a becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself" (*Thousand* 238). In my view, *The Magic Toyshop* functions as a perfect bridge between Deleuze and Guattari's ontology of returning/becoming and Friedman's geographics of positionality. Melanie's experience in this particular position — a young, orphaned girl under the roof of her despotic uncle —, through which she so eagerly yet unsuccessfully tries to maintain the self with which she left her parents' home, culminates in the obsolescence of the need for the self potentially generated by and for this experience, and in the indication that yet another self, another Melanie, shall be generated by and for her upcoming position. The itinerancy of the subject — geographical, social, financial, sexual — dictates its state of becoming. It is important, however, that also Finn looks ahead in surmise, and also his future is uncertain, as becoming in *Toyshop* is not a state exclusive to women.

"This can never be me, not really me," Melanie cries in horror (90). But the postmodern reader would soon recall Barthes: "how do you know? What is the 'you' you might or might not look like? Where do you find it—by which morphological or expressive

calibration? Where is your authentic body?" (*Roland*) For Carter, as for Barthes, there is no authentic self but a "written" self, an image, a representation whose original is but imaginary. Immersed in ideology and its interpretive repertoire, the subject's challenge is therefore to acknowledge its inescapable insertion in a context and to become familiarized with its symbolic order so as to begin to overturn it, similarly to Louis Althusser's argument that "from within ideology we have to outline a discourse which tries to break with ideology, in order to dare to be the beginning of a scientific (i.e. subject-less) discourse on ideology" (*Lenin* 175).

In writing herself into the milieu around her, Melanie will not find means external to the cultural apparatus of that milieu: her context determines her possibilities. Even if the illusion of choice exists, these choices are also dictated and limited by predominant discourses, as well as the ways in which her choices can be read by others. Lawrence M. Friedman's writes that "choice," when it comes to subjectivity, "is often an illusion ... [people] choose their politics, their dress, their manners, their very identity, from a menu they had no hand in writing" (240). What is left for Melanie is the abdication of the idea of a solid, organic authenticity towards the strategic embrace of synthetic identity; only through the acceptance of identity as crafted rather than found could she engage in the creation of herself and attempt to stand as the inauguration of a discourse subversive of the order of discourses that oppress her. An embrace, however, requiring the acceptance of her contingency to the continuous dislocations among the many axes of the geographical, social, political, and historical map on which she becomes rather than is.

2.2 The Textual Self and Its Negotiations in *Nights at the Circus*

If Melanie in *The Magic Toyshop* fails to detect and conquer the representational means through which she could negotiate with materiality, *Nights at the Circus*'s Fevvers is her perfect counterpart. Differently from *Toyshop* where the need for self-making is only hinted at, *Nights* plainly revels in it. And, as opposed to the somber pessimism of *Toyshop*'s male artists crafting women's reality, in *Nights* we have the freedom of identity construction epitomized by the female protagonist, while her male peer is the one still having to internalize it.

Nights at the Circus is the story of Sophie Fevvers, a supposedly winged woman who makes a living as a circus trapeze artist. The story begins when Jack Walser, a U.S. correspondent, is sent to London in order to interview Fevvers so as to gather enough information to reveal her as one of the "Great Humbugs of the World" (11). Walser is "a man of action," (10) as he would describe himself, and not at all prone to introspection. An apt journalist, he is a fact-checker, "a connoisseur of the tall tale," (11) bearing "eyes the cool grey of scepticism" (10). Journalistic skepticism in the novel symbolizes an impracticable search for irrefutable facts, the persistence of which blinds Walser to the possibility of designing realities. Contrary to Carter's domineering male characters, Walser is a man of very little fictive creativity; it shows through the way he presents himself to the world, as described by the narrator:

there remained something a little unfinished about him ... There were scarcely any of those little, what you might call *personal* touches to his personality, as if his habit of suspending belief extended even unto his own being ... it was almost as if he himself were an *objet trouvé*, for, subjectively, himself he never found, since it was not his *self* which he sought. (10, emphasis in original)

Fevvers, on the other hand, is anything but neutral or impromptu. Her name, her size, her appetite, her loud, metallic voice, her extravagant behavior, and, needless to mention, her wings, all is so unusual and grand about her that “there [is] enough of her to go round, and some to spare” (12). During her first conversations with Walser, the novel’s third-person narration shifts constantly to Fevvers’s voice so that most of Part I is narrated by her; from the beginning, she makes a point of being the one telling her own story. In Eva Aldea’s words, Fevvers “is both the subject and the object of her own narration; it is clear from the outset ... that she is making her own reality ... in order to find a place in the world, a definition of herself.” (65) through Fevvers’s demand of narration, Carter again analogizes identity construction and positional negotiation to fiction writing, performance — she is in fact a professional performer — and representational manipulation.

But the narrative shifts serve yet another purpose, together with frequent time-lapses, fragmentation, and the overall absurdity of the plot: they concoct a space where nothing is logical and all is possible, where old discourses can be challenged and new ones can be proposed. As Helen Stoddart explains, these elements reveal Carter’s desire “to destabilize completely” as they “[set] an atmosphere of unreality” that immediately “liquifies all solid truths and allows everything to be questioned and reconstructed” (17). For Stoddart, it is the novel’s “absurdity and confusion” that allows for “such a deep questioning of our values ... so as to begin putting the pieces together from scratch,” (17) and the main device in Carter’s illogical reassessment of values is Fevvers.

Fevvers’s very biology immediately establishes her as a disturbance to the order. Not even her birth was as expected: hatched, not born, she claims to have no navel. Her existence is challenging of the natural order of things from the start, which is also the story’s start as Fevvers herself opens the novel:

‘Lor’ love you sir!’ Fevvers sang out in a voice that clanged like dustbin lids. ‘As to my place of birth, why, I first saw light of day right here in smoky old London, didn’t I! Not billed the “Cockney Venus”, for nothing, sir, though they could just as well ‘ave called me “Helen of the High Wire”, due to the unusual circumstances in which I come ashore — for I never docked via what you might call the *normal channels*, sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy, was *hatched*.’ (7, emphasis in original)

Fevvers’s hatching opening the narrative represents the very story’s inauguration of a new concept of being to be assimilated by the reader. As Sarah Sceats puts it, “the literal impossibility of [Fevvers’s] existence is of no matter; if we are to read the novel, or Walser to engage with her story, it is simply necessary to accept the premise of a six-foot-tall bird-woman” (87). Moreover, her frequently stressed powerful voice, her compelling rhetoric, and the vividness of her reproduced cockney accent are some of Carter’s gathered strategies to transform Fevvers’s narration into an overpowering vortex of suspension of disbelief. To the same effect, she is vehemently materialized as if the whole environment around her were an extension of herself. As when Walser accidentally disturbs a pile of love letters:

His attempts to get rid of the damn’ glass only succeeded in dislodging a noisy torrent of concealed *billets doux*, bringing with them from the mantelpiece a writhing snakes’ nest of silk stockings, green, yellow, pink, scarlet, black, that introduced a powerful note of stale feet, final ingredient in the highly personal aroma, ‘essence of Fevvers’, that clogged the room. (9)

She smells, expels gas at will, and dominates the room by extension through belongings marked by the organicity of her body. Fevvers’s stressed corporeality and the sovereignty of her presence in the dressing room challenge the conspicuously elusive and fabricated nature

of her persona and, together with her sensuous oratory, render her an irresistible pull towards the suspension of disbelief whose rejection initially defines Walser.

As Fevvers shares her vertiginous life story with Walser, we are introduced to a number of different characters, mostly women, of all possible categories. As a newly-hatched baby, Fevvers was adopted by Ma Nelson, a brothel owner, and raised among prostitutes with whom the reader becomes familiar. One of them is Lizzie, who later becomes Fevvers's surrogate mother and accompanies her throughout the novel. After reaching teenagehood in the brothel, during which she fully develops wings, Fevvers is taken by the obscure Madame Schreck to a House of Horrors where men go to watch and touch the women "freaks" albeit no sexual acts are allowed. Madame Schreck may be an aberration herself, as she appears to have no skin covering her bones, and apart from Fevvers, the House of Horrors features a hermaphrodite, a four-eyed woman, a dwarf woman, and a woman who seldom awakes.

It is noteworthy about these women, Fevvers included, that their stories are telling of an important axis of subjectivity, that of physical ability. These women's anatomy greatly determines their levels of agency, their means of livelihood, which institutions they inhabit, how they experience the world around them and how they are perceived by others and by themselves. As their life stories revolve around their physical deviation, bodily difference transcends the status of occasional oddity to be rendered a major marker of positionality.

Moreover, Fevvers tells hers and these women's stories with detail, warmth and sensibility, confronting dominantly accepted signifiers of "woman" as she humanizes and dignifies these unfamiliar beings. A Sarah Sceats has already pointed out, these women are only "freakish" from the limited perspective of the stereotyped world, as they very naturally develop supportive and fraternal relations among themselves (87). These freakshow existences are therefore central to Carter's postmodern-feminist discourse as they require the

reader's assimilation of the deviant, blurring the boundaries of normalcy so that the marginal can blend in. In Shima Sadat Mirmusa's words, "calling great attention to the peripheral classes of people, Carter presents them as the figures of authority well-deserved to reside side by side with those traditionally believed to be the dominant group of the society" (141). Similarly, Hutcheon mentions freaks in general and, more specifically, *Nights*'s "multi-ringed circus" as "the pluralized and paradoxical metaphor for a decentered world where there is only ex-centricity," so that the novel combines "this freak-circus framework with contestings of narrative centering" (*Poetics* 61). In other words, these women stand as Lyotard's *petit récits*, revealing a diversity of discourses otherwise smothered by dehumanizing metanarratives of "woman."

But what Fevvers challenges is not only "woman:" she also denaturalizes "natural," as she and her fellow "freaks" are "unnatural" beings whom her impeccable persuasiveness impels Walser, and the reader, to absorb. "For what is 'natural' and 'unnatural', sir," she asks Walser, and continues: "the mould in which the human form is cast is exceedingly fragile. Give it the slightest tap with your fingers and it breaks" (61). Passages like this one reveal that Carter's destabilizing, de-doxifying impulse does not end at gender. Fevvers extends her ontological skepticism from "woman" to virtually all human categories, making room for an apprehension of "identity" capable of encompassing all possible diversity. Fevvers herself is an emblem of such skepticism since, as Janine Root notes, "her obvious sign of difference — her wings — is not a *normal* sign of difference" (13, emphasis in original). Also, Fevvers has both wings and arms instead of wings substituting for arms, which Walser understands as "the impossible made doubly unlikely — the impossible squared" (15). Or, in Eva Aldea's Deleuzian terms,

[Fevvers] is a becoming in the Deleuzian sense, recalling that for Deleuze, becoming is never an imitation, but two things entering a zone of imperceptibility ... Fevvers has both arms and wings ... [but] she doesn't imitate the bird in flight ..., meandering through the air, somersaulting as no bird, nor human trapeze artist could conceivably do. She is an element divergent from the laws of nature, a line of flight traversing the series of both the human and the avian.

She is the object = x of the text, something she, in fact, 'performs' by being anything to anyone that sees her ... as an object = x, she is not bound by any convergent system such as the State or the laws of nature, and is, as it were, autoproduktive. (65-6)

From a Deleuzian vantage point, Fevvers is difference-in-itself: doubly different, she inhabits a zone between woman and bird claiming for imperceptibility, to be read as a concept "with a consistency all its own." Her double unnaturalness establishes identity as "autoproduktive" in that, by not belonging to any "normal" order, she commences her own. She symbolizes Carter's ambition of the "creation of the means of expression for an infinitely greater variety of experience than has been possible heretofore, to say things for which no language previously existed," ("Notes" 42) that is, the effort to challenge and deconstruct the prevailing discourses that regulate materiality.

Also the circus, where Fevvers heads from Madame Shreck's establishment, features two very peculiar women. Mignon is an underprivileged fifteen-year-old with "an exceedingly short memory" (141) that is the only thing saving her from despair, for her story is an accumulation of all sorts of privation and (especially male) abuse. The enigmatic Princess of Abyssinia, a piano player and tiger tamer, is also voiceless, but seemingly by choice. She is tough and unfriendly, unwilling to communicate. French-speaking and extremely dark-skinned, she is emblematically foreign and her past is unknown; only her

scar-covered body hints, literally — for the scars were made by her own tigers — and symbolically, at a narrative of hardship and pain. Eventually, Mignon and the Princess become a romantic pair. As the narrator observes when the two first meet, they were just the same height, both little things, frail, one as fair as the other was dark, twinned opposites. And both possessed that quality of exile, of apartness from us, although the Princess had chosen her exile amongst the beasts, while Mignon's exile had been thrust upon her. (153-4)

In the circus, where Mignon was initially a hanger-on, she begins to sing to the Princess's piano music: the two incommunicable women, in their twin opposition, find in music a common language.

It should also be noted that Mignon is liberated from her oppressor as she engages in a homosexual relationship. Vera and Olga's romance is similarly important in the escape from the panopticon, as their exchanged glances and love messages initiate the movement that ultimately liberate all prisoners. I will better examine lesbianism in the next chapter, but the importance of sexual orientation as a constituent of identity is maximized as these encounters engender characters' major positionality shifts.

About Mignon, I endorse Helen Stoddart's reading that she "demonstrate[s] the worst and most sadistic excesses of [exploitation] involving the complete destruction of power and identity" (121). Her short memory and inability to communicate may be post-traumatic symptoms, while symbolizing the utter obliteration of her agency. Let us not forget that, for Carter, "language is power" ("Notes" 43) and the past is where one can "find the old lies on which new lies have been based" (41): deprived of language and history, two keywords in Carter's feminist project, Mignon is virtually helpless as an abused woman.

