

QUEEREST OF THE QUEER:  
THE FICTION OF ANGELA CARTER AND THE  
POLITICS OF DISARTICULATION

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QUEEREST OF THE QUEER:<sup>1</sup>  
THE FICTION OF ANGELA CARTER AND THE  
POLITICS OF DISARTICULATION

By

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<sup>1</sup> Garbage, "Queer" *Garbage* Mushroom Records International, 1995.



## Abstract

Feminist theory and queer theory remain largely at odds in contemporary discourses on sexuality. While certain feminisms rely on category affirming strategies in which difference is continually inscribed, queer theorists are exploring sites of transgression which are characterised by an indeterminacy of identity and a fluidity of sexual practices. This conceptual difference ensures that feminist and queer imperatives are perpetually locked in tension, with challenges and debates continually arising regarding "the proper object of analysis" for each discourse.

This tension characterises the critical reception of Angela Carter's fiction. The transgressive fluidity and iconoclastic disrespect for boundaries, identities and political correctness that Carter's fiction flaunts has been awkwardly received by those Carter critics working within theoretical paradigms of boundary affirmation. Much of the existing Carter criticism displays appropriative strategies which preclude the analysis of her work in terms of transgressive potential.

This dissertation takes up the transgressive potential of Carter's fiction, using a queer perspective to explore spectatorship practices, sexually explicit representations and normative identity construction. Carter's fiction provides a rich site for the exploration of a queer project of disarticulation, in which sexualities and identities resist the reiterative performances of themselves as themselves. A disruption of this perpetual chain of signification disrupts the citational histories which accord power and cultural validity to certain sexualities and not to others, and temporarily diffracts the means by which identities are regulated so easily by hegemonic structures. Through a detailed study of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, *The Passion of New Eve*, and *Nights at the Circus*, this dissertation proposes a destabilisation of the very ground on which debates over inclusion and exclusion are fought.



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## **Declaration**

I declare that the main text of this dissertation is the original work of the undersigned and that it has not been submitted in any form for another award. All information presented in quotations or references has been duly acknowledged, and a complete list of references is included.

Signature Redacted

Wendy O'Brien



## Introduction

Angela Carter's iconoclastic, interrogative and textually dense writing style has sparked a number of lively and diffuse debates among critics on issues as wide-ranging as the constraints of the fairy tale form to postmodern identity politics. The magnitude and diversity of the existent Carter criticism signals Carter's place as one of the most notable British postmodernists. It is to the discourses regarding Carter's place as a postmodernist that this dissertation contributes.

Recognising a space in the existing criticism for a queer approach to Carter's work, this dissertation engages in a queer exploration of four of her texts: *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972), *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), *The Sadeian Woman* (1979), and *Nights at the Circus* (1984). I will argue that Carter's fiction has a transgressive potential which enables queer reading practices and the performance of queer identities. Rather than encouraging "straight" identifications and subject positions, the variety of sexualities, practices and corporealities performed by Carter's characters and narrative positions allows the reader to adopt fluid and queer character identifications and reading practices. By encouraging a self-reflexive examination of the reader's sexual construction, Carter's texts contribute to the means by which queer theory interrogates the presumably stable boundaries of the "self".

This study originates from an identification of a number of appropriative effects in much of the existing Carter criticism. There are a broad range of theoretical, political and contextual influences at work within these critical approaches. Chapter One traces the predominant trends in Carter criticism, identifying feminisms, pornography, literature, art, taste and morality as recurring discourses and codes by which Carter's work is assessed. This chapter

recognises the significance of contextualising Carter's work in terms of its critical reception, and suggests that much of the subversive potential of Carter's work has proved troublesome for critics. A significant proportion of the Carter criticism indicates a preoccupation with the sexual politics of Carter's fiction, and it is these issues that hold most interest for this particular study.

Chapter One also traces a noticeable shift in the reception of Carter's fiction paralleling a like shift in feminist thought. Moving away from the earlier emphasis on the sexual violence and the psychoanalytic aspects of Carter's work, the later Carter criticism engages with the postmodern concerns with theorising identity. This chapter maps this shift in reception, noting several important contributions, yet at the same time identifies a space for the analysis of the transgressive aspects of Carter's work according to queer notions of identity and performativity.

A significant proportion of the later Carter criticism operates according to feminist theoretical engagements with Judith Butler's notion of performativity. These critiques assess Carter's work as a potential means of feminine resistance via performative strategies. This indicates an important shift toward postmodern understandings of identity, yet this later criticism remains somewhat curbed by the reliance of certain feminisms on category affirmation. This highlights an opening for the reading of Carter's fiction as a site in which to explore transgressive and cross-identificatory sexuality.

Chapter Two proposes a dialogue between the theories of category affirmation and those of indeterminate identity, and traces the means by which the employment of identity categories need not fulfil a normative agenda. Drawing extensively on Judith Butler's notion of the performative, this thesis proposes that Carter's fiction provides a useful site for the exploration of identities as characterised by a series of disjunctures of the normative. This chapter maintains the critical view that identity might be figured in terms of fluidity rather



than fixity, and that this might operate through a destabilisation of the reiterative effects of identity categories. In crossing the discourses of feminism and queer theory, this chapter considers identity categories in terms of their regulatory effects. By destabilising the distinction between sex and gender as a final privileging of the authenticity of anatomy, the causal connections between the presumably discrete aspects of identification, desire and practice are contested.

Chapter Three examines conventional approaches to pornography and pornographic reading practices, with attention to claims that Carter's work is "pornographic". With a Foucaultian emphasis on the hegemonic "production" of bodies and desires, Carter's *The Sadeian Woman* provides an explicit exploration of the effects of pornographic discourse. Chapter Three traces the polemical thread of Carter's text, indicating a concern with the dominant tenets of anti-pornography discourse. In taking Carter's notion of the moral pornographer as a starting point, this section aims to refigure pornography in terms of potentiality rather than prescription or proscription. An extension of the theoretical perspective outlined in Chapter Two, this chapter proposes that pornography facilitates access to the potentialities of sexual identity rather than reinscribing normative and restrictive modes of sexual behaviour. By reconceptualising the discursive terms through which pornography is assessed, this chapter proposes that the "gaze", "objectification", "penetration" and "power" might not always signal the fulfilment of a normative agenda. Rather, pornography might be seen as a site in which to play out the tensions of identity formation, but also as a means of accessing those pleasures, bodies and desires excluded by the normative. In theorising a queer approach to pornography, Chapter Three proposes a reading model useful in analysis of Carter's fiction.

This concern with the politics of sexuality is paralleled in the fictional aspects of Carter's work and provides a rich site for destabilising the normative production of sexualities. Many of the characters and much of the imagery and iconography within Carter's texts operate to

frustrate the naturalisation of the normative. An emphasis on artifice, clockwork, and performance indicates a postmodern preoccupation with the construction of identity. Chapter Four presents an analysis of the postmodern reflexivity of *The Passion of New Eve* and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*. The contention of this chapter is that these two texts facilitate a dual purpose in that they provide the excessive display and parody of normative regulatory apparatuses, but also explore the transgressive potentialities of identity indeterminacy. Frustrating the normative connections of sexual identity formation, and setting the effects of performative utterances in perpetual flux, these novels exemplify the theoretical issues discussed in previous chapters.

Continuing the thematisation of the construction of identity, Chapter Five explores *Nights at the Circus* as a comment on the discursive regulation of the body. Through an analysis of the textual invocation of Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque body, this chapter proposes that *Nights* parodies the discursive appropriation of the body according to the mind/body split, and that the fleshly manifestation of the body belies the naturalisation of ontological boundaries. Concerned with the conventional means by which gendered corporeality is regulated, this chapter aims to identify a destabilising potential within *Nights at the Circus*. In drawing on the theoretical discussion of previous chapters, this section will foreground the processes of objectification, the regulatory function of language, and the historical naturalisation of feminine iconographies and mythologies. *Nights at the Circus* will be read as a parody of the processes by which the boundaries of the body, and thus the ontology of the subject, are secured. The resonance of Fevvers' Bakhtinian "last laugh" reminds the reader of Carter's fiction that identity is no more nor less than a phantasmagoric display, and that attempts to determine a point of fixity provide access to neither an ontological nor a corporeal truth.

This dissertation proposes a reading of Carter's fiction as destabilising the social and cultural fictions that regulate lives. The over-determined intertextuality of Carter's work



holds historical, literary, mythological, medical and political discourses accountable for the binary regulation of subjectivities. Particularly critical of notions of authenticity/inauthenticity, the self-reflexive and parodic elements of Carter's work destabilise the binaries through which identities are conceived/constructed. The surfaces of Carter's text are palpably sexual, and the parodic excess works as a constant reminder to the reader that the differences most inscribed with naturalness are those with the most profound regulatory effects. It is this continued emphasis on gendered fictions that ensures Carter's work offers potentialities for queer reading practices. In reading Carter's fiction as a frustration of binary normativity, this dissertation aims to free a space for the fictional representation of, and reader identification with, sexualities that are elusive of categorical constraints.

## Chapter One

### The Conventions of Context: Exploring the Reception of Carter's Work

Lorna Sage writes in the introduction to the 1994 edited collection of criticism, *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, that figures from the British Academy show that in "1992-3 there were more than forty applicants wanting to do doctorates on Carter, making her by far the most fashionable twentieth-century topic".<sup>2</sup> This explosion of interest in Carter's fiction following her death in 1992 appears to be matched in its intensity by the debates which exist within this body of critical writing. I propose that there are several interesting points to be raised in an analysis of these critical debates. Firstly, much of the existing writing on Carter functions to categorise or constrain the subversive potential of her work in some way. Secondly, following the feminist interest in Judith Butler's theory of gender as a performance, there has been an increased focus on the sexual element of Carter's work. Furthermore, much of the literature reading Carter's fiction in terms of gender as a performance, tends either to operate from within a restrictive or prescriptive feminist paradigm, or to critique the application of such theories of performativity to Carter's fiction as utopian or celebratory. A historicisation of the critical reception of Carter's fiction positions these critical concerns and appropriations as analogous to contemporary critical tensions concerning identity politics and theories of performativity. A survey of existing Carter criticism provides an indication of the historical and cultural tensions contributing to the continual negotiations of feminism and sexuality. This facilitates a reading of Carter's fiction and its context of reception as functioning in a dialogue of tension regarding issues of cultural theory and criticism. Rather than desiring to see agreement among critics or stasis in

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<sup>2</sup> Lorna Sage, introduction, *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. Lorna Sage (London: Virago Press Limited, 1994) 3.



these negotiations, I see these critical and theoretical tensions as a useful context in which to situate and analyse many of the issues raised by Carter's fiction.

While all literary criticism tends to construct its subject according to set criteria or categories, much of the criticism of Carter's work is notable for the degree to which these categories and terms are debated according to particular ideological perspectives. A recurring focus in Carter criticism is the contestation and politics of ideological "ground". Categories and terms of identity or politics are continually negotiated according to their ideological significance in terms of inclusion/exclusion. This theoretical and critical focus corresponds with the thematic concerns of Carter's fiction which indicates an emphasis on "individuals" as effects of social and cultural ideologies. Consequently, reading Carter's fiction in terms of the context of reception facilitates an analysis of the broad spectrum through which these negotiations and contestations of identity and politics are played out. Carter's intertextual, critically aware and self-reflexive style frames her work as itself a literary criticism, and in this sense the nexus of Carter's work and the context of reception form a productive site for the analysis of identity politics and the cultural significance of labelling.

There are ongoing debates regarding Carter's place as a feminist, as a pornographer, as politically correct, as politically incorrect. I would suggest that what is notable about the debates which will be explored in detail in this chapter is the degree to which a policing of the boundaries and often binaries of these terms is effected. Furthermore, I will suggest that an adherence to the criteria which sustain categories such as this belies the elements of Carter's fiction which embrace a destabilisation not only of identity categories, but of theoretical perspectives and ideologies also. In a cyclical fashion, then, Carter's fiction reads as a critique of normative strategies, some of which are operative in the criticism of her work. As Sarah Gamble says of Carter, "both her fiction and non-fiction writing showed her constantly pushing at, testing, the boundaries of any received belief system".<sup>3</sup> Carter herself states, "I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the

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<sup>3</sup> Sarah Gamble, *Angela Carter: Writing From the Front Line* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) 4.

new wine makes the old bottles explode".<sup>4</sup> Carter's work seems to be unqualifiedly concerned with exploding the old bottles of cultural and discursive mythologies, indicating a commitment to her "demythologising business".<sup>5</sup> However, much of the criticism of Carter's fiction does not match this demythologising strategy, functioning instead as a classification of her work according to pre-existing ideological codes, whether they be of feminism, pornography, literature, art, taste or morality.<sup>6</sup>

The 1994 publication of Lorna Sage's edited collection of Carter criticism, *Flesh and The Mirror*, provided the first book-length study of Angela Carter's work. Prior to this time, Carter criticism took the form of review articles, critical journal and magazine pieces. In recent years, however, there have been a number of book-length studies published, each of which will be discussed in this chapter.<sup>7</sup> *Flesh and the Mirror* demonstrates the wide variety of critical positions which have been established in relation to Carter's fiction, with articles ranging in scope from science fiction to surrealism, feminism and cinematic theory. With the increased interest in Carter's fiction in recent years, there have been several collections of articles published which take a more focused approach to her work.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps there are a number of reasons for the recent shift in the form and content of Carter criticism. Initially, I would suggest that with the proliferation of interest in Carter's work following her death, the ever-increasing body of Carter criticism necessitates collections

<sup>4</sup> Angela Carter, "Notes From the Front Line", *Shaking a Leg: Journalism and Writings*, ed. Jenny Uglow (London: Chatto & Windus Limited, 1997) 37.

<sup>5</sup> Carter, "Notes From the Front Line" 38.

<sup>6</sup> Cornel Bonca suggests that critical essays "assume familiarity with her texts and squeeze them into ideological frameworks (feminism, postmodernism, etc.) without giving her books much room to breathe". Cornel Bonca, "In Despair of the Old Adams: Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman*", *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 14.3 (1994) : 57.

<sup>7</sup> The book length studies of Carter's fiction which will be discussed in this chapter include: Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton, eds. *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1997).

Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

Sarah Gamble, *Angela Carter: Writing From the Front Line* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).

Linden Peach, *Angela Carter* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998).

Anja Muller, *Angela Carter: Identity Constructed/Deconstructed* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1997).

In addition, as the results of the 1992-3 interest in her work are published, there are many Masters and Doctoral dissertations available which study the fiction of Angela Carter.

<sup>8</sup> *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter*, edited by Bristow and Broughton, combines a number of articles by critics interested in the feminist implications of the performative aspects of Carter's work, in particular, her later fictions, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*.



which are "specialised" in terms of theoretical perspective or of selected novels, rather than simply being bound by the Carter oeuvre. Additionally, I would suggest that following the popularity of Judith Butler's theory of "gender performances", the aspects of Carter's fiction which explore the shifting nature of subjectivity have more currency with feminists than they may have had in previous years. Prior to the mid 1980s, popular preoccupations regarding Carter's fiction concerned the violence of the sexuality, the ideological constraints of the form (particularly the fairy tale), psychoanalytic analyses of Oedipal and other gender representations and, finally, issues pertaining to Carter's position on pornography and the inclusion in her fiction of elements seen as pornographic. With the contemporary feminist interest in performances of gender, issues of pornography and violence have not received as much attention in recent Carter criticism. However, many of the recent analyses of Carter's fiction reinscribe binary conceptualisations of sexuality by framing performativity as a means of positive resistance for the feminine, rather than a trans- or inter-sexual spectrum of potentialities. While there is clearly potential for performativity to operate as a means of destabilising the structures which regulate femininity and appropriate feminine behaviour, this does not indicate the full potential either of performative politics, or the transgressive imagery in Carter's fiction. In this sense, then, perhaps these theories read Carter's fiction in terms of inverting binary structures of oppression, rather than exploding, or finding ways to operate *through* or *across* such structures.

Carter has been referred to as the "High Priestess of Post-Graduate Pornography"<sup>9</sup> and the sexual aspects of her fiction and polemical work have incited a number of continuing debates among feminists and literary theorists. Robin Ann Sheets highlights some of the issues characterising the debates regarding Carter's fiction and her place as a feminist author:

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<sup>9</sup> Amanda Sebestyn, "The Mannerist Marketplace", *New Socialist* March 1987 : 38.

British author Angela Carter holds a problematic place in the debates about pornography that have polarized Anglo-American feminists, originally over issues of sadomasochism and other sexual practices, and more recently over questions of artistic representation.<sup>10</sup>

While Carter described herself as a feminist,<sup>11</sup> there are many feminist critics who would suggest that Carter's work is antithetical to the feminist cause.<sup>12</sup> The publication of Carter's polemical defence of de Sade signals a quest for a "moral pornographer" who might put pornography in the service of women.<sup>13</sup> This focus on the potentially subversive aspects of pornography is one aspect of Carter's work which has proved problematic for feminists. Additionally, images of violent sexuality, female passivity, objectification, mutilation and rape within Carter's fiction have been repeatedly equated with an anti-feminist agenda.

The first part of this chapter will chart the critical reception of Carter's fiction, suggesting that Carter's work has been assessed or debated primarily according to feminist criteria. While these criteria are not always uniform, Carter's fiction has consistently been the subject of critical debate and contention in feminist terms. Following a broad analysis of the strands of debate which feature in Carter criticism, I will argue that despite Carter's tenuous position in relation to the anti-pornography and anti-censorship debate, as well as the debate over her work between feminist and anti-feminist writers, the majority of Carter criticism functions to maintain representational limitations rather than representational possibilities. I will suggest that much of the earlier feminist Carter criticism operates from an essentialist premise which conflates representation with violence. Additionally, much of the later Carter criticism which takes up the more contemporary feminist theory of gender performance also operates through feminist politics of inversion. Thus, most of the existing criticism on Carter

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<sup>10</sup> Robin Ann Sheets, "Pornography, Fairy Tales and Feminism: Angela Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber'", *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9 (1992) : 663.

<sup>11</sup> Carter, "Notes From the Front Line" 37.

<sup>12</sup> Susanne Kappeler, Patricia Duncker, Paulina Palmer, John Bayley, and Robert Clark are amongst the critics who suggest that Carter's work is anti-feminist. There are other writers, such as Sarah Gamble, Elaine Jordan, and Guido Almansi, who suggest that whilst Carter's project is predominantly feminist, there are elements which tread a fine line between reinforcing patriarchal attitudes, and challenging them. These arguments will be explored in more detail in this chapter.

precludes a reading of her fiction as a space in which we might explore transgressive and cross-identificatory sexuality.

Elaine Jordan has written several articles on Carter and is one of the earliest critics to attempt to contextualise Carter's fiction in terms of the broader debates which surround her work.<sup>14</sup> Although Jordan's contextualisation of Carter's work is brief, it does provide a useful starting point for an analysis of some of those debates. While Jordan does not explicitly draw attention to the fact, her article "The Dangerous Edge" highlights the major issue which characterises the critical reception of Carter's fiction.<sup>15</sup> Jordan explores what she perceives to be the tenuous relationship between the feminist movement and Carter's work.<sup>16</sup> According to Jordan, it is Carter's "criticism of feminism from the inside" which constitutes the "risky edge" of the political and the literary which she treads.<sup>17</sup> While Jordan agrees that the literary cannot be separated from the political in this way, the notion of the "risky edge" proves central to an analysis of the debates on Carter. Most Carter criticism appears to endorse only one side of this "edge", suggesting that her work is either by a literary genius, or that it is politically motivated and operative. It is possible to suggest that the function of both these arguments is fundamentally a depoliticisation of Carter's work. The arguments which posit Carter's work as literary effectively divorce the content of her work from a political imperative and, similarly, the arguments which assume Carter's work to be political do so from a prescriptive position whereby Carter is seen either as politically correct or politically dangerous; for some critics, these are one and the same.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago Press Limited, 1979) 19-20.

<sup>14</sup> Elaine Jordan, "The Dangers of Angela Carter", *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London: Routledge, 1992). Sarah Gamble's much later publication of *Angela Carter: Writing From the Front Line* (1997) provides an important discussion of the way in which Carter's fiction has been framed.

<sup>15</sup> Elaine Jordan, "The Dangerous Edge", *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. Loma Sage (London: Virago Press, 1994) 189.

<sup>16</sup> Jordan, "The Dangerous Edge" 190.

<sup>17</sup> Jordan, "The Dangerous Edge" 191.

<sup>18</sup> Arguably, this is a position taken by John Bayley, who critiques the way in which Carter's work continually maintains a feminist "party line". John Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown", *New York Review of Books* 23 April 1992 : 9.



While it is this "risky" oscillation between the political and the literary in Carter's work that has incited much of the debate among critics, Jordan also argues that it is this which ensures that Carter's work continues to give "pleasure and provocation".<sup>19</sup> Jordan celebrates both postmodernism and Carter's work for their disruption of "categorical divisions between art and politics",<sup>20</sup> suggesting that Carter "has her cake and eats it, refusing to give up enjoyment, excitement, engagement in any of this, refusing also to take it quietly and passively".<sup>21</sup> While Jordan celebrates the "risky edge" of the literary and the political, there are a number of critics who challenge Carter's continual blurring of this distinction. John Bayley advocates a separation of the literary and the political, admonishing Carter for "having it both ways".<sup>22</sup>

In his article "Fighting for the Crown", published two months after Carter's death, Bayley suggests that Carter is a postmodernist who insists on "stick[ing] . . . to the party line".<sup>23</sup> Bayley's article both trivialises and conflates political correctness, postmodernism, feminism, popular culture, and Carter's fiction. In his desire for classification, Bayley demonstrates frustration and derision at the categorical and stylistic elusiveness of postmodernism:

Postmodernism in the arts notoriously starts from the premise that "anything goes" but this is no great help if we are trying to find out what sort of fiction today is actually thought and spoken of as postmodernist. The expression has often been used about the books of Angela Carter, and so has the rather more easily definable term "magic realism".<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Jordan, "The Dangerous Edge" 190.

<sup>20</sup> Elaine Jordan, "Down the Road, or History Rehearsed", *Postmodernism and the Re-Reading of Modernity*, ed. Francis Barker et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992) 178-179.

<sup>21</sup> Jordan, "Down the Road, or History Rehearsed" 159.

<sup>22</sup> Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown" 9.

<sup>23</sup> Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown" 9.

<sup>24</sup> Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown" 9.

Bayley's work indicates an intention to place boundaries around both "postmodernism" and the work of Angela Carter. His definition of postmodernism follows the circular logic that if Carter's texts have been referred to as postmodernist, then her work is in fact what postmodernism "is". The way in which Bayley comes to the conclusion that Carter is a "postmodernist" reveals not only his cursory analysis of her fiction - and literary theory generally - but also a privileging of the "literary" over popular culture texts which are imbued with the political:

Although she is an enterprising and versatile writer . . . there is about all her novels a strong element of continuity, even communality . . . that does not distinguish between intimacy and togetherness, any more than between high art and pop art. . . . Angela Carter is good at having it both ways, dressing up pop art in academic gear and presenting crude aspects of modern living in a satirically elegant style.<sup>25</sup>

Bayley makes a series of elitist binary distinctions by aligning communality, togetherness and pop art with "the crude aspects of modern living". These are the aspects he identifies in Carter's work, as distinct from the celebrated qualities of intimacy, high art, academic gear and "satirically elegant style". Bayley laments the defilement or corruption of "high art" by the way in which Carter's texts are "committed to the preoccupations and to the fashions of our moment".<sup>26</sup> By classifying Carter as postmodernist, according to the definition "anything goes", Bayley demonstrates not only his disapproval of this type of writing in his assertion that the literary and the political should remain discrete, but also that there should be standards or restrictions maintained for literary content, form and even readership. This is made explicit when he comments that many of Carter's novels are "designed to appeal to a diverse audience":

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<sup>25</sup> Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown" 9.

<sup>26</sup> Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown" 11.

Another of postmodernism's purely negative qualifications is that it is not "elitist": that is to say does not possess the kinds of private and individual distinction which recommend themselves to a small audience. *Heroes and Villains* is a romp allegory appealing to everyone suspicious of such minority tastes.<sup>27</sup>

Bayley's efforts to maintain "minority tastes" are underlined when he takes this abstraction further to equate political correctness with feminism.<sup>28</sup> In identifying features which are "feminist", Bayley adopts a defensive perspective, and becomes critical of the "ideology" of Carter's work.<sup>29</sup> This masculine defensiveness is demonstrated in his response to those elements seen as "feminist" within her novel *Love*:

The notion of the "perilous interior", with its medieval and literary antecedents in perilous chapels and seas, affords Carter and her readers some subliminal amusement; but although she is sorry for Buzz she sticks even here to the party line: instructing us that female bodies must not be treated as objects. Still less of course as mechanical traps. Indeed if there is a common factor in the elusive category of the postmodern novel it is political correctness: whatever spirited arabesques and feats of descriptive imagination Carter may perform she always comes to rest in the right ideological position.<sup>30</sup>

Bayley's reference to "Carter and her readers" demonstrates a sarcastic regard for what he considers to be "feminists" and feminist issues. It would appear that Bayley feels as though he (and the presumably male readers that are implied by "us") are being "instructed" by Carter, suggesting that Carter's "supple and intoxicating bravura"<sup>31</sup> functions only to ensure

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<sup>27</sup> Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown" 10.

<sup>28</sup> Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown" 11.

<sup>29</sup> Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown" 9.

<sup>30</sup> Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown" 9.

<sup>31</sup> Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown" 11.



a political purpose. The assumption here is that Carter's fictions are manipulative, masquerading as literary in order to "instruct" the reader through less than honest (rather, "intoxicating") means. Bayley indicates that Carter employs narrative strategies and devices only to serve an ideological purpose: "Carter controls the Gothic element, as well as her other literary devices, with characteristic brio, driving it firmly to a polemical end, and not indulging it for its own sake".<sup>32</sup> Patricia Duncker also notes that Carter's texts function as vehicles for didacticism. She refers to Carter's fiction as :

[d]idactic little pieces of enlightened self-interest, the short tale in which sign and sense become utterly fused, with the moral, often a contradictory one, chugging along behind like the guardsvan.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, Bayley and Duncker appropriate Carter's fiction according to only one side of the literary/political "risky edge". The implication is that Carter's novels are purely political, with the literary or linguistic elements employed only to achieve this effect.<sup>34</sup> Arguably, then, Bayley maintains that the literary and the political are discrete, privileging the appeal of literary distinction over political or ideological "purpose". This is evident in his criticism of Carter's narrative style as creating "picaresque" and purely "performance" novels which have no lasting value.<sup>35</sup> The implication in this is that Bayley would prefer the preservation of literature<sup>36</sup> which is both timeless, yet private.<sup>37</sup> Bayley suggests that "Carter obviously took what the fashions and emphases of an epoch sent her way",<sup>38</sup> implying that there are

<sup>32</sup> Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown" 9.

<sup>33</sup> Patricia Duncker, "Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales, Angela Carter's *Bloody Chambers*", *Literature and History* 10.1 (1984): 3.

<sup>34</sup> Contrary to this, Nicola Pitchford writes of both the aestheticism and politics of Carter's work: "It recognizes both the complete mediation of political life through representations and the absence of an outside space from which to launch an aesthetic critique". Nicola Pitchford, "Redefining Postmodernism: Contemporary Feminist Fiction and Persistent Myths of Modernism", diss., U of Wisconsin, 1994, 11. In response to the arguments such as those of Bayley and Duncker, Pitchford writes: "Critics have damned this [Carter's] elaborate style as an aestheticization of violence, assuming that an aesthetic treatment of oppression and injustice is incompatible with a politicized one". Pitchford 10.

<sup>35</sup> Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown" 11.

<sup>36</sup> "A room of one's own or a bloody chamber?" Bayley asks of Carter's fiction, lamenting the fact that Carter's "new role model for women may seem to deny them the literary gift of privacy". Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown" 11.

<sup>37</sup> Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown" 11.

<sup>38</sup> Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown" 9.

literary texts which are produced in a cultural void and imbued with a timeless quality. Intent on maintaining canonical distinctions of "taste", "good writing", and "individual distinction", Bayley deprecates Carter's contextual and intertextual polemical style. Despite this, however, Bayley does in fact refer to Carter's work as "good writing" in order to admonish her "politicisation" and, I suggest, popularisation of literature.<sup>39</sup> He comments that her work "shows how a certain style of good writing has politicized itself today, constituting itself as the literary wing of militant orthodoxy".<sup>40</sup> Bayley implies that Carter's writing would be "good" if only it were not imbued with the political - and the popular. Thus, while Bayley recognises that Carter produces "good writing", conceding that she is "brilliant" at "updating" and "up-ending" stereotypes, it is in examples of this brilliance that he sees her as "stick[ing] . . . to the party line".<sup>41</sup> In other words, Bayley does admit that Carter's works function as a means of subversion, yet he laments this fact, suggesting that her novels are mere vehicles for ideology. Bayley suggests that Carter has a talent to "help create a new kind of persona for real women to copy".<sup>42</sup> Seemingly, it is the ideology of "female subversion" that Bayley finds most affronting:

[T]he magic talisman of female subversion, though it could turn even de Sade's victims into early feminists, was also an ambiguous gift, making imagination itself the obedient handmaid of ideology.<sup>43</sup>

In this way, Bayley and Duncker appear intent on maintaining an (imagined) boundary between literature and politics. Bayley's modernist premise indicates that he would prefer to see the literary and the political remain discrete categories in order to retain the distinction between "high art" and "pop art", and in order to preserve literature as just such a form of "high art". The argument that is made by Duncker is distinct from this in that she

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<sup>39</sup> Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown" 11.

<sup>40</sup> Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown" 11.

<sup>41</sup> Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown" 9.

<sup>42</sup> Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown" 11.

<sup>43</sup> Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown" 11.

suggests that the ideology of some literary forms is too powerful to subvert with a new politics.<sup>44</sup> In this sense, Duncker also separates the literary from the political, privileging the power of the political as it is inscribed in particular literary forms.

In a radical separation of form and content, Duncker suggests that while Carter's tales are interesting, their form secures the means by which sexual roles of domination and submission are produced.<sup>45</sup> The argument here is that the fairy tale is already fused with masculinist ideology, and that any attempts to overcome this will be at best partially effective. In positing the essentially masculinist nature of particular narrative forms, Duncker perpetuates the ascribed power of fairy tales to fulfil a normative agenda. By insisting on the separation and hierarchisation of form and content, Duncker's argument reinscribes masculinist power, and feminine or feminist powerlessness. Duncker writes that "although the fairy tales show a fantastic inverted world where every pretty chamber maid can aspire to be queen the hierarchies themselves remain resolutely intact".<sup>46</sup>

In order to support this reading, Duncker quotes from anti-pornography feminist Andrea Dworkin, who suggests that fairy tales are "ideological vehicles" and a means of "interested propaganda" in the teaching of fear, as a function of femininity.<sup>47</sup> From this Duncker says of Carter, "We must stand back to applaud her ambition";<sup>48</sup> however, "Carter is rewriting the tales within the strait-jacket of their original structures".<sup>49</sup> Thus, Duncker's argument is that while Carter has made an attempt at rewriting fairy tales, the masculinist form itself is actually

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<sup>44</sup> Duncker, "Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales" 6.

<sup>45</sup> Duncker, "Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales" 5. This is an argument countered by Paulina Palmer, who suggests that despite the fact that the form of the fairy tale is "not one noted for its feminist perspective. . . . Carter succeeds in transcending the ideological limitations which fairy-tales reveal. While the fairy-tale format of the stories enables her to treat women's conventional role as object of exchange, the motif of magical metamorphosis which it includes gives her the opportunity to explore the theme of psychic transformation, liberating her protagonists from conventional gender roles". Paulina Palmer, "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman: Angela Carter's Magic Flight", *Women Reading Women's Writing*, ed. Sue Roe (Great Britain: The Harvester Press, 1987) 195-196.

<sup>46</sup> Duncker, "Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales" 5.

<sup>47</sup> Andrea Dworkin qtd in Duncker, "Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales" 4.

<sup>48</sup> Duncker, "Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales" 3.

<sup>49</sup> Duncker, "Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales" 6.



stronger than Carter's feminist good intentions.<sup>50</sup> Although acknowledging Carter's awareness of the normative function of the form of the fairy tale, Duncker contributes to this regulatory history by assigning Carter's efforts to a masculinist agenda. Duncker suggests that "the infernal trap inherent in the fairy tale, which fits the form to its purpose, to be the carrier of ideology, proves too complex and pervasive to avoid".<sup>51</sup> It is in this way that Duncker sees Carter's rewriting of these tales as pornographic:

Red Riding Hood sees that rape is inevitable . . . and decides to strip off, lie back and enjoy it. She wants it really. They all do. The message is spelt out. . . . I would suggest that all we are watching, beautifully packaged and unveiled, is the ritual disrobing of the willing victim of pornography.<sup>52</sup>

Duncker's suggestion here is similar to Robert Clark's contention that Carter's tale provides "Old chauvinism, new clothing".<sup>53</sup> In reading the same story, both Clark and Duncker come to the same conclusion: Carter may have changed things around a little, made the language a little more "sensational" or "beautifully packaged", but what remains is chauvinism or pornography. The means by which both these critics come to this conclusion is that they read the girl in "Red Riding Hood" as being submissive to the wolf. Duncker writes:

Pornography, that is, the representation of overtly sexual material with the intention to arouse prurient, vicarious desire, uses the language of male sexuality. Even the women's equivalent of soft porn, romance novels and 'bodice rippers', all conform to recognisably male fantasies of domination, submission and possession . . . . Carter envisages women's sensuality simply

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<sup>50</sup> Clark also makes a similar suggestion regarding the notion of the "moral pornographer" which Carter explores in *The Sadeian Woman*. Clark suggests that Carter "seems mistaken, the ideological power of the form being infinitely greater than the power of the individual to overcome it". Robert Clark, "Angela Carter's Desire Machine", *Women's Studies* 14.2 (1987): 153.

<sup>51</sup> Duncker, "Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales" 6.

<sup>52</sup> Duncker, "Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales" 7.

<sup>53</sup> Clark 149.

as a response to male arousal. She has no conception of women's sexuality as autonomous desire.<sup>54</sup>

Duncker employs binary understandings of male and female sexuality to inscribe a prescriptive notion of "women's sexuality as autonomous desire". In this Duncker disallows the possibility that a legitimate "autonomous desire" might entail such fantasies of domination, submission and possession, those aspects which she easily aligns with male sexuality and pornography. This positions these fantasies (as well as male sexuality and pornography) as unquestionably powerful, and immutable. To assume that these fantasies exist in only one form and for one purpose (i.e. masculinist) perpetuates their performance of powerfulness. Playing with conventional scenarios of domination and submission, Carter's revision of the fairy tale inverts the scenario of the girl as submissive, frightened and threatened, with *her* "autonomous desire" terrifying the wolf. Clark suggests that "what is on offer is the standard patriarchal opposition between the feral domineering male and the gentle submissive female".<sup>55</sup> Instead, I would argue that it is she who is active and the wolf who is frightened, as is evident by the wolf's sobbing, whimpering, groaning and choking increasingly with each piece of clothing that the young girl removes as she undresses. Neither Duncker nor Clark agrees with the suggestion that Carter's work stages ideology in order to subvert it. Clark suggests that Carter's work is voyeuristic, and thus successful only in re-aligning itself with patriarchy:

In so far then as Carter's novels offer a knowledge of patriarchy they may be said to do so in ways that reproduce the consciousness they recognize as unhappy. The staging of the ideology in the text tends toward repetition because while there is a degree of conscious alienation of the reader, the more fundamental self-alienation of the writer produces an equally powerful attempt to encourage vicarious identification. Many of Carter's readers will therefore find themselves becoming what they are in everyday life, distraught

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<sup>54</sup> Duncker, "Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales" 7.

witnesses of depravity, and encouraged to get what pleasure they can from their own sickness.<sup>56</sup>

Clark suggests that Carter's work is voyeuristic through its encouragement of "vicarious identification", and in this way it denies the success of the allegorical writing which he suggests it attempts, due to the fact that it disallows the necessary space between the reader and the text.<sup>57</sup> In an argument reminiscent of Bayley, Clark suggests that the "tantalizing literariness" of Carter's work puts "the reason to sleep".<sup>58</sup> In referring to Carter's work in this way, Clark reveals his prescriptive feminist position, which privileges essentialism and criticises postmodern strategies of dissolution:

Carter's insight into the patriarchal construction of femininity has a way of being her blindness: her writing is often a feminism in male chauvinist drag, a transvestite style, and this may be because her primary allegiance is to a postmodern aesthetics that emphasizes the non-referential emptiness of definitions. Such a commitment precludes an affirmative feminism founded in referential commitment to women's historical and organic being. Only in patriarchal eyes is femininity an empty category, the negation of masculinity.<sup>59</sup>

Clark highlights one of the major issues relevant to a study of Carter criticism. For many critics, Carter's fiction fails to adequately allocate, or celebrate a collective identity or space for women. Arguably, it is exactly this notion of "women's historical and organic being" which Carter's novels attempt to problematise. A later chapter will involve a theoretical

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<sup>55</sup> Clark 149.

<sup>56</sup> Clark 159.

<sup>57</sup> This is an argument that is supported by Margaret Ann Henderson in her Marxist-Feminist critique of Carter's fiction. "I tend to agree with Clark . . . the reader is seduced by the desire machine, and made a voyeur to the violence, domination and perversity". Margaret Henderson, "Wild Thing: Gender, Genre and Subversion in the Writing of Angela Carter", diss., U of Queensland, 1992, 71. Catherine Lappas works against such a perspective, however, suggesting that Carter's stories "boldly [transform] themes of victimization and voyeurism into opportunities for female empowerment". Catherine Lappas, "Seeing is Believing, But Touching is the Truth": Female Spectatorship and Sexuality in 'The Company of Wolves', *Women's Studies* 25.2 (1996): 116.

<sup>58</sup> Clark 159.

<sup>59</sup> Clark 158.



discussion of the non-referentiality of "femininity" and indeed also of "masculinity", terms which achieve the appearance of referentiality only through repetitive opposition. Carter's novels reveal the arbitrary demarcation of the sexes as an effective way of maintaining social control and ideological regulation. In light of this, and in the context of Carter's work, I would argue that it is efforts such as Clark's to retain and preserve "women's historical and organic being" which in fact prove negative and reductive. This is an argument also made by Jordan in response to Clark's comments:

The "historical and organic being" of women is true enough, as true and real as anything ever is, but it is not fixed as a necessary identity that must be referred to. We are speaking or writing subjects, in discourses that precede us and go on; we participate in them and can produce new ones.<sup>60</sup>

By situating women as speaking subjects of discourse, Jordan's work signals a shift in the terms of the argument. While Clark adheres to a quest for "affirmative feminism", postmodern critics such as Elaine Jordan celebrate the multiplicitous representations of Carter's fictions as a means of tactical and subversive engagement. Jordan argues that Carter "abhors utopias and role-models. . . her fiction is not an image of 'what is' or a blueprint of 'what may be', but an unaccommodated space in which the dissatisfied can find some possible openings, some pleasure".<sup>61</sup> Signalling a postmodern fluidity of reading practices, Jordan's argument is contrary to Clark's desire for an "affirmative feminism". The possibilities indicated by Jordan's reading contrast with Clark's determinist approach to the categories of "masculinity" and "femininity" and his continued search for a feminist alternative or utopia. His failure to identify an appropriate feminist utopia in Carter's work is not surprising, if Jordan is correct in writing that Carter refuses Utopian idylls, suggesting "[h]er Paradises usually have shit in them".<sup>62</sup> Clark reads this scatological impulse as a failed

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<sup>60</sup> Elaine Jordan, "Enthralment: Angela Carter's Speculative Fictions", *Plotting Change: Contemporary Women's Fiction*, ed. Linda Anderson (London: Edward Arnold, 1990) 27.

<sup>61</sup> Jordan, "Down the Road, or History Rehearsed" 165.

<sup>62</sup> Jordan, "The Dangers of Angela Carter" 128. Nicola Pitchford also reads the effects on women in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* as pointing "to the more fundamental failure of leftist utopianism to recognize that all dreams are entangled in a web of power relations already existing in society". Pitchford 212. I would agree with

invocation of a feminist utopia, critiquing Carter's representation of the women in Beulah as a "feminist alternative" to patriarchal structured societies:

Why . . . do the women of Beulah choose a convicted male chauvinist as their material for the New Eve? Why teach the New Eve to understand herself by showing videos of all the male views of women through the ages? As revenge on the individual this may be a fitting punishment, but as an idea of a feminist alternative, it is negative and reductive.<sup>63</sup>

This passage reveals the essentialist and humanist assumptions of Clark's argument, referring as he does to Eve trying to "understand herself".<sup>64</sup> Clark continues with this essentialist argument, when he writes that Carter's "fascination with violent eroticism and her failure to find any alternative basis on which to construct a feminine identity prevent her work from being other than an elaborate trace of women's self-alienation".<sup>65</sup> That which Clark reads as a failure on Carter's part clearly indicates his search for an essential female identity, something which he believes is hampered by Carter's indulgence in "literary sensationalism".<sup>66</sup> In this way, Clark's argument is similar to that made by Bayley. Both appear to have quite prescriptive notions as to what it is that constitutes a literary text, and evidently Carter's work does not meet these requirements.

The differences between Clark and Bayley, however, are significant. I would suggest that Bayley would like to see the maintenance of the literary as sacrosanct, without it being impeded by the inclusion of politics, whereas Clark advocates the inclusion of politics (presumably, his own "affirmative" feminist politics) in literature. However, it would seem that

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Pitchford, suggesting that *The Passion of New Eve*, particularly can be read as a critique of some forms of feminism for their failure to adequately analyse the power relations imbricated in separatist utopian ideals.

<sup>63</sup> Clark 157.

<sup>64</sup> Clark 157.

<sup>65</sup> Clark 158.

<sup>66</sup> Clark 152.

Clark views Carter's work and its "literary sensationalism" as operating in terms of patriarchal aims. This is evident in his analysis of one of the rape scenes in *The Passion of New Eve*:

Rape is a patriarchal topos because even when it is not successful the act signifies the subjection, humiliation and reduction of women. Where tinged with eroticism it represents subjection as part of desire and in itself desirable; where revealing the physical and psychological isolation of women it nonetheless represents women as victims, usually to be pitied. To write about rape is therefore of importance in the transformation of patriarchal relations but under the caveat that if such representation is not unwittingly to support masculinist assumptions, the representation should unambiguously situate the practice in its wider moral and political history. The last thing it requires is such literary sensationalism as this: "He . . . told me to lie down on the floor regardless of the excrement which littered it, unfastened his fly, brought out a weapon which I now saw was of amazing size and, with a wild cry hurled himself upon me; he entered me like the vandals attacking Rome. I felt a sense of grateful detachment from this degradation".<sup>67</sup>

In this Clark is suggesting that Carter's "literary sensationalism" reflects "masculinist assumptions" in her work.<sup>68</sup> Following from this is his notion that her writing simply represents "Old chauvinism, new clothing".<sup>69</sup> Clark implies that while Carter might dress up the language or the form of the fairy tale, the political content, or the ideology remains.<sup>70</sup> He

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<sup>67</sup> Clark 152.

<sup>68</sup> Clark 152.

<sup>69</sup> Clark 149.

<sup>70</sup> Clark's argument here is similar to that which is made by Duncker when she suggests that the ideology of the fairy tale is too powerful to subvert. Duncker, "Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales" 6. Clark's suggestion that Carter's work is "Old chauvinism, new clothing" reveals his fundamental separation of the political and the literary, in that regardless of how it is that Carter alters a story or represents a rape, it remains ideologically intact. As he comments, "rape is a patriarchal topos". Clark 152.



comments on the sexuality in "The Company of Wolves", suggesting that the power of the girl's sexuality is "achieved at the cost of accepting patriarchal limits to women's power".<sup>71</sup>

Elaine Jordan takes issue with both Bayley and Duncker for their criticism of Carter, yet she takes strongest exception to Bayley's article "Fighting for the Crown", referring to it as "a nasty piece of work".<sup>72</sup> In a further critique of Bayley's article, of which she says "the put down of Carter is vicious",<sup>73</sup> Jordan writes:

And what can I do to resist Bayley's assessment of her as exemplary of "the literary wing of militant orthodoxy", when my first impulse to write about her work was in opposition to some Marx-ish and radical feminist critiques, which argued that far from being politically correct, she reinscribed patriarchy, no less?<sup>74</sup>

In this passage Jordan provides an indication of what appear to be two extremes of thought in the Carter criticism. While Bayley may be seen as having made gestures toward positioning Carter as writing only in order to push her "feminist line", there are other critics who suggest that Carter reinscribes patriarchy through representations of sexuality that are pornographic or voyeuristic. It is in this way that many of the critics who suggest that Carter's work is "vulgar"<sup>75</sup> read her novels from a narrow feminist perspective which equates any representation of sexual violence with "reinscribing patriarchal attitudes".<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Clark 149. Nine years after the publication of Clark's article on Carter, Wendy Swyt offers a convincing critique of his reading of "The Company of Wolves". Swyt suggests of the female character that "her encounter with the wolf leads to greater sexual and feminine awareness rather than sacrifice or patriarchal rescue". Wendy Swyt, "Wolfings: Angela Carter's Becoming-Narrative", *Studies in Short Fiction* 33.3 (1996) : 315. Swyt provides a postmodern reading of Carter's tale as a combination of a number of genres, through which "common sense is destabilized". Swyt 317. Swyt's argument is one that also counters the claims that Patricia Duncker makes in her exploration of Carter's rewriting of fairy tales.

<sup>72</sup> Jordan, "The Dangerous Edge" 191.

<sup>73</sup> Jordan, "The Dangerous Edge" 191.

<sup>74</sup> Jordan, "The Dangerous Edge" 192.

<sup>75</sup> Guido Almansi, "In the Alchemist's Cave: Radio Plays", *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. Lorna Sage (London: Virago Press Limited, 1994) 223.

<sup>76</sup> Clark 147.

One feminist critic who expresses concern regarding the sexual perspective of some of Carter's fiction is Paulina Palmer. Palmer highlights a tension in Carter's work which is also noted by several other literary critics. Although writing in specific reference to *Nights at the Circus*, Palmer suggests that this tension is applicable to the entirety of Carter's work:

on the one hand, a reference to celebratory and utopian elements is introduced, on the other, there is an equally strong emphasis on the analytic and the "demythologising".<sup>77</sup>

Palmer suggests that, in Carter's earlier works, there is an emphasis on the "analytic and demythologising impulse", whereas in the later texts "the deconstruction of femininity and masculinity is explored and, in keeping with the shifts in contemporary feminist thought, the perspective becomes increasingly woman-centred".<sup>78</sup> For Palmer, Carter's later texts, such as *Nights at the Circus* and *The Bloody Chamber*, replace the female puppets of the earlier stories with the celebration of "the emergence of a female counter-culture".<sup>79</sup> Palmer's argument is maintained by a number of critics, particularly her suggestion that Carter's later fiction is more subversive than her earlier fiction, which, "while presenting a brilliantly accurate analysis of the oppressive effects of patriarchal structures, ran the risk of making these structures appear even more closed and impenetrable than, in actual fact, they are".<sup>80</sup> Palmer's feminist critique of Carter's earlier fiction becomes even more overt in terms of textual representations of sexual violence. For Palmer, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* has little to offer the feminist reader, and in fact the violence and narrative framing of sexuality are aligned with a masculinist perspective:

Here the point of view is chauvinistically male. The sexual atrocities represented in this novel (and some of them are very brutal indeed) are

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<sup>77</sup> Palmer, "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman" 179.

<sup>78</sup> Palmer, "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman" 179-180.

<sup>79</sup> Palmer, "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman" 180.

<sup>80</sup> Palmer, "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman" 181.

described by a male narrator. His response is one not of anger, but of detached curiosity. The fact that, in the final pages, the atrocities are revealed to be illusions, contrived by the evil Dr Hoffman and illustrating (parodying perhaps?) misogynistic male fantasies, does not, in my opinion, justify their inclusion in the text. In "Notes From the Front Line" Carter admits that in her youth she suffered from what she calls "a degree of colonisation of the mind", which caused her to possess "an element of the male impersonator". Certain episodes in this novel appear to illustrate, in an unpleasant and disturbing manner, this aspect of her cultural conditioning.<sup>81</sup>

For Palmer, Carter's later texts, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*, have much more to offer the feminist reader, as they offer a strong sense of female community and support. Palmer suggests that *Nights at the Circus* "contains a number of episodes focusing on woman-identification and female collectivity, themes which, in her earlier texts, Carter either marginalised or ignored".<sup>82</sup> This argument is reminiscent of Clark's quest for a Utopia of female collectivity and, while a number of critics are eager to find a female collectivity<sup>83</sup> in Carter's fiction, Carter herself wrote that she was suspicious of the "social fiction" of a collective femininity. For Carter, "the notion of a universality of female experience is a clever confidence trick".<sup>84</sup> Additionally, certain aspects of Carter's fiction might be read as critiques of feminist collective identity, for instance Mother's followers in *The Passion of New Eve*. Nonetheless, the point worth noting here is that according to a prescriptive feminist position, Palmer defines a shift in Carter's fiction and does not find any value in those texts which she sees as incorporating certain forms of sexual violence.

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<sup>81</sup> Palmer, "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman" 190.

<sup>82</sup> Palmer, "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman" 200.

<sup>83</sup> Harriet Blodgett also identifies a previously unacknowledged representation of "women's strength through community" in *Nights at the Circus*. Harriet Blodgett, "Fresh Iconography: Subversive Fantasy by Angela Carter", *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 14.3 (1994) : 53.

<sup>84</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 12.



Harriet Blodgett also notes a shift in Carter's style, signalling a feminist maturation and liberation from masculinist discourses: "The reader has experienced her metamorphosis from a writer trained in male paradigms and reveling in male fantasies to a feminist who has learned to live and respond as a female without losing her insight into maleness".<sup>85</sup> Christina Britzolakis also suggests that Carter's later novels feature "heroines who are no longer the puppets of male-controlled scripts but who use theatricality and masquerade to invent and advance themselves".<sup>86</sup> Arguments of this kind usually follow Carter's cue, in that she has suggested that prior to the late 1960s she was writing as a "male impersonator".<sup>87</sup> I would suggest there is a danger in too readily aligning the sexually explicit elements of Carter's earlier work with a masculinist perspective. Such a move reinscribes the anti-pornography equation of male consciousness and sexuality with pornography, and disallows female participation in sexual explicitness and violence. Further, this "colonisation of the mind" argument posits a feminine consciousness (which Carter was purportedly to later develop), thus facilitating a binary fetishisation not only of sexuality but also of writing and expression. Finally, to relegate these "politically incorrect" representations of sexuality to the unfortunate past of Carter's career effectively prevents their theoretical analysis.

Elaine Jordan writes in response to those perspectives which are dismissive of the elements of Carter's fiction that do appear to fulfil a feminist agenda. Jordan suggests that the "provocation" of Carter's fiction is what lends it its potential for subversion. In response to the criticisms made by critics such as John Bayley, Robert Clark, Susanne Kappeler and Patricia Duncker, Jordan suggests that the elements commonly found most disturbing may be those with the potential to challenge conventional representations of female sexuality:

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<sup>85</sup> Blodgett 51.

<sup>86</sup> Christina Britzolakis, "Angela Carter's Fetishism", *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter*, eds. Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (New York: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1997) 52.

<sup>87</sup> Carter, "Notes From the Front Line" 38.