As to the Princess of Abyssinia, I would argue that her silence functions as to maximize her difference, as a black and probably an immigrant or refugee, to which the element of wildness to her contributes. Carter is probably emphasizing race and nationality, through language, as a hindrance to communication, complicity, and even empathy among women. The Princess is purposely detached from all other characters, even female characters to a certain extent, because her positionality as a foreigner is utterly discrepant from theirs: her values, concerns and needs might be incommunicably different from those of the others. In other words, perhaps the point is basically that her context matters: the particularity of her history is not erased by her commonalities with the other women characters. The mysteriousness of her origins materialize in the obstacles for communication placed by difference; she cannot be known for her difference cannot be communicated by the means available to, for instance, Fevvers. “Abyssinia” in her title emphasizes the abyss between her and her fellow circus artists, even her fellow women. At the same time, she does connect to Mignon, as if a bridge was finally found — or erected — along the abyss of their distance. If we think back to Friedman,

bridges signify the possibility of passing over. They also mark the fact of separation and the distance that has to be crossed. Borders between individuals, genders, groups, and nations erect categorical and material walls between identities. Identity is in fact unthinkable without some sort of imagined or literal boundary. But borders also specify the liminal space in between, the interstitial site of interaction, interconnection, and exchange. (3)

Along with Friedman’s theorization, difference is what separates Mignon and the Princess from the others and, simultaneously, what brings both together; their love is built on the very terrain of difference that is their common trait.

Walsler, too seduced by the exoticness of Fevvers, decides to accompany the circus in its journeys, from London to St. Petersburg and then Tokyo, as a clown. “I need to have my sense of wonder polished up again,” (90) he tells his boss, and indeed, as soon as he finds himself covered with clown makeup, a notable change ensues. Rereading the first story he typewrites in St. Petersburg, he notices: “the city precipitated him towards hyperbole; never before had he bandied about so many adjectives. Walsler-the-clown, it seemed, could juggle with the dictionary with a zest that would have abashed Walsler-the-foreign-correspondent” (98). And after presenting his clown persona to Colonel Kearney, the circus owner, for a successful probation, he feels “the beginnings of a vertiginous sense of freedom ... the freedom that lies behind the mask, within dissimulation, the freedom to juggle with being, and, indeed, with the language which is vital to our being, that lies at the heart of burlesque” (103). Walsler’s enthusiasm derives from his newly acquired perception of the possibility of self-making, of identity as a composed performance, and also the power of language as a tool with which to create rather than report. His sudden change in language is both a product of this perception and a means, now available to him, of more eloquently expressing his existence into the world. His detached fact-checking character begins to dissolve as he becomes able to actively engage in the convolution of textually and performatively constructed subjectivities.

The sense of “freedom” experienced by Walsler-the-clown is another echo of Deleuze when he writes about “the freedom of the non-mediated ground, the discovery of a ground behind every other ground,” (*Difference* 85) that is, the creation of new concepts made possible by the realization that there are no essentially real concepts to represent or accord to. In Deleuzian fashion, what the novel ultimately does is liquify the hierarchy between actual and virtual, so that the virtual — the possibility of actualization — is as much part of the real

as the actual — that which is actualized. The virtual here stands, of course, for fiction and performance, that which not necessarily is but expresses the conjecturing of what could be.

It seems therefore that in *Nights* Carter stresses fiction as a central component of materiality similarly to how Deleuze stresses virtuality as part of the real. To establish communication between the virtual and the actual, Deleuze writes in *The Logic of Sense*, is where “our greatest freedom lies — freedom by which we develop and lead the [virtual] to its completion and transmutation, and finally become masters of actualizations” (qtd. in Aldea 21). Actualization mastery is thus achieved when the strict sense of mimesis is lost; when actualizations are no longer limited by prevailing models of “actual,” a reasoning that Fevvers embodies in all possible ways.

Right before the circus leaves St. Petersburg, however, Fevvers has a date with the Grand Duke at his mansion that begins to implode the novel’s own logic. She agrees to meet the Duke out of financial interest — perhaps Fevvers’s most stressed concern —, but he unsettles her from the beginning, first with a life-size ice sculpture of her in the middle of his study, then by declaring his love for “toys — marvellous and unnatural artefacts,” followed by a wink at her (186-7). Quite surprisingly, she becomes offended by how the Grand Duke diminishes her to a concept and seems to steal her from an intrinsic value: “if all the women in the world had wings, he’d keep his jewels to himself ... My value to him is as a *rara avis*” (185). Essentially, what she perceives is the subjection of her created identity to the interpretive modes of her reader, the way in which her finely calculated performance rests unable to warrant a desired interpretation. She is disconcerted by the lack of authority she has over the wrought text of herself once it circulates; or, in Barthes’s words, by that “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (“Death” 148).

Eva Aldea interestingly reads the circus space as a metaphor for “a strict hierarchy: circus manager, audience, performers, with the latter in turn divided into men, women, animals,” where the space “is striated to reflect these divisions in a sort of inverted cone of concentric circles (the structure of the circular stage) where the further away from the centre you are, the higher up in the hierarchy you find yourself” (64). To one as high up in the hierarchy — as distant from her at the center of the circus stage as the Grand Duke standing afar in the audience — the “personal touches” of Fevvers’s persona go amiss, for there is so little shared “history, biography, psychology” (“Death” 148) between them, standing so socially apart, for his reading to be in keeping with the intended terms of her writing.

Fevvers’s uneasiness grows tensely as the ice sculpture melts, which I view as her very sense of selfhood melting before her eyes. But the Duke aggravates her discomfort when he reveals a series of egg-shaped designs — a reference to Fevvers’s delivery — some of which he opens up to reveal smaller designs within them. The first egg has “an inner carapace of mother-of-pearls” inside, “which, in turn, opens to reveal a spherical yolk of hollow gold. Inside the yolk, a golden hen. Inside the hen, a golden egg” and, inside that egg, “the tiniest of picture frames” bearing a miniature depiction of Fevvers on the trapeze (189). Another egg is opened to reveal a miniature tree with fruits; the Duke splits open one fruit, and “the smallests of all possible birds” flies out, singing: “only a bird in a gilded cage” (190). Fevvers feels “more and more vague, less and less her own mistress” (190) as the Duke symbolically undresses her of all her layers of representation until there is only a very diminutive Fevvers left. He finally disposes her of her sword, the phallus she carries around — the symbol of her understanding and maneuver of the symbolic order — shortly after which her attention moves to the egg containing a model train, the Trans-Siberian Express. She claims she wants to keep that one egg, but the Duke has another one ordered especially for her: it contains a bird cage,

but no bird inside. In refusal to become the bird to that cage, she manages to escape during an instant of distraction by the Duke, and hops on the train where Lizzie, Walser, and the remaining circus staff await.

Fevvers runs from two potentially dangerous men in the novel, Rosencreutz — a client at the House of Horrors — and the Duke. But in the second episode, as the Duke appears as less of a threat to Fevvers's physical integrity than Rosencreutz who plainly plans to murder her, it becomes more evident that, at another level, she is running from his textual appropriation of her. As the novel progresses and the setting becomes, in Magali Cornier Michael's words, "increasingly foreign and remote," it moves farther "away from any stable ground of reality and toward the ever more fantastic" (495). The sense of groundlessness heightened by this movement seems, in scenes like this, to render the novel's feminist debate more abstract, allowing for more markedly postmodern standpoints, such as the problematization of the dichotomy between reality and fiction and the resulting apprehension of textual, authorial subjectivities. In running from the Duke, Fevvers escapes not purely the possible, material consequences of her subjugation to a male despot but, in a more abstract level, his desire to define and diminish her; to fix her identity and turn her into mere object, no longer subject, of her own story. Again, as in *Toyshop*, the transitional space of the train is where subjectivities can be melted down and remodelled; the train Fevvers jumps onto marks the fluidity of identity she chooses over a fixed and belittling perception of herself, suggested by the Duke's cage, the tiny birds, and the tiny Fevvers. In having Fevvers run to a train, Carter exposes a great portion of the mechanism behind the domineering dynamics of heterosexual relations, which has to do not only with material restrictions to subjectivity but, in a more abstract plan, to its very conceptualization: control is exerted by representing the female identity as diminutive and controllable/controlled, in a movement authorized by

favorable positionalities resulting from combined factors — in the Duke’s case, not only gender, but also class and social status.

But if the novel seems to contend that fiction and reality are ultimately indistinct, this sequence of scenes comes to halt such conclusion. Fevvers’s powerlessness around the Duke uncovers social hierarchy as that which traces the limit of self-creation and performance. At the center of stage, to quote again from Aldea, Fevvers has “a specified identity” that is passive and objectified, based on a relation imposed from outside ... On stage ... Fevvers’s identity is specified by those who come to see her: as angel, as freak, as impostor, as sex-object and so on, all predicated on the order of the circus-State where the specifying gaze always belongs to those further up the hierarchy: the audience and the man. (64)

Fevvers’s crafted persona and professional performance cannot persuade the Duke because the real world in which her fiction is consumed remains ruled by wealthy men who detain, on top of material riches, a great deal of authority over the representational domain and its symbols. As Anthony Wilden has famously proposed, “whoever defines the code or the context, has control ... and all answers which accept that context abdicate the possibility of redefining it” (294). Fevvers’s escape is an attempt to redefine code and context through resisting the Duke’s authority. So the issue of reality versus fiction in *Nights at the Circus* by no means ends in nihilistic relativism but in a disquieting double-pull that evades answers and leaves escape routes open while not flinching at reality and its constraints.

The trip is soon interrupted by an abrupt crash, after which very little of the locomotive remains. The passengers are left scattered across the desert, Fevvers and Walser are separated, and Walser loses his memory with the impact: “all his previous experiences were rendered null and void. If those experiences had never ... modified his personality to

any degree, now they lost all potential they might have had for re-establishing Walser's existential credibility" (252). Walser is, like Melanie in *Toyshop*, rendered a *tabula rasa* for an intense subjectivity shift to occur; and the whiteness and bareness of the desert function as a mirror to his blank mental state. Also in terms of the spatial symbology, Aldea reads the train as representing a segmentation of identities, based on social and financial hierarchies, "a mini-State dividing people and animals in ordered segments," (65) and as it collapses, so do Fevvers's income and performance — she loses, in Aldea's words, "her main way of creating identity," (66) besides having one of her wings broken. The destruction of the train therefore forces the characters to reshape their identities through other means: for Fevvers and Walser, through love. As Aldea writes:

Walser starts off comfortable in his role as an adventurous, independent man who possesses a specifying gaze both in his role as a man and as a journalist: he writes down and thus determines the identities of the objects he investigates. Carter has him go through a complete becoming-other in his madness, in order to allow him to emerge a 'new man'; an identity he receives by subjecting himself to Fevvers's gaze. (66)

The trainwreck is the apex of Walser's profound reassessment of the nature of reality and of identities, propitiated by his contact with Fevvers and the circus atmosphere — the "Ludic Game," as Colonel Kearney phrases it (100), in which Walser discovers the freedom of self-making.

But the experience is distressing for both Walser and Fevvers. Walser is rescued by a Siberian Shaman and chaotically introduced to the man's doctrine while in a process similar to rebirth, as indicated by the first words he learns in the Shaman's language: hunger, thirst, and sleep (260). The Shaman believes Walser to be a supernatural envoy, and Walser's faint memories of his past life that he poorly shares in the new dialect the Shaman understands as

visions to be interpreted. In other words, after skeptical Walser-the-journalist is obliterated by memory loss, the reborn Walser is soon enough exposed to the Shaman's extraordinary mysticism and very differently instructed as to the fact/fiction dichotomy:

[The Shaman] made no categorical difference between seeing and believing ... there existed no difference between fact and fiction; instead, a sort of magic realism. Strange fate for a journalist, to find himself in a place where no facts, as such, existed! Not that Walser would have known what a journalist was, any more. He was increasingly visited by memories ... but his memories were incomprehensible to him until the Shaman interpreted them. (260)

What this passage brings to my mind is Hayden White's concept of "emplotment," or "the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot structures" (83). Through the Shaman, Carter depicts reality and identity in terms very resembling of White's historical text: in needing the Shaman's interpretive abilities to assign meaning to his memories, Walser embodies White's argument that "we do not live stories, even if we give our lives meaning by retrospectively casting them in the form of stories" (90). As Walser becomes deeply impoverished of the previously learned values with which he would, even if unconsciously, weave narratives from isolated events or evaluate pre-existing narratives, his inability to interpret and evaluate his own memories echoes White's claim that, "as potential elements of a story, historical events are value-neutral. Whether they find their place finally in a story that is tragic, comic, romantic, or ironic ... depends upon the historian's decision to configure them according to the imperatives of one plot structure" (90).

Regarding White's theorization on events and narratives and how they relate to identity, Friedman follows a similar line of reasoning when she calls narrative "a

multiplicitous form of meaning-making thought” (8). For Friedman, “identity is literally unthinkable without narrative. People know who they are through the stories they tell about themselves and others. As ever-changing phenomena, identities are themselves narratives of formation, sequences moving through space and time as they undergo development, evolution, and revolution” (8). At the same time, White’s emphasis on that these narratives are assigned certain tones depending on the “plot structure” to which they resign stresses their dependence on pre-existing cultural modes. This thinking certainly recalls Barthes’s “speech of the People, ... the non-subjective mass” to which the open-ended text is delivered and of which blank Walser is temporarily excluded from. Walser’s need for someone else — someone immersed in a given culture — to construct his narrative for him while he is an ahistorical and culturally alien being testifies for the predominance of culture over intrinsic authenticity on the matter of subjectivity. This is the perspective from which Walser is to rebuild his sense of selfhood: identity as an endlessly written narrative subjected to external interpretation, which in turn is inevitably oriented by a prevailing cultural logic. Moreover, the centrality of his adventure to the novel demonstrates that Carter’s postmodern/poststructuralist treatment of subjectivity is not restricted to “woman,” as if only women were beings of fluid identity and textual selves, to recall Braidotti’s and Laetitia’s critiques.