If books can change lives at all, they must do so by unsettling identities and fixed positions. I plead, against Clark, Duncker and Kappeler, that readers should attend to the whole argument of Carter's fictions and at least think twice before deciding that there is nothing positive for them and for feminism, when their predispositions are offended. This does not mean that I am asking for passive submission to the author's goading; it is the moment of disturbance and anger which may produce a new consciousness and order of things.<sup>88</sup>

Jordan's postmodern perspective is evident in her continual celebration of the elements of Carter's fiction that challenge preconceptions. According to this perspective, the debates concerning the representations of violent sexuality in Carter's work would themselves be productive, as they have the potential to unsettle "identities and fixed positions".<sup>89</sup>

Much Carter criticism fails to engage with this disturbance by either criticising or defending particular textual events. This is clear in the work of Hermione Lee, who writes what is ostensibly a defence of Carter's work. However, her failure to substantively engage with the issues of debate aligns her own argument with that which she claims to refute. Lee attempts to counter the argument made by Bayley, which she refers to as "a striking exercise in insidious disparagement".<sup>90</sup> Lee argues that by labelling Carter's work as politically correct, Bayley is burying her: "Bayley has posthumously maligned her: if you now want to dismiss a feminist author, you can make her sound rigid and intolerant by giving her the "pc" label".<sup>91</sup> In a further indication of her indignation at Bayley's article, Lee writes:

Rarely can a recently dead writer have been so travestied by an ostensibly enthusiastic appraisal. For a writer who spent much of her life out of fashion,

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<sup>88</sup> Jordan, "The Dangers of Angela Carter" 121.

<sup>89</sup> Jordan, "The Dangers of Angela Carter" 121.

<sup>90</sup> Hermione Lee, "Angela Carter's Profane Pleasures", *Times Literary Supplement* 19 June (1992) : 5.

<sup>91</sup> Lee, "Angela Carter's Profane Pleasures" 6.

who failed or declined to fit into any feminist orthodoxy, whose novels notoriously did not win big literary prizes and whose name has only become generally well known since her death, this is indeed an ironic post-mortem.<sup>92</sup>

While it might appear that Lee attempts to refute Bayley's suggestion that Carter's work is simply a vehicle for her "hard-line feminist ideology",<sup>93</sup> she fails to actually provide any comprehensive evidence to the contrary. Lee's defence of Bayley's assertion that Carter is a postmodernist and feminist is that Carter lived a life of semi-obscurity, sometimes being disapproved of by feminists, and feeling a sympathy for writers who found themselves outside of the mainstream.<sup>94</sup> I would suggest that the fact that Lee sees Carter as fully aligned neither with postmodernism nor feminists is an inadequate defence against Bayley's argument. Neither, would it appear, does Lee take any steps toward contesting the suggestion that Carter's work is "vulgar", an opinion which was proffered anonymously by an obituarist in the *Times*, and which Lee quotes in her article. Thus, while Lee appears to be passionate about the defence of Carter's work against Bayley's "insidious disparagement", she does not specifically engage with the elements of sexuality or "feminism" criticised by Bayley and the obituarist in the *Times*. This is something which is indicated when Lee comments that Carter's best subjects are loneliness and alienation,<sup>95</sup> shifting attention from the issue of overt sexuality and violence in Carter's novels. These omissions could possibly indicate an apparent complicity with these arguments, despite her finding them an "insidious disparagement" to a "recently dead writer".<sup>96</sup>

Lee indicates that her feminist reading of Carter utilises a reductive paradigm in her suggestion that Carter's work is utopian:

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<sup>92</sup> Lee, "Angela Carter's Profane Pleasures" 5.

<sup>93</sup> Lee, "Angela Carter's Profane Pleasures" 5.

<sup>94</sup> Lee, "Angela Carter's Profane Pleasures" 5.

<sup>95</sup> Lee, "Angela Carter's Profane Pleasures" 6.

<sup>96</sup> Lee, "Angela Carter's Profane Pleasures" 5.



Not that there is anything misleading about John Bayley's identification of Carter with a feminism which employs anti-patriarchal satire, Gothic fantasy, and the subversive rewriting of familiar myths and stories to embody alternative, utopian recommendations for human behaviour.<sup>97</sup>

Lee's labelling of Carter as a feminist, and her subsequent failure to elaborate on this claim, could be seen to actually curtail the elements of Carter's fiction which function to problematise representations of sexuality and, I would suggest, "alternative, utopian recommendations for human behaviour".<sup>98</sup> Instead of labelling Carter as politically correct, Lee has labelled her "feminist", and by not qualifying this - or by qualifying "feminism" in the way in which she has above - precludes an analysis of many of the subversive elements of Carter's work. In relation to the elements of transgressive sexuality within Carter's fiction, Lee writes:

Carter's fictional gift was to turn "polymorphous perversity" - sadism, deformity, illegitimacy, freakishness, - to pleasurable ends, to let it run free and enjoy itself.<sup>99</sup>

Yet Lee's article fails to analyse or discuss the elements of "polymorphous perversity" or freakishness within Carter's text, dismissing the political nature of these aspects through reference to Carter's "fictional gift". By shifting the focus onto the literary "artist" here, Lee's concentration on Carter's "talent" is a similar gesture to that made by Bayley in his concentration on literature in an attempt to depoliticise that which is intrinsically political.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, in making an isolated comment such as this, Lee does not challenge any of the

<sup>97</sup> Lee, "Angela Carter's Profane Pleasures" 5.

<sup>98</sup> Lee, "Angela Carter's Profane Pleasures" 5.

<sup>99</sup> Lee, "Angela Carter's Profane Pleasures" 6.

<sup>100</sup> This is something which is also made explicit by Walter Kendrick when he writes that Carter has the "ability to make gorgeous tableaux out of carnage" Walter Kendrick, "The Real Magic of Angela Carter", *Contemporary British Women Writers: Narrative Strategies*, ed. Robert Hosmer Jr. (New York: St Martin's Press) 70. He then qualifies that "the violence she portrays would be merely sickening, like Stephen King's or Clive Barker's, if it weren't described in rhapsodic, grand-operatic terms that in their very extravagance promise deliverance from evil". Kendrick 69. Kendrick's argument makes the assumption that the literary is discrete from the political, and that Carter's aestheticism somehow prevents the production of "real" violence.

meanings attached to the usage of words such as "sadism", "freakishness", etc., denying the sustained political exploration of these issues within Carter's work. The implication in Lee's article is that it would take a "fictional gift" to allow these forms of sexuality/identity to run free. Lee takes no steps toward deconstructing, or toward drawing from Carter's fiction a deconstruction of, the assumptions and meanings behind the labelling of these sexualities as such.

Thus, while Bayley's work can be seen to be more overtly censorious of Carter's fiction, the analysis offered by Lee actually operates more through omission than through obvious criticism. These omissions could in fact, be said to constitute a criticism, a final recuperation or curtailment of the subversive elements of Carter's work. At the very least, the failure of Lee to deal with these issues allows a perpetuation of the silence and criticism which surrounds both the issues of violent sexuality in general and, more specifically, violent sexuality as it is problematised within the novels of Angela Carter.

Guido Almansi is another of the critics writing on Carter who positions her in a way which celebrates certain elements within her work, yet criticises the representations of sexuality which it contains. Almansi begins his article by discussing "minimalist" writers in order to provide a contrast with Carter, whom he sees as a "maximalist" writer:

I need a "maximalist" writer who tries to tell us many things, perhaps too many things, with grandiose happenings to amuse me, extreme emotions to stir my feelings, glorious obscenities to scandalise me, brilliant and malicious expressions to astonish me.<sup>101</sup>

Almansi continues his enthusiasm for "maximalist" writers throughout his article; however, it is not entirely convincing. Indeed, he suggests that he might need medicating after reading this type of fiction when he writes, "I swallow Angela Carter whole, and then I rush to buy

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<sup>101</sup> Almansi 217.

Alka Seltzer".<sup>102</sup> The excesses of Carter's texts are implied as effecting a sickness, recalling earlier claims of the "intoxicating"<sup>103</sup> power of her work. Much of Almansì's focus concerns the "style" of Carter's work, privileging literary form over culturally critical content:

What she aspired to (and her readers as well) was . . . meatiness of subject, breadth of interests, Baroque-ness of fantasy, intensity of imagination, a touch of exuberance in the writing. And big, open-ended parables of horror. (What else?)<sup>104</sup>

Almansì asks "What else"? as though there were nothing more important in fiction than the qualities that he lists, yet in the remainder of his article he barely analyses Carter's work at all. Almansì writes that Carter's style has "continuous felicity", and he identifies sentences of "breathtaking vitality".<sup>105</sup> Thus, Almansì proves to be yet another critic who privileges the literary over the political, reserving his most congratulatory language for the stylistic elements in Carter's work. However, the seeming glow of the review that he gives her fiction is considerably lessened when he comes to talk about her elements of "bad taste".<sup>106</sup>

When one reads Angela Carter, one has to accept the bad with the good, and even the explosions of deliberate "bad taste" which she exploits in an act of aggression against the propriety of the Establishment and of males who do not understand the female perspective she advocates (I mean "female", not "feminist": i.e. from a woman's point of view).<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Almansì 217.

<sup>103</sup> Bayley, "Fighting for the Crown" 11.

<sup>104</sup> Almansì 217.

<sup>105</sup> Almansì 218.

<sup>106</sup> Almansì 227.

<sup>107</sup> Almansì 227.



Almansi is indicating here his aversion to the elements of Carter's texts which he refers to as "bad taste".<sup>108</sup> By suggesting that "one has to accept" the bad taste of her novels, he is obviously privileging the "good", operating from the assumption that there is a universal notion of taste from which one might understand Carter's fiction to be either "good" or "bad".<sup>109</sup> Therefore, when he sets up the two reading positions of "males who do not understand the female perspective", and "'female. . . i.e. from a woman's point of view",<sup>110</sup> it is already clear in which category he has positioned himself. This article is notable, however, for the reluctance to align Carter's work with a feminist perspective. Almansi is clear that he identifies Carter's fiction as female, rather than feminist. Nonetheless, the defensive attitude that Almansi takes as a "male" is revealed when he writes:

Puss-in-Boots is the most joyous of her radio plays; it displays all the shamelessness verging on obscenity, the vigorous bawdry and robust vulgarity, of Angela Carter . . . . She privileges vulgar characters who can be vulgarly exhibited. Take Fevvers, the winged trapeze artist in *Nights at the Circus*. Her changing room is the quintessence of smells and feminine squalor (especially for a male reader) . . . . Her gestures are carnal, vulgar, sensual and aggressive, all things which give men a great fright, "go for the ballocks, if needs must" (p. 182), suggests her governess. And Carter herself often aims in that direction. We are dealing with a vulgarian with an explicit and explosive style of writing who, fortunately, is not at all ashamed of her virtuosity in vulgarity, or afraid of shocking the reader, especially if he is male (women are more resilient according to her view of the world).<sup>111</sup>

If it weren't for the word "fortunately" in the last part of this statement, it would seem that Almansi were engaging in a gender-specific moral critique of Carter's work. As it is, it

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<sup>108</sup> Almansi 227.

<sup>109</sup> Almansi 227.

<sup>110</sup> Almansi 227.

<sup>111</sup> Almansi 223.

appears that he is offended (as a male), at the very least. The fact that Almansi continues to assert that he is taking a "male" perspective, and Carter a "female" perspective (which he admits that he does not understand), indicates that he reads her work from a position which will deny rather than reinforce the transgressive sexuality in her fiction. The fact that Almansi finds himself to be "*dealing with a vulgarian . . . who is not at all ashamed of her virtuosity in vulgarity*"<sup>112</sup> (my emphasis) demonstrates that he is offended or threatened (as a male?). Should Angela Carter be ashamed of her "vulgarity"? Does she need "*dealing with*"? The paranoia that Almansi demonstrates in his suggestion that Carter's work is designed to shock men, indicates that he does in fact find her fiction shocking or threatening. The fact that he suggests that a man would be more offended by "the quintessence of smells and feminine squalor" than a woman gives an insight into the politics which inform his review. Almansi once again demonstrates his unwillingness to accept the emphasis that Carter's works place on female sexuality in his reading of Red Riding Hood in Carter's radio version of "The Company of Wolves", by criticising the elements of her character which do not appeal to him:

"I stand and move within an invisible pentacle, untouched, invincible, immaculate . . . the clock inside me, that will strike once a month, not yet . . . wound . . . up" (p. 61). I would find these words intolerably incongruous in a written narration, but they become natural in the radio context, where they converge to our ear from a void, a nothingness . . . The radio allows this to-ing and fro-ing between the "realistic" character, the little child, curious yet frightened of her adventure, and the "symbolic" character who seduces the wolf-man.<sup>113</sup>

It would seem that Almansi is better able to deal with Red Riding Hood's seduction of the wolf-man if he categorises her as "symbolic" rather than "realistic". Apparently he finds active female sexuality something which is "intolerably incongruous", and prefers to think of

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<sup>112</sup> Almansi 223.

the "realistic" female character as a "little child, curious yet frightened of her adventure".<sup>114</sup> By the end of the article, Almansi makes his censure of Carter's work more obvious. Of the radio play *Vampirella* he writes:

I personally prefer its narrative version in "The Lady of the House of Love". In *The Bloody Chamber* Angela Carter cancels the very conventional Count, father of Vampirella, who behaves like a perfect vampire with his history of stakes driven into the heart . . . . Besides, the short story omits all the radio play's scenes of cannibalism, necrophilia and necrophagy, which the writer so enjoys - for instance, when she claims that an act of coition with a reluctant and unwilling wife is equivalent to necrophilia, coition with a corpse.<sup>115</sup>

From this it seems that, while Almansi claims to celebrate the "vulgarity" of Carter's work, he favours Carter's publications which exclude irreverence and profanity. Moreover, it is only the "vulgarity" which he feels is directed at men and offends him as a "male", which warrants comment. Almansi is one of the few critics of the time who disregards Carter's excessive representations of the objectification of women. Instead, Almansi positions as "vulgar" those texts in which active female sexuality is portrayed. Almansi's commentary again indicates a separation of form and content, suggesting that the literary technique employed by Carter facilitates a necessary distancing from the "vulgar" or "offensive" content.

A distinction between the "symbolic" and the "realistic" appears in many of the reviews of Carter's fiction. Praise for Carter's use of "symbolism" is most commonly invoked as a means of explaining or excusing the violence, and thereby de-politicising the content of Carter's work. This is the approach taken by Walter Kendrick, as noted above.<sup>116</sup> The arguments

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<sup>113</sup> Almansi 225-6.

<sup>114</sup> Almansi 226.

<sup>115</sup> Almansi 226-7.

<sup>116</sup> Kendrick 69.



made by Kendrick and Almansi, which suggest a restoration of order through symbolic and literary technique, differ markedly from those made by Clark, Bayley and Duncker, who read Carter's implementation of literary technique as failing to overcome or prevent the violence and misogyny of her work's content. The common factor in each of these arguments is the radical separation of form and content.

Arguments of this kind lack a resonance in contrast to the postmodern reviews of Carter's experimentation with form. The approaches of Jordan and Swyt, which have already been discussed, maintain that Carter's fiction engages in political tactics of subversion through an incorporation of a variety of discourses, narrative modes, intertextual references and motifs. In this sense, the implementation of experimental and inter-discursive form is itself a political act or tactic. In fact, Jordan contends that Carter's fiction deconstructs the distinction between "art and politics",<sup>117</sup> a gesture that destabilises the terms of argument employed by Almansi and Kendrick. Gamble makes a similar argument, suggesting that Carter's "narratives constantly negotiate and adjust their position on the margins of a variety of literary genres and forms".<sup>118</sup> For Gamble, Carter's political project of "testing the boundaries" extends to the liminal use of narrative style and generic conventions.<sup>119</sup>

Andrzej Gasiorek also emphasises Carter's structural and thematic liminality, arguing that "liminal states, thresholds, margins - all these surface again and again in Carter's work because they undermine intellectual certainties".<sup>120</sup> For Gasiorek, the forms that Carter's subversions take are determined by her refusal to adhere to conventions of narrative and character. "Carter's deconstruction of cultural codes depends upon her depiction of characters as intertextual ciphers, who are quite literally put together out of bits and pieces

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<sup>117</sup> Jordan, "Down the Road, or History Rehearsed" 178-179.

<sup>118</sup> Gamble 5.

<sup>119</sup> Gamble 5.

<sup>120</sup> Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995) 126.

of other writings".<sup>121</sup> Gasiorek's highly intertextual reading of Carter's fiction emphasises the stylistic tensions and rewriting techniques which reflexively encourage "hard questions about the political efficacy of her narrative strategies".<sup>122</sup> The significance of intertextuality, pastiche, symbolism, parody and numerous other stylistic techniques is widely recognised by postmodern Carter critics as integral to the "demythologising project" which characterises her work. In *Notes From the Front Line*, Carter discusses the functions of language and form, arguing that "language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation".<sup>123</sup> Carter critiques the bourgeois fictions which are "basically fictionalised etiquette lessons", preferring to align herself with writers who "are transforming actual fiction forms to both reflect and to precipitate changes in the way people feel about themselves".<sup>124</sup> Recognising that language is political and a useful political tool, Carter frames the problematisation of fictional form as a means of problematising "the social fictions that regulate our lives".<sup>125</sup>

Before engaging in a review of the later Carter criticism, I would like to return to Jordan's notion of the "risky edge" in Carter's fiction. According to Jordan, Carter's "risky edge" is the simultaneous working of the literary and the political. Through an analysis of the criticism, both for what it says and for what it excludes, I would suggest that much of the earlier Carter criticism intimates a distancing of the literary from the political, and in this way effects what is fundamentally a denial of the political within Carter's work. This is not to say that the political is something which could be extracted from the literary (as much as John Bayley may like to think was once the case). On the contrary, my assumption that the political and the literary are inseparable leads me to question why it is that this trend appears in the criticism of Carter's work. What is it that these critics are designating as "political"? And why is this something which they feel compelled to curtail?

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<sup>121</sup> Gasiorek 125.

<sup>122</sup> Gasiorek 126.

<sup>123</sup> Carter, "Notes From the Front Line" 43.

<sup>124</sup> Carter, "Notes From the Front Line" 42.

<sup>125</sup> Carter, "Notes From the Front Line" 38.

The condition for which Almansì requires Alka Seltzer, and which has seen Carter's work occupy a problematic or tenuous position in relation to feminism is her overt and relentless problematisation of "sex". Thus, while the existing criticism on Carter is varied, encompassing both feminist appraisal and feminist censorship of her work, these differences and debates, though sometimes heated, often work towards similar conclusions. Regardless of the specific form that this sort of criticism takes, the function it performs remains the same, namely, the stifling of the subversive power which exists within the contradictions, excesses and permutations of Carter's fiction. The remainder of this chapter will explore recent Carter criticism which signals a marked shift away from the issues of violence and pornography that had been the focus of earlier criticism of her work. While much of this later commentary does seem to take up Carter's relentless problematisation of sex, it also operates according to the prescriptive boundaries of feminist paradigms which tend to limit the subversive potential of such a problematisation.

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of criticism which celebrates the sexual aspects of Carter's fiction, rather than rejecting them as vulgar, pornographic or voyeuristic. Again, it is possible to identify a number of trends in this criticism. Initially, there are a number of critics who suggest that Carter's fiction can be read in terms of theories of performative sexuality. The publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter* in the early 1990s coincided both with Carter's death and the explosion of interest in her fiction. It is difficult to define a clear chronological shift between the Carter criticism which finds the violent sexuality disturbing and that criticism which celebrates its performative aspects. However, it does seem plausible to suggest that much of the Carter criticism of the 1990s has been informed by the contemporary trends of feminism which celebrate the performative aspects of gender.

Notably, however, among those who do focus on the performative in Carter's fiction, it seems there are few critics who extend their analysis to the transgressive possibilities in terms of queer sexualities, bodies or pleasures. One exception is indicated by the



provocative question raised by Bristow and Broughton in their edited collection of essays on Carter: "Are we witnessing the emergence of a 'queer' (as distinct from a feminist) Carter"?<sup>126</sup> Although Bristow and Broughton do not follow through with the possibilities that such a question raises, included in the volume is a significant study by Heather Johnson of the "gender-transgressive figure" within *The Passion of New Eve*. Johnson's reading of Carter's text embraces the fluidity and indeterminacy of queer, suggesting that "the disruptive potential of such new configurations seems to point . . . to liberating possibilities in thinking about gender relations".<sup>127</sup> Patricia Duncker also engages in a queer analysis of Carter's fiction, specifically in terms of the queer Gothic. Duncker suggests, that "Carter's Gothic presents identity in flux: the instability of metamorphosis is always possible. There are no boundaries between the animal and the human; there is a slippery continuum".<sup>128</sup> After further consideration of this imagery of flux and "general physical freakishness", Duncker suggests that "Carter's frolics in the exotic world of the weird conclude by domesticating, diminishing or even denying the dangers of difference".<sup>129</sup> Defining queer in terms of "same-sex desire", Duncker suggests that "Carter's women still have their heads full of men".<sup>130</sup> Approaching Carter's fiction from a specifically defined "same-sex" understanding of queer, Duncker finds Carter's texts invoke a queer gothic iconography which is not sustained in the final instance.

With the exception of the specific works of Johnson and Duncker mentioned here, many of the analyses of gender performance in Carter's fiction are firmly grounded in a feminist politics. This suggests that Carter's fiction represents gender performance as a tactical measure for women to resist conventional appropriations of femininity. While many of these critics read Carter's fiction in a considerably more positive light than the critics discussed

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<sup>126</sup> Bristow and Broughton, "Introduction" 18.

<sup>127</sup> Heather Johnson, "Transgressive symbolism and the transsexual subject in *New Eve*", *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter* eds. Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (New York: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1997) 176.

<sup>128</sup> Patricia Duncker, "Queer Gothic: Angela Carter and the Lost Narratives of Sexual Subversion", *Critical Survey* 8.1 (1996) : 65.

<sup>129</sup> Duncker, "Queer Gothic" 66.

<sup>130</sup> Duncker, "Queer Gothic" 67.

previously, such as Clark and Bayley, it is clear that Carter's work is repeatedly being assessed in exclusionary feminist terms.

I would suggest that this continual appropriation of Carter's fiction by feminist theorists proves problematic for a number of reasons. To begin with, feminism is not, nor should it be, monolithic, although it is sometimes assumed to be so. For this reason, there have been a number of acrimonious debates regarding the place of Carter's fiction on the feminist bookshelf. As this chapter has explored already, differing notions of what feminist politics should be have divided Carter criticism primarily in terms of the violent sexuality in her work, and also in terms of her polemic on de Sade and pornography. In this way, there are often prescriptive and sometimes essentialist debates regarding the nature of feminism, and the suitability or viability of Carter's work according to these standards. I would suggest that this restricts the transgressive and subversive possibilities which I see in her fiction. Further, I would suggest that queer analyses of Carter's work may clarify some of the claims that recent feminist criticism of her fiction has been too celebratory. Rather than reading Carter's fiction in terms of the inversion of binaries, queer theory might prove a means by which to identify a more fluid project in which binaries are dislocated and prevented from fulfilling their conventional operative functions.

One recent text which marks the surge of interest in the performative aspects of Carter's fiction is the edited collection of essays *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter*. Several of the contributors to this collection indicate a scepticism regarding the political efficacy of the performative aspects of Carter's fiction. Palmer expresses doubt that such gender performances can actually have political repercussions, existing as they do in the "shadowy, slippery world of image, appearance and 'surface'".<sup>131</sup> Palmer's reading of *The Magic Toyshop*, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children* focuses on the theatricality of each

<sup>131</sup> Palmer, "Gender as Performance" 27. An uncertainty as to the political importance of surfaces implies that there is more to an identity than image, appearance and surface. Rather, I would suggest that the appearances of sexuality are all that there is, and as Baudrillard argues, "why become stuck undermining foundations, when a *light* manipulation of appearances will do". Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* trans. Brian Singer (Houndmills: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1990)10. These are arguments that will be explored in greater depth in Chapter Two. However, it is worth noting that though gender performativity is being used as a means of reading Carter's fiction, this is also seen as problematic according to the constraints of paradigms of feminist, queer and political efficacy.

of the novels. She also briefly notes the performative aspect of *The Passion of New Eve*, highlighting the "construction of the feminine role".<sup>132</sup> Further, though, and in keeping with her argument made in previous work, Palmer claims that Carter "sometimes slips inadvertently into an essentialist position", and moreover, into heterosexism and misogyny:

The portrayal of Mother and the radical feminist community she rules is an anti-feminist caricature, illustrating the misogyny and heterosexism to which Carter, in her wish to challenge the reader's preconceptions about gender and create sexually provocative images, sometimes descends."<sup>133</sup>

Identifying misogyny in Carter's work, Palmer suggests that Carter's treatment of gender performance is diverse, yet "makes little attempt . . . to interrogate the concept of 'gender performance' or to explore its problematic aspects."<sup>134</sup>

In an article which demonstrates similar reservations, Christina Britzolakis critiques responses to Carter's fiction which indicate a "celebratory symbiosis between fiction and theory".<sup>135</sup> In keeping with the performative analyses of the volume, Britzolakis also takes up a reading of Carter's fiction in terms of performativity. Britzolakis' contention is that "Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and the Chances in *Wise Children* (1991) are exemplary postmodern heroines who take control of their own performance and manipulate their self-stagings for their own advantage".<sup>136</sup> For Britzolakis this is problematised, however, by an objectification of the spectacle of femininity.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Palmer, "Gender as Performance" 29.

<sup>133</sup> Palmer, "Gender as Performance" 29.

<sup>134</sup> Palmer, "Gender as Performance" 32.

<sup>135</sup> Britzolakis, 44.

<sup>136</sup> Britzolakis 45.

<sup>137</sup> Britzolakis 45.



"Gender performance" is therefore, I would argue, a double-edged sword in the analysis of Carter's work. It enables us to argue that Carter deploys masquerade-like tactics in order to expose the fictional and inessential character of femininity. But it also enables us to argue that she is at least equally engaged by the male scenario of fetishism which lies behind, and is required by, the female scenario of masquerade.<sup>138</sup>

In the same volume, Clare Hansen also critiques the celebratory approaches to Carter's work suggesting that they neglect textual complexities:

I am thinking here of the ways in which *Nights at the Circus* (1984), especially, has been read in terms of constructionism, and has been seen as a novel which, in exposing the discursive construction of "essences" such as femininity and masculinity, suggests ways in which these essences can be reconfigured throughout an exuberant reappropriation of dominant discourses.<sup>139</sup>

Hansen reads the Mother in Carter's short story, "The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe" in terms of gender performativity. However, she concludes that the tale reinscribes conventional notions of the feminine: "what actually happens within the story is a return of the repressed archetype of the maternal-feminine linked with death".<sup>140</sup> Hansen's article is notable, however, for her analysis of the performative aspects of the character of Fevvers:

Fevvers herself is from the beginning of the book a dazzling spectacle whose ontological status cannot be determined. Depending on your information and/or your point of view, she is either wonder or freak: the borderline

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<sup>138</sup> Britzolakis 53.

<sup>139</sup> Clare Hansen, "'The Red Dawn Breaking Over Clapham': Carter and the Limits of Artifice", *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter*, eds. Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (New York: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1997) 59.

<sup>140</sup> Hansen 62.

between the acceptable and the unacceptable is almost literally figured by her body. But this is, the narrative suggests, a border which we all know intimately: it is for us all an internal as much as an external boundary, fragile and shifting.<sup>141</sup>

Hansen appears to be celebrating the liminal status of Fevvers as a means of destabilising the boundaries of identity. However, she undermines this argument with a cynical critique of the "cheery belief in a self-help radical politics with which Carter has been associated".<sup>142</sup> Hansen concludes that "while the boundaries of what constitutes a legitimate or acceptable subject may, once in a while, be redrawn . . . there is ultimately no change in the general sum of human happiness, for the rise of one individual or group will always be at the expense of another".<sup>143</sup>

The articles by Palmer, Britzolakis and Hansen included in the Bristow and Broughton volume signal a significant contribution to Carter criticism for a number of reasons. Initially, these critiques mark the surge of interest in the performative aspects of Carter's work, a critical trend which parallels contemporary feminist theoretical concerns. This is an important move in Carter criticism, as it indicates a willingness to engage with the theoretical issues raised by Carter's sexualised writing, issues which had been dismissed as pornographic or misogynist in earlier critiques of Carter's work. Further, these performative approaches to Carter's work are significant in their illustration of a theoretical scepticism or wariness which might accord with Jonathan Dollimore's contention that performative and queer theories are sometimes characterised by a "wishful theory".<sup>144</sup> Carter criticism which utilises theories of

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<sup>141</sup> Hansen 62-63.

<sup>142</sup> Hansen 66.

<sup>143</sup> Hansen 66.

<sup>144</sup> Dollimore indicates a cynical view of certain theoretical trends in which "plausibility is often in inverse proportion to the degree to which it makes its proponents feel better. To that extent, wishful theory is also feel-good theory". Jonathan Dollimore, "Bisexuality, heterosexuality, and wishful theory", *Textual Practice* 10.3 (1996): 532-533. What these "highly wrought" theoretical narratives evince is a commitment to fashion, and a failure to engage with "the cultural real in all its surprising diversity and mysterious complexity". Dollimore 532-533. These claims are present in Palmer's suggestion that liberatory theoretical responses to Carter's fiction are not critically self-aware, and have no correspondence to actual change for women. Palmer, "Gender as Performance" 29.

performativity is then placed at the nexus of contemporary debates regarding the political efficacy of category affirmation versus ambivalence of identity.

As previously indicated, these critical approaches rarely take a queer perspective in reading the performative aspects of Carter's fiction. This is notable for a number of reasons, each of which form the grounds for this study. If the recent scepticism of Carter's work according to feminist appropriations of performativity invokes the theoretical tensions between category affirmation versus ambivalence of identity, then this warrants a contextualisation in terms of feminist/queer dialogue regarding subjectivity.<sup>145</sup> For these critical approaches to insist on assessing Carter's performative fiction according to feminist concerns to the exclusion of queer indicates a significant omission in theoretical terms. Much of the Carter criticism which takes such an approach reiterates feminist discursive tactics reliant on category affirmation.<sup>146</sup> With the historical reiteration of identity categories dependent on binary normalcy, Carter criticism which affirms the boundaries of identity does so at the risk of normative co-option, whether intentional or not. I would suggest, however (and this is explored in Chapter Two), that performativity has the potential to operate as a means of destabilising the binary categories which facilitate the regulation of identities in the first instance.

There are, however, a number of Carter critics whose work explores the instability of identity without reinforcing the binaries of sexuality. Several of the perspectives of these critics will be discussed below.

Elaine Jordan's feminist approach to Carter's work effectively avoids the binary effects of conventional approaches to pornography. Rather, Jordan sees Carter's work as providing a

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<sup>145</sup> Both Bidy Martin and Judith Butler express concern regarding the recent theoretical construction of queer as opposing and superseding feminism. Bidy Martin, "Sexualities Without Genders and Other Queer Utopias", *Diacritics* 24.2-3 (1994) : 104. Judith Butler, "Against Proper Objects", *differences: A Journal of Feminist and Cultural Studies* 6.2-3 (1994) : 3. These concerns signal an ongoing dialogue between feminists and queer theorists as to the "proper" means by which to effect politically transgressive subjectivities.

<sup>146</sup> Bidy Martin suggests that "insofar as feminists have reduced the possibilities of gender to just two, that is, men and women, gender has come to do the work of stabilizing and universalizing binary opposition at other levels, including male and female sexuality". "Sexualities Without Genders" 104.



comment on, and challenges to, some of the trends in contemporary feminism. In this sense, Jordan interrogates Clark's simplistic account of *The Passion of New Eve* as a "feminist alternative", arguing instead that Carter's text challenges the ways in which Zero's harem "is only maintained in existence by the women's belief in his ideas which condition their desires".<sup>147</sup> Additional to reading the text as disrupting the willing internalisation of gender roles, Jordan suggests that *The Passion of New Eve* operates as a means of exploring the "unfixed character of gender identity".<sup>148</sup> Jordan makes this clear when she endorses "a tactic of 'mimicry' such as Luce Irigaray proposed: acting out the ascribed identity so as to expose it as playing out a role which could be changed, to call into question the system in which it plays its part".<sup>149</sup>

Jordan argues that both Judith Butler's and Angela Carter's work counters the tendencies of victimisation, over-emphasis on pornography, and cultural insensitivity with which feminism is all too often identified. Similarly, Jordan sees in Carter's work many of the issues that were later explored in Judith Butler's theoretical text, *Gender Trouble*:

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* has had considerable influence in disseminating theoretical arguments which deconstruct the opposition between what is 'natural' and what is 'artificial', which is embedded in our language and ways of thought, but not universal. These arguments are already implicit and explored in Carter's writing over three decades.<sup>150</sup>

While Jordan suggests that Carter's work pre-empted the widely celebrated theoretical ideas of Judith Butler, it is possible to identify Jordan herself as one of the first critics to read Carter's work as an exploration and possibly a celebration of the instability of gender. Jordan argues that Carter "finds that there is no end to the construction of gender and

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<sup>147</sup> Jordan, "Enthralment" 36.

<sup>148</sup> Jordan, "Enthralment" 37.

<sup>149</sup> Jordan, "The Dangerous Edge" 194.

<sup>150</sup> Jordan, "The Dangerous Edge" 190.

sexuality, as masquerade, as mimicry, and as creative affirmation that can take us by surprise".<sup>151</sup> This is something which Jordan suggests is thematised in Carter's fiction:

Eve is a narrative device, as passive as Desiderio because like him she is a way for the reader to pass through possible options, as it were experimentally. . . . Angela Carter does not simply query masculine representations: she mounts a critique of women's 'feminine' behaviour, and of some feminist programmes".<sup>152</sup>

While Jordan's work can be seen as a precursor for a queer analysis of Carter's fiction in that she is exploring the "possible options" of identity, I would suggest that she does not fully capitalise on the transgressive potential of the Carter narratives. Jordan fails to present a sustained critique of Carter's fiction in terms of the means by which the reader might "pass through possible options as it were experimentally". However, her work is significant in that it marks the first theoretical exploration of Carter's thematisation of the instability and mutability of identity which does not remain within the binary of masculinity/femininity.

In her analysis of *The Passion of New Eve*, Roberta Rubenstein notes Carter's "imaginative incursions into the zone of the imaginary", yet suggests that the text ultimately fails to provide "an alternative ideology for a de-gendered - or, rather, a re-gendered - world".<sup>153</sup> Drawing on Sandra Gilbert's notion of "gender anomalousness" and transvestism, Rubenstein reads Carter's novel in terms of the "third sex" of bisexuality.<sup>154</sup> While acknowledging the "ambivalent identifications and fractures that exist between biological sex and culturally constructed roles",<sup>155</sup> Rubenstein reinscribes the "naturalness" of the two existing "biological" sexes by positing a third. By virtue of the *bi*, the somewhat

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<sup>151</sup> Jordan, "The Dangerous Edge" 199.

<sup>152</sup> Jordan, "Enthralment" 36.

<sup>153</sup> Roberta Rubenstein, "Intersexions: Gender Metamorphosis in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* and Louis Gould's *A Sea Change*", *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 12.1 (1993): 116.

<sup>154</sup> Rubenstein, 104.

<sup>155</sup> Rubenstein, 111.

feminised third sex of bisexuality reinscribes the naturalised duality of terms. This duality is located specifically in terms of genitalia, with revision of the psychoanalytic "penis envy" as "penis fear" or "penetration anxiety".<sup>156</sup> In reading Carter's characters as "anomalous" bisexual figures "mediating" gender polarity of this kind, Rubenstein's argument remains entrenched in dualistic ideology. Within this normative framework, a reading of Carter's text as a "de-gendered, or re-gendered world" is not possible.

Michael Hardin is another Carter critic who explores the instability of identity. Destabilising conventional conceptualisations of the phallus and parentage, Hardin's analysis allows a disjuncture between the markers of sex and sexual identity. In his critique of *Wise Children*, Hardin reads the confusion surrounding the parentage of Nora and Dora as a destabilising of the notion that identities are fixed:

Carter's dissolution of conventional means of identity - the name and identity of the father - provide access to one of the major functions of this work, to challenge the very notion of true or final identity. . . . sexuality is primarily a private characteristic, the signifiers of sexuality, maleness and femaleness, are not the sexual organs themselves, which are so prudently concealed, but are instead superficial and substanceless signifiers such as clothing, makeup, hairstyle and even occupation. The signifying chain is dependent upon the individual's adherence to the socially constructed external appearances for male and female.<sup>157</sup>

Hardin then goes on to make a convincing argument for the deconstruction of the penis as the privileged signifier. This undermines the notion that sex and gender determine identity,

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<sup>156</sup> "I propose instead that the phallogcentrically constructed 'female wound' might be better understood from the female perspective as a fear of sexual wounding . . . the structure of female sexual identity is *penetration anxiety*: not 'penis envy' but *penis fear*". Rubenstein, 105. This reinscription of women as victims, and particularly as victims of sexuality is problematic for a number of reasons. The power of the phallus, and the penis as phallic are reinscribed here, but additionally woman as lack and as wounded is reiterated in terms which prove an unhelpful revision of Freud's masculinist position. Chapter Three outlines the particular difficulties of this approach in an analysis of the position taken by Andrea Dworkin.

<sup>157</sup> Michael Hardin, "The Other Other: Self-Definition Outside Patriarchal Institutions in Angela Carter's *Wise Children*", *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 14.3 (1994) : 78-9.



and this is a point which he explores in his analysis of *Wise Children*. Hardin's article is arguably one of the "queerest" of those written on Carter, making excellent use of the queer potential of Carter's fiction as evident in Nora's statement, "We're both of us Mothers and both of us Fathers . . . They'll be wise children, all right".<sup>158</sup> He writes:

By looking at Carter's unravelling of the patriarchal definition of woman, we will see that in a postmodern world, identity, like any other means of signification, becomes more and more tenuous. Through the rupturing of the strict definition of woman, Carter opens up a surplus of space in which women can find and create new definitions of self, and, at the same time, through her excessive use of otherness, she exposes as fraudulent the idea that the penis is an originary or ultimate signifier.<sup>159</sup>

Deconstructing the phallogentric imagery of the male/female binary, Hardin facilitates a reading of sexualities and subjectivities as mobile and fluid. Providing a useful analysis of the performative aspects of *Nights at the Circus*, Anne Fernihough suggests that "Carter literalizes the metaphor of the performing trajectory, the lifelong impersonation, of womanhood. In the process of doing so, she demonstrates the 'groundlessness' of that womanhood".<sup>160</sup> In reading Fevvers as a representation of the performance of gender, Fernihough suggests that Carter's text also critiques the masculinist texts and traditions which have sought to secure the 'ground' of female identity. Among these texts and traditions are notions of classicism, as well as feminine passivity as represented in art and literature. Using Fevvers' status as *aérialiste* to signify that there is no "ground" to her identity, Fernihough reads the reiteration of Fevvers' performativity in terms of a transgressive and disruptive potential:

<sup>158</sup> Angela Carter, *Wise Children* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991) 230.

<sup>159</sup> Hardin 77.

<sup>160</sup> Anne Fernihough, "Is She Fact or is She Fiction?": Angela Carter and the Enigma of Woman", *Textual Practice* 11 (1997): 89.

As *aérialiste*, Fevvers dramatizes not only the lack of a “ground” to gendered identity and its performing trajectory through time, but also its dependence on repetition, for she performs the same circus-act day after day. For Butler, moreover, it is at those moments when the repetition is disrupted that the “groundlessness” of gender reveals itself.<sup>161</sup>

Fernihough’s reading of Fevvers in terms of the “groundlessness” of gender draws heavily on Butler’s notion of gender as performance. Considering Fevvers’ identity as a “performing trajectory through time”, the reiteration of Fevvers’ performance culminates in the final recognition that her identity is nothing more, nor less, than a confidence trick.

Similarly, Sarah Gamble’s comprehensive book-length study of Carter’s work explores the instability of identity as a consistent Carter theme. Gamble identifies a preoccupation with the figure of the “dandy” in Carter’s work, “an entirely self-created being who is the possessor of neither past or a future, only an ever-changing yet also curiously static present, he [sic]<sup>162</sup> is therefore the embodiment of a particular cultural moment, itself dandified and inherently superficial”.<sup>163</sup> Of Honeybuzzard in *Shadow Dance*, Gamble suggests “his ‘flamboyant and ambiguous beauty’ (p.55) is androgynous, thus posing an implicit challenge to dualistic categories of gender, and his love of flashy, outrageous costume renders notional any concept of a fixed and stable identity”.<sup>164</sup> As with Palmer and other critics, however, Gamble suggests that Carter’s destabilisation of identity ultimately works in ways antithetical to a feminist perspective. She writes:

Essentially, therefore, where the camp burlesque of *Shadow Dance* falters badly is over its treatment of women, which could come as a nasty shock to any reader accustomed to thinking of Carter as a feminist writer. Although

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<sup>161</sup> Fernihough 95.

<sup>162</sup> Gamble’s reference to the dandy as masculine here is significant in terms of her later comments regarding the positioning of women in terms of such instability of identity.

<sup>163</sup> Gamble 50.

<sup>164</sup> Gamble 52.

Carter appears to be trying to create a world in which you make your own rules unfettered by the traditions or moral assumptions of an outmoded past, it is a freedom that the text often seems only to extend to men.<sup>165</sup>

Far from celebrating the destabilisation of gender categories, then, Gamble's initial response to the text as challenging the "dualistic categories of gender" results in reinforcing them within the terms of her own argument. Finally, she returns to the position maintained by many of the critics who have taken up these issues of identity, that is, that Carter's deconstruction of identity categories ultimately fails to work in favour of women. In response to this critical position I would suggest that there appears to be a fundamental difference in aim between the deconstructive and fluid project of interrogations of identity such as Carter's, and feminist projects which rely at least to some degree on notions of universality or stability. Even where feminism questions the efficacy of identity categories, by definition feminism relies on some notion of collective experience, materiality or construction in terms of "women". While Carter's fiction is about dismantling categories of identity, feminism is very much about creating positive spaces for women through identity categories. This is a perspective that is reinforced by many of the critics who identify the deconstructive elements of Carter's fiction, but who suggest that finally, her work does not endorse a feminist project and, for this reason that her challenges to identity categories ultimately benefit men.

While Gamble does read Carter in terms of a preoccupation with performativity, she suggests that by the time Carter comes to write her final novels there is a reversal of this position, particularly in *Nights at the Circus*. "There comes a point, it implies, when the performance has to end, and the notion of being nothing more than the sum of your performance, a view by which Carter's fiction was once seduced, is now regarded as a threat".<sup>166</sup> Just as Gamble's arguments regarding the dandyism in Carter's earlier works

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<sup>165</sup> Gamble 53-4.

<sup>166</sup> Gamble 166.



perceived the “camp” and “narcissistic spectacle” of the male characters as a threat to the female characters, she similarly credits Buffo’s performance in *Nights at the Circus* with the “Sadeian philosophy of self-creation”.<sup>167</sup> Focusing on the violence which characterises the performativity of the clowns, Gamble suggests that the self-creation of Sade’s Juliette, and also that of several of Carter’s characters, indicates a nihilistic void rather than a realm of potentiality. Of Lady Purple, in Carter’s short story “The Loves of Lady Purple”, Gamble aligns the “self-referential loop which cannot be untied”<sup>168</sup> with “a savage cycle of endless replication and self-destruction which makes her the very epitome of the Sadeian subject”.<sup>169</sup> Gamble thus associates performativity or self-creation with not only the threat of an ontological void, but also violence and self-destruction. Further, this is a void with which Fevvers is associated, preventing Carter’s text from presenting her as a Utopian winged woman or feminist icon:

As far as Fevvers is concerned, the clowns are her dark mirror-image, for there is always the risk that she may share their complete submersion in performance. Take away *her* make-up, after all, and what is left?<sup>170</sup>

Implicit is the suggestion that just as Fevvers is at risk of losing her “true self” to the performance, so Carter may become “seduced” by the notion that subjects are only the sum of performances. Rather than commenting on the ontological void on which subjectivity/performativity is constructed, Gamble suggests that Carter’s fiction highlights the perils of the Sadeian philosophy of self-creation as that which would suggest that the subject/character recognise the performative nature of that which they *know* as their identity. Fevvers “embodies all the problems of living and lurking in the gaps between categories, and thus is a potent symbol of both the drawbacks and possibilities of living on

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<sup>167</sup> Gamble 163.

<sup>168</sup> Gamble 106.

<sup>169</sup> Gamble 105.

<sup>170</sup> Gamble 164.

the margins".<sup>171</sup> More a reading in terms of drawbacks rather than possibilities, the fear of losing the sense of self which is in itself illusory motivates Gamble's critique of camp, dandyism, and the performativity of Fevvers, Buffo and the other "freaks" in the text. One of the "drawbacks" of identity as performance is that it prevents access to the "authentic" and "real" connection of love. Human interaction is privileged as that which cannot be maintained within structures of performativity or the trickery evident in *Nights at the Circus*. As Gamble suggests, "[t]here is real experience, authentic emotion, to be had in the world outside the circus, and the novel concludes having firmly staked its claim there".<sup>172</sup> This privileging of the experiential posits a consciousness existent through human connection and interaction.

Gamble is not the only Carter critic whose reading of *Nights at the Circus* privileges "love" as the authentic, in contradistinction to the performativity and illusory, intangible trickery which prevails in Colonel Kearney's Circus. Rory Turner also celebrates what he sees to be Carter's "reorientation of human nature and human relationships".<sup>173</sup> Invoking Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque, Turner traces the imagery and symbols of Walser's transformation as that which amounts to a "development and deepening of character".<sup>174</sup> Turner's figuration of Fevvers is simply "that she is growing up and that she is falling in love with Walser".<sup>175</sup> While Turner denies Fevvers an iconic feminist significance, he does give perfunctory consideration to the problematics of a woman wanting to "maintain a strong subjective identity and yet also be treasured as a symbolic illusion by a loving other".<sup>176</sup> However, any discussion of the problematics of subjectivity is subsumed in his theory of

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<sup>171</sup> Gamble 156.

<sup>172</sup> Gamble 166.

<sup>173</sup> Rory Turner, "Subjects and Symbols: Transformations of Identity in *Nights at the Circus*". *Folklore Forum* 20:1/2 (1987): 52-53.

<sup>174</sup> Turner 53.

<sup>175</sup> Turner 54.

<sup>176</sup> Turner 55.

the Bakhtinian transformation of both Walser and Fevvers, as those who may now connect according to a new "vision of human relationships".<sup>177</sup> Turner's emphasis on romantic love and relationships is evident in his mis/reading of Fevvers' "last laugh". Rather than seeing Fevvers' triumphant "Gawd I fooled you" as an indication that the entire quest for the "truth" of her identity is illusory, Turner reinscribes notions of truth by reading Fevvers as having sustained the trickery of her virginity:

The big joke at the end is that she was not a virgin. Her virginity and its defence served as a mechanism to create the structure of the plot.<sup>178</sup>

Reinscribing conventional and masculinist notions of feminine "value", Turner assumes that the question of Fevvers' sexual history is that which places her "authenticity" in the balance. While Turner does employ Bakhtinian imagery and symbols to trace a transformation in both Walser and Fevvers, the outcome of this transformation is a romantic connection and a visionary "human relationship", rather than an interrogation of the construction of subjectivities and the discourses which regulate them. Similarly, Betty Moss reads *Nights at the Circus* in terms of Bakhtin's grotesque, and contends that "Walser enjoys the opportunity to discover authenticity as he journeys into a world of the grotesque that leads to authentic passions, hurts, betrayals, and desires".<sup>179</sup> For Amy Schwartz also, the "journey of consciousness is long indeed, and it takes Walser through some weird intimacies before he can achieve true companionship with the opposite sex".<sup>180</sup> It is not the emphasis on love here which I find problematic, but rather the shift away from the inauthentic performances and trickery of Fevvers and the circus characters to the notion of the "authentic" which is characterised by the connection between Walser and Fevvers. This celebration of the "authentic" is further complicated by the argument that Carter's later

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<sup>177</sup> Turner 58.

<sup>178</sup> Turner 58.

<sup>179</sup> Betty Moss, "Feminine Desire and Grotesque Narrative in Angela Carter's Fiction", diss., U of South Florida, 1997, 135.

<sup>180</sup> Amy E. Schwartz, rev. of *Nights at the Circus*, by Angela Carter, *The New Republic* 20 May 1985 : 41.



novels embody a stronger feminist or feminine perspective, signified by what both Gamble and Moss see as a progression in Carter's work.<sup>181</sup>

In a further indication of her binary feminist perspective, Gamble contends that Honeybuzzard operates as an example of Carter's "radical pornographer", suggesting that his treatment of Ghislaine "can be justified as a kind of (anti) morality play which aims to undermine through exaggeration".<sup>182</sup> Here Gamble implies that Carter's work needs justification – justification, it would seem, according to feminist aims. Gamble also suggests that Honeybuzzard represents "murderous misogyny", and that Carter's failure to provide the women in *Shadow Dance* with a narrative voice prevents them from being other than a "product of the male imagination".<sup>183</sup> While Gamble's analysis of camp appears to celebrate the instability of gender in *Shadow Dance*, her discussion of the text concludes with reservations about the place for women in a sphere of gender relativism. Again, this reinforces the theoretical chasm between category supportive feminist projects, and the destabilisation of gender identity which ultimately denies a fixed and secure space for women:

It is the women in *Shadow Dance*, therefore, who become the means by which the text's camp facade is ruptured. They are not participants in the narcissistic spectacle, but its victims, and when they resist the role forced upon them, they reveal the true horror of a cultural environment in which ethical and evaluative concepts have become wholly relative.<sup>184</sup>

While Gamble reads Honeybuzzard's murder of Ghislaine as a point at which *Shadow Dance* "falters badly", the gendered violence might be read as part of Carter's broader project of

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<sup>181</sup> Moss argues that "Carter's increasing concern both with postmodern aesthetics and feminist politics propels her towards the distinctive postmodern feminist voice she achieves in her final novels, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*". Moss, iii.

<sup>182</sup> Gamble 54.

<sup>183</sup> Gamble 55.

<sup>184</sup> Gamble 57.

demythologising. Famously quoted as having said that the social fiction of femininity was “palmed off on me as the real thing”,<sup>185</sup> Carter writes, “myths deal in false universals, to dull the pain of particular circumstances. In no area is this more true than in that of relations between the sexes”.<sup>186</sup> In Carter’s fiction it would seem that she is intent on focusing on the “pain of particular circumstances”, to function as a continual reminder of the chasm between the mythology of femininity and the materiality of living as a woman. In this sense, Carter’s representations of violence towards women might be read as displaying the workings of the mythology of femininity and, furthermore, the complexities of roles of complicity played by some women. This is a point made by Elaine Jordan, who writes that “the killing of the object of desire in these stories is not a killing of women, but a killing of masculine representations, in which some women collude”.<sup>187</sup>

Capitalising on this demythologising impulse, Anja Muller’s book-length study engages in a sustained analysis of the various means by which Carter’s fiction critiques the Enlightenment view of identity. Far from being solely a feminist critique, Muller suggests that “the ambiguity with which . . . [Carter] invests the body is the starting point of her deconstructive critique, from which she suggests ways to subvert the rigidity of identity”.<sup>188</sup> In a postmodern critique of “the rigid binary of masculinity and femininity”,<sup>189</sup> Muller celebrates Carter’s “androgynous gender ideal”.<sup>190</sup> Characterised by a “necessary eclecticism”<sup>191</sup> of theoretical approach, Muller provides a historicisation and contextualisation of Carter’s specific challenges to the Enlightenment ideal of the monolithic, stable and truthful self. Mindful of the role that the “rigid binary” of gender plays

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<sup>185</sup> Carter, “Notes From the Front Line” 38.

<sup>186</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 5-6.