Simultaneously, Fevvers’s larger-than-life persona begins to shatter as she is deprived of her wardrobe and cosmetics, of her paying audience, and notably, of Walser’s fascinated gaze upon her. She feels that “every day, the tropic bird look[s] more and more like the London sparrow” (271) as her hair goes back to its original brown hue and also her feathers are darkened as she moults. “The young American it was,” she muses, “who kept the whole story of the old Fevvers in his notebooks; she longed for him to tell her she was true. She

longed to see herself reflected in all her remembered splendour in his grey eyes:" (273). Amidst an identity crisis produced by the dispossession of her material resources, her competence as her own story-teller is severely weakened to the point that she needs Walser to re-tell her story for her. Walser's story, his reading and writing of Fevvers, is moreover what she clings to in order to avoid a frightening positionality transition; the challenge of rewriting oneself.

In the final pages, when the couple reunites, Fevvers goes quickly from "the worst crisis of her life" — "Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?" (290) — to her usual confidence as she spreads her wings and sees Walser's eyes "fixed upon her with astonishment, with awe, the eyes that told her who she was" (290). While I partially agree with Eva Aldea regarding the optimism of the novel's final message — that Fevvers has at least, as Aldea puts it, "chosen her performance and her spectator" (66) —, I find it essential to emphasize that the novel does not treat identity construction as an area of infinite possibilities. Again Lawrence M. Friedman's words — that "[people] choose their ... identity ... from a menu they had no hand in writing" (240) — apply, in the sense that Fevvers's sense of selfhood remains largely, if not entirely, dependent upon an external approbation, hence invariably liable to pre-established modes of reading. Therefore, I find it risky to go cheerfully along with the idea that Fevvers would be, in Carter's terms, a being "unburdened with a past," ("Notes" 41) since the frailty of her persona when audience-deprived and her very dependence upon an external confirmation of identity immediately insert her in an interpretive web of values out of her control, especially in that her chosen audience is male. Ultimately, she does not dismantle the limitations of identity and subjectivity but negotiates with them as well as possible.

The story ends with Fevvers and Walser in a room, reunited as far as they can be considered the same subjects after all, especially Walser. Fevvers retakes her life story, evoking the couple's first encounter that opens the novels. She clarifies which bits of her story were tricks and assures him that the rest was true, after which he asks her one final question:

'Fevvers, only the one question ... why did you go to such lengths, once upon a time, to convince me you were the "only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world"?'

She began to laugh.

'I fooled you, then!' she said. 'Gawd, I fooled you!'

She laughed so much the bed shook. (294)

Her raucous laughter spreads great distances, contaminating everyone it reaches like an "infection" (294). Her enigmatic answer and laughter also mirror the story's beginning, with Fevvers "guffaw[ing] uproariously" (7) and Walser trying to grapple with the mystery of her nature. The novel ultimately refuses to define her and even revels, through her laughter, in her persistent indeterminacy, celebrating fluidity rather than mourning comforting hegemonic notions of intrinsic selves and stable centers. "To think I really fooled you ... just goes to show there's nothing like confidence," (294) Fevvers concludes in amazement, which I view as suggesting that one might be surprised by the degree to which proper engagement with discourse might impact one's subject position in practice.

Also central to a reading of *Nights* in the light of Friedman's positional geographics are the bits on the House of Horrors and the Siberian panopticon. Both places feature women exploited by women: the first is an exhibition of female "freaks" run by another female "freak;" the second is a prison for women who have killed their husbands, commanded by a woman who has also killed hers. What establishes Madame Schreck and Countess P. as rulers

is merely their status, in an echo of Friedman's defense of a discourse of "situational" positionality:

one situation might make a person's gender most significant; another, the person's race; another, sexuality or religion or class. So while the person's identity is the product of multiple subject positions, these axes of identity are not equally foregrounded in every situation. Change the scene, and the most relevant constituents of identity come into play.

(23)

In the House of Horrors, the abuse suffered by the captives when they are exposed to the male visitors maximizes gender, but their very captivity by another woman, a wealthy one, maximizes, in turn, class. Similarly, Countess P. and her captives' common crime — and shared captivity, since the Countess is ultimately a prisoner in her own jail — hint at a common history of gender oppression, but the oppression taking place inside the panopticon is status-based. The repetition in the novel of the concept of punishment and exploitation among women is, in my view, Carter's explicit affirmation of difference among women — although in both scenes she does not go farther than class — and its imprint on material conditions, and a challenge of an assuaging idea of sisterhood that could tempt the reader towards a feminist theory that would disregard women's situational positionalities and the potential for oppression among women.

Throughout this review, I have focused on the constitution of identity as depicted in *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus*. Both novels emphasize identity as a fluid site and express the process of its construction as analogous to artistic creation, such as painting, writing, and performance. The contrast between Melanie and Fevvers suggests the importance that women become attentive to the extent to which self-creation is possible, highlighting the discursive sphere as a powerful maintainer of material conditions while

acknowledging existing limits. Recognizing the textuality of the subject and assuming the post of narrator is therefore to exert “the freedom to juggle with being” or, basically, to negotiate with the world through discourse, revealing the political potential of representation. Identities in these novels also relate strongly to spatial and temporal aspects, standing as “sequences moving through space and time as they undergo development, evolution, and revolution,” (8) to quote again from Friedman. As to axes of subjectivity, *Toyshop* considers mostly the interplay between gender and class, while *Nights* supplements these categories mostly with physical ability and sexual orientation.

It is important to note, however, that these considerations on identity are not made gendered in any of these novels: in *Toyshop*, Finn’s smell of paint reveals his positionality as carefully crafted, and Walser’s rebirth in *Nights* similarly exposes that identity as narrative and performance is not exclusive to Fevvers. For this reason, together with my adoption of a feminist theorization of subjectivity that aims at moving beyond the exclusiveness of gender, I have avoided focusing on gender for the present chapter. The next chapter, in turn, shall look more closely at gender, sex, and desire.

Chapter Three

“Flesh Comes to Us out of History”: Sex, Gender, and Desire

in *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus*

What we have to contend with ... is the long shadow of the past historic ... that forged the institutions which create the human nature of the present... It's not the “soul” that must be forged on the anvil of history but the anvil itself must be changed in order to change humanity. Then we might see, if not “perfection”, then something a little better, or, not to raise too many false hopes, a little less bad.

Nights at the Circus

Our flesh arrives to us out of history, like everything else does. We may believe we fuck stripped of social artifice; in bed, we even feel we touch the bedrock of human nature itself. But we are deceived. Flesh is not an irreducible human universal ...

Flesh comes to us out of history; so does the repression and taboo that governs our experience of flesh.

The Sadeian Woman

As I have exposed in Chapter Two, an appropriate study of Angela Carter's treatment of identity will outline a rich web of theories and propositions, for her works persistently decline the notion of stable and easily fathomable selves. I have argued that Carter's postmodern representations of subjecthood seem very much aligned with theories such as Susan Stanford Friedman's, which holds identities a fluid, situational, even contradictory result of a combination of elements — ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, class, gender. But gender, albeit one of the various constituents of such complex product, is itself as elusive a concept as identity as a whole. While gender, sex, and sexuality are central categories for feminist theory, they have long been points of intense debate among the movement's thinkers.

Feminist and gender theories underwent a radical transformation, from the 1970s into the early 80s, in a critical movement generally associated with socialist feminism: the rise of a social-constructionist approach to gender. That is the perception of a gap between “sex” and “gender” with the first referring to innate biology and the second to sociocultural learned traits, that is, gender as socially constructed. A general opposition spread then among these social-constructionist feminists to the biological essentialism of pre-feminism, first-wave feminists, and radical feminists — the idea that women are women because they have vaginas, breasts, etc. — by the claim that, in Alison Stone’s²⁰ words, “while being *female* may require certain anatomical features, being a *woman* is something different, dependent on identification with the feminine gender” (139, emphasis in original). But social constructionism in turn was also accused of gender essentialism by later theorists who noticed that social constructionists, after identifying femininity as a cultural product, began seeking to outline the set of characteristics that defined “women,” the social traits that all women shared. I agree with Stone that anti-essentialist social constructionists such as Nancy Hartsock, Catherine MacKinnon, and Carol Gilligan “can readily *be* essentialists if they believe ... that a particular pattern of social construction is essential and universal to all women” (140, emphasis on original). However, whether all essentialism should be frowned upon is another legitimate question, which I will soon address.

The identification of essentialist patterns by theorists that proposed themselves as anti-essentialist is heightened by the rise of postmodern/poststructuralist theories relying on the recognition of difference among individuals of a group, the discursive mechanisms behind notions of identity, and the subsequent need for a deconstruction of the subject. But

²⁰ My overview of the essentialist debate in feminism draws mostly from Stone’s essay “Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Philosophy,” which I would recommend for further reading on the topic, although some of the thinkers I mention are not featured in her text.

the growing relativization of identity and subjecthood makes a number of scholars suspicious that a postmodern mode of thinking could be dangerous for feminism: in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Linda Nicholson recalls that for feminists such as Hartsock and Susan Bordo, there should be “stopping points” to theorization one of which should be gender, since “to invoke the ideal of endless difference,” they argued in the 80s, “is for feminism either to self-destruct or to finally accept an ontology of abstract individualism” (140). Clearly, their efforts do not succeed: queer theory, for instance, emerges soon after in the 90s to energetically implode well-established assumptions of sex and gender that many earlier feminist theorists relied on. Postmodern/poststructuralist gender theory probably reaches its apex with Judith Butler, who has famously theorized gender performativity on the grounds that there are no selves prior to (phallogocentric) discourse. Butler understands the subject as factual but begotten by a series of operating discourses and social practices, so that her theory ultimately questions the possibility and the very necessity of identities. She proposes, for instance, that the sex/gender relation cannot be overlooked as part of the cause of the problems that feminism had been focused on tackling:

the identity categories often presumed to be foundational to feminist politics, that is, deemed necessary in order to mobilize feminism as an identity politics, simultaneously work to limit and constrain in advance the very cultural possibilities that feminism is supposed to open up. The tacit constraints that produce culturally intelligible “sex” ought to be understood as generative political structures rather than naturalized foundations. (187)

Since gender-based identities are the effects of phallogocentrism and function as synthetic disguises for often oppressive social practices, Butler raises the possibility that they be erased altogether.

Meanwhile, other late 80s and early 90s thinkers maintained the position that some kind or degree of essentialism could be necessary and positive for feminism. Denise Riley in her 1988 *Am I That Name?* argues that “to adopt ... a philosophical resignation to the vagaries of a movement doomed to veer through eternity is cold comfort,” and suggests that the discomfort with “woman” or other sexed designations results from “the unwillingness of many to call themselves feminists” (112). She understands that the desire to abolish the category “woman” and even the category “feminist” relates to women being “tired” of gendered injustices (112), but disagrees that undoing “women” would be the best project for feminism and that it could in fact be dangerous. Riley writes:

My own suggestions grind to a halt here, on a territory of pragmatism. I’d argue that it is compatible to suggest that ‘women’ don’t exist — while maintaining a politics of ‘as if they existed’ — since the world behaves as if they unambiguously did. So that official suppositions and conservative popular convictions will need to be countered constantly by redefinitions of ‘women’. Such challenges to ‘how women are’ can throw sand in the eyes of the founding categorisations and attributions, ideally disorientating them. But the risk here is always that the very iteration of the afflicted category serves, maliciously, not to undo it but to underwrite it. (112)

Iris Marion Young, in an important 1994 essay entitled “Gender as Seriality,” similarly contends that “feminist politics evaporates ... without some conception of women as a social collective,” (719) and sees in the dissolution of groups into individuals “an infinite regress” (721). Paula Moya, an identity theorist and harsh Butler reader, maintains that identities such as “woman” are “socially significant and context-specific ideological constructs that nevertheless refer in non-arbitrary (if partial) ways to verifiable aspects of the social world” (13). Moya further argues that “the extreme linguistic constructivism informing

postmodernist conceptions of identity impedes rather than enables the achievement of the liberatory political goals [postmodern thinkers] claim as their own” (12).

All these scholars, each in their own way, oppose the postmodern/poststructuralist aim to undo gender identities and attempt to outline a social gendered group in ways that would nonetheless acknowledge the contingency of subjecthood and the differences among women. Alison Stone refers to this kind of operation as feminism’s “anti-anti-essentialism,”²¹ a moment of reconsideration over “how far some form of essentialism might be necessary for feminist social criticism and political activism” (141) at which point an important tendency is “‘strategic’ essentialism: the defense of essentialism not as a descriptive claim about social reality, but merely as a political strategy” (141).

For a great deal of Angela Carter’s writing span, therefore, gender theorization constituted a major double-pull for feminists. Carter’s stance, as usual, estranged those who firmly identified with either side of the debate. Most visible in her later works but present throughout her oeuvre is a tension between two possibly opposing impulses: on the one hand, her “committed materialism” (“Notes 38”) — the practical and urgent concerns characteristic of second-wave feminists — combined with her personal socialist views, and on the other, the evolution of concerns associated with postmodernism and poststructuralism, such as the notion of gender as a performance ruled by the discursive sphere and the symbolic order, the need to destabilize established dichotomies and to reconceive subjectivity, and a search not for answers but for new ways of questioning. As I have shown, Carter’s first novel, *Shadow Dance*, is mostly descriptive of gender oppression and its mechanisms, but *The Magic Toyshop*, her following publication, retains the pessimistic descriptive tone while it begins to complicate conceptions of identity and gender. *Nights at the Circus* takes the identity/gender

²¹ The term was actually coined by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* and referred originally to theories on race.

discussion a few steps farther with the help of its ultra-postmodern aesthetics of carnival, grotesque, pastiche, non-linearity and embedded narratives.

In this chapter, however, I will argue that while *The Magic Toyshop*'s publication took place in the early days of anti-essentialism and way farther than *Nights at the Circus* from the feminist accommodation of theories on gender performativity and the deconstruction of identities, *Toyshop* stands nonetheless as a more anti-essentialist novel than *Nights*. As desire and sexuality are other fundamental concepts for the gender discussion, both in the sense of how sexual politics influence romantic/erotic encounters and of how sexualities affect one's experience of gender, I will also examine the portrayal of these elements in the two novels. I will defend a Lacanian representation of desire and a pessimistic description of heterosexual relationships in *The Magic Toyshop*, and highlight the ways in which *Nights at the Circus* refers positively to lesbianism and acknowledges heterosexual dynamics as generally toxic but seems to simultaneously ponder on the possibility of and pathways to healthier, more equal heterosexual relations.