<sup>187</sup> Jordan, “The Dangers of Angela Carter” 127.

<sup>188</sup> Muller 8.

<sup>189</sup> Muller 7.

<sup>190</sup> Muller 8.

<sup>191</sup> Muller 10.

in naturalising such understandings of stable subjectivity, Muller focuses on the “pertinent source of terror”<sup>192</sup> posed by the possibility of a decentred self.

A number of Carter critics explore her later fiction, particularly *Nights at the Circus*, in terms of Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque and carnivalesque.<sup>193</sup> Celebrating the subversiveness of the grotesque, these critics herald Carter’s work as transgressive and as representative of carnivalesque mirth. While many of these critics assume the transgressive potential of Bakhtin’s theory, Paulina Palmer reads *Nights at the Circus* as making use of the grotesque, but also as offering a feminist critique of certain aspects of Bakhtin’s approach:

Instead of regarding the beatings and thrashings associated with carnivalistic mirth as manifestations of playful exuberance, she uses them to represent the violence which is rife in a male-dominated culture. The brutal slapstick in which the clowns engage verges on the murderous.<sup>194</sup>

While Palmer’s argument demonstrates a feminist critique of Bakhtin’s theory, she does read Carter’s text as a feminist project. Similarly, those critics who celebrate Carter’s use of Bakhtin in *Nights at the Circus* do so from a feminist perspective. These critics argue that patriarchal structures represent the existing order which is overcome, confronted by, or mocked by the carnivalesque and grotesque. As Palmer suggests, “carnivalistic perspectives may be adapted as a vehicle for the treatment of important feminist themes, including an analysis of patriarchal culture and the representation of female community”.<sup>195</sup> Once again, this emphasises the ubiquity of feminist assessments of Carter’s fiction.

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<sup>192</sup> Muller 184.

<sup>193</sup> Moss, Gamble and Femihough all review *Nights at the Circus* in terms of Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque and carnivalesque, as representing the carnivalesque potential to transgress existing systems and structures. Chapter Five will explore issues pertaining to *Nights at the Circus*, Bakhtin’s theory, and issues of ontology, identity and performance.

<sup>194</sup> Palmer, “From ‘Coded Mannequin’” 198.

<sup>195</sup> Palmer, “From ‘Coded Mannequin’” 197.



In mapping certain trends in Carter criticism there appears to be a fundamental shift in the quantity, object and nature of study coinciding approximately with the time of Carter's death. The predominant concerns of critics prior to this time were violent representations of sexuality, pornographic elements, psychoanalytic theories, and analyses of Carter's revision of the fairy tale form. Much of this body of criticism illustrates the squeamishness which is signalled by Bristow and Broughton in their suggestion that "Carter's writings exasperated those who felt that modesty, grace and dignity were prerequisites of proper 'literature'".<sup>196</sup>

Although Carter has often been credited with pre-empting the theoretical imperatives of Judith Butler and performative theory,<sup>197</sup> her death coincided with the publishing and subsequent popularity of these theories. This impact of this coincidence is felt in Carter criticism, with the proliferation of book-length studies on Carter signalling a concern for the implications of performance theory. These critical works indicate a repeated exploration of the grotesque, carnivalesque and performative in Carter's work in terms of a feminist agenda. This Carter criticism, illustrated notably by Britzolakis, Hansen and Palmer, aligns itself with contemporary theoretical interests in feminism, rather than queer theory or a dialogue between the two.

Having mapped the primary critical concerns of Carter criticism to date, this chapter will also signal a map or trajectory for contemporary approaches to Carter's work. Contextualising the corpus of Carter criticism according to the historical and cultural narrative concerns of the

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<sup>196</sup> Bristow and Broughton "Introduction" 7.

<sup>197</sup> Bristow and Broughton contend that "her work anticipated by several years two of the most urgent feminist debates to develop in the 1980s and 1990s: first, the role of pornography as either liberatory or oppressive; and second, the construction of gender as scripted performance". Bristow and Broughton "Introduction" 2. This is a view also expressed by Jordan, as quoted previously. Jordan, "The Dangerous Edge" 190.

time in which it is produced, I have noted a distinct shift primarily in feminist terms. As the dialogue and debate between feminist and queer theories increases, and notions of performative subjectivities gain increasing currency in academic study, critics are beginning to explore the significance of Carter's fiction in terms of a queer perspective, or the multiple potentialities for differently sexed, gendered, and performed bodies. It is to this contemporary trend<sup>198</sup> which this study contributes as an exploration of Carter's fiction in terms of a queer theoretical paradigm.

Initially creating a space to respond to the claims that Carter's work incorporates pornography, misogyny and chauvinism, this dissertation engages with these terms via a queer paradigm which indicates that Carter's interest in pornography, and her "transvestite style"<sup>199</sup> need not necessarily equate with chauvinism or a perpetuation of a masculinist status quo. In response to the theoretical scepticism which characterises later Carter criticism, I offer an exploration of queer performativity which utilises Carter's fiction to demonstrate the potential destabilisation of particular sites and apparatuses of identity regulation. This facilitates a renegotiation of the sites of spectatorship, voyeurism, pornography, penetration and power as those which prove problematic in the above-mentioned feminist analyses of gender performance.

Necessarily working within the system of signification which so powerfully structures notions of difference, this dissertation emphasises the importance of negotiating alternate and reworked systems of identification and naming. By destabilising the normative efficacy of language to demarcate and name, the politics of performativity (particularly in terms of the performative utterance) need not be relegated to the sphere of theoretical abstraction or

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<sup>198</sup> Bristow and Broughton indicate the recent claims that Carter's work has anticipated "postmodern feminists" such as Judith Butler, and ask, "what does this posthumous recognition, this after-the fact 'Butlerification' of Carter mean for literary history, for feminist historiography, and for Carter's own project?" "Introduction" 19.

<sup>199</sup> Clark 158.

impotency. Rather, performativity might prove a cogent illustration of the degree to which discursive regulation is itself permeable and mutable.



## Chapter Two

### Not Without My Identity: Queer Politics, Letting Go and the Processes of Disarticulation

Characterised by tensions between feminisms, queer, and gay and lesbian theories, contemporary approaches to sexuality demonstrate a simultaneous dissatisfaction with identity categories, and a persistent reluctance to move beyond or through these.<sup>200</sup> This chapter explores a queer paradigm which might facilitate such a move through and across identities. This is not so much about the formation of oppositional identities, sexualities or politics. Rather, it proposes a fragmented and temporary disavowal of the articulation and categorisation of these identities and sexualities in the first instance. By holding these categories in tension, and continually contesting and problematising the normative tendency to “know” these categories, we might frustrate the causal links and conventions of continuity which produce the categories of sex, gender and sexual identity as hegemonic effects.

Judith Butler’s article “Against Proper Objects” explores the tensions between feminism and gay and lesbian theories, and specifically critiques the means by which gay and lesbian studies produces itself as “the proper successor to feminism”.<sup>201</sup> According to Butler, certain lesbian and gay theories suggest that gender is the “proper” object of feminism, and “sexuality” the “proper” object of gay and lesbian studies.<sup>202</sup> Furthermore, with gay and lesbian studies subsuming the category of gender, feminism becomes subsumed, and superseded by the more “expansive and complex” gay and lesbian studies.<sup>203</sup> Seeking

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<sup>200</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) 43.

<sup>201</sup> Butler, “Against Proper Objects” 3.

<sup>202</sup> Butler, “Against Proper Objects” 1.

<sup>203</sup> Butler, “Against Proper Objects” 4.

discursive validation or privilege in terms of the "proper" object of analysis highlights the contestation of the categories of sex/gender/sexual identity in contemporary theories of sexuality. This signifies the specific contradiction that we might *know* that which we cannot know. In other words, the implication that gender implicitly *means* and that sex implicitly *means* contributes to the demarcation of sex/gender thus perpetuating the regulation of identity by normative measures. Concomitant with the policing of boundaries of identity, then, is the policing of the distinction between sex and gender, with each now relegated to separate discursive or analytical sites.

Foucault's impact on theories of sexuality has been that sexuality and cultural theorists now consider sexuality to be an effect and an instrument of power rather than an initiative of the self.<sup>204</sup> Grosz writes:

For Foucault . . . sex can no longer be understood as the ground, the real, the (biological/natural) foundation of later superstructural ramifications: it is not a base onto which the superstructure of "gender" and of "sexuality" can be securely added. There is no biological substratum onto which to hang a discursive and cultural overlay. For him, the very notion of sex as origin, as given, as fundamental, to subjectivity, identity and/or cultural harmony, is itself the product or effect of a socio-discursive regime of sexuality.<sup>205</sup>

As Butler argues also, the notion of "sex" as ontologically prior is established retroactively through an intersecting web of social and cultural institutions which determine sexuality as the natural *effect* of biological sex.<sup>206</sup> The presumption of a causal connection between sex, gender and sexuality effects an understanding of "sex" as prior, natural and as the

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<sup>204</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1990) 26.

<sup>205</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: The Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 212.

<sup>206</sup> Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination", *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* ed. Diana Fuss (London: Routledge, 1991) 29.

determinant of gender, sexuality, and sexual identity. Just as Foucault encourages the recognition of "sex" as a product or effect, Butler suggests that the categories which are named as sources of sexual behaviour, are indeed the product of such repetitive sexual behaviour or performance:

Although compulsory heterosexuality often presumes that there is first a sex that is expressed through a gender and then through a sexuality, it may now be necessary fully to invert and displace that operation of thought. If a regime of sexuality mandates a compulsory performance of sex, then it may be only through that performance that the binary system of gender and the binary system of sex come to have intelligibility at all. It may be that the very categories of sex, of sexual identity, of gender are produced or maintained in the *effects* of this compulsory performance, effects which are disingenuously renamed as causes, origins, disingenuously lined up within a causal or expressive sequence that the heterosexual norm produces to legitimate itself as the origin of all sex.<sup>207</sup>

Taking then the categories of sex, sexual identity and gender as *effects* which are "mistaken" for origins, it seems appropriate to consider the normative or conventional conceptualisations of such terms and the means by which these contribute to heteronormativity. Queer theory marks a shift away from the totalising gestures of identity politics, and signals a move toward an exploration of sexualities, desires, bodies and pleasures which are characterised only by the fact that they resist being characterised at all. This chapter will make use of the recent issues of queer theory to explore the means by which identity categories such as gay, lesbian, heterosexual, etc. contribute to the normative production of sexualities. Additionally though, this chapter will explore the means by which the policing of the boundaries of sex, gender and sexual identity further "authenticate" the notion that sexual identity exists as a causal effect of natural or biological

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<sup>207</sup> Butler, "Imitation" 28-29.



"sex". Similarly, the normative significance of the connections between the policing of each of these categories will be examined.

We understand that bodies, sexes and pleasures are regulated by reified notions of heterosexuality, and its corollary of morality, which operate as normative concepts. However, sexualities are also maintained by their identifications with transgression and deviance. The designation of certain sexualities as deviant or marginal - such as "homo" and/or "cross" sexualities - operates as a hegemonic strategy. A number of contemporary sexuality theorists or queer theorists have expressed reservations about the effects of adhering to and campaigning for the recognition of labels and categories of identity. Eve Sedgwick suggests that the persistence of identity categories functions more in favour of hegemony than of the individuals who might be identified with a particular category:

Far beyond any cognitively or politically enabling effects on the people whom it claims to describe, moreover, the nominative category of "the homosexual" has robustly failed to disintegrate under the pressure of decade after decade, battery after battery of deconstructive exposure - evidently not in the first place because of its meaningfulness to those whom it defines but because of its indispensableness to those who define themselves as against it.<sup>208</sup>

"Dissident" or "transgressive" sexualities are produced as an effect of, and a perpetuating effect for, the regulation of normative sexualities. We know that the "monolithic" and pervasive power accorded heterosexuality can only be maintained by allowing for and actually producing sexualities which can be labelled as Other. The policing of the boundaries of marginal sexualities maintains the boundaries of the centre - and compulsory heterosexuality. In other words, the persistence of essentialist politics among marginal sexualities functions as a hegemonically produced re-legitimation of heterosexuality.

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<sup>208</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990; London: Penguin Books, 1994) 83.

Steven Angelides argues that "by laying claim to the specificity of their sexuality, the discourses of sexual identity politics remain inextricably moored to an apparatus of sexuality, or what I will call the *economy of (hetero) sexuality*".<sup>209</sup> Ironically, then, or perhaps typically, the threatened position of heterosexuality is safeguarded by marginal sexualities and theorists of sexuality. If the economy of (hetero)sexuality is dependent on the articulation and maintenance of categories of sexual specificity, then we should perhaps work to disrupt these categories rather than maintain them.

Perhaps queer will signal a fracturing of this re-legitimation through resistance. An interrogation of "normative sexuality", as the regime in and by which all sexualities are constituted, also destabilises the categories of "dissident" or "transgressive" sexualities. This can be seen as a move which functions to test the discourses that articulate and perpetuate separatist categories of sexual identity.

It is significant that both the demarcation of categories such as gay and lesbian, and also those of sex, gender and sexual identity, contribute to the notion that there are natural and unnatural sexualities. The conflict regarding the "proper object" of either feminism or gay and lesbian studies maintains these boundaries in a number of ways. For feminism and gay and lesbian studies to be figured as discrete discursive operations implies that there is no overlap of subjects, interests or desired outcomes. Additionally, the desire to categorise feminism in terms of gender, and gay and lesbian studies in terms of sexuality, perpetuates understandings of sex and gender as two discrete categories. This maintains the division which is then appropriated as a means by which certain sexualities are positioned as "natural" as they follow through on the expected "causal" connections among sex, gender and sexual identity. The inverse of this is, of course, those sexualities that are "unnatural", characterised as they are by a disjunction of that which is assumed to be the natural or causal connection among sex, gender and sexual identity.

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<sup>209</sup> Steven Angelides, "Rethinking the Political: Post-structuralism and the Economy of (Hetero)Sexuality", *Critical inQueeries* 1.1 (1995) : 28.

Binary conceptualisations of sex and gender have effected an understanding of gender as the “cultural overlay” of an ontologically prior anatomy or biological physicality. Fundamental to this is the understanding - often implicit, though maintained through more overt means when necessary - that corporeality and thus identity are a case of “either/or”. Either a body is anatomically male, or anatomically female. With genitalia as the metonymic representation of anatomy, such a conceptualisation of bodily difference fails to account for a number of bodies which, rather than being produced by the binary “either/or”, might better be described as “and/both” or “neither”. Taking transsexuals and hermaphrodites as the most culturally (in)visible (though by no means the only such group, or indeed, the majority) of those who are effaced by such a binary of physicality, we might explore the assumption that gender refers to the “cultural” and sex to the “natural”.

Certainly, there is much to encourage us socially and culturally to assume that “sex” (referring here to anatomy, rather than practice)<sup>210</sup> is a “natural” thing. The “semantic slipperiness”<sup>211</sup> of “sex” signifies the means by which sexual practice and ultimately sexual identity are conflated with “biological sex”. Martin suggests that “the separation of anatomical sex and social gender implied by the sex/gender split has had the consequence of leaving the assumption of biological sexual difference intact”.<sup>212</sup> With anatomical “sex” assumed a given, then, the dual signification of “sex” is reserved to signify “sexual practice”. This elides the distinction between anatomy and practice, the assumption being that practice is determined (naturally, of course) according to anatomy. Normatively, the “choice” of sexual partner/s for sexual practice is dependent on the anatomy one possesses, as are the frequency, degree of activity and eroticised organs of sexual practice. “Gender”, as the term which serves as the signifier for sexually specific behaviours or habits, is widely recognised as a cultural construction, or at least as culturally influenced. The significance of this is that “sex” as anatomical difference goes largely unquestioned,

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<sup>210</sup> The isolation of anatomy from practice is arguably problematic, as anatomy is also a practice, or habitual series of citations and performances. This is a point which will be explored in more detail in the later part of this chapter.

<sup>211</sup> Tamsin Wilton, “Which One’s the Man? The Heterosexualisation of Lesbian Sex”, *Theorising Heterosexuality: Telling it Straight*, ed. Diane Richardson (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1996) 125.

<sup>212</sup> Martin 104.



relegated as it is to the security of semantic disuse. This ensures that "sex" continues to occupy the space of the "authentic", the biological and primordial. When required, for purposes of "authentication", "sex" can be used free from the taint of cultural critique as an authoritative means of ensuring the natural, unquestionable and immutable sexual identity of a particular body.<sup>213</sup> What I would suggest is that a focus on the duality of this particular term necessitates a cultural critique not only of sexual practice, but also of anatomy itself as a practice or series of practices which take on the status of authenticity both through the associations with medical, scientific and physiological discourses, and also through the semantic isolation of the signifier "sex".

Ushered into this world with the performative of *either* "it's a boy" *or* "it's a girl", anatomy is something that is determined (pathologised) outside of us, and certainly prior to the time in which we might begin to speak for/of ourselves. These performatives, often proudly announced/enacted in newspapers and greeting cards, trigger a series of practices through which the subject is expected to assume a gender and sexual identity, (constituted by desire, identification and practice, etc.) which match up with the "sex" announced at birth. Indeed, so profound "culturally" is this "natural" differential that parents often desire to know the "sex" of a child prior to its birth, in order to prepare more readily the colour-coded social and cultural apparatus necessary for this sexually specific identity induction.

Even prior to birth then penis/vagina becomes one of the most important distinctions that we make. Yet is this a distinction that is purely "physical" or is it indeed culturally influenced, and culturally determined? In other words, how far is this distinction a distinction of the corporeal? Certainly, for a phallogentric culture in which "size counts", this distinction is by

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<sup>213</sup> The normative necessity of perpetuating the "naturalness" of the category of sex is evident in the varied forms of discrimination and violence that transvestites and transsexuals experience regarding their "chosen" sex/uality in contrast to their "birth" or "real" sex/uality. This is evident in the case of "Susan", a pre-operative male-to-female transsexual, who "fought an extraordinary legal battle with the Department of Social Security for the right to call herself a woman". David Leser, "I am Woman", *Good Weekend: Sydney Morning Herald Magazine* 21 Oct. 1995 : 30-40. After living for seven and a half years as a woman, Susan lost the right to claim a "wife's pension". Instead, the Department of Social Security declared "Susan" eligible for the higher rate of unemployment benefits, as a male. With the unemployment benefit paid at a higher rate than the wife's pension, and the financial expense of the lengthy trial, the significance of this case lies in the institutionalisation of the cultural need to protect the "naturalness" of the binary of male/female. Leser 30-40.

no means natural: as those penises clinically deemed "inadequate" either by size, appearance or function are rendered into "vaginas".<sup>214</sup> Ostensibly to secure the child's future sex and gender identity, this "castration" in fact works to protect the ascribed power of the phallus, too easily conflated here with the penis. Certainly too, with advances in fertility treatments and procedures, and the possibility of human cloning and genetic engineering looming, genital difference is appearing less and less natural, and more and more a socially and culturally determined phenomenon.

Yet medical intervention aside, we can understand sex as a social and cultural construct even without such "slips of the scalpel" and laboratory technologies. Assuming (and, as indicated, this is by no means a safe assumption) that children are born with particular genital characteristics, how is it that we make sense of the physiological differences culturally? Why is it that there are only two official or endorsed genders for instance when genital diversity is infinitely broad? Indeed we might say that genital difference is as broad as the number of bodies. The significance of such a conflation and denial of difference cannot be underestimated. Of course, there is a huge cultural gain in the arbitrary demarcation of "the sexes" through the naturalisation of such differences and distinctions. For instance, heteronormativity is dependent on and perpetuated by the binary hierarchisation of the two sexes, which could not exist without such physiological reification. Butler writes:

The notion that there might be a "truth" of sex, as Foucault ironically terms it, is produced precisely through the regulatory practices that generate coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms. The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between "feminine" and

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<sup>214</sup> This can operate on a number of levels. Literally, a misshapen or inadequate penis can be castrated, as in the case of "Joan" whose penis was removed following a "circumcision that went awry". The surgeons and parents of the child opted for a "kind of vagina out of the remaining tissue". Presumably the thought of a "kind of vagina" was less threatening than the "kind of penis" that "Joan" had. The decision that "the child's best shot at a normal life was as an anatomically correct woman" highlights the degree to which anatomy functions as the first and final marker of sexual identity. The simplicity with which surgeons assumed that a castration and "kind of vagina" would secure "Joan's" "normal life" and identity as a woman, serves as testament to the faith that our culture places in the "truth" of genital anatomy. Christine Gorman, "A Boy Without a Penis", *Time* 24 March 1997: 57.



"masculine", where these are understood as expressive attributes of "male" and "female".<sup>215</sup>

The structural necessity of the terms male/female within the binary hierarchy which is both produced by, and maintains, heteronormativity leads us to question some of the assumed (and often enforced) connections among sex, gender, and sexual identity. Generally speaking, "sexual identity" is presumed to be a unified phenomenon. Yet delving only a little into what this might comprise prompts a consideration of the variables of sexual identification, sexual desire and sexual practice - and this is without considering the relationship of these three factors to genital assignment.

Current trends in queer theory stress the importance of recognising the means by which the simulated connections between sex and sexual practice, for instance, are maintained and enforced. Similarly, I would suggest that there is a need to continually challenge assumptions or representations of the category of "sexual identity" as homogeneous and discrete, and instead recognise the amorphous and infinitely potential nature of the category of sexual identity. Moreover, can theorists of sexuality understand the composites of "sexual identity" to be discernible and discrete? For instance, do our conceptualisations of the categories of sexual identification, sexual desire and sexual practice need to be interrogative in nature, conceptualising an overlap or "contradiction" among such phenomena? In other words, if we take these categories to be discrete, does this mean that we *know* what they signify? If we assume that we can demarcate where identification ends and desire begins, then we are sustaining the means by which the polarisation of identification and desire serve a heteronormative purpose. If instead we allow for more fluid understandings of the intersections among, and categorical boundaries of sexual identification, desire and practice, then we cannot so easily map identities in terms of a series of binary forces. Additionally, I would suggest that any assumption of the discretion of these categories needs to be combined with an analysis of their normative positionings

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<sup>215</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 17.



and conventional connections. As Butler argues, there is a significance in interrogating assumptions regarding the interconnection and interaction of these categories:

There are no direct expressive or causal lines between sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practice, fantasy and sexuality. None of those terms captures or determines the rest.<sup>216</sup>

While it seems that challenges to the homogeneous representations of "sexuality" form an effective means of critique, Butler reminds theorists of sexuality of the need to extend analysis to the normative connections that are drawn between each of the elements thought to comprise sexuality or sexual identity. Perhaps in this sense we need to continue to contest and challenge what it is that these categories signify, as well as the "conventions of continuity" which bind them to one another in a heteronormative sense. This would necessitate a focus on the conventional connections between categories, as well as an analysis of the ways in which the categories are conventionally figured. Eve Sedgwick provides a suitably lengthy indication of only some of the elements, and the normative positionings that comprise the assumedly discrete category of "sexual identity":

your biological (e.g., chromosomal) sex, male or female;  
 your self-perceived gender assignment, male or female (supposed to be the same as your biological sex);  
 the preponderance of your traits of personality and appearance, masculine or feminine (supposed to correspond to your sex and gender);  
 the biological sex of your preferred partner;  
 the gender assignment of your preferred partner (supposed to be the same as her/his biological sex);  
 the masculinity or femininity of your preferred partner (supposed to be the opposite of your own);

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<sup>216</sup> Butler, "Imitation" 25.

your self-perception as gay or straight (supposed to correspond to whether your preferred partner is your sex or the opposite);  
 your preferred partner's self-perception as gay or straight (supposed to be the same as yours);  
 your procreative choice (supposed to be yes if straight, no if gay);  
 your preferred sexual act(s) (supposed to be insertive if you are male or masculine, receptive if you are female or feminine);  
 your most eroticized sexual organs (supposed to correspond to the procreative capabilities of your sex, and to your insertive/receptive assignment);  
 your sexual fantasies (supposed to be highly congruent with your sexual practice, but stronger in intensity);  
 your main locus of emotional bonds (supposed to reside in your preferred sexual partner);  
 your enjoyment of power in sexual relations (supposed to be low if you are female or feminine, high if male or masculine);  
 the people from whom you learn about your own gender and sex (supposed to correspond to yourself in both respects);  
 your community of cultural and political identification (supposed to correspond to your own identity).<sup>217</sup>

Sedgwick's account of only some of the factors referred to by the category of "sexual identity" reads somewhat like a list of rules, on "how to". There is no "mix and match" option here; you cannot, for instance, choose your own "identity". Speaking normatively, of course, your sexual identity is your birthright, and anatomy is indeed destiny. Sedgwick challenges such a conceptualisation of sexual identity, recognising that such a prescriptive framework relies on the "easy common sense" that "the male and female sexes are each

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<sup>217</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (1993; London: Routledge, 1994) 7.

other's 'opposites'".<sup>218</sup> Wilton also suggests "we speak unthinkingly of the opposite sex, yet there is no biological or somatic sense in which the bodies of women can be understood as opposite to the bodies of men".<sup>219</sup> Heteronormativity is both reliant on and functions to perpetuate the oppositionality of male and female. Furthermore, normative sexuality necessitates the conceptualisation of these sexes as unquestionable origins which then have causal connections or manifestations. In this sense, the "truth" of physiology secures sexual identity through a series of naturalised connections among the constructed categories of sex, gender and sexual identity. Recalling Butler's point that the binary of sex and the binary of gender, as they structure heterosexuality, are produced as the effects of compulsory performances of sex,<sup>220</sup> we can understand the significance of the prescriptive connections between the presumably discrete categories of sex, gender, desire, practice etc., as they combine to produce a homogeneous and intelligible "sexual identity". For instance, David Buchbinder suggests that sexuality operates as a naturalised connection or "bridge" between "sex" and "gender", functioning as a means by which those aspects of "identity" more widely recognised as "socially constructed" are lent an air of authenticity, or "naturalness".<sup>221</sup> This then operates as an easy means by which behaviour, identification and desire are more easily regulated:

Sexuality, as a link between sex and gender, thus permits a slide between the social and the bodily, a slide which often becomes an ideological convenience in a patriarchal culture. So, for instance, though women have long resisted the idea that biology is destiny, the bi-directional pathway created by sexuality between sex and gender in fact encourages people in the culture to think precisely in those terms, so that gender, for all its social construction, is reconceived as located in sex, that is, in the body.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Sedgwick, *Tendencies* 7.

<sup>219</sup> Wilton 126.

<sup>220</sup> Butler, "Imitation" 29.

<sup>221</sup> David Buchbinder, *Performance Anxieties: Re-producing Masculinity* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1998) 130.

<sup>222</sup> Buchbinder 130.



There are several implications here, firstly, that the "social" is figured as "natural", or at least certain aspects of the "social" are endorsed as "natural". Certainly, it is significant that those aspects recognised as culturally constructed (gendered behaviours, gender specific dress, etc.) take on qualities of "naturalness" due to their associations with the corporeal, which is assumed to be immutable. An additional significance is that certain social behaviours are of course excluded from such associations of naturalness, depending on the degree to which they adhere to and maintain notions of binary sexuality. Certain "bridges" of sexuality are privileged or favoured institutionally over others. For instance, there is not a culturally authenticated connection between "feminine" behaviour and a "male" body. In a sense, there is little chance that, in this case at least, the culturally constructed gendered behaviour or "social", would be passed off as "bodily" or "natural". In other words, the structures and systems are not in place to authenticate or naturalise such a connection. Rather they function to render this behaviour abhorrent or anomalous. Similarly, a female, in a bodily sense desiring another "bodily" female cannot be endorsed culturally, as the "bridge" of sexuality in this case is also "unauthorised" or "inauthentic". Once again, the normative arrangement of the components of the category of sexual identity can be understood as operating through a reliance on and perpetuation of binary notions of sexuality. That which does not operate in respect of this normative causality in accordance with binary anatomy takes on the cultural significance of the secondary term in the conceptualisation of sexual identity as either authentic or inauthentic.

While this may seem yet another way of theorising the means by which certain sexualities are rendered "inauthentic" by a highly regulated, and highly regulating heteronormativity, there are other implications for theorising the connections between sex and gender in this way. As Buchbinder suggests, "the fact of same-sex desire . . . contradicts and disrupts the discourse which unproblematically sees sexuality as the connection between sex and the privileged (heterosexual) gender identity".<sup>223</sup> Grosz agrees that "the rigid alignments of

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<sup>223</sup> Buchbinder 130-131.

sexual stimuli and responses, the apparently natural coupling of male and female lovers, are unstuck by the existence of lesbians and gays".<sup>224</sup> What is then positioned as "anomalous" or "inauthentic" operates as a means of revealing the authenticated itself to be inauthentic. If sexuality *were* the natural connection between sex and gender, as it appears/claims, then such "anomalous" sexualities as same-sex desire would not and could not exist. Similarly, if the gendered behaviours that are removed from the social through such a naturalised connection were indeed "natural" or bodily, they could not be reproduced so easily (and, as is often suggested, "more convincingly") by transsexuals, transvestites, etc., who do not hold a privileged/naturalised connection between sex and gender identity. For a particularly sexed body to produce the gendered effects of that which is seen as its "opposite" casts doubt on the "naturalness" or discretion of either category - sex and gender thus become highly suspect notions. What these "anomalies" reveal, then, is the untruth by which the naturalisation of "sexual identity", as the connection between sex and gender, operates.

This is not to say that sexual identity and the varied social and cultural apparatuses that encourage subjects to assume the "correct" sexual identity - correct for their genitalia, that is - do not for the most part operate incredibly effectively. Nor does this deny that the effects of these apparatuses do not present significant problems for those whose sexual identities and effects operate outside the slim range of authentication. "Punishments" or apparatuses of discouragement for such aberrance might range from and include self-doubt, social ostracism, myriad forms of discrimination, and institutionalised as well as "random" acts of violence. Although theorists of sexuality may recognise the connection between sex and gender as simulated, evidence of this connection at all, is testament to its effectiveness. In other words, it operates and exists only through its effects, with bodies that have "got it right" by matching the correct genital apparatus with the correct social-but-natural behaviours, operating as the best advertisements for heteronormative behaviour. Of course, social-but-natural behaviour must culminate in the final authentication of subjectivity, that is: sexual desire always and only for the opposite sex.

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<sup>224</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion* 227.



As already indicated, if a sexual identity is socially and culturally considered inauthentic, then the gender and more importantly the sex of that person become questionable. This is indicated in sexually specific name calling, which often takes the form of exclusion, given that male and female are figured as oppositional. For instance, effeminate behaviour by a man might be "punished" or traduced as "sissy", and thus aligned with the gendered characteristics of a female or as a "girl", exemplifying the way in which the gendered characteristics are easily conflated with "sex".<sup>225</sup> Both dependent on and perpetuating heteronormative notions of difference, this name-calling polices sexual behaviour "by the deployment of stigmatised/anathematised gender identities . . . it is equally the case that gender behaviour has been policed by the deployment of stigmatised *sexual* identities".<sup>226</sup> Wilton argues that homosexual relationships, specifically lesbian ones, are heterosexualised in order to maintain the binary structures on which heteronormativity is dependent:

To demonstrate that desire exists between individuals located at one or other pole - that two positives or two negatives may attract rather than repel - is to demonstrate the artificiality of the heteropolar model, so homosexuality is inconceivable to the straight mind without the insertion of "difference". Hence the homophobe's anxiety to have an answer to the intolerable puzzle posed by lesbian existence: which one's the man!<sup>227</sup>

<sup>225</sup> These binary slurs are not reserved for sexual identities that do not fit within the "authentic". In fact, name-calling which is reduced to the level of sexual categories operates as a means by which any "undesirable behaviour" might be regulated. Interesting in this is the effectiveness of such name-calling, indicating and also perpetuating the social importance of sex and gender authenticity. Thus, for a boy or man to be referred to as a "fairy", "wuss", "girl" or "old woman" implies a degree of gender treachery. In this sense, the name-calling operates as a threat, implying that if the behaviour is not rectified, the individual will be associated with the "diminutive" female, or possibly with the gender treachery of homosexuality. This operates in a similar way as a means of behaviour regulation for women and girls; however, I would suggest that for a variety of reasons this is to a lesser extent. The point here is that, regardless of whether the (mis)behaviour is of a sexual nature or not, a sexually specific slur may be applied, with the understanding this will either be particularly hurtful by virtue of the associations with aberrance, or that it will have the effect of preventing, regulating the mis/behaviour. Either way, this indicates the degree to which a fear/abhorrence of gender treachery operates as a means of regulating identity.

<sup>226</sup> Wilton 126.

<sup>227</sup> Wilton 127.



Similar strategies are at play in the designation of a fixity of positions in relationships between gay men. In assuming a binary sexualisation which accords to a uniformity of roles in sexual practice, the penetrated partner is invariably defined as "female" and the penetrator as "male".<sup>228</sup> The nonsensical binary logic at work here is easily disrupted by the fluidity of identifications and practices in gay and lesbian sex. Interchangeable roles of penetrator and penetrated, and the dislocation of these practices from notions of activity and passivity, disturb the ease with which same-sex desire is recast in the image of the heteronormative.

What this might indicate, then, is that while "sex" or "bodily" sexual characteristics are often seen as the most natural and perhaps the least questionable of sexual categories, they are in fact fiercely dependent upon the maintenance of their oppositional status. Challenges to "authentic" sexual identity, necessarily binary heterosexuality, amounts to a destabilisation of the notion that there are two sexes, male and female. Additionally, any overlap between the presumably discrete categories of sexual identification and sexual desire immediately problematises normative conceptualisations of sexuality. This is by virtue of the disregard for the binary structure of conventional object relations, according to which subjects are expected to identify with sexual subject/s of the same sex as themselves, and desire sexual object/s of the "opposite" sex: "It is important to consider that identification and desire can coexist, and that their formulation in terms of mutually exclusive oppositions serves a heterosexual matrix".<sup>229</sup> Any conflation of identification/desire then threatens the security of this heteronormative process. Problematisations of the presumably discrete categories - penetration, reception, activity, passivity, object, subject, identification, desire - amount to a destabilisation of the binary male/female, and thus also of heteronormativity. Biddy Martin suggests:

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<sup>228</sup> The significance of normative and binary understandings of penetration and power, and the implications that this has for specifically sexed bodies will be discussed in Chapter Three.

<sup>229</sup> Butler, "Imitation" 26.

The analytic and political separation of gender and sexuality has been the rallying cry of a great deal of queer theory that seeks to complicate hegemonic assumptions about the continuities between anatomical sex, social gender, gender identity, sexual identity, sexual object choice and sexual practice.<sup>230</sup>

Further, inquiries into the multitudinous permutations of all these characteristics assumed to be discrete and arranged causally threaten the security of the distinction between what is natural and what abhorrent, what authentic and what inauthentic. It is for this reason that I see sexualities which do not fit within the slim realm of "authentic" sexual possibilities as posing the greatest threat to the very notion and security of "authenticity". While the "authentic" is thought to be characterised by heteronormativity, I would suggest that a conflation of the two oversimplifies the restrictions and regulations on sexual identities, sexual practices and sexual expression. In heterosexuality, there are certainly restrictions and regulations concerning inter-generational sexual relationships, "promiscuity", often inter-racial sexual relationships, degrees of female activity in sex, which practices and body parts are eroticised, sado-masochistic sexual practices not to mention, of course, where sex takes place, and whether or not it is "free" – power-free, economically free, etc. While these prohibitions apply to gay and lesbian sex also, and some of them are mistakenly thought of as specifically "queer" sexual practices, they do serve to indicate that heterosexual sex is not without restrictions and demarcations of what might constitute an appropriate or "authentic" sexuality.

Thus, engaging in sexual intercourse with someone who has the "opposite" genitalia is not always sufficient to secure a sexual identity as "authentic". Grosz argues:

So simply *being straight* or *being queer*, in itself, provides no guarantee of one's position as sexually radical: it depends on how one lives one's

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<sup>230</sup> Martin 105.

queerness, or renders one's straightness, one's heterosexuality as queer.<sup>231</sup>

This indicates, then, that sexualities which are ostensibly straight may comprise contradictions and permutations which undermine heteronormative structures. This is significant because it destabilises the means by which same-sex and transgender sex are fetishised as Other. Additionally, this facilitates the collapse of the authentic/inauthentic binary, through the illustration of the already "inauthentic" nature of the sexualities which occupy the privileged space of the heteronormative. For instance, a slide between identification and desire has the potential to inflect a "straight" relationship with queer potentialities. Similarly, fluid approaches to activity and passivity and non-reproductive sexual practices such as male anal penetration in "straight" intercourse transgress boundaries which sustain binary heterosexuality.

Further, a diffraction of erogenous zones displaces the phallic emphasis on penetration and the power attributed the penetrator. This destabilises the distinction between intercourse and outercourse and the means by which the latter is produced as feminine, aligned as it is with the emotional, the juvenile and the inferiority of foreplay. A displaced emphasis on non-penetrative sexual activity destabilises the production of the activities and pleasures of foreplay as merely "fore" to the prime act of "fucking". Destabilising this hierarchical distinction between foreplay and "actual" sex, or outercourse, and intercourse also challenges the perception that "straight" women do not enjoy penetration, preferring instead the "emotional connection" thought to be more evident in foreplay. Further, this allows a transgression of the regulation of "straight masculine subjects" as privileging fucking and not enjoying foreplay. Any assumption of what constitutes "real sex" contains significant regulatory power. Similarly, any notion of preferred sexual activities as dependent on anatomical sex also perpetuates heteronormative conceptualisations of sexual practice. In this sense, there is benefit in an inquiry into the privileging of certain

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<sup>231</sup> Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion* 217.



activities and erogenous zones, particularly as these are produced as specifically sexed or gendered. To assume that certain sexual practices or erogenous zones are exclusively "masculine", exclusively "feminine", or further that they are specially "straight" or specifically "queer", perpetuates the regulatory function inherent in the distinction between these identity categories.

What all of this may indicate, then, is a kind of "slippery sex" in which identifications, desires, practices and erogenous zones are not held in stasis, but slide between and simultaneously disrupt conventional understandings of the straight and conventional understandings of homosexual practice. These are just some of the means by which a "straight subject" "renders one's straightness, one's heterosexuality as queer".<sup>232</sup>

As Grosz suggests, then, it is problematic to assume that "straight" sexualities are not transgressive or inauthentic, and that queer sexualities necessarily are. Sexualities which do not fit within that which is thought of as "authentic" may include gay, lesbian, transgender, transsexual and sado-masochistic sexualities, yet there are also many sexualities which fit or appear to fit under the rubric of heterosexuality, yet which would similarly be considered "inauthentic". While such instances of "inauthenticity" are often understood as an indication of the degree of control and regulation that normative discourses of sexuality apply, we might use queer theory as a means of understanding the subversive potential of these "inauthentic" sexualities. At times bisexuals might be (mis)understood as heterosexual, temporarily assuming (depending on the gender of their current partner/s) the "appearance" of "authenticity". Perhaps the ambiguity of such "appearances" might be seen not as undermining the specificity of bisexual identity, but rather as a means of frustrating the notions of "authenticity" which prompt an investment in the "security" of identity categories in the first instance.

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<sup>232</sup> Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion* 217.

To recall Buchbinder's point, "same-sex desire . . . contradicts and disrupts" the naturalised assumption of a connection between sex and gender identity.<sup>233</sup> If there is an understood "natural" connection among genital assignment, gender identity and sexual practice, and these are of the heteronormative kind, then same-sex desire indicates that these connections are not natural, but rather potential. Instead of seeing anatomy as destiny, I would suggest that we conceptualise genitals less a foregone conclusion, than a starting point, which may or may not have a degree of physical immutability, but which nonetheless can be culturally understood, and certainly used sexually, in a number of ways. In recognising that gendered behaviour need not necessarily line up with anatomy, and that sexual practice need not always be consistent with the binary masculine/feminine, sexual identity becomes characterised more by possibility than prohibition. That most fraught of categories, "sexual identity", need not be dictated by either genitalia or gendered behaviour, a lesson that might be learned from many of the sexualities deemed "inauthentic" by the regulatory apparatus of heteronormative sexuality.

From this I would suggest that sexualities might comprise a series of disjunctures rather than connections. By this, I mean disjunctures of the normative and simulated connections that are naturalised socially and culturally as unwritten (and sometimes written) rules. If "inauthentic" sexualities are considered those characterised by disjunctures of the normative connections among sex, gender, and sexual identity, then perhaps a widening of the category of the "inauthentic" might be more beneficial than efforts to campaign for inclusion by normative measures. By this, I mean to suggest that the "inauthentic" is characterised by a subversive potential, by virtue of the very fact that it is necessarily considered "inauthentic". The stability of the "authentic" and the categories on which it relies are continually threatened with collapse as the "inauthentic" disregards the "unwritten rules" of the simulated connections among sex, gender and sexual identity. Perhaps, then, we might understand that the very appearance or existence or performance

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<sup>233</sup> Buchbinder 130-1.

of sexual identities which disregard/disjoin these connections is indicative of the simulated, and in a sense "inauthentic", status of that which refers and reiterates itself as "authentic".

This is not to suggest that we increase the means by which gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, and countless others, are referred to and reiterated in terms of aberrance of sex, gender or sexual identity. Rather, by challenging and contesting these categories, as we must, on their own terms, theorists of sexuality - and all of us as sexual subjects - might find sites or instances of transgression, perhaps not within categories, but across categories, in the links between categories and what each category is commonly held to signify. By holding the categories in tension, by evading definitive or prescriptive notions of what they signify, we may also hold in tension the means by which identities are labelled so easily in terms of either normality or deviance.

If sexual resistance is to be effective at all, it must problematise and destabilise the heteronormativity on which even the impetus of resistance is constructed:

Resistance from the margins seems doomed to replicate internally the strategies, structures, even the values of the dominant. Unless, that is, resistance is otherwise, and derives in part from the inevitable incompleteness and surplus of control itself?<sup>234</sup>

It is in an exploration of the "inevitable incompleteness" of the dominant that queer theory might be most useful. The power which is ascribed to heterosexuality as a monolithic regime of regulation is just that - ascribed. Both Lynne Segal and Butler suggest that heterosexuality is less impermeable than we think, constituted solely by its need to reiterate and covering over the differences and exclusions of and by which it is formed. Segal argues:

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<sup>234</sup> Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence* 81.



As soon as we look into this overworked, heterosexualized normativity, we see what it is working so hard to hide. Sexual relations are perhaps the most fraught and troubling of all social relations precisely because, especially when heterosexual, they so often *threaten* rather than confirm gender polarity.<sup>235</sup>

In Butler's terms, the fact that binary heteronormativity consistently needs to reiterate itself indicates its non-essential status. By virtue of this necessary repetitive process, heterosexuality reveals that its position as hegemonic and monolithic is not causal but contingent. To view heterosexuality in this way renders it vulnerable to interruptions of its repetitive trajectory. In Baudrillard's terms, the simulacrum does not masquerade as truth; rather, the simulacrum reveals that there is no truth.<sup>236</sup> This allows an understanding of heteronormativity as continually working to cover the ontological void of which it is constructed. Heteronormativity consists of continual claims that it does *mean*, and it continually polices the boundaries of that which it claims to mean. By contesting the meaning of heterosexuality, and even contesting that it *means* at all, we might redelineate identity categories, and disrupt their illusory signifying trajectory.

Queer theory focuses on a problematisation of heterosexuality rather than a perpetuation of its dominance through an adherence to its major instruments of regulation: categories of identity. Queer theory might thus be thought of more in terms of disjunctures than connections, as a means of frustrating the connections and dictates of heteronormative sexuality. Similarly, then, we might think of sexuality as characterised by potentialities, rather than dictated by a series of "preordained" connections which borrow their "authority" from the "natural" status of genitalia.

This signals the point at which queer theory finds itself currently - caught in discussions regarding the "proper object" of inquiry, locked in debates between a broadly queer project

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<sup>235</sup> Lynne Segal, *Straight Sex: The Politics of Pleasure* (London: Virago Press, 1994) 254.

of antideterminancy which celebrates labile sexual identity, and certain feminist, or gay and lesbian campaigns for recognition on grounds which are category-affirming. While the earlier section of this chapter outlined the problems associated with the policing of identity boundaries/practices, there is nonetheless an argument to be made that contemporary cultural studies owes a significant debt to the earlier campaigns of the feminist, and gay and lesbian movement/s, which fought for recognition and for voice/s on the basis of identity politics and an affirmation of categorical difference. This work and the significant contribution that it has made to the history of sexual subjectivities are often dismissed too easily as "essentialist", a move which undermines the foundations which have facilitated the progression of cultural and sexual theory to the point at which it now finds itself.

Further, it is in an exploration of the tensions between category-affirming and anti-determinist impulses that we might foster points of friction and destabilisation in the apparatus of hegemonic regulation. For instance, these tensions signal the impasse at which queer theory is caught but, as Judith Butler suggests, they also illustrate the impasse of the sexual subject. Using Spivak's term, Butler discusses the "necessary error of identity"<sup>237</sup> as that which enables the subject. Butler concedes that the dualistic nature of categories of identity regulate the subject, but also produce that subject in the first instance. This facilitates a conceptualisation of identity categories as fictional rather than intrinsic, indicating that their significations and effects are negotiable and in constant flux. Figuring subject positions as sites "of converging relations of power",<sup>238</sup> as Butler does, enables a recognition of the perpetual incompleteness of the subject, and the inevitable failure of the subject to accord with any given identity category. This may prove a promising conceptualisation of identity categories in terms of making productive use of the tensions between discourses of category-affirmation and anti-determinism. For any identity category to be figured as a "temporary totalization"<sup>239</sup> allows a recognition of the simultaneous

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<sup>236</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), Inc., 1983)1.

<sup>237</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 229.

<sup>238</sup> Butler, *Bodies* 229.

<sup>239</sup> Butler, *Bodies* 230.

possibility and potentiality of that signification. This indicates previously unacknowledged openness, or fluidity associated with identity labelling.

One significant example of this recent recognition of the potentiality of identity categories can be found in Jacquelyn Zita's "empirico-mosaicism" which "allows for the emergence of omnisexual and nomadic desires".<sup>240</sup> In a critique of the modernist "science of desire" that produces an understanding of sexual orientation as an identifiable phenotype, Zita challenges the notion that sexuality "is a mode of speciation reflecting an ontology of difference".<sup>241</sup> Further, Zita contends that without the "historical forces that pressure individuals to construct a narration of the self based on principles of consistency within a single monosexual trajectory. . . . sexual orientation might be experienced as less discrete, less clearly measurable, less fixed, less isolable, and more fluid".<sup>242</sup> Taking the complementary notions of "fluidity" and "mosaicism" as a postmodern challenge to a reductive modernist framework, Zita proposes a "new sexual pluralism . . . a sexuality that becomes more nuanced: more lascivious . . . and less easily domesticated by the either/or obliqueness of sexual object choice".<sup>243</sup>

Zita recognises an "intellectual fascination" with fluidity, suggesting that queer theory at times replaces "flesh with the word".<sup>244</sup> In avoiding the discursivity of queer notions of fluidity, Zita engages in a "postmodern empiricism" reliant on multi-dimensional scales used to measure a series of "distinguishable impulses".<sup>245</sup> Compared to the much-criticised Kinsey scale of 1948, Zita's "empirico-mosaicism" does "open up differently nuanced categories of sexual identification".<sup>246</sup> Fundamentally, though, the procedures and outcomes of "empirico-mosaicism" reflect a commitment to proliferating typologies,

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<sup>240</sup> Jacquelyn N. Zita, *Body Talk: Philosophical Reflections on Sex and Gender* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 135.

<sup>241</sup> Zita 128-129.

<sup>242</sup> Zita 128.

<sup>243</sup> Zita 132-133.

<sup>244</sup> Zita 133.

<sup>245</sup> Zita 134.



categorisations and identity categories, rather than frustrating the regulatory function of their discursive invocation. This exemplifies the distinction between queer approaches completely resistive to identity categorisation, and those queer discourses which posit a proliferation of the significations and potentialities within and among identity categories.

As a challenge to the modernist insistence on sexual "truth", the paradigm of mosaicism performs a vital function. Zita's critique of the designation of sexual orientation as a phenotype engages in a sustained and significant critique of the Kinsey scale which appropriates sexual identity according to a binary code. Yet the framework exhibits a commitment to proliferating the "distinguishable" data, indicating a desire to determine, albeit within "nomadic, omnisexual" terms, the "identity" or typology of a particularly "empirically" sexed subject. In contrast, the discursive emphasis of queer "fluidity" displaces the necessity to "know" identity by disrupting the semantic and discursive strategies of naming. Although far from essentialist, the empirico-mosaic approach nonetheless remains implicitly concerned with an intelligibility grounded in empiricism:

Monosexual beliefs in the linearity and purity of sexual orientation are replaced by an ontology of empirico-mosaicism and by what emerges from that, the remarkable agency involved in putting the pieces together to constitute an intelligible sexual self.<sup>247</sup>

This "intelligibility" is not invoked to ground the sexual self. Rather, this illustrates Butler's "necessary error" as that which enables the subject in the first place. Outside of "intelligibility", the subject does not exist, and Zita's project to proliferate the significations of that which constitutes the intelligible. Queer notions of fluidity, by contrast, revel in the discursive interruption of sexual intelligibility, and extend the project of typology proliferation to typology destabilisation. Acknowledging that "language . . . is central to the

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<sup>246</sup> Zita 134.

<sup>247</sup> Zita 135.

achievement and the maintenance of power",<sup>248</sup> the queer project undertaken in this dissertation exhibits a commitment to discursive instability. To exacerbate the semantic slippage in the labelling/production of subjectivities is to challenge the outcomes of classificatory, measuring and identifying impulses.

Recognising that the sexual subject is a discursive subject, and a linguistic "narrative" or trajectory, I would suggest that although the somatic does not exist detached from the discursive, language does not adhere to or produce corporeality in "natural" ways. The slippage allowed by the arbitrary yet highly regulated production of bodies as though they were categories enables a transgressive play with categories, upsetting the strategies by which they adhere so convincingly to the subjectivities they produce. This does not constitute a replacement of the "flesh with the word". Rather, this comprises a simultaneous gesture to the regulatory power of the word in producing the flesh, and also a challenge to the naturalisation of this discursive power. It is this which indicates the contemporary tension yet also the project of queer theory. A dual concern with destabilising the injurious and regulatory function of identity categories, and yet a recognition also of a fundamental inability to operate independently of these discursive constructs, highlights a tension both within queer discourses, and within individual subjects as they perform their sexual selves.<sup>249</sup>

While this chapter foregrounds many of the problems associated with identity politics, there appears to be a value in exploring theoretically that tension between stasis and flux which we as sexual subjects must negotiate or, conversely, be negotiated by every day. The preceding discussion of the operations and effects of the sex/gender distinction, for instance, highlights the potential vulnerability of regulatory discourses to the elision of this distinction. By continually recognising and negotiating such points of tension and

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<sup>248</sup> Muller 185.

<sup>249</sup> I would agree with Zita's suggestion that the projects of "fluidity" and "mosaicism" are complementary. Zita 131. The distinction between these two strategies and their various theoretical paradigms serves as a constant reminder of the production of the subject as a series of discursive effects. This is vital in queer critique, to curb the tempting yet false assumption that subjectivities might operate free of the regulatory effects of language.

theoretical conflict, we increase the means by which pressure can be placed on the discourses which produce our "identities" as sexual effects.