3.1 *The Magic Toyshop*: Dismantling Gender Essentialism, Unveiling Cultural Desire, Considering Violent Masculinities

In *Masculinities*, R. W. Conwell briefly overviews the history of the theorization of sex and gender roles. She recalls that although gender roles appeared in scientific texts in as early as the 1950s (and were then called sex roles), those first theorists "assumed ... that socialization went ahead harmoniously, and that sex role learning was a thoroughly good thing," as the roles allegedly "contributed to social stability, mental health and the performance of necessary social functions" (23). It was only a couple of decades later that feminist scholars began to rapidly disturb this reasoning, advocating that the female gender

role was generally one of subordination and that role internalization was meant to keep women dominated. Conwell writes that research on gender roles became political only in the 70s, a movement of which I would place Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* as a fictive precursor.

Toyshop came out in 1967, only two years before major second-wave feminist Kate Millett, one of Carter's most notable contemporary gender scholars, publishes her germane *Sexual Politics*. In what she calls a tentative "theory of patriarchy," (24) Millett argues that societies ruled by men rely ideologically on "temperament, role, and status" (26) to maintain male dominance:

As to status, a pervasive assent to the prejudice of male superiority guarantees superior status in the male, inferior in the female ... temperament ... involves the formation of human personality along stereotyped lines of sex category ("masculine" and "feminine"), based on the needs and values of the dominant group and dictated by what its members cherish in themselves and find convenient in subordinates: aggression, intelligence, force, and efficacy in the male; passivity, ignorance, docility, "virtue," and ineffectuality in the female. This is complemented by a second factor, sex role, which decrees a consonant and highly elaborate code of conduct, gesture and attitude for each sex. In terms of activity, sex role assigns domestic service and attendance upon infants to the female, the rest of human achievement, interest, and ambition to the male. (26)

The Flower home perfectly matches what Millett describes. Aggression and force are blatant in Uncle Philip, while it is his talent and efficacy that provides for the family. Mute Aunt Margaret is the personification of passivity and servitude. Her existence is restricted to the domestic — cooking, cleaning, mending, nursing — and her only functions are to care for and nurture the men and children in the house while poorly doing so for herself (she barely eats, for instance, and is described as skeleton-like). After Melanie arrives and replaces her

aunt at the toyshop's register, the woman's last contact with the external world is severed; she no longer leaves the house. The portrayal of a typically patriarchal home as utterly inhospitable situates Carter within the period's movement, indicated by Conwell and theorized by feminists such as Millett, of unveiling the ways in which the dominant apprehensions of gender roles served to incarcerate and disenfranchise women under men's authority.

The novel does not, thus, associate women's subordination in the domestic with female biology. Femininity is explicitly depicted as a sociocultural construction that is passed on, as when Melanie imitates, in front of her mirror, the diverse and contradictory models of "woman" that she is familiar with as to explore "the supple surprise of herself now she was no longer a little girl" (1):

She ... posed in attitudes, holding things. Pre-Raphaelite, she combed out her long, black hair to stream straight down from a centre parting and thoughtfully regarded herself as she held a tiger-lily from the garden under her chin, her knees pressed close together. A la Toulouse Lautrec, she dragged her hair sluttishly across her face and sat down in a chair with her legs apart and a bowl of water and a towel at her feet. ...

She was too thin for a Titian or a Renoir but she contrived a pale, smug Cranach Veuns with a bit of net curtain wound round her head After she read *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, she secretly picked forget-me-nots and stuck them in her pubic hair. (1-2)

The mention, by name, of all these emblematic models of "woman" produced by high-art stresses "woman" as pertaining to the cultural-historical domain, a range of prototypes culturally spread by an artistic and aesthetic canon authorized by dominant societal groups, rather than an inner essence. This movement is challenging not only of the patriarchy but of essentializing feminisms that were still the norm at the time of the novel's publication.

At this point I find it relevant to recover Linda Hutcheon's observation of a "postmodernist refocusing on historicity" (*Poetics* 16) that Carter here realizes, together with her allusions, through the contrast between Melanie and her sister Victoria. Together with their other sibling, Jonathon, Victoria is described as unaffected by their parents' passing:

... Jonathon and Victoria hardly seemed to feel the lack of a mother. They had their own private worlds. Jonathon pressed on with his new model. Victoria babbled like a brook, chasing motes in the sunbeams. Neither referred to their parents or seemed to realize that their present life was coming to an end—Victoria too young, Jonathon too preoccupied. (29)

Meanwhile Melanie understands, terrified by the burden, that she is to become her siblings' mother from then on. During the train journey to London, Victoria falls asleep and does not catch the beginnings of the new city (32): by not acknowledging the change she is being subjected to, she is to be unaware, when older, of the historical circumstances that led her to become one of her uncle's puppets. She is still a pre-language baby during their relocation — she coos more often than speaks, and her first lines in the novel are quite precarious — while Melanie is already a cultured fifteen-year-old. Therefore the baby girl is unsurprisingly far less affected by the change than her older sister, not only because as a baby Victoria is not imposed with home chores like Melanie is, but also because Victoria does not remember her past: "too young for sentiment," (54) she adapts quite easily to the new environment as she "[forgets] anywhere else because she live[s] from day to day" (88). In her childish ignorance, Victoria symbolizes the alienated belief in the possibility of existing ahistorically, a belief generating subjects incapable of criticism and unlikely to attempt resistance. Come teenagehood, should the dynamics around her not change, Victoria is bound to be forced into the same role as her sister's, but alienation deprives her of the means to perceive imposed,

culturally constructed gender roles as such. Her being pre-language signifies her unawareness of the symbolic order that produces, in Butler's terms, "culturally intelligible genders" (37) and, hence, her easy transition into them.

Jonathon, Melanie's twelve-year-old brother, brings another significant reflection to the novel. Differently from Victoria, he is old enough to have already greatly assimilated the cultural regulations that restrain Melanie, but is free to continue sailing the imagined seas of his model boats and remain harmlessly alien to the external dynamics because these do not restrain him. Moving to his uncle's household does not slightly remove him from a position of power as an artist, a designer of worlds, given his privilege as a male in Philip's patriarchy. He does not seem to suffer at all with the transition between homes and, during the train journey, stares so absent-mindedly out the window that he and Melanie seem to have different landscapes before them (32).

As eye problems in Carter's symbolic dictionary tend to signify a difficulty of empathy — of seeing the other — his myopia, for which he thick bottle glasses, is soon enough established as a symbol of his detachment from materiality: "in the things of this world," the narrator says, "he was extremely short-sighted" (4). This detachment is explained later on as a result of a notable immunity he has to the hindrances of materiality in comparison to his older female sibling: his single interest is making model boats, a commonality he shares with his uncle the toymaker and of which the new home does not deprive him. Melanie, on the contrary, has her major teenage concerns — looking in the mirror, caring for her appearance, becoming acquainted with herself and with femininity — violently swallowed by the change, and her routine drastically altered as she becomes an apprentice housewife. So while the novel stresses the workings of financial restraint in Melanie's tragic transformation, it also highlights Jonathon gender-related advantage in

relation to Melanie even though their context is the same. The difference between brother and sister, while it reinforces the argument of contingent positionalities I have developed in chapter two, reveals the female gender role as disadvantaged. Furthermore, the heterogeneity among the three siblings expresses the instability of concepts such as groups or collectives: although the three undergo the same disruption and dislocation, the three experiences are radically different from one another due to multiple factors operating simultaneously.

Socially constructed gender roles are also expressed in the novel through the oxymoronic descriptions of Aunt Margaret. She is a “garrulous dumb” woman (48) who “would have been talkative” (41) if she could — she communicates through writing on a chalkboard, which she does all the time — but, as Finn explains, her marriage of necessity has made her mute: “it came to her on her wedding day, like a curse” (37). Aunt Margaret’s muteness is, of course, symbolic of the obliteration of her agency and freedom signified by her financial dependence to Philip, but although she is silenced, disparaged, and domesticated by her marriage, she is “red” and has “substance,” (77) is unfaithful and incestuous (194), besides managing to remain talkative albeit mute. Aunt Margaret’s contradictory character is another argument in favor of gender roles as imposed codes of behavior rather than as favored by any innate biological or psychological trait of women — it is clearly not Aunt Margaret’s “nature” to be subservient and silent. This contradiction is often indicated by the contrast of the vivid, intense red of her hair — her own hair, symbolizing her potential for a much more energetic and passionate existence — against the cadaverous paleness of her skin resulting possibly from her confinement to the house and poor diet.

So gender in *Toyshop* is a socially constructed role to be performed, the female role is one of subordination, and the contrast between Melanie and Victoria expresses the role of discourse and the need for critical historicity in order to understand and challenge the

patriarchy. However, these claims do not enclose the story inside a postmodern utopia of detached theorization. In an opposing impulse, the novel also portrays the contingency of gender performativity to material conditions: while rich Melanie is imprisoned to a limited range of models to imitate, poor Melanie and her Aunt Margaret, financially dependent on Uncle Philip, are much further trapped to the point that only one model is offered them, that of the silent and obedient housekeeper. Melanie's mother is an interesting figure in this respect: described as a sweet and joyful woman, seemingly happily married, her contrast to Aunt Margaret is notable but not extreme. She is nonetheless dependent on her husband and somewhat reduced to being his partner. Her silently accompanying him on his lecturing tour and posing for a kitchen magazine hint at her conformity to the role of the domestic wife and, perhaps more importantly, her participation in the maintenance of such roles since her wealth does alleviate that burden: she can, for instance, afford a housekeeper and even travel abroad with her husband as Mrs. Rundle takes care of the house and the children.

Nevertheless, the real circumstances of her marriage are obscured in that the couple never really appears except through their belongings and Melanie's recollections of them. I find it quite provocative in this sense²² that they are simultaneously present and absent: denied access to the dynamics of their relationship and to Melanie's mother's mental state and levels of agency, the reader is left with conjectures and questionings over the wife's, and the couple's, real conditions. Questions such as the extent to which their marriage, apparently peaceful and satisfying on the surface, can really be functional and fulfilling for the

²² It is probably Sarah Gamble who first writes about the "metonymic substitution" (33) of Melanie's parents, although she interestingly interprets it in terms of their association with post-war consumerism: "they never appear in the text directly, but through reference to a series of objects ... that stand in for their absent selves. This raises the implication that they may have been nothing more than the total of their rather extravagant possessions" (33-34). My reading is not in opposition to Gamble's, but complementary to it, as I believe Carter's symbols and techniques to frequently possess many levels.

financially dependent housewife, as well as what the issues possibly caused by such imbalance are, are aroused by the lack of proper evidence, the unquestioning optimism with which the couple is briefly described, and the contrast that is later produced between this couple and the Flowers family where a similar dependence takes place. In short, for a story so committed with revealing economic dependence as a major element of gender oppression, I find the parents' obscurity not at all casual or dismissive but ingeniously teasing.

Also, being past-aware and critical, alone, does not grant Melanie the power to modify her reality in any way. Her complete subjugation to her uncle is affirmed by his symbolic rape when she, replacing a broken puppet, plays Leda in his Leda and the Swan spectacle, the puppet swan of which he controls. Amused by the clumsy swan in the beginning, Melanie becomes increasingly scared of it as it advances to attack her:

She thought of the horse of Troy, also made of hollow wood; if she did not play her part well, a trapdoor in the swan's side might open and an armed host of pigmy Uncle Philips, all clock-work, might rush out and savage her. This possibility seemed real and awful. All her laughter was snuffed out. She was hallucinated; she felt herself not herself, wrenched from her own personality, watching this whole fantasy from another place; and, in this strange fantasy, anything was possible. Even that the swan, the mocked up swan, might assume reality itself and rape this girl in a blizzard of white feathers. (166)

This scene does more than mark Uncle Philip's domination of Melanie: it momentarily suspends the distinction between fantasy and reality as to reveal the line between them as more porous than Melanie had judged. The myth of Leda is offered as an example of how gender oppression is reinforced by cultural narratives — in Carter's words, "those myths that reflect society as much as [people] create them" ("The Language of Sisterhood," 228) — and Melanie's real fear of the fake swan — the fear that the inanimate swan may come to life at

any moment — evidences the effect of these fictions upon practice, making fictive monsters not so fictive anymore. This strategy, because it reveals myth and fiction as informing the violent dynamics of materiality to the point that they are also material to a great extent, simultaneously creates a space of intersection between the very fiction at hand and the materiality of the reader. It reminds the reader that the story of some fictive girl named Melanie is, in fact, about the history of the social group “woman.” Furthermore, Melanie’s continuously increasing entrapment, regardless of her being able to make sense of her situation, is a clarification that awareness and historicity are necessary but not enough: they are but the initial conditions for the insurgence of a much longer, more arduous battle against a sovereign structure. While the novel calls attention to the ways in which gender oppression is maintained abstractly and intellectually, it does not dismiss the material limitations to change.

In terms of the novel’s discussion of gender theory, a reading I find particularly interesting, fair to the richness of the often discredited *Toyshop*, and moreover consonant with my present purposes is Elizabeth Gargano’s in her article “The Masquerader in the Garden,” to which I have already referred in previous chapters. Starting from the acknowledgement of the so-called “Butlerification” of Carter criticism, Gargano’s investigation of gender and the body in *The Magic Toyshop* results in an alluring conclusion: while she does identify instances of gender performativity in the novel, they appear with “an implicit contrast [to] the lure of gendered essentialism,” generating “a conflict that the text finally refuses to resolve” (58). Gargano’s conception of a masquerader in the garden is an oxymoronic bringing together of performativity — the trope of the masquerade expressed through elements of theatricality such as enactment, props, costumes, Uncle Philip’s stage — and more essentialist apprehensions of gender — the garden, an “ancient metaphor of the

female body” that, for Gargano, “‘naturalizes’ Melanie’s female physical and psychic spaces as a virgin territory [to] be discovered by a male explorer” (59). The contrast is established immediately in the story’s first paragraph, when the narrator’s description of Melanie’s sexual awakening as the discovery of an uncharted territory — “O, my America, my new found land” (1) — is followed by her posing as the models from paintings familiar to her.