As one exploration of this impasse between a determinist imperative and one of fluidity, I would suggest that a queer appropriation of media and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard's work destabilises even the ground on which these debates are fought. Baudrillard is not conventionally figured as a contributor to queer theory, nor is his work usually framed in queer terms. I would suggest, though, that his notion of the precession and procession of the simulacra has interesting implications for theories of sexuality, as it provides a means of deconstructing pervasive notions of authenticity/artificiality. Following on from Baudrillard, sexuality theorists might determine that the problematics surrounding the regulation of identities do not originate in notions of inauthenticity. I would suggest that our efforts need to be less in terms of campaigning against the labelling of certain sexualities as "inauthentic", and more about a destabilisation of the notion that there is indeed an "authentic". To undermine the reiterative incantation of "authenticity" is to ensure that there is no longer a comparative or oppositional relation by which the "inauthentic" can be measured. In fact, it is at this point that Baudrillard's work appears to converge with that of queer and sexuality theorists, such as Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and David Buchbinder.

While there are significant theoretical distinctions between Butler, Sedgwick, Buchbinder and Baudrillard, this chapter considers the point at which their theoretical positions intersect. For each of these theorists notions of authenticity and artifice are destabilised, although by variant means. While Butler's discussion of "performativity" deconstructs notions of an ontologically prior self or identity, Baudrillard's "simulations" destabilise the "real" more generally, a discussion which can then be returned to an analysis of sexual identity and the means by which these are appropriated as either authentic or artificial. For Sedgwick, the arbitrary relation of the components of "sexual identity" problematises the understanding that "sexual identity" is either ontologically prior or secured by anatomy. Similarly for Buchbinder an analysis of the means by which certain connections between



sex, gender, practice, etc., are privileged as natural and causal ensures that we can no longer understand sexual identities to be either "natural" or "unnatural" but rather culturally privileged, or culturally abhorrent. In this sense then, queer theory itself represents an amorphous cultural and theoretical movement. The scope of queer (if not the boundaries) are in constant critical flux, a state which produces a rich site for the contestation of meanings and intersections of ideas. What I am charting in this chapter then, is the convergence of a variety of theoretical and cultural approaches, which intersect at a point of significance. The fundamental destabilisation of the "real", whether that be of "reality", "sex", "gender", or "sexual identity", facilitates the disruption of the hegemonic principle that there is a justified means for inclusion and exclusion based on sexuality. With the complexity of sexual regulation, subjectivities are determined according to all of the variables which comprise sexual identity. Sex, gender, desire, identification, practice, erogenous zones, naming and category affiliation - each of these functions as a potential means for the regulation of the subject. For this reason it is useful that queer theory has proven an inclusive set of discourses, allowing for a space where semiotics, cultural theory, feminist, gay and lesbian, medical, sociological and countless more discourses conflict, connect and converge. What this might indicate, then, is a means by which a multi-faceted system of regulation is confronted by an amorphous and multi-faceted ensemble of discourses, with the possibility that each of the factors - "sex", "gender", desire, etc., - might function not as a point of regulation, but rather indicate both a point of destabilisation, and a point of potentiality.

It is with this in mind that I suggest that, by applying Baudrillard's notion of simulations to sexualities, we come to understand that not only are sexual identities simulacra, or a composition of different simulacra, but also "sex" as both anatomy and practice possesses no reality status. This allows a destabilisation of the means by which sex is continually posited as the unquestionable and immutable guarantor of identity, and that to ascertain someone's "sex" (i.e., anatomy) you can then ascertain their (also immutable) desires, fantasies, practices, identifications, as these are expressed causally. It is in this sense that, with reference to Baudrillard, I discuss "sex" as a simulacrum, indicating not only the

mistaking of the simulacrum of sexual practice "sex" for "reality", but also that aspect of sexual identity which tends to be taken as the marker of "reality status", that is, "sex" as anatomy.

According to Baudrillard, the proliferation of media images has reached a point where the "real" is but a simulation, signalling that which he refers to as the hyperreal. The hyperreal is characterised by the loss of referentiality, and "the implosion of the discursive polarities (subject/object, private/public, imaginary/real, etc.) heretofore sustaining meaning".<sup>250</sup> For Baudrillard, "the simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth - it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true".<sup>251</sup> What this indicates is that the simulacrum should not be thought of as a false copy of a pre-existent real, but rather as an indication of the fact that there is no real. For Baudrillard there is a distinction between "imitating" or simulating, in that "one implies a presence, the other an absence".<sup>252</sup> Simulations differ from imitations in that they produce the effects of that which they simulate, with that "thing" existing only through these effects in the first instance. This "precession of the simulacra" destabilises the distinction between "true" and "false", between "real" and "imaginary".<sup>253</sup> There is no difference between "signs of the real" and "the real itself",<sup>254</sup> the truth of the real being denied by the precession and procession of simulacra. For Baudrillard, "the duplication is sufficient to render both artificial".<sup>255</sup> In other words, the very reproducibility of the "signs of the real" indicates that there is no intrinsic or originary real:

Above all, it is the reference principle of images which must be doubted,  
this strategy by means of which they always appear to refer to a real world,

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<sup>250</sup> Alan Cholodenko, introduction, *The Evil Demon of Images*, by Jean Baudrillard (Sydney: Power Institute Publications, 1987) 11.

<sup>251</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations* 1.

<sup>252</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations* 5.

<sup>253</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations* 5.

<sup>254</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations* 4.

<sup>255</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations* 18.

to real objects, and to reproduce something which is logically and chronologically anterior to themselves. None of this is true. As simulacra, images precede the real to the extent that they invert the causal logical order of the real and its reproduction.<sup>256</sup>

This "short-circuited meaning" has generated a "state of indeterminacy,"<sup>257</sup> in which meanings cannot be fixed. Similarly, we cannot assume the meanings of identities to be fixed or immutable. Just as the "reproducibility" of images as simulacra denies the distinction between the "real" and its "representation", so too do the necessary and reiterative performances of identity deny the distinction between the essence of a sexuality and its effects or representations. In other words, just as simulacra are models without a "real-life" referent or origin, sexes are repetitive performances without an essence. It follows, then, that the simulations or performances of sex are all that there is of sexual identity, the truth of sexuality being only that there is no truth of sexuality.

My argument, then, is not only that sexes and genders are third-order simulacra, but also that the monolithic trajectory of compulsory heterosexuality is itself a model of simulation. The theory of simulations is that "reproducibility" is pushed to the limit where symbols replace the real.<sup>258</sup> This is the very process which has sustained the simulacrum of heterosexuality as an "intelligible sex", constituted only through a persistent process of "performing" as one. Baudrillard contends that the notion of a "real" is characterised by a perversity:

I would like to conjure up the perversity of the image and its referent, the supposed real; the virtual and irreversible confusion of the sphere of

<sup>256</sup> Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images* 13.

<sup>257</sup> Cholodenko 11.

<sup>258</sup> Sara Schoonmaker, "Capitalism and the Code: A Critique of Baudrillard's Third Order Simulacrum", *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader*, ed Douglas Kellner (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1994) 171.



images and the sphere of a reality whose nature we are less and less able to grasp.<sup>259</sup>

There is no "real" of sexuality, there is no originary sex which a subject might possess. Rather, that sex comes into being only through the proliferation of the symbols through which it is signified. Thus, heterosexuality can be considered an image which is constantly maintained or "reproduced", yet it has no "real-life referent". In other words, heterosexuality is a model which precedes the "real", with the very possibility of its reproducibility, or performance, rendering the distinction between the original and the copy redundant.

This has implications in relation to the designation of certain sexualities as "authentic", and others as "deviant" or "bad copies". The implosion of the "original" and the "copy" destabilises the notion that there are such things as "authentic" or "good" sexualities, as well as the opposite of this, that there are "false" or "bad" sexualities. This accordingly deconstructs the notion that representation is somehow a corrupted or false version of the "real" - with all sexualities being copies of a non-existent referent:

It is precisely when it appears most truthful, most faithful and most in conformity to reality that the image is most diabolical . . . . They only seem to resemble things, to resemble reality, events, faces. Or rather, they really do conform, but their conformity itself is diabolical.<sup>260</sup>

It is for this reason that we might consider those sexualities or identities that appear "authentic" as equally "diabolical" or, to use another of Baudrillard's terms of reference, equally "perverse". The "perversity" of the relationship between the image and the "assumed" real is characterised by the exactness, and the degree of verisimilitude, with which simulations of heteronormativity approximate their non-existent point of reference. In other words, those sexualities which appear the most "truthful" or "true" to "themselves"

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<sup>259</sup> Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images* 13.

are in fact characterised by the greatest degree of "artifice", as they refuse to allow a distance between the image and the real, which would reveal the fact that there is indeed, no real.

By recognising the implosion of the image and the referent, we can understand sexed bodies only as simulacra. Anatomy can no longer be the unquestioned symbol of sexual difference, of "femaleness" or "maleness", genitalia becoming no less simulacra than the "gendered" behaviours which genitalia are thought to inspire. I would argue that identity categories and their contiguous modes of behaviour do not exist, apart from their actualisation through reiterative processes. More specifically, in recognising sexes, genders and the ubiquitous "heterosexuality" as models of simulation, we might move toward an exploration of the destabilising of this "persistence of vision" through queer moments, or moments of seduction.

With the multiplicity of ways in which the repetitive trajectory of heterosexuality is sustained, there is a danger that any strategy of opposition may be appropriated as a "truth effect" in the model of simulation. The result of this is that the means of resisting the simulations of heteronormativity seem difficult and unlikely. For instance, the insistence that "gay" and "lesbian" sexualities be recognised as "real" or "authentic" only maintains the simulated structures which produce discourses of validation or denigration. Rather, as Baudrillard suggests, we should recognise all sexualities as simulacra,<sup>261</sup> all sexualities as inauthentic in the sense that there exists no authentic from which to differentiate.

Madan Sarup writes that, for Baudrillard, the only means of resisting the regulatory power of the proliferation of images is the refusal of the search for "meaning" in signifieds:

We are just bombarded with information-rich images every moment of our lives, and the only way we can cope with this, the only way we can resist the

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<sup>260</sup> Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images* 13-14.

power of this information to take over our lives, is to accept the images as only signifiers, only as surfaces, and to reject their meanings, their signifieds.<sup>262</sup>

To view sexualities as surfaces belies the existence of a depth or truth. To recognise that all sexualities are surfaces, performances or simulacra destabilises the production of certain sexualities as truth, and others as false. Baudrillard's refusal of the existence of a "meaning" for a "signifier", or "depth" for a "surface", is evident also in *Seduction*, many parts of which might be seen as a precursor for queer's project of fluidity. Baudrillard writes of the destabilising force of seduction, suggesting that to play with the surface problematises the distinction between a surface and a depth:<sup>263</sup>

The capacity immanent to seduction to deny things their truth and turn it into a game, the pure play of appearances, and thereby foil all systems of power and meaning with a mere turn of the hand. The ability to turn appearances in on themselves, to play on the body's appearances, rather than with the depths of desire. Now all appearances are reversible . . . only at the level of appearances are systems fragile and vulnerable . . . meaning is vulnerable only to enchantment.<sup>264</sup>

The destabilising potential of the "play of appearances" is a phenomenon which Baudrillard sees as singularly "feminine".<sup>265</sup> Baudrillard suggests that "the masculine is certain, the feminine is insoluble", indicating that the feminine is characterised by an "indistinctness of surface and depth".<sup>266</sup> "What is specific to women lies in the diffraction of the erogenous zones, in a decentred eroticism, the diffuse polyvalence of sexual pleasure and the

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<sup>261</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction* 41.

<sup>262</sup> Madan Sarup, *Post-structuralism and Postmodernism* 1988 (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) 165.

<sup>263</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction* 10.

<sup>264</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction* 8.

<sup>265</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction* 10.

<sup>266</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction* 10-11.



transfiguration of the entire body by desire".<sup>267</sup> Baudrillard's figuration of seduction as a gender specific phenomenon arguably operates as a fetishisation of gender differences and, in a sense, refutes the "power" ascribed to seduction as a "play of appearances". Perhaps Baudrillard's point is that the culturally constructed ways of "understanding" bodies are gender-specific, and that the feminine is a decentred eroticism, whereas the category of the masculine is reliant on a stability directly threatened by such an erogenous diffraction. This may be the case; however, does this deny that there are bodies sexed as male, that celebrate each of the qualities that Baudrillard sees as "specific to women"? Baudrillard's suggestion that the "diffraction of the erogenous zones" is "specific to women" proves problematic for a queer theorisation of sexuality which promotes such a diffraction as a means of frustrating the assumption of a direct correlation between physiology and sexual practice. Further, Baudrillard suggests that the privilege that is solely feminine is "the privilege of having never acceded to truth or meaning, and of having remained absolute master [sic] of the realm of appearances".<sup>268</sup> For this reason, feminism must resist seduction, according to Baudrillard,<sup>269</sup> yet the suggestion that "feminism" resists the true nature of the "feminine" and remains complicit with the "order of truth",<sup>270</sup> figured as masculine, certainly appears problematic. Finally, I would suggest that there are contradictions at work in the suggestion that a phenomenon such as seduction which is characterised by a "trans-sexuality . . . which the entire organization of sex tends to reject"<sup>271</sup> is specifically located within that organization, as a perpetuation of the boundaries of its binary terms.

Certain of these theoretical contradictions are evident in Baudrillard's discussion of "Nico", whose gender performance he fetishises in terms of a "real sex":

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<sup>267</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction* 9.

<sup>268</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction* 8.

<sup>269</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction* 8.

<sup>270</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction* 8.

<sup>271</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction* 8.

Nico seemed so beautiful only because her femininity appeared so completely put on. She emanated something more than beauty, something more sublime, a different seduction. And there was deception: she was a false drag queen, a real woman, in fact, playing the queen. It is easier for a non-female/female than for a real woman, already legitimated by her sex, to move among the signs and take seduction to the limit. Only the non-female/female can exercise an untainted fascination, because s/he is more seductive than sexual. The fascination is lost when the real sex shows through; to be sure, some other desire may find something here, but precisely no longer in that perfection that belongs to artifice alone.<sup>272</sup>

Implicit here, is the suggestion that there is indeed such a thing as an "authentic" sexuality. In fact, Baudrillard refers to Nico as a "real woman", suggesting that her seduction of gender was in some sense less than the appropriation of the signs of female gender by a "male" body.

Despite these contradictions, I would suggest that certain aspects of Baudrillard's theorisation of seduction prove useful for a queer reading practice, and that by dislocating "seduction" from the specific realm of the "feminine" we might understand its disruptive force as a revelation of trans-sexual and trans-categorical possibilities and potentialities. According to Baudrillard, "*seduction alone is radically opposed to anatomy as destiny*. Seduction alone breaks the distinctive sexualization of bodies and the inevitable phallic economy that results".<sup>273</sup> The operational strategy of seduction is that of the "mastery of the strategy of appearances"<sup>274</sup> in which the manipulation of the surface denies the very existence of a depth. In a sense, the effects and the permutations of these effects deny the existence of an essence:

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<sup>272</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction* 13.

<sup>273</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction* 10.

<sup>274</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction* 10.

Immediately obvious - seduction need not be demonstrated, nor justified - it is there all at once, in the reversal of all the alleged depth of the real, of all psychology, anatomy, truth, or power. It knows (this is its secret) that *there is no anatomy*, nor psychology, that all signs are reversible. Nothing belongs to it, except appearances - all powers elude it, but it "reversibilizes" all their signs. How can one oppose seduction? The only thing truly at stake is mastery of the strategy of appearances, against the force of being and reality. There is no need to play being against being, or truth against truth; why become stuck undermining foundations, when a *light* manipulation of appearances will do.<sup>275</sup>

Such a "conspiracy of signs"<sup>276</sup> is oppositional in nature to the assumption or "production" of signs as "natural". Baudrillard sees "seduction as an ironic, alternative form, one that breaks the referentiality of sex and provides a space, not of desire, but of play and defiance".<sup>277</sup> Baudrillard suggests that "the state of sex's liberation is also that of its indetermination. No more want, no more prohibitions, and no more limits: it is the loss of every referential principle".<sup>278</sup> Images or referents of gender/sex never represent a "reality", whether they be consistently heterosexual or performances which are considered to be more transgressive or "inauthentic". This is not because identity categories are constricting and artificial. Rather, it is because there is no "reality" of sex outside the effects generated by the ritualised implementation of these categories. In Baudrillard's terms, there is no "real-life referent" for the simulacrum of sexuality. Thus, if the effects of these images and referents are all that there is of sexuality and gender, then a denial of a coherent reproduction or "ritualised implementation" of these categories frustrates the simulated connection between the name given to a sex, and the notion that there is an "actual" or "real" sex named.

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<sup>275</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction* 10.

<sup>276</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction* 2.

<sup>277</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction* 21.

<sup>278</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction* 5.



Butler's extensive theorisation of the performative functions of speech and gender have contributed to a significant shift in the understanding of sexual subjectivities. Butler's notion of gender as performance, or a series of performances, relies on the assumption that sex "was always already gender".<sup>279</sup> Thus while Butler recognises the construction/performance of the category of sex, there is a danger that the history of the semantic distinction of sex/gender will ensure that her continued use of the term "gender" is appropriated according to an essentialist agenda. As Grosz argues, an emphasis on gender is problematic, as it is framed "as a kind of overlay on a preestablished foundation of sex, a cultural variation of a more or less fixed and universal substratum".<sup>280</sup> Rather than leaving sex unquestioned, as implicit in the distinction between sex and gender, sex itself might be considered a performance. A focus on the performativity of "sex" and "sexuality" allows analysis of that which is assumed to be the "foundation", thus denying the assumption that there is a prior or untouched realm of sexuality. By dislocating Butler's notion of gender performances from "gender" and instead talking about the performativity of "sex", the simultaneous disruption of performance and the performative utterance can be seen as a means by which the subject might exert further pressure on the discourses in and by which they are regulated. Butler writes:

if repetition is the way in which power works to construct the illusion of a seamless heterosexual identity, if heterosexuality is compelled to *repeat itself* in order to establish the illusion of its own uniformity and identity, then this is an identity permanently at risk, for what if it fails to repeat, or if the very exercise of repetition is redeployed for a very different performative purpose?<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble* 7.

<sup>280</sup> Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion* 212.

<sup>281</sup> Butler, "Imitation" 24.

Butler tells us that "heterosexuality only constitutes itself as the original through a convincing act of repetition".<sup>282</sup> According to Butler, the successful reiteration of identity categories relies on the degree to which the subject accurately repeats "performances" of the "self".<sup>283</sup> The "self" is constructed only through this process of repetition, and is deemed "intelligible" only to the degree that it is identical to previous repetitions. This is the gender performance which Butler suggests we are "forced to negotiate".<sup>284</sup> Perhaps there are transgressive and subversive possibilities to be found in the reiterative process which is necessitated by hegemonic productions not only of gender but of sex. This need for the persistence of reiteration to maintain the naturalised status of identity categories provides a space for discursive interruption and instability. This reiterative space indicates a site of slippage, a space in which subjects might refuse to reiterate, refuse the clarity which "intelligible" gender performance demands. Perhaps it is here that, in appearing most *unlike* itself, the subject might resist reinscription and regulation in the discourses of sexuality as they operate in the production of identity categories.

Eve Sedgwick reminds us not to underestimate the constitutive effect of the linguistic utterance, or that which Butler refers to as the performative utterance.<sup>285</sup> The performative speech act forms part of the process by which genders are designated as "intelligible". Performative utterances represent the power of discourse to produce as its *effect* that which it names. Butler discusses the performativity of speech acts in relation to institutionalised utterances of power, such as "I pronounce you..." or "I sentence you...".<sup>286</sup> To elaborate on this, we might consider the discursive power of the naming of identities. To consider the use of identity categories as performative utterances recognises their imbrication in the processes which produce subjects as the effects of hegemonic

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<sup>282</sup> Butler, "Imitation" 23.

<sup>283</sup> Butler, *Bodies* 225.

<sup>284</sup> Butler, *Bodies* 237.

<sup>285</sup> Butler, *Bodies* 224.

<sup>286</sup> Butler, *Bodies* 224.

discourse. This precludes a reading of identity categories as able to *represent* sexualities, by implying that it is only in the *naming* or discursive act that the subject is formed:

the discursive condition of social recognition *precedes and conditions* the formation of the subject: recognition is not conferred on a subject, but forms that subject.<sup>287</sup>

Perhaps, then, as a means of resisting the continual reiterative processes of such a subject-formation, we might indeed resist the discursive production involved in the performative utterance. In denying the performative utterance as a constitutive effect of discursive power, we might temporarily frustrate the processes by which bodies, sexes and pleasures are so easily regulated. Clearly, there is nothing innate in the performative utterance; rather, its power functions as a result of its historical investments and repetitions:

Indeed, it is through the invocation of convention that the speech act . . . derives its binding power; that binding power is to be found neither in the subject . . . nor in his will, but in the citational legacy by which a contemporary "act" emerges in the context of a chain of binding conventions.<sup>288</sup>

By denying the convention of the performative utterances of identity categories we might temporarily frustrate and fracture the apparatus by which our identities are produced so neatly as a perpetuation of hegemonic power. Given that language means only in context, and that our understandings of signifiers are formed through habit and repetition, we might recognise that there is potential for the "injurious"<sup>289</sup> uses of identity categories to be frustrated by a recontextualisation of their terms.

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<sup>287</sup> Butler, *Bodies* 225-6.

<sup>288</sup> Butler, *Bodies* 225.

<sup>289</sup> This is Butler's term, indicating the degree to which "words wound" and discourse performs injury. Judith Butler, *excitable speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 47.



Much theoretical discussion has taken place regarding the re-appropriation of the signifier "queer". Inscribed with an injurious history, the signifier queer is taking on new signifieds to represent a positive and fluid understanding of sexuality. Arguably, the recent positive and productive associations with queer effect a subversion and disabling of the previously injurious effects of this term. Perhaps we can explore further identity categories in this way. Rather than altogether abandoning identity categories such as gay, lesbian, etc., perhaps we can move towards more fluid understandings of what it is that these terms represent. By frustrating conventional and predictable expectations for these signifieds, the institutionalised means of injury and performance might be temporarily and repeatedly disabled.

There are a number of ways in which such a frustration of the predictable connections and uses of such labels of identity may be effected. Initially, a concentration on relaxing rather than policing the boundaries of identity would frustrate the notion that there are legitimate means for inclusion and exclusion based on either sexual practices or sexual desires. Celebrating a heterogeneity rather than homogeneity would frustrate the expected behaviours, appearances and practices of particular identity categories and discursive practices. This chapter has explored the tension between the injurious function of speech and language and the fact that we cannot operate outside language. Perhaps there is a means by which the tension between queer theory and identity politics may be eased and a dialogue between these discourses may prove productive.

An understanding of identity categories as themselves fluid and mutable reduces the necessity for subjects to perform according to a prescriptive set of behaviours. Discontent originates from the fact that signifiers such as "lesbian" are used as though they were representative. Recognition of the fact that there is no such thing as "a lesbian" prevents the assumption that there are a set of associative behaviours, desires and appearances encoded in, and imputed by this term. Rather, we may understand that there are a number of subjects who on occasion may, for myriad reasons, choose to make reference to

themselves by way of the signifier "lesbian". Similarly, there are both individuated and institutionalised uses and enactments of this signifier. On occasion, such labelling proves injurious, however, we might challenge, dislocate and diffract the uses of this signifier, in accordance with the heterogenous practices, desires, identifications, bodies and pleasures of the signified: "lesbian". Butler writes:

identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression. This is not to say that I will not appear at political occasions under the sign of lesbian, but that I would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that sign signifies.<sup>290</sup>

Butler suggests that the signification of a particular identity category is always unclear, "because its *specificity* can only be demarcated by exclusions that return to disrupt its claim to coherence".<sup>291</sup> If the specificity of identity categories is continually threatened with collapse via the exclusions of those aspects which are often constitutive of those categories, then perhaps we can take this not as an indication of a loss or weakening of sexual self identity, but rather as a means of destabilising the means by which sexualities are produced as either/or. We might understand the queer project of fluidity and ambiguity as a possible means by which subjects either resist the effective application of signifiers (necessarily politically invested) to their sexualities, or challenge the conventional and classificatory effects of these labels. By denying a point of fixity, a moment of articulation or "intelligible" gender performance/performativity, the subject might momentarily destabilise the already fragile nexus of reiterative citational practices that constitute heteronormativity.

What queer explores, then, is a process of resignifying sexualities as that which cannot be consistently and uniformly signified. The subject's failure to "perform" sexuality intelligibly,

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<sup>290</sup> Butler, "Imitation" 13-14.

and thus fulfil the performative utterance, could potentially render the discourses which produce the subject temporarily unable to define or articulate sexual identity. This would operate in a paradigm in which sexual identities were cross-identificatory, working across genders, across sexes and across pleasures as they function as modalities of power.

Several theorists have demonstrated reservations about the use of the term "queer" to signify this paradigm.<sup>292</sup> The reluctance to see the application of a label or classificatory term to this particular paradigm indicates a desire to maintain the momentum of resistance to classification. Queer promises to be a series of transient moments, fleeting moments of cross identifications, moments which do not stand still but are constantly shifting. As a set of discourses with "perhaps as many meanings as it has practitioners",<sup>293</sup> queer functions as a series of tensions, problematics and queries, rather than as answers or declaratives. As Annamarie Jagose suggests, "queer itself can have neither a foundational logic, nor a consistent set of characteristics"<sup>294</sup> and that by "refusing to crystallise in any specific form, queer maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal".<sup>295</sup> To maintain its potential as a theory for cross-identificatory sexuality, queer needs to constantly fail to reiterate and perpetuate itself as a category. Perhaps "queer" can function as such an ever-shifting, historically specific, amorphous series of moments and possibilities - despite its label. "Queer" might then function as a signifier which is temporarily attached to a space that cannot be properly signified. Queer might be seen best as an "open mesh of possibilities",<sup>296</sup> through which the persistent traversing of categories of gender, sex and desire allows a temporary and fractured resistance to the heterosexist matrix which regulates and reifies "sexual identity" as an effect of biological sex.

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<sup>291</sup> Butler, "Imitation" 15.