Gargano holds the novel’s depictions of gender and sexuality as persistently conflicting and paradoxical: “casting Melanie’s voyage of self-discovery in the language of John Donne’s ‘Elegy 22’ (‘O, my America, my Newfoundland’),” she shrewdly observes as example, “Carter emphasizes that [Melanie’s] emerging sense of her physicality is already mediated by culture and history” (60). In fact, this precise reasoning is later formulated by Carter herself in *The Sadeian Woman*: “our flesh arrives to us out of history, like everything else does. We may believe we fuck stripped of social artifice; in bed, we even feel we touch the bedrock of human nature itself. But we are deceived. Flesh is not an irreducible human universal” (9). Thus Carter’s emphasis, in 1967, on the historicity of the body remarkably foregrounds a proposition to be generally accommodated by feminists only in the early 1990s.

Gargano also notices the body as a social construction in Melanie’s adventure in the garden wearing her mother’s wedding dress, which ends dramatically with Mrs. Rundle’s cat destroying the dress and leaving Melanie naked. After the dress is ripped apart, Melanie becomes “horribly conscious of her own exposed nakedness,” experiencing “a new and final kind of nakedness, as if she had taken even her own skin off and now stood clothed in nothing, nude in the ultimate nudity of the skeleton” (*Toyshop* 21). It alludes, of course, to Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden, reinforcing the garden trope. The feeling culminates in Melanie’s inability to see her own body, where her adventure first started: “she was almost

surprised to see the flesh of her fingers; her very hands might have been discarded like gloves, leaving only the bones” (21). This passage reveals Melanie’s final dependence upon what Carter calls “the social fiction of ... femininity” (“Notes” 38) in exploring the newly found territory of womanhood: her body, although factually made of flesh and bone, can only be understood, even by herself, in terms of its conformity to culturally produced femininities.

As much as I honor Gargano’s original and thorough essay, our readings part ways at her conclusion that essentialism versus social constructionism is an unresolved conflict in the text. While it is true, as she recognizes and I have been claiming repeatedly as well, that Carter’s writing is markedly experimental and often inconclusive, I find it quite odd to identify references to gender essentialism in *Toyshop* as legitimate “impulses” that the novel “embodies,” garden and masquerade as “complementary tropes,” (59) as though Carter is writing from a place of indecisiveness. To me, essentialist instances in *Toyshop* are not meant to be “complemented” or even merely “interrogated,” as Gargano suggests, but slowly dismantled by those of gender as a socialized and performed social construct. As I hope to have already exemplified, none of the novel’s essentialist impulses goes unhaltingly by a social-constructionist counteract. Scenes of Finn and Melanie in real and symbolic gardens that Gargano ultimately seems to interpret as pulsating returns by Carter to essentialist perceptions of gender, I view as symbolic of Carter’s psychoanalytic treatment of sexuality as conflictingly divided into primeval needs and culturally generated desires, with the gardens’ natural quality relating to the first. I agree with Gargano that the novel is exemplar of Carter’s refusal “to limit any work to the generally accepted theoretical parameters of its own time ... , for instance, the essentialist definitions of gender so prevalent at the time *Toyshop* was composed” (57); but, more than it refuses to being limited to essentialist ideas, I would say that *Toyshop* openly and vigorously opposes biological essentialism throughout.

As I have already argued in chapter two, I believe that the novel discloses Carter's special interest at the time in declining simplistic notions of stable truths and inner essences, a tendency still rising in the late 60s. The more Melanie strives to grasp any version or facet of herself that is prior to culture, the more confused and distressed she becomes, implying that her unacknowledgement of the historicity of all things social helps maintain her passive. 1967 Carter strikes me as especially committed to revealing gender essentialism as a disguised hindrance for women's emancipation. In my view, *Toyshop* was Carter's proposal of an alternative approach and theoretical path for 60s' feminists, the sketch of notions such as the body as "brought to us by history" (9) and all myths of women as "consolatory nonsenses" (5) to be better developed and more imposingly defended twelve years later in *The Sadeian Woman*.

The Magic Toyshop is open-ended: the house catches fire with Uncle Philip inside, Melanie and Finn escape and wonder who else made it, then stare at each other "in a wild surmise" (200). The chances of Uncle Philip having survived are little, and the reader is left wondering what it will be of Melanie's future besides Finn, with whom she had been interacting romantically. The answer is not quite clear because, in Melanie's quest for agency and understanding, Finn stands as a rather obscure figure. There is immediate sexual tension between them during their first encounter at the train station, when he lets out the ominous "let me take the child off you, Melanie" (35): he refers to baby Victoria, whom Melanie is carrying, but the ambiguity neatly foreshadows the subsequent events.

Finn might be Melanie's first-ever object of sexual desire, although such desire seems rather contradictory for the most part. She is repulsed by his unclean smell and physical dirt, and the "quality of maleness" (45) that he only at times exhibits, as in this passage:

He was grinning again, slackly. His squinting eyes slithered and shifted like mercury on a plate. She could see the pointed tip of his tongue between his teeth. He tapped his cigarette ash on the floor. The curl of his wrist was a chord of music, perfect, resolved. Melanie suddenly found it difficult to breathe. It was as if he had put on the quality of maleness like a flamboyant cloak. He was a tawny lion poised for the kill—and was she the prey? She remembered the lover made up out of books and poems she had dreamed of all summer; he crumpled like the paper he was made of before this insolent, off-hand, terrifying maleness, filling the room with its reek. She hated it. But she could not take her eyes off him. (45)

I am prone to believing that what confuses Melanie about Finn is, apart from her young age, her somewhat unacknowledged detection of a discrepancy between the object of her organic desire and the immateriality of her socially-constructed romantic aspirations, a double-pull seemingly drawn from Jacques Lacan's theorization of desire. Considering Carter's penchant for psychoanalysis and her belief that "language is power, life, and the instrument of culture" ("Notes" 43), it is no wonder that she would orient a significant portion of her investigations of psychic agencies to the work of the psychoanalyst who rendered the symbolic order an essential piece in the desire machine.

The unconscious is structured as a language,²³ Lacan famously postulates after supplementing Freud's interpretive logics with structuralist principles gathered chiefly from Ferdinand Saussure's, Roman Jakobson's, and Claude Lévi-Strauss's works. To grossly summarize Lacan's career-long, language-like operations of desire:²⁴ the Real is a state of nature characterized by fullness, a state whose only drive is primordial need; copulation, he

²³ "Translating Freud, we say — the unconscious is a language" (*Seminar* 209).

²⁴ Lacanian theory of desire is vastly and diffusely spread over his numerous seminars, so that I am relying mostly on Dino Felluga's overview of Lacan's work.

argues, is a primordial need. Only babies, however, are close to experiencing this state, as it is the introduction to language that forever severs us from it. Language, in Lacanian theory, inserts beings in the Symbolic Order, or the Law of Order — which Louis Althusser explanatorily calls Law of Culture (*Lenin* 209) —, and marks the differentiation between demand, as in the demands of the libido, and desire, which is simply fantasy construction based on culturally conventionalized images of perfection. Lacan argues that while animals exert sexuality by copulating, as they do not experience disgust for their mates' imperfections, human sexuality would be based on masturbation, since human desire relies on imaginary, culturally fabricated images of both oneself and one's partner. As Dino Felluga explains, for Lacan,

we are not in control of our own desires since those desires are themselves as separated from our actual bodily needs as the phallus is separated from any biological penis. For this reason, Lacan suggests that, whereas the zero form of sexuality for animals is copulation, the zero form of sexuality for humans is masturbation. The act of sex for humans is so much caught up in our fantasies (our idealized images of both ourselves and our sexual partners) that it is ultimately narcissistic. (78)

As the analogy with phallus/penis exemplifies, Lacanian desire is only loosely connected to organicity; by and large, it is much more of a cultural phenomenon.

Human desire for Lacan is ultimately masturbatory and narcissistic; so is Melanie's, as seen from her first kiss with Finn:

She thought vaguely that they must look very striking, like a shot from a new-wave British film, locked in an embrace beside the broken statue in this dead fun palace, with that November dusk swirling around them and Finn's hair so ginger, hers so black, spun together by the soft little hands of a tiny wind, yellow and black hairs tangled together.

She wished someone was watching them, to appreciate them, or that she herself was watching them, Finn kissing this black-haired young girl, from a bush a hundred yards away. Then it would seem romantic. (106)

Melanie is incapable of experiencing this moment first-hand: she needs to detach herself from it in order to check its accordance to cultural standards of romance. My view is that she is, in fact, sexually attracted to Finn in the primordial sense that he awakens her libido, but although the libido is an innate human drive, an organic fact, our immersion into a social-cultural network forbids us from experiencing sex organically; sexual practices are also necessarily mediated by culture. Melanie's first experiences of sexuality and desire are conflicting and frustrating for the same reason that her first experiences of womanhood are also frustrating: her search for impossible universal truths and bare essences keeps proving naive. Melanie's alienation of her own desire is a fictional preview of Carter's later argument in *The Sadeian Woman* that "[Western] literature is full, as are [Western] lives, of men and women, but especially women, who deny the reality of sexual attraction and of love because of considerations of class, religion, race and of gender itself," (11) in an anticipation of 90s discourses of the body as culturally experienced but also an echo of second-wavers such as Millett when she claims that "coitus can scarcely be said to take place in a vacuum" (23). Carter phrases it in strikingly similar terms in *The Sadeian Woman*: "sexuality, in short, is never expressed in a vacuum" (12).

As to Finn, he is an enigmatic character even beyond Melanie's paradoxical desire. There constantly seems to be something confusing and contradictory about him; he is capable of treating Melanie nicely and tenderly, but occasionally forces himself upon her and frightens her. In the first scenes of Uncle Philip's being physically violent towards him, he strangely reacts with an immovable grin. Moreover, he carries two of Carter's favored bad

omens: an aptitude for representation — for being a controlling figure bearing the means to design truths — and atypical eyes. Finn has a squint from an early age, when he picked up a flower from the orphanage's garden and a bee came out of it, stinging his eye. As symbolized by the eye, Finn's toughness can be seen as a product of pain; pain, in turn, produced by sensitivity. Analogously, he grows numb and austere throughout the narrative as Uncle Philip's series of abuses progresses, until he is so violently beaten that he bursts out with anger. From that day on, he stops smiling. And during the final scenes, when Aunt Margaret and Francie are playing music, he refuses to dance.

As I have written, these joyful scenes of music and dance represent the fissures in Uncle Philip's system that enable resistance, fissures through which Philip's domination can begin to be overturned; they are small reminders that the fight against oppression is continuous, persistent under adversity. But pain hits Finn so badly that even his truthful, beautiful connection with his brother and sister, the novel's representation of a united and stubbornly resistant minority, is undone: "Finn had moved into a glass box and never noticed if ... Francie or Aunt Margaret scratched on the glass to attract his attention. ... The circle of the red people was broken" (134). In becoming serious and resigned, Finn becomes more and more like Uncle Philip, and while gender-oriented readings of Carter's novels generally focus on imposed femininities, I find Finn an interesting discussion on a toxic masculinity that is also violently imposed. These final scenes are significant indicators that Finn is in the process of becoming as vicious as Uncle Philip, that toxic masculinity has been successfully imposed upon him through violence and suffering.

As much as I would like to look optimistically at Melanie's prospects at the end of the novel, I find very little literary encouragement to do so when Finn's assimilation of Philip's masculinity seems nearly complete. What I identify as yet another bad omen for Melanie is

the novel's alignment with the patterns of literary carnivalization, although much more discreet than in later novels. Carter's notions of carnivalesque seem drawn from Umberto Eco²⁵ and possibly Bakhtin;²⁶ the latter has become a major theorist for Carter critics.

The carnivalesque tone is properly installed when Melanie notices that those around her "[go] masked" (68). Also, the scene in which they all freely and fearlessly party in Uncle Philip's absence, followed by Aunt Margaret and her brother Francie's sexual retreat into the bedroom, recalls Bakhtin's description of carnival as

a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life. The behavior, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions ... defining them totally in noncarnival life, and thus from the vantage point of noncarnival life become eccentric and inappropriate. (*Problems* 123)

Incest works in this scene as an exemplar of Bakhtin's carnivalesque profanation and the eccentricity which "permits — in concretely sensuous form — the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves," (123) possibly leading back to Lacan to whom incestuous impulses are refrained by the introduction to the symbolic. In this sense, Bakhtin's "symbols of higher authority" (125) with which the present profanation plays are the very symbolic order. Lacan refers, of course, to incest between mother and baby boy, which does not greatly diverge from the novel's scenario once Aunt Margaret, similarly to Melanie, comes to replace their deceased mother; Aunt Margaret becomes the Jowles's maternal

²⁵ In the short story "In Pantoland," for example, Carter resorts to Eco in order to describe carnival: "as Umberto Eco once said, 'An everlasting carnival does not work.' ... The essence of the carnival, the festival, the Feast of Fools, is transience. It is here today and gone tomorrow, a release of tension not a reconstitution of order, a refreshment. . . after which everything can go on again exactly as if nothing had happened" (*Burning* 289).

²⁶ While there is uncertainty as to whether Carter had read Bakhtin before writing *Nights*, critics like Magali Cornier Michael and Paulina Palmer argue that she had (Michael 507).

figure. Also greatly significant is the fire that consumes the house: “it is a fire,” Bakthin writes, “that simultaneously destroys and renews the world,” ensuing Philip’s decrowning — through both cuckoldry and death — and, most likely, the subsequent “crowning” of Finn. Bakthin also highlights that “he who is crowned is the antipode of a real king, a slave or a jester” (124): Finn’s position in relation to Philip is indeed somewhat analogous to slavery, working exhaustingly and at times under physical violence and threats thereof, crafting superb miniatures for the toyshop for a tiny portion of the profits. In short, Finn’s slow and apparently successful apprenticeship of Philip’s toxic and austere maleness seems to have been preparing him for becoming the new king, or the new patriarch, when the carnival had its end.

It is Victoria who foreshadows such replacement: “Finn is Daddy,” (183) she exclaims upon watching the young man sit in Philip’s chair while he is away. Victoria’s raw, innocent look reveals the obvious with no sugarcoating. Meanwhile, Finn himself appears to be in denial and frightened: after understanding that he has been sufficiently “out of [his] mind” to destroy the puppet swan, the token of Philip’s authority, he becomes utterly inattentive and his face looks filled with terror (179-80). One possibility is that he is afraid he might lose control again, perhaps become as violent as Philip as to murder him as he has the swan; perhaps take Philip’s place, become Philip. Unlike self-centered Jonathon who remains distant and unbothered from beginning to end, Finn comes across as a sensitive young boy whose kindness and tenderness are smothered away. The hardships of life, mainly Uncle Philip’s abuse, harden Finn until he is apt to become the perpetrator of the pains he and his loved ones have endured.

To conclude, in addition to depicting women’s suffering and distress under male domination, the novel also considers how patriarchy is maintained at the male end,

suggesting that it may be similarly harmful to men who do not identify with the typical alpha-male patriarch. It not only portrays women as not innately destined to serve, but also men as not innately fit to rule. Finn's plot recalls Carter's own words on masculinity in a 1979 interview: "imagine having to be macho. I can't think of anything more terrible ... I think it's all terrible ... for everyone, not just women" (Gordon 215). However obviously determined *Toyshop* is to uncover the ways in which the patriarchy harms women, it also proposes that women are not its only victims; it heavily denounces the oppression of women while concomitantly performing a movement against gender-exclusive victimization.

Furthermore, *Toyshop*'s discussion of gender is profoundly marked by its anti-essentializing force, seeking to reveal the cultural-historical character of all things feminine. Femaleness, or the sexed body, is also challenged in this approach, as one's apprehension of one's own body is described as equally mediated by culture. Not even desire is organic; the libido constantly conflicts with culturally constructed idealizations to the point that desire becomes a narcissistic enterprise, experienced through a detachment that revisits the media from which it gathers its models — books and movies, for instance. *Toyshop* stands out thus for vigorously and committedly confronting the belief that anything pertaining to the realm of sex, gender, and desire might be experienced organically, essentially, ahistorically.

3.2 *Nights at the Circus: Rewriting Female Monsters, Retreating to Sexed Bodies, Rethinking Sexual Encounters*

A great deal has been written about *Nights at the Circus*'s intertextuality and its political disposition. A good example, commented by Helen Stoddart, is the moment when Olga and Vera, a newly-formed lesbian couple, find Walser unconscious in the snow. "How

shall we wake him?" Olga asks, to which Vera responds, ironically, that "the old tales diagnose a kiss as the cure for sleeping beauties" (222). Stoddard observes how Carter's evocation of the tale of the Sleeping Beauty is rewritten through a "double irony" as it transforms the passive figure into a man while moreover the two women "are in love ... and so well aware of the conventions of fairy tales that they are in a position to comment ironically on the scene" (17). Other examples are the multiple allusions to Leda and the Swan — Fevvers is said to be the daughter of a swan-father — which, as the novel establishes a woman as the winged creature, seems to invert the domination logic of the myth.

Monstrosity in the novel is another important aspect of Carter's intent to demythologize and rewrite myths of "woman." In chapter two I have analyzed Fevvers's monstrosity in Deleuzian terms and how such reading contributes to an understanding of identity in *Nights at the Circus* as a perennial becoming, but it is impossible to overlook that the concept of the monstrous feminine has long appeared in myths that collaborated with women's oppression. Barbara Creed argues that "all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (1). Some of her examples are the toothed vagina, or female castratrice; the witch, whose long fingers and nose may represent female appropriation of the phallus; Medusa, which Freud links to the male fear of sexual difference and castration (2-3). She further emphasizes that the historically identifiable "monstrous feminine" differs from the idea of "female monsters" because the second would be merely a reversal of a male monster; that is not the case, she argues, since "as with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, [the female monster] is defined in terms of her sexuality," (3) while male monsters are not necessarily so. "The phrase 'monstrous-feminine,'" she concludes, "emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity" (3).

Ghislaine from Carter's first novel, *Shadow Dance*, is a perfect example of Carter's understanding and depiction of how the mythical monstrous feminine has historically helped male abuse. As I have better explained in chapter one, Ghislaine's literal and discursive "monstrification" by the men around her contributes to worsen her subjugation: literal as when Honeybuzzard deforms her face, after which she is rejected by all other men and friends and feels she has no option but to serve her attacker; discursive as in Morris's descriptions of her as Medusa-like or resembling of a *vagina dentata*, the dehumanizing effect of which helps justify his passivity towards Honey's violence. Both men's intention to depict Ghislaine as monstrous seems to come from anger towards her free-spiritedness, mainly in terms of her sexual liberation, and the subsequent need to end it. From *The Bloody Chamber* on, Carter's cast of monstrous women begins to include exemplars capable of using their grotesqueness to their own advantage, perhaps because Carter herself becomes more capable of — as a writer and a thinker — or more prone to — as one immersed in an increasingly postmodern mentality — rewriting and subverting the monstrous feminine.

Therefore, in *Nights*, Fevvers's monstrous quality functions the opposite way as Ghislaine's: it is the cause of her worldwide success, her source of income, independence, autonomy and self-confidence. This subversion has already been noted by critics such as Sara Martin, who writes that "by creating grotesque female monsters," women writers such as Carter "deny men the privilege of being the sole producers of monstrous portraits of women," and become able to use the monstrous body in their own favor (195). Fevvers's freakishness is also significant thus with regards to gender and feminism because the literary appropriation by a woman — both Carter as the author and Fevvers as the monster — of a typically male domination tool and its subversion into an asset for negotiating with materiality is an important historical motion and another of the novel's many examples of Hutcheon's

complicitous critique. It is an important motion taking place within Carter's oeuvre as well, probably encouraged by the rise of postmodern thought.

At a deeper level, female monstrosity in Carter's novels may be related to the female body itself as perceived as the deviant shape. As Sara Martin also observes, in *The Sadeian Woman* Carter analyzes a scene from Frank Wedekind's plays that feature the protagonist Lulu. She is intrigued by that "the beautiful and sexually free Lulu" appears androgynously dressed as Pierrot the clown:

This is surely a modern phenomenon, this downgrading of the physical value of the imperiously attractive woman ... [Lulu] must make fun of herself because she can never admit she knows *why* she is pretty. ... The pretty girl must voluntarily remove her boobs and buttocks from the armoury of the seductress. She must pretend she cannot understand how they got there, in the first place.

Soon they lose even the significance of the conventional attributes of the female; they become the signs of a denaturalised being, as if there was an inherent freakishness about breasts and buttocks at the best of times, as if half the human race were not equipped with them. As if they were as surprising and unusual physical appurtenances to find on a woman as fins or wings. (77-8, emphasis in original)

Examined under this light, Fevvers's wings may be metaphorical of her biological femaleness.²⁷ She is monstrous simply because she is a woman; one, however, who is aware of it and able to use it in her own favor. It recalls another Carter moment, her interview with Kim Evans for the BBC documentary, *Angela Carter's Curious Room*, in which she states about *Wise Children's* Dora and Nora Chance that

²⁷ "Bird" is British slang for "woman."

their whole livelihood is based on the public presentation of certain kinds of aspects of sexuality, certain kinds of aspects of femininity, which they are quite conscious about. Being a showgirl is a very simple metaphor ... for being a woman. Being aware of your femininity, being aware of yourself as a woman, and having to use it to negotiate with the world.

Read this way, Fevvers becomes symbolic of a problematic negotiation along the lines of prostitution, pornography or exhibitionism, so that the circus performance may be an example of the “entertaining surface” Carter tells John Haffenden in *Novelists in Interview* that she tries to keep to her novels; “so that you don't have to read them as a system of signification if you don't want to” (87).

But Carter goes deeper into the issue of prostitution. A significant portion of the novel takes place in Ma Nelson's brothel, where Fevvers was abandoned as an infant and adopted by its residents. Her surrogate mother and loyal friend, Lizzie, who accompanies her throughout the narrative, is a former prostitute from Ma Nelson's establishment. Lizzie is a vital character because she is the channel for Carter's shared beliefs from Marxist feminism. As Magali Cornier Michael notes, Lizzie's equating marriage and prostitution — “what is marriage,” she asks Walser, “but prostitution to one man instead of many?” (21) — recalls, for one, Friedrich Engels in *The Origin of the Family*:

a marriage of convenience ... turns often enough into crassest prostitution—sometimes of both partners, but far more commonly of the woman, who only differs from the ordinary courtesan in that she does not let out her body on piece-work as a wage-worker, but sells it once and for all into slavery. (38)

Carter herself, Michael also notes, perfectly echoes Engels in *The Sadeian Woman* when she argues that “all wives of necessity fuck by contract,” (9) so that Lizzie can be taken as a

conduit for the author's own stance on marriage as equivalent to prostitution in patriarchal societies. I would add that she also echoes Karl Marx's categorical statement that "prostitution is only a *specific* expression of the *general* prostitution of the *laborer*" (100, emphasis in original) in scenes like the one where Lizzie claims that

though some of the customers would swear that whores do it for pleasure, that is only to ease their own consciences, so that they will feel less foolish when they fork out hard cash for pleasure that has no real existence unless given freely—oh, indeed! we knew we only sold the simulacra. No woman would turn her belly to the trade unless pricked by economic necessity, sir! (39)

Here, Lizzie deconstructs the misleading and demoralizing stereotype of the nymphomaniac prostitute, as Michael also notices, and equates prostitution with any other labor as it is exerted out of necessity — which sounds more like a critique on capitalism than a defense of prostitution.

Lizzie's marxist materialism constantly contrasts with Fevvers's utopian ideas of gender dynamics and the future of women in a manner that depicts Lizzie generally trying to educate Fevvers but without completely dismissing her viewpoints. Helen Stoddard similarly notices that Fevvers's "utopian zeal" gets "checked by Lizzie whose historical analysis adopts a rather more cautious stance," (23) such as in when Fevvers and Lizzie rescue the woman left to die in a cabin and Fevvers speaks passionately of a better future for women:

'And once the old world has turned on its axle so that the new dawn can dawn, then, ah, then! all the women will have wings, the same as I. This young woman in my arms, who we found tied hand and foot with the grisly bonds of ritual, will suffer no more of it ... The dolls' house doors will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages ... will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed —'

‘It’s going to be more complicated than that,’ interpolated Lizzie. ‘This old witch sees storms ahead, my girl. When I look to the future, I see through a glass, darkly. You improve your analysis, girl, and *then* we’ll discuss it.’ (285-86, emphasis in original)

As much as Lizzie soberly contains Fevvers’s emotional unrealism, she does not grimly discard the possibility of a freer future, so that the novel establishes a communication channel between the two opposing veins. Michael’s extraordinary essay argues that the junction of these two very contradictory feminist strands produces “not tension but rather a space where possibilities for change can be explored,” (493) with which I completely agree. While postmodern thinkers of gender and sexual politics have refused to understate the importance of the discursive, proposing revolutionary and subversive paths to reconceiving subjecthood, Marxists and other materialist feminists have typically accused them of disengaging theory from practice and dissolving necessary political subjects, besides rejecting metanarratives (such as Marxism), in favor of utopian objectives. However, Carter’s bringing together of such conflicting epistemologies results not in an either/or stance but rather in a proposal of, in Michael’s words, “an engaged feminism with liberatory potential” (495): a new, more thorough mode of feminist theorizing and writing that would, postmodernly, acknowledge the abstract levels at which the patriarchy’s mechanisms take place and, instead of allowing itself to be thus detached from the material situation, seek ways to apply to materiality the transformative potential of its subversive modes.

A very similar and equally important double-pull in the novel’s treatment of feminism is related to gender essentialism. Fevvers’s slogan — “is she fact or is she fiction?” — is possibly the most emblematic line from *Nights at the Circus*, appearing as title or pivot of a number of critical texts. The question is a cardinal one because it contains a number of the impasses considered by *Nights*; it encapsulates the richness of the novel’s discussions of sex,

gender, and identity, besides bringing into the text the heated debate taking place among feminists from the period. Of course the primary question it sets forward is that of Fevvers having wings or not, but the use of “she” allows one to extend the question from Fevvers to “woman” and extract a few other inquiries from it: does she have a factual essence or is that essence, that “she,” culturally produced, as is fiction? As one’s — a female’s, in this case — identity, is identity a stable truth to be found or a fiction to be composed? As a position of subservience assigned to women, is “she” to be read materialistically as a cold hard fact or postmodernly as a subvertible fiction? At last: does “woman” exist?

That last question is a major one, in my view, as it reveals the evolution of Carter’s feminist ethos and how her trajectory mirrors, to a certain extent, the very trajectory of feminist theory. The feminist impasse with essentialism is that while universalizing notions of “woman” are obviously harmful for feminism — they overlook different features of one’s subjectivity such as race, class, culture, sexuality, etc., and generally cast particular historically and culturally privileged forms of femininity as the norm, working to silence female minorities — on the other hand a completely anti-essentialist position as to argue that there is no such thing as “woman” raises the question of, to use Natalie Stoljar’s words, “whether women constitute a genuine political category, and if not how feminism can operate as a political movement” (178). In the 90s, however, feminist theory took another path; thinkers like Butler, Moira Gatens, and Elizabeth Grosz argued, in Alison Stone’s words,

that bodies are thoroughly acculturated, and therefore participate in the same diversity as the social field that they reflect. ... our bodies are first and foremost the bodies that we live, phenomenologically, and the way we live our bodies is culturally informed and constrained at every point. Sexed embodiment is therefore not external but *internal* to the gendered realm of social practices and meanings. Consequently, one cannot appeal

to any unity amongst female bodies to fix the definition of women, since the meaning of bodies will vary indefinitely according to their socio-cultural location. (8, emphasis in original)

Carter's proposition that "our flesh arrives to us out of history" (*Sadeian* 9), which I have cited earlier, is a very analogous reasoning.