<sup>292</sup> This is a notion which Butler and Sedgwick both explore in some depth. Butler, *Bodies* 226-227. Sedgwick, *Tendencies* 9. Alan McKee also adopts a self-reflexive approach to the labelling of the discourses of queer as a "theory". Rather than an attempt to "try to name the *real* Queer, to police the use of the word", McKee engages in a historicisation of queer which frames discursive tension as "productive of the very energy which motivates Queer". Alan McKee, "(Anti)Queer: Introduction", *Social Semiotics* 9 (1999) : 168-169.

<sup>293</sup> Alan McKee, "'Resistance is Hopeless': Assimilating Queer Theory", *Social Semiotics* 9 (1999) : 237.

<sup>294</sup> Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996) 96.

<sup>295</sup> Jagose, 99.

<sup>296</sup> Sedgwick, *Tendencies* 8.



This chapter has mapped the normative effects of the iteration of identity categories, and a number of tactics for resisting the binary regulation of sexualities in these terms. Contextualised in terms of the sex/gender distinction and current discursive tensions among feminisms, queer and gay and lesbian theories, this chapter has suggested that language operates as necessary for subject formation and is in this sense highly regulatory. The following chapter will explore the effects of several other normalising apparatuses in the coding of binary sexualities and sexual practices. With an emphasis on Carter's polemical text, *The Sadeian Woman*, this chapter queers sites which have proven contentious in discourses on sexuality. Capitalising on this contentiousness, Carter's polemical and fictional work provides the impetus and exploratory site for this project. Chapter Three utilises Carter's theory of the "moral pornographer" as a foundation for the interrogation of conventional approaches to pornography, spectatorship, penetration and sexual difference. Through a detailed exploration of this theory of pornography and its correlative significance to Carter's work, Chapters Three, Four and Five elaborate a queer praxis of sexual fluidity.

### Chapter Three

#### A Sadeian Woman? The Politics of Representation and the "High Priestess of Post-graduate Pornography"<sup>297</sup>

Angela Carter occupies a tenuous position in terms of the feminist movement. Although Carter defines herself as "a feminist in most of the conventional ways",<sup>298</sup> her polemical defence of de Sade in *The Sadeian Woman* has been viewed by many feminists as an assault on the fundamentals of feminist thought. Referred to by Paul Gray as a "brand of fanciful and sometimes kinky feminism",<sup>299</sup> Carter's unremitting emphasis on sexual subjectivities has broken into territory not commonly explored by feminists. For instance, Carter's interest in de Sade derives from "the problems he raises about the culturally determined nature of women and of the relations between men and women that result from it".<sup>300</sup> Carter's continued use of explicit sexual imagery to explore these cultural determinations and her suggestion that pornography might prove a useful site for this investigation ensure her controversial place within the pornography debate. Viewing Carter's oeuvre as a whole, *The Sadeian Woman* can be seen as a theoretical extension of Carter's relentless problematisation of culturally determined roles or mythologies not only for women but for "all the genders".<sup>301</sup> It is this refusal to ground gender in terms of a binarised prior essence, in addition to Carter's repeated interrogation of the role of social and cultural apparatus in regulating subjectivities, that has ensured the reception of Carter's

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<sup>297</sup> Sebestyn 38.

<sup>298</sup> Angela Carter, interview, *Conversations: Angela Carter with Susanne Hayes*, Adelaide College of Technical and Further Education, 1984. Elsewhere, Carter has stated "I would regard myself as a feminist writer, because I'm a feminist in everything else and one can't compartmentalise these things in one's life". Angela Carter, "Notes From the Front Line" 37.

<sup>299</sup> Paul Gray, rev. of *Nights at the Circus*, by Angela Carter, *Time* 25 Feb. 1985: 87.

<sup>300</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 1.

<sup>301</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 19.

work in terms of the essentialism/constructivism debate. Further, while the 70s and 80s saw the feminist movement divided by passionate debates over pornography, Carter refused to align herself neatly with either position. Instead, Carter's fiction and her discussion of it have proved repeated sites of tension among critics. Carter's fiction often charts terms of critical debate, investigating and interrogating mythologies and unsettling any falsely assumed ideological or ontological security. It is partly this which has ensured Carter's controversial place among theorists of both essentialism and constructivism. This is a tension in which Carter revels, describing her fiction as "nudging at the edges of possible experience".<sup>302</sup> In tribute to Carter's iconoclastic and irreverent style, Lorna Sage has said, "part of what characterises Carter is her power to provoke".<sup>303</sup> This provocative style is at work in *The Sadeian Woman*.<sup>304</sup>

Following on from a discussion of *The Sadeian Woman*, this chapter will follow several trajectories. Initially, I will suggest that the challenges Carter's text makes to the anti-pornography conceptualisation of pornographic imagery highlight the means by which these discourses have been appropriated as a means of preventing the destabilising potential of sex from disrupting the "spurious archetypes"<sup>305</sup> on which the hegemonic regulation of identities is so reliant. Then, I will propose that an analysis of the ambivalence which permeates Carter's text allows for a refiguration of pornography in terms of the discourses which influence its production and reception, rather than insisting on reading pornographic imagery according to an existing "understanding" of what it might contain, and the assumed effects of this. In other words, I will suggest that Carter's text might

<sup>302</sup> Angela Carter, "Fools are my Theme", *Shaking a Leg: Journalism and Writings*, ed. Jenny Uglow (Great Britain: Chatto & Windus Limited, 1997) 34.

<sup>303</sup> Lorna Sage, introduction, *Flesh and the Mirror* 19.

<sup>304</sup> Lorna Sage writes that Carter's notion that de Sade might be seen as an ally to women "got her into great trouble in 1979 and for years afterwards, though radical feminist attacks on her for bad faith carry less conviction these days". introduction, *Flesh and the Mirror* 16-17. In a note to Elaine Jordan, Carter indicates an awareness of the contentious nature of her polemic on pornography. "If I can get up Susanne Kappeler's nose, to say nothing of the Dworkin proboscis, then my living has not been in vain". qtd in Jordan, "The Dangerous Edge" 331.

<sup>305</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 6.



function as a precursor for a means of moving outside the paradigm of conventional conceptualisations of pornography. Further, this will be seen as enabling an exploration of the tensions between the fluidity and multiplicity of identities as they are lived and performed, and the rigidity and "normativity" which characterise the institutionalisation of binary identity categories. Reading pornography queerly might be seen as a means of allowing a site that has been conventionally coded as repressive and harmful to operate as a site of temporary and fractured resistance to the heterosexist matrix which regulates, and reifies, "sexual identity" as an effect of biological sex. Finally, I will argue that this theoretical position, which draws largely on the important work in *The Sadeian Woman*, is one which can be identified as operating in fictional terms within Carter's oeuvre. In this sense, Carter can be read as a Sadeian Woman, her fiction serving as an extension of the theoretical position under review.

First published in 1979, *The Sadeian Woman* marked a significant and timely contribution to the debates regarding pornography. At a time in when many of the conventional anti-pornography feminist discourses were effectively undermining female agency in heterosexual relations, Carter's text takes de Sade as an important starting point from which to explore representations of the possibility of female enjoyment and empowerment in heterosexual sex. Carter stresses that her text is not an unqualified celebration of de Sade, referring to him as an "eighteenth-century lecher"<sup>306</sup> and an "old monster".<sup>307</sup> However, she does contend that Sade put "pornography in the service of women".<sup>308</sup> According to Carter, "Sade's work concerns the nature of sexual freedom and is of particular significance to women because of his refusal to see female sexuality in relation to its reproductive function".<sup>309</sup> Carter's point is that fictions of femininity ensure that women's bodies are

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<sup>306</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 11.

<sup>307</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 37.

<sup>308</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 3.

<sup>309</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 1.

determined in terms of their reproductive function, rather than as bodies of sexual pleasure, or sexual agency. While Carter does highlight several limitations within Sade's fiction, she suggests that he is notable for his emphasis on the right of women to "fuck":<sup>310</sup>

Women do not normally fuck in the active sense. They are fucked in the passive tense and hence automatically fucked-up, done over, undone. Whatever else he says or does not say, Sade declares himself unequivocally for the right of women to fuck.<sup>311</sup>

Undermining conventional conceptualisations of activity and passivity, power and powerlessness, Carter takes Sade as the starting point for her discussion of a potentially subversive pornography. However, *The Sadeian Woman* is permeated with an ambivalence as to whether it is pornography as a form or the way in which it is conventionally framed and conceptualised that stifles this subversive potential. While Carter draws attention to the "spurious archetypes"<sup>312</sup> of sexuality, she considers the perpetuation of these archetypes to be evident both in the pornographic representations themselves, and in the processes and practices of the reception of these images. Carter does not explicitly define this dualistic position, yet I would argue that it is in keeping with postmodern reading practices. To view a text as "containing" or directly communicating a message would be to deny that a text is produced through a dialogic process of production. Further, to consider that textual production is somehow value-free is to naively reinscribe textual consumption in terms which deny both the influences which produce texts, and the influences they produce. I would read Carter's ambivalence regarding the power of pornographic texts as evidence of a history of cultural trends and forces which repeatedly shape pornographic texts of a certain kind. Additionally and, I would suggest, more importantly there is the question of the

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<sup>310</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 27.

<sup>311</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 27.

<sup>312</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 6.

means by which sense is made of these pornographic texts according to a set of predetermined codes, assumptions and (in Carter's terms) mythologies. So while all texts (not only pornography) must be considered as processes of dialogic production rather than monologic communication, the social and cultural influences which determine the ways in which these texts are produced must be factored in. While Carter does not note these issues explicitly, her approach is largely constructivist, foregrounding the degree to which conceptualisations of pornography determine the effects of pornography.

Carter argues that "pornography reinforces the false universals of sexual archetypes",<sup>313</sup> suggesting that the text is coded in a particular way, determining certain effects. Shortly after, however, Carter insists that were our "perceptions"<sup>314</sup> of pornography to change, we might define pornography rather as a site of transformation, a site in which perhaps women might "fuck their way into history and, in doing so, change it".<sup>315</sup> At times, then, it appears as though Carter approaches pornography as though it were a discrete product with certain predetermined outcomes and effects. The ambivalence of Carter's language may at times appear to indicate a classic realist argument, with statements such as "pornography reinforces the false universals of sexual archetypes".<sup>316</sup> This is framed as the task of the "moral pornographer" who might fulfil a series of criteria to "produce" a subversive pornographic text. This implies that the power to produce textual meanings resides in the "author" or the "pornographer" rather than in a process of exchange involving the reader or viewer. This indicates once again Carter's oscillation between the notion that the text itself contains the "meaning" or "message", and the notion that meaning is "produced" by the reader or viewer in response to the text. Once again, though, I would argue that there do appear to be cultural trends which determine the means by which pornographic texts are

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<sup>313</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 16.

<sup>314</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 17.

<sup>315</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 27.

<sup>316</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 16.



produced according to particular codes. Similarly, a poststructuralist reading position informs us that texts can operate in terms which are more or less open or closed. In this sense there are certain pornographic texts which encourage a reflexivity, or interactivity with the viewer, and yet there are others which seek to prevent the participation of the viewer or reader. The argument here is that there are certain texts in which the audience may be more conscious of their role in the process of production, and yet others in which the audience is encouraged to consider their role as existing outside the text as consumer, not producer.

What this indicates, then, is nothing more than a tension akin to that of the essentialist and constructivist debate, or similar tensions between classic realist and poststructuralist or postmodernist reading practices. Interestingly, though, these debates are not often framed with reference to "the pornographic". It would seem that pornography has remained the last bastion of the classic realist, the assumption being that meanings are simply contained in the text, to be unquestioningly read off.<sup>317</sup> This is not to say that pornography is seen as having no effect on the audience; rather, it is seen as being of the greatest influence, and of course a predetermined, quantifiable and highly gender-specific influence. For women, pornography is framed as unqualifiedly harmful, repressive and objectifying, and for men, (straight men, that is), pornography is vicarious, misogynist and violent.

Yet it is against conceptualisations of this kind which Carter appears to write. As Colin Manlove suggests, "her celebrated feminism is no fixed code or polemic, but rather a perpetual challenge to the rigidities of gender classification".<sup>318</sup> Carter's continued critique of the ready internalisation of mythologies of gender, and her emphasis on the

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<sup>317</sup> This coincides with the way in which culturally, sexuality is aligned with truth. When all other aspects of subjectivity come under question, sexuality remains the first and final marker for authenticity.

<sup>318</sup> Colin Manlove, "In the Demythologising Business": Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*", *Twentieth Century Fantasists: Essays on Culture, Society and Belief in Twentieth-Century Mythopoeic Literature*, ed. Kath Filmer (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992) 148.

contextualisation and historicisation of sexuality also indicate that conceptualisations of pornography play a role in the regulatory power of fictions of femininity. This locates pornography as a site of negotiation, not instruction, and suggests that reading practices are at least partly responsible for the perpetuation of sexuality as something which is prediscursive, and thus an instrument of regulation.

Carter's text provides a clear recognition of the destabilising potential of sexuality, and the investment that hegemonic conceptualisations of sexuality have in preventing that potential from becoming realised. Carter suggests that the disruptive power of sexuality comes with the recognition that sexuality is a cultural fiction rather than an innate fact. Acknowledging that sexualities are cultural fictions destabilises the efficacy of regulatory apparatuses which rely on notions of authenticity and inauthenticity to produce normative sexualities and behaviours. Carter maintains that much pornography is responsible for mythic representations of the sexes, with sexual archetypes assisting in the process of "false universalising".<sup>319</sup> For Carter, the subversive potential of pornography is denied by its refusal to ground sexual representations in the social context in which they occur and which is responsible for their production:

Pornographers are the enemies of women only because our contemporary ideology of pornography does not encompass the possibility of change, as if we were the slaves of history and not its makers, as if sexual relations were not necessarily an expression of social relations, as if sex itself were an external fact, one as immutable as the weather, creating human practice but never a part of it.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 12.

<sup>320</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 3-4.

In this instance Carter codes pornography as a site of negotiation, suggesting that our perceptions of pornography need to be imbued with an awareness of change in order for us to understand that sexuality is not an external fact, but both an integral element in the construction of our social existence and a useful site for the study and exploration of this construction. There is a regulatory power in assuming sexualities to be determinants rather than *effects* in constant flux. For Carter, then, the way in which we frame pornographic discourse positions sexuality as something which is outside of or in some way separate from the remainder of our lives. The implication of positioning sexuality in this way, is that it becomes something separate from our social conditions of existence, and thus also separate from the analysis of these conditions.

To isolate sex and sexuality from cultural critique facilitates a slide into the prediscursive. As the binary terms male and female are daily reiterated as prediscursive and innate, those "characteristics" and culturally endorsed behaviours which are "attached" to these terms also assume an exemption from, and resilience to, cultural critique. Carter's suggestion that pornography perpetuates archetypal representations of sexuality indicates that we lose sight of our potential to investigate the myriad ways in which our sexualities are constructed and regulated. For Carter, the perpetuation of archetypes is due to pornography's failure to contextualise and historicise sexuality:

So pornography reinforces the false universals of sexual archetypes because it denies, or doesn't have time for, or can't find room for, or, because of its underlying ideology, ignores, the social context in which sexual activity takes place, that modifies the very nature of that activity.<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>321</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 16.



Carter warns that an identification with sexual archetypes is particularly dangerous, as these myths function to "dull the pain of particular circumstances"<sup>322</sup> operating "at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life".<sup>323</sup> Carter's suggestion is that there is a danger in participating in the "consolatory nonsense"<sup>324</sup> of mythological representations of sexuality, in that they prevent us from recognising the social and historical forces which shape and determine our actions.<sup>325</sup> For Carter, the internalisation of these representations or archetypal sexualities denies the fact that "our flesh arrives to us out of history, like everything else does".<sup>326</sup>

Historically, anti-pornography discourses have facilitated the construction and perpetuation of pornography in terms of an excessive (representational and actual) control over women. Anti-pornography feminists claim a causal connection between pornographic representations and the dominance of patriarchy and male sexuality. In the early 70s and 80s the combination of the increased focus on male violence against women and "sexual pleasure" as the key to female self-discovery formed a feminist critique of what was assumed to be "standard" heterosexual practice.<sup>327</sup> This critique did not look into the complexities of heterosexuality in an attempt to understand more fully the complex intersections of power and sexuality. Rather, the revolutionary feminist position on heterosexuality was one which was characterised by its outright rejection of heterosexuality as a possible site of mutual pleasure or empowerment. Thus, associated with the belief that women's self-defined sexuality was prevented purely by men's sexual domination was the notion that "compulsory heterosexuality" disavowed the possibility for women to gain any

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<sup>322</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 5.

<sup>323</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 5.

<sup>324</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 5.

<sup>325</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 5.

<sup>326</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 9.

<sup>327</sup> Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism* (1987; London: Virago Press, 1994) 80.

form of empowerment at all from heterosexual sex. Many feminists at this time considered that men's "crippling imposition" of "compulsory heterosexuality" was the primary means by which women and female sexuality were repressed. Denying any difference between mutual pleasure and male violence in individual sexual relations, anti-pornography feminists considered all heterosexual sex to be in itself a form of violence. This feminist climate effectively left no space for the heterosexual feminist, given that women who were serious about their feminist politics were literally expected to give up sexual relationships with men.<sup>328</sup> Furthermore, these discourses explicitly prevented women from gaining any enjoyment from pornographic texts, a move which perpetuated the assertion that these texts served a masculinist agenda. This effectively closed off several avenues of potential sexual pleasure for women, who were thus framed as victims, in need of having their sexual pleasures and rights dictated by others. Carter comments on the irony of the sexual repression, which coincided with claims to sexual permissiveness:

Now I am permitted as much libidinal gratification as I want. Yippee! But who is it who permits me? Why, the self-same institutions that hitherto forbade me! So, I am still in the same boat, though it has been painted a different color. I am still denied authentic sexual autonomy, perhaps even more cruelly than before, since now I have received permission to perform hitherto forbidden acts and so I have acquired an illusory sense of freedom that blinds me more than ever to the true nature of freedom itself.<sup>329</sup>

The notion that feminists might police desire and sexuality in such a manner seems antithetical to their claims that women should be free to enjoy their sexuality free of danger,

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<sup>328</sup> In 1971 the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group argued that "Giving up fucking for a feminist is about taking your politics seriously". qtd in Segal, *Is the Future Female?* 96. Segal notes that "They later qualified this statement; women cannot actually give up 'fucking', only 'getting fucked', because: "We now think it's rubbish to say that women fuck men; what happens is that men fuck women, or women get fucked by men". Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, qtd in Segal, *Is the Future Female?* 96.

<sup>329</sup> Angela Carter, "Lovely Linda: Review of Linda Lovelace, *Inside Linda Lovelace*", *Shaking a Leg* 54.

inhibition and guilt. Any demarcation of what might constitute a "bad sexuality" in opposition to a "good sexuality" proves to be more about decreasing the options, choices and information on sexuality which are available to women. Operating in complicity with traditional discourses on sexuality which serve to maintain binary conceptualisations of sex, anti-pornography feminists succeeded, it appears, only in replicating many of the effects which they see as produced by pornographic material. I would argue that not only do many of the elements of the anti-pornography feminist movement fail to validate the sexual existences of many women, but additionally they undermine, ridicule and silence many of the aspects integral to women's experiences. By insisting that women need protection from explicit sexuality or sexist images of women, anti-pornography feminists continually recast women in the role of the passive sexual object.

The variety of ways that pornography is positioned as the singular oppression of women functions to separate it from the social context in which it is produced. This is problematic not only because it detracts from the myriad other restrictions and regulations on women's lives, but also because it prevents an effective analysis of the means by which pornography intersects with these variant modalities of regulation. The popularisation of the notion that sexual liberation for women could not be found in heterosexual relationships resulted in a reification of exactly what it means to have heterosexual sex and, even worse, exactly what it means to *be* heterosexual. Amounting to a reluctance or a refusal to question the status of heterosexuality as powerful, the complexities which constitute the relations between men and women were being ignored. This functioned as an alarmist and generalised elision of the permutations and specificities which constitute that which is so broadly referred to as "heterosexuality" and "heterosexual practice". Unfortunately, this contributed to the already- and ever-present unquestioning acceptance of heterosexuality, perpetuating the notion that it is somehow intrinsically and immutably powerful. The result here is similar to that effected by many contemporary references to "compulsory heterosexuality", which position it as a catch-all responsible for sexual regulation, yet somehow unchallengeable. If



it is the case that heterosexuality, or the more recently termed "compulsory heterosexuality", is responsible for the normative production of sexualities, then it would seem that an analysis of that which is referred to in the term "heterosexuality" might be a good place to begin an investigation as to why. As indicated by theorists such as Foucault, Jeffrey Weeks, Lynne Segal and many others, "heterosexuality" is a construction, and for this reason should be subject to critical inquiry. Rather than shrouding omnipotent and omnipresent heterosexuality in silence, it is an area in which we need to stimulate discussion in order to investigate the complexities which constitute all that is referred to and instituted in the use of that one word - heterosexuality. I would argue that it is in our treating heterosexuality as a "catch-all" that we allow it to operate as one. Our reluctance or refusal to question heterosexuality allow it to continue to perpetuate and perform itself as powerful.

It would seem that in this sense the anti-pornography feminist movement has at times functioned not only to perpetuate the reified binaries which inform categories of sex and gender, but also has effectively prevented any cultural analysis or questioning of these categories and their operational strategies. The argument might be made that anti-pornography discourse has in fact played into the hands of dominant ideology, in that it has (albeit inadvertently) lobbied to maintain the conditions by which sexualities are so easily regulated.

Carter is writing against what seems to be the common perception that pornography is homogeneous, immutable and destructive, and that its elimination would ensure the continuance of our "normal" social and sexual existences free of its pervasive and negative effects on women. Obviously then, Carter's position on pornography differs markedly from that which is taken by many of the anti-pornography feminists.

For Carter, the problem with pornography is not its explicitness, nor an abstracted notion of "obscenity", nor even is it any causal connection that might be drawn between the viewing of a sexual act and the uncontrollable compulsion to perform that act - even at the cost of violence. For Carter, there is something far more insidious at work in pornography than the eroticisation of violence, or the "graphic depiction of whores".<sup>330</sup> The notion that pornography might operate as an instrument of control in the production and regulation of sexualities is one that she holds in common with many anti-pornography feminists, yet for markedly different reasons. Whereas Carter finds pornography to be "in the service of the status quo",<sup>331</sup> by virtue of the fact that it perpetuates "spurious archetypes",<sup>332</sup> many anti-pornography feminists such as Andrea Dworkin are most intent on maintaining such archetypes with the notion that the innate female essence is maligned within pornography. Thus, while Carter sees pornography as regulating sexualities via images which are then internalised or processed by viewers, Dworkin suggests that pornography (mis)represents a pre-existing femininity via means that are misogynist and repressive. Dworkin contends that for every woman who is maligned in a pornographic representation, all women are maligned. Dworkin's position is antithetical to that of Carter here, as, for Carter, the major problem with pornography is that it perpetuates that which Dworkin is intent on defending, namely, the notion that all women experience their sexuality in the same manner:

The notion of a universality of human experience is a confidence trick and the notion of a universality of female experience is a clever confidence trick. Pornography, like marriage and the fictions of romantic love, assists in the process of false universalising.<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>330</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981; London: The Women's Press Limited, 1984) 9.

<sup>331</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 17.

<sup>332</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 6.

<sup>333</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 12.

Arguably, much anti-pornography rhetoric functions in complicity with the perpetuation of such archetypes. Fundamentally, anti-pornography feminism<sup>334</sup> positions male sexuality as the primary means of oppression for women, the consequence of this being that "male sexuality" is seen as synonymous with "violence". While this is by no means the position of all anti-pornography feminists, it is, as Catharine Lumby points out, that which "became identified with feminism in the popular imagination".<sup>335</sup> This continuing perception of feminism ensured that the positioning of men and women as discrete homogeneous groups continually recast women, or the universalised woman, in the role of victim. The internationally influential anti-pornography campaigner, Andrea Dworkin, is just one who explicitly cites heterosexual sex as the means by which men exert both power and ownership over women. Dworkin employs extremely sensational and emotive language in her passionate speeches and essays on pornography, claiming that "the eroticization of murder is the essence of pornography, as it is the essence of life".<sup>336</sup> Dworkin also sees pornography as "anti-woman propaganda which functions to perpetuate male supremacy and crimes of violence against women because it conditions, trains, educates, and inspires men to despise women, to use women, to hurt women".<sup>337</sup> Dworkin provides graphic illustrations of this view in all her writing on pornography:

In practice, fucking is an act of possession-simultaneously an act of ownership, taking, force; it is conquering; it expresses in intimacy power over and against, body to body, person to thing. . . . In the male system,

<sup>334</sup> In this chapter, use of the term "anti-pornography feminists" is not meant to imply that there is a such a homogeneous group. Rather, I am focusing on the dominant perceptions and ideas espoused by the major, or most vocal proponents of the anti-pornography movement as they become identified publicly as the representatives of feminism against pornography.

<sup>335</sup> Catharine Lumby, *Bad Girls: The Media, Sex and Feminism in the 90s* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1997) 50.

<sup>336</sup> Andrea Dworkin, "Pornography and Grief", *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1980) 288.

<sup>337</sup> Dworkin, "Pornography and Grief" 289.



sex is the penis, the penis is sexual power, its use in fucking is manhood.<sup>338</sup>

Dworkin's argument here rehearses the means by which the penis is performed as sex, and as sexual power. Dworkin's refusal to acknowledge that heterosexual intercourse might take place in terms other than this reinforces the entire string of binaries which predicate heteronormative assumptions/regulations regarding sex. Reinscribing binaries of activity/passivity, penetration/penetrated, power/powerlessness and aggressor/victim, Dworkin's argument perpetuates the terms by which that apparatus of normativity are sustained. This ensures that women are cast once again as victims, this time by feminists. Worse than this, is the notion that those women who desire to engage in heterosexual sex are victims of their own design. By denying any possibility for change within the scenario of heterosexual sex which she sees