Berthold Schoene cites the passage above from *The Sadeian Woman* to bill Carter "doubtlessly Foucault's queerest English contemporary,"²⁸ (283) but as much as Carter comes to share with queer theorists the acknowledgement of the sexed body as culturally and historically experienced, the legitimacy of sex in answering the questions of whether and how a category of "woman" could be delineated — and even whether such category should be delineated — seems to me to have been puzzling Carter a good deal less than it did, for instance, Butler in *Gender Trouble*. At the same time that *Nights* blatantly emphasizes gender performativity and acknowledges the heterogeneity of experiences of femininity, its stress on corporeality seems to characterize an opposing impulse, possibly offering sex as an answer to the feminist impasse of "woman" as either a dangerous social construct or a necessary political category.

I have argued that Fevvers symbolizes, among other things, the female itself, her monstrosity standing for what Carter perceives as a culturally assumed deviance of the female body. That in fact is also noteworthy for the present discussion: Fevvers's sign of difference as equivalent to femaleness reinforces biological difference as a central element of gender conceptualization and analysis. But she concomitantly signifies "woman" as she hyperbolizes the artificiality of gender and the fictionality of identities. Gender as socially constructed in *Nights* is a well-trodden path; Fevvers's dressing-room is "a mistresspiece of

²⁸ Schoene's reference is Foucault because he is overviewing the importance of *The History of Sexuality* (1976) to the development of queer politics and theory.

exquisitely feminine squalor,” (9) and her looks exaggerate femininity so thoroughly that Walser wonders if she is not a man impersonating a woman: “her face, in its Brobdingnagian symmetry, might have been hacked from wood and brightly painted up by those artists who build carnival ladies for fairgrounds or figureheads for sailing ships. It flickered through his mind: Is she really a man?” (35) In an echo of *The Passion of New Eve*, in which the perfect woman, Tristessa, is revealed a transvestite, Carter again implies that femininity is so much a product of the male imagination that the “perfect woman” would have to be a man; but the perfect woman is an accumulation of so much artifice that she resembles a wooden mask. As Jeannette Baxter puts it, “Fevvers is a site of tension ... between the metaphoric and the material, between the performing body and the physical body” (105) in that while she epitomizes the concept of the performer, the major determinant of her experience is her anatomy.

What calls my attention however is that, even if that which Fevvers embodies is gender as construct, at the same time that she exhibits extreme artifice and exaggeration she also has a remarkable bodily presence. If Fevvers stands for gender, it becomes especially important then to acknowledge how extremely corporeal she is, as seen mainly from Walser’s description of her dressing-room in the first pages: it is covered in her belongings and clothing that work upon the scenery as tentacle-like extensions of herself; her smell clogs the room so heavily Walser feels it could be bottled and sold; she expels gas and gulps her champagne — her voracious appetite is tiringly emphasized throughout the whole novel. Also frequently stressed is how large and bumpy she is, physically: she has “tremendous red and purple pinions large enough, powerful enough to bear up such a big girl as she;” (7) her hair “add[s] a good eighteen inches to her already immense height” (13); naked, she looks “the size of a house” (292).

Also crucial in this respect is the scene in which the female prisoners at the panopticon use excrement and, more importantly, menstrual blood to write their secret letters and establish the communication channel that would culminate in their escape. Panopticism, as Foucault famously writes in *Discipline and Punish*, is individuation taken to the extreme: it lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease and his death, his well being, by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way even to the ultimate determination of the individual, of what characterizes him, of what belongs to him, of what happens to him. (197)

The disciplinary mechanism of the panopticon consists on “strict divisions” and “the assignment to each individual of his ‘true’ name, his ‘true’ place, his ‘true’ body” (198). But in *Nights* the system is cracked by an emphasis on corporeality: first concealed touches exchanged through bars, then the secret messages written in bodily fluids. It is the body that can bridge the individualities of these women — and, significantly, liberate them — and when this body is represented by menstrual blood, it comes to explicitly signify sex.

I understand this scene as a critique of the individualistic tendencies of some feminist strands, and as a suggestion that complete individuation, complete relativization of “woman” and its utter division into separate and unique beings, makes it impossible to devise a necessary political subject. Read this way, the passage becomes a sort of allegory of liberal versus radical feminism that ultimately maintains the radical apprehension of the sex/gender relation as the central cause of women’s oppression and, therefore, a fundamental pillar for feminism. In short, what Carter seems to argue is that in times of extreme individuation and relativization, the maintenance of “women” as a political group can require the embrace of sex as their unifying category. She may be suggesting that a strategic retreat for feminism to

some degree of essentialism would be necessary for theory to transit into politics and practice.

In this sense, I find Carter's stance less consonant with Butler's than with, for instance, Iris Marion Young's when she contends that one reason to conceptualize women as a collective ... is to maintain a point of view outside of liberal individualism. The discourse of liberal individualism denies the reality of groups. According to liberal individualism, categorizing people in groups by race, gender, religion, and sexuality and acting as though these ascriptions say something significant about the person, his or her experience, capacities and possibilities, is invidious and oppressive. The only liberatory approach is to think of and treat people as individuals, variable and unique. This individualist ideology, however, in fact obscures oppression. Without conceptualizing women as a group in some sense, it is not possible to conceptualize oppression as a systematic, structured, institutional process. (718)

To me, this scene together with Fevvers's overstated body brings *Nights*, in terms of the sex/gender relation, closer not to queer theory's extreme suspension of gender but to Young's understanding of gender as seriality. Drawing from Jean-Paul Sartre, Young claims that while it is true that experiences of femininity are too diverse and culturally contingent for women to constitute a proper group, they can in fact be taken as a series. The advantages of her approach are, in her words, that "it provides a way of thinking about women as a social collective without requiring that all women have common attributes or a common situation," and that gender as seriality "does not rely on identity or self-identity for understanding the social production and meaning of membership in collectives" (723).

Young explains that, for Sartre, a group is "a collection of persons who recognize themselves and one another as in a unified relation with one another;" so that group members

“mutually acknowledge that together they undertake a common project” (723-24). A series, in turn,

is a social collective whose members are unified passively by the objects around which their actions are oriented or by the objectified results of the material effects of the actions of the others ... The unity of the series derives from the way that individuals pursue their own individual ends with respect to the same objects conditioned by a continuous material environment, in response to structures that have been created by the unintended collective result of past actions ... Though they are in this way a social collective, they do not identify with one another, do not affirm themselves as engaged in a shared enterprise, or identify themselves with common experiences. (724)

Moreover, while series do define individuals to some extent, they do so rather limitedly. “One ‘is’ a farmer, or a commuter, or a radio listener, and so on,” (727) but these categories do not restrain the subject’s sense of self nor do they establish common purposes for all individuals they identify:

The definition is anonymous, and the unity of the series is amorphous, without determinate limits, attributes, or intentions. Sartre calls [series] a unity “in flight,” a collective gathering that slips away at the edges, whose qualities and characteristics are impossible to pin down because they are an inert result of the confluence of actions ... While serial membership delimits and constraints an individual’s possible actions, it does not define the person’s identity in the sense of forming his or her individual purposes, projects, and sense of self in relation to others. (727)

Young then formulates that, as a series, “*woman* is the name of a structural relation to material objects as they have been produced and organized by a prior history” (728, emphasis

in original), a reasoning still quite similar to Butler's if one thinks back to *Gender Trouble* and her proposition of a "genealogy," in the Foucauldian sense, of gender:

a genealogical critique refuses to search for the origins of gender, the inner truth of female desire, a genuine or authentic sexual identity that repression has kept from view; rather, genealogy investigates the political stakes in designating as an origin and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin. The task of this inquiry is to center on—and decenter—such defining institutions: phallogocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality. (xxix, emphasis in original)

What this means is that both theorists acknowledge "woman" as a concept to be investigated historically and regulated by external elements that Butler calls "defining institutions" and Young, following Sartre, calls "practico-inert objects:" they are practical because "their effects are the results of human action," but they "constitute constraints on and resistances to action that make them experienced as inert" (725-26).

Finally, Young explains that the female body is indeed a practico-inert object of gender, that is, it participates in the definition of "woman," although it does so not only in the sense of there being a female anatomy — vagina, breasts, etc. — but mainly because such anatomy entails certain practices:

social objects are not merely physical but also inscribed by and the products of past practices.

The female body as a practico-inert object toward which action is oriented is a rule-bound body, a body with understood meanings and possibilities. Menstruation, for example, is a regular biological event occurring in most female bodies within a certain age range. It is not this biological process alone, however, that locates individuals in the series of women. Rather, the social rules of menstruation, along with the material objects associated with

menstrual practices, constitute the activity within which the women live as serialized. One can say the same about biological events like pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation.

Therefore, in view of the so-called “Butlerification” of Carter which includes major names of Carter criticism, such as Sarah Gamble, it is relevant to straightforwardly establish a distinction between both theorists that I find ultimately crucial. My claim is that Carter’s emphasis on the body and especially on menstruation aligns her better with such postulations that acknowledge the experience of the body as culturally and historically determined — “not an irreducible human universal” (*Sadeian* 9) — but simultaneously embracing the sexed body as a useful starting point for the conception of a social collective felt necessary for feminism.

Sarah Sceats has similarly noted that “[Carter’s] conception of the body” in *Nights*, if compared to Butler’s, “is more thoroughly material” given Carter’s emphasis “on physicality, on physical differences, needs, desires and appetites” and her consideration of “the social and political forces that act upon the person” (86). In fact, the women freaks from Section I are a perfect expression of the body as an important, determinant material reality rather than an abstraction: it is their bodies that dictate their whole lives, their lived experience, their disadvantage and suffered abuse, their special needs, their positionality in materiality. Regarding sex differences, it seems quite clear to me that Carter would have agreed less with Butler than with, for one, Martha Nussbaum, a very hostile Butler reader who writes:

culture can shape and reshape some aspects of our bodily existence, but it does not shape all

the aspects of it. “In the man burdened by hunger and thirst,” as Sextus Empiricus observed long ago, “it is impossible to produce by argument the conviction that he is not so burdened.” ... Even where sex difference is concerned, it is surely too simple to write it all off as culture; nor should feminists be eager to make such a sweeping

gesture... In short: what feminism needs, and sometimes gets, is a subtle study of the interplay of bodily difference and cultural construction. (9)

Pretty much like physical disability and its implications cannot be undone rhetorically, sexual difference and its role in power structures cannot be simply theorized away in societies that promptly identify “female” and labels it second-class.

Helen Stoddard calls attention to the influence of Laura Mulvey’s important essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” over Carter’s treatment of gender in *Nights* (26). Although written for film studies, Mulvey’s central argument of “women as image, men as bearers of the look” (“Visual” 837) perfectly applies to Fevvers:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (837, emphasis in original)

Stoddard identifies an echo of Mulvey when Fevvers tells Walser that, posing as Cupid in Ma Nelson’s brothel during her childhood, she was “nought but the painted, gilded *sign* of love,” and calls the experience her “apprenticeship in *being looked at*,” or “being the object of the eye of the beholder” (23, emphasis in original). For Stoddard, “the emphasis ... is on the *codification* of female display,” (27, emphasis in original) that is, Fevvers’s femininity is represented as built upon the male expectation, the codes of femininity understood by males — a task at which she excels, having vast experience.

Fevvers is so acutely aware of “femininity” as an artifice and its regulating codes that she strikes Walser as a female impersonator. Although winged, as a trapeze artist Fevvers

does not fly great heights nor is she able to move fast. Walser observes that her limitations, instead of raising suspicions, reinforce the viewer's belief in her anatomy and make him "briefly contemplate the unimaginable" (17) — that she is indeed a bird-woman —, after which he concludes that "in order to earn a living ... a genuine bird-woman [might] have to pretend she was an artificial one" (17). Carter's commentary of gender here is, to some degree, in accordance to Butler's claim:

as the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an "act," as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of "the natural" that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status. (187)

The word separating Carter and Butler here is "genuine": while gender is a performance Fevvers carries out, as long as her wings stand for femaleness, the idea of Fevvers's being a "genuine" bird-woman pretending artificiality entails the existence of a female subject prior to gender. This would be an example of Joanne Trevenna's observation, featured in my first chapter, that the parallelism between Carter and Butler is ultimately not complete because Carter's comparison between gender acquisition and theatrical performance "suggests a subject position prior to gender acquisition," for there has to be an actor before there is a role, "and maintains a sex/gender division ... rejected by Butler" (269). Fevvers performs "woman" as she exaggerates the cultural codes of femininity — she does, in Butlerian terms, "reveal [the] fundamentally phantasmatic status" of gender (187) — but she is a woman before doing so. Her female anatomy, her bodily difference from "man," labels her "woman" before her cultural acquisition of gender takes place.

However, Iris Young's essay goes on to argue that it is not exactly the body but "enforced heterosexuality" (729) that, through the body, ultimately constitutes the gendered

series “women,” a clear point of agreement between her and Butler. It seems to me that the novel does not expose the exact extent to which Carter would share this particular position. In fact, I believe that not only in *Nights* but in Carter’s oeuvre, taken as a whole, there is a persistent double-pull enveloping the relation between gender oppression and (hetero)sexuality. *The Magic Toyshop* would be very much in accordance to Young’s and Butler’s idea, as Aunt Margaret’s predicament results from her marriage to Philip and Melanie is clearly bound to repeat her experience by marrying Finn. Similarly, the two instances of lesbianism in *Nights* result in characters’ liberation from situations of abuse. Extremely significant about Mignon and the Princess becoming a couple is that their union signifies a challenging expression of lesbian desire as the antithesis of male pornography.²⁹ For a writer so harshly criticized for allegedly condoning oppressive male fetish and its pornographication of lesbianism — Paulina Palmer, for example, accuses Carter of “[giving] the reader the impression that lesbian sex exists only as a figment of the pornographic male imagination” (195) — it is worth noting that lesbianism in *Nights* ultimately represents Mignon’s deliverance from her abuser. To use Sarah M. Henstra’s words, “lesbian desire ... is precisely what *threatens* the pornographic male imagination” (105, emphasis in original) that objectifies and subsequently hurts Mignon, in which sense I have called it male pornography’s antithesis.

As I have noted in chapter two, lesbianism reappears in the Siberia section, when Olga and Vera’s romantic engagement begins the movement that would free all of Countess P.’s prisoners: “desire ... leapt across the great divide between the guards and the guarded,” after which “it was as if a wild seed took seeds around” and “the flowers that sprang from those seeds grew in silence” (216-17): rapidly, a number of new couples appear until the

²⁹ Henstra makes a similar remark about Carter’s reading of Sade’s *Philosophy in the Boudoir* in *The Sadeian Woman*.

prison becomes “an army of lovers” (217). Together they easily disarm and lock up their captor, Countess P., who sides with and perpetuates patriarchal oppression regardless of being a woman. The scene fictionalizes lesbian desire being taken from the hands of the patriarchy — which will generally accept only those expressions of lesbianism that aim at pleasing males — and redeployed in favor of freedom-seeking women, in which sense it appears indeed to resonate with both Butler’s and Young’s claims of enforced heterosexuality as a major piece in the oppressive structure.

Fevvers, however, is heterosexual, and her relation with Walser throughout the novel is rather positive in comparison to earlier Carter couples such as Ghislaine and Honeybuzzard or Melanie and Finn. Walser approaches Fevvers in the beginning with the clinical eyes of a detached fact-checker, but his attentive openness to her story and subsequent willingness to follow her and the circus ultimately result in a major transformation: “he was not the man he had been or would ever be again,” (290) Fevvers notices when they finally reunite after the train crash. In their first erotic encounter, Fevvers’s being on top — the only position her anatomy permits — resembles an inverted Leda and the Swan, a very significant divergence from *Toyshop* possibly indicating a maturing perception by Carter of heterosexual dynamics that would allow for optimism. Sara Martin writes negatively about the novel’s close: most critics, she argues, overlook “the magnitude of the changes Fevvers demands from Walser,” changes that to her define Walser as “not so much an independent character but part of Fevvers’ characterisation, just like her wings,” (197) and describes their love-plot as “a story between the woman who wants to be the New Woman and the man she chooses to be her New Man” (197). Martin also recalls Clare Hanson’s valid argument that “Fevvers, after all, imposes her vision of herself on Walser, reversing, rather than dissolving, existing power

structures,” (67) to which Martin adds: “not only her vision of herself, but also her vision of himself” (197).

I understand positions such as Martin’s and Hanson’s, but I am prone to agreeing with Heather Johnson that Walser is an example of Carter’s male characters who undergo “a kind of feminist conversion that enables him to achieve a nonpatriarchal relationship” (79). Walser is indeed radically transformed, but perhaps one may rethink how radically societies should change if their women are regularly beaten, tortured, raped, and even murdered by their own partners. His skepticism, the ease with which he believes himself able to label things “possible” or “impossible” based on his culturally acquired notions of normality, may be representative of the alienated individual misled by cultural constructs disguised as universals, such as those attempting to maintain women in a position of discretion and servitude. Considering Fevvers’s unnatural anatomy a symbol of women’s empowerment, Walser’s initial disbelief in Fevvers may be seen as disbelief in empowered women, in societies of gender equality; that is not how the world goes. Only a complete erasure of those deeply ingrained guidelines to how the world should go could make Walser fit for being the partner of a woman as big as Fevvers. As Lizzie eventually asserts,

what we have to contend with ... is the long shadow of the *past historic* ... that forged the institutions which create the human nature of the present... It’s not the “soul” that must be forged on the anvil of history but the anvil itself must be changed in order to change humanity. Then we might see, if not “perfection”, then something a little better, or, not to raise too many false hopes, a little less bad. (240)

Walser’s memory loss, his exclusion from “the past historic ... that forged the institutions” of gender oppression, is ultimately what enables him to be the New Man to the New Woman. So while Carter’s encouragement of the expression of non-heterosexual sexualities as positive

and liberating would pair her with theorists to whom enforced heterosexuality is a harmful institution, her treatment of heterosexual dynamics in *Nights* is, differently from the gloominess of her first writings, one of optimistically exploring possibilities and proposing happier endings.

To sum up, *Nights at the Circus* offers strongly postmodern representations of gender mostly in its cultural-historical approach to femininity and, as example of that, in its revision and redeployment of female monstrosity. *Nights*'s exultant rendition of the monstrous feminine implodes a discourse historically exploitive of women, presenting the subversive power of understanding these discursive mechanisms and partaking in their workings. Nevertheless, the novel's plain postmodern tendencies are counterbalanced by its notable retreat to gender essentialism as it seems to insist on the body as pivotal for gender theorization and women's struggle for freedom. Surprisingly, this rhetoric is absent in the earlier *The Magic Toyshop*, although it would have been far more consonant with the period of its publication. This is possibly due to Carter's realization in the early 80s of the perilous paths of abstract relativization through which the postmodern/poststructuralist theorizations may be taking gender studies and feminist politics, while in the 60s they were yet burgeoning modes of thinking that shone with subversive potential. I perceive the gender discussion in *Nights* as participating in the anti-anti-essentialist movement described by Stone — however ahead of its time, as is usually Carter's case — merging highly postmodern aesthetics and philosophy with a more cautious, materialist, and strategically essentialist approach to gender and feminism.

With regards to sexuality, the novel casts a positive light on lesbianism as it depicts lesbian encounters as liberating; one could even read these characters' heterosexual past as symbolizing their imprisonment in heterosexuality, so that the novel challenges the

compulsory heterosexuality identified by Butler and Young as a central institution in gender oppression. Heterosexual relationships, on the other hand, are portrayed rather romantically and optimistically, although the narrative does not disregard the deep cultural transformation that healthy and equal heterosexual dynamics would primarily require.

Final Remarks

“The survival of feminism—of feminism as an ongoing history-in-process with a future—depends in part on our ability to reproduce ourselves in subsequent generations and to pass on what we have learned so that the wheel does not need to be reinvented every generation.”

Susan Stanford Friedman

This thesis has attempted to contribute to the analysis of gender, identity, and feminist theory as presented in Angela Carter’s work. It also integrates the body of studies on Carter’s affiliation with postmodernism. In my introduction I have outlined a few general concerns that were to orient my research: whether one can identify Carter’s accommodation of ongoing and emerging feminist debates, and whether her stances are made clear; the influence of postmodernism over her theorization and aesthetics, and the dialogues between her postmodern tendencies and her feminist ethos; the extent to which her production considers difference within the category of “woman”; at last, if Carter’s treatment of gender can be said to change throughout her writing career.

In chapter one, my specific aim was to introduce Carter’s feminist project and trace a chronologic overview of a selection of her fictions, examining their approximation with feminist theory and its unfoldings. I hope to have demonstrated the diversity of feminist debates that she comes to encompass over time, and to have contributed to the examination of Carter’s literary techniques as I expose how these themes are expressed in her fiction. My analysis demonstrates Carter’s movement from a pessimistic diagnosis of gender oppression towards optimistic models of agency for women characters. It also reveals a number of persistent and pervasive concerns and positions, such as the notion of gender as a myth, the stress on discourse as a major force shaping women’s materiality, and the urge that women be

willing to let go of these comforting myth of women by participating in gender representation.

As I have stated, my selection of fiction works for chapter one was based on what I particularly perceive as the most remarkable moments of Carter's career in terms of feminist debates and gender theories. However, I acknowledge that some, if not all, of the volumes that were left out could have contributed substantially to an overview such as mine. As an analysis of all of Carter's fictions is beyond the scope of this thesis, it remains as something to be accomplished. Although some critics have already developed chronological studies of her fiction — Sarah Gamble, Lorna Sage and Linden Peach are examples — these do not focus specifically on feminist theory and varying representations of gender. I reiterate that, as I see it, the importance of this procedure lies on that Carter's theoretical trajectory sheds great light on the debates of her time, with their controversies and confluences, revealing literature as a site of political and theoretical examination and experimentation.

In chapter two, I intended to analyze Carter's discussion of identity in the novels *The Magic Toyshop* and *Nights at the Circus*. My main objective was to verify the applicability of Friedman's cartographies of identity to Carter's representations of subjectivity. I believe that this is achieved by my demonstration of the stress, in both novels, on time and space and their relation to identity. I have exposed that identities in these stories, as in Friedman's theorization, are not stable but fluid, situational, and contingent to spatial and temporal dislocations.

Although a good number of studies considers the multiplicity and transience of Carter's identity, approximating Carter's fiction and Friedman's project is not a frequent move. Other readings may successfully extend this approach to other fictions by Carter, among which I would primarily suggest her last one, *Wise Children*. As it narrates the

trajectory of sisters Dora and Nora Chance from infancy to old age, exploring also their large and very diverse family, the story is notably rich in spatial and temporal dislocations, class differences, and reflections upon age.

Chapter two also connects these positional theories, such as Friedman's, to Deleuze's conceptualization of difference, becoming, and eternal return. As my introduction clarifies, Deleuzian readings of Carter exist but do not abound; this has been the reason for my choice, and I expect that this chapter has successfully indicated the usefulness of the Deleuzian discourse to the Carter reader. However, other names that recur in Carter readings have, once more, proved indispensable for my objective, mainly Freud and Barthes. Freud's *Uncanny* adds a psychoanalytic layer to Carter's identity politics, as it helps the expression of how oppressing discourses act upon the subject and hinder agency. Barthesian notions of textual subjects and interpretive limitations have been essential for my accounts of subjectivity and negotiation in the two novels, uncovering the postmodern modes of Carter's politics.

In chapter three, the purpose was to focus on sex, gender, and desire in *Toyshop* and *Nights*, attending especially to notions of biological essentialism, gender social-constructionism, and the relation between these and sexuality. It argues that *Toyshop* is descriptive not only of imposed femininity but also of masculinity as violently and painfully imposed. It should be noted that readings of *Toyshop* rarely concentrate on Finn's pain, which I find dismissive: this movement by Carter places her against feminisms that praise images of suffering women, such as the antipornography movement I recall in chapter one. In view of the strength of these victimizing strands at the time, focusing on masculinity reveals *Toyshop* as a much bolder work than a study oblivious to Finn probably would. Chapter three also explores desire in *Toyshop* in Lacanian terms, and my conclusion is that desire in the novel is as culturally experienced as sex and gender.

I believe that the major contribution of this chapter to the field is the demonstration of the anti-anti-essentialist impulse in *Nights* that renders it a more essentialist work than the much earlier *Toyshop*. This chapter opposes Elizabeth Gargano's claim that *Toyshop* shifts between essentialist and constructionist views of gender, arguing rather that essentialism appears in the novel only to be declined. Meanwhile, although *Nights* is obviously concerned with differences within the category of "women," it seems to retake the need for a common denominator, and to elect the body as such.

It is not rare, though, to come across arguments such as Gargano's that Carter's earlier novels feature more instances of gender essentialism than her last ones, as if she gradually acquires or enhances the skill to deconstruct gender. Nevertheless, I assume that this perception is related mostly to aesthetics. It is probably the somber tone of *Toyshop*, reinforced by its gloomy allusions to male-dominated texts such as fairy tales and the Bible and combined with the bare linearity and relative simplicity of its plot and characters, that immediately displays it as more conventional, less postmodern than *The Bloody Chamber*, *Nights at the Circus*, or *Wise Children*. Also, as I have argued, the first publications appear indeed more concerned with denouncing gendered power structures rather than seeking to subvert them. I would maintain, however, that a closer look at these earlier novels might reveal, perhaps more poorly or obscurely expressed but equally present, a firm postulation of gender, sex and sexuality as invariably cultural-historical institutions. Therefore, I see my analysis as a rereading of *Toyshop* criticism, and encompassing other novels into this movement — those from the Bristol trilogy, for example — is a possibility for future criticism.

Similarly, much has been written recently about the commonalities between Carter and Butler, while their divergences, especially in Carter's later novels, might remain

underexplored. Butler's and similar postmodern modes of identity deconstruction have completely revolutionized feminism and gender studies but, on the other hand, a sizeable portion of thinkers have responded with distrust and resistance, often proposing limits to theorization and even resorting back to primary strategies. It is a valid response; one should indeed be able to consider the weight of theory and discourse without losing sight of materiality. It is extremely significant that Carter is able to have her fiction go along with these theoretical and political motions, resisting the empty comfort of conviction.

I have opened this final section with Friedman's words not only to cherish her work, which has been central to my analysis, but because I see the possibility to, as feminists, "reproduce ourselves in subsequent generations and to pass on what we have learned," (215) as being among Carter's greatest talents. Yet it seems to be often misinterpreted as a flaw; charges against Carter of political and theoretical inconclusiveness or impracticality seem to expect that she chooses one path to follow and embrace whatever it brings, demolishing whatever complicates or questions it. On the contrary, Carter grows together with feminism, fearlessly challenging outdated strategies and energetically adapting new ones to her project — "so that the wheel does not need to be reinvented every generation" (215). In the ubiquitous feminist conflict between discourse and materiality, I view Carter as a writer in constant effort to stand precisely within the interstitial space between the two poles, trying not to be carried away by philosophical tendencies flowing in either/or direction. This endeavor will require different courses of action at different moments, depending on what current runs harder. Carter's trajectory encourages feminist debates to be reopened, reworked, and enriched, rather than checked and put away or dismissed as excessive. And, as it does so through fiction, it attests the political potential of postmodernism and of postmodern literature.

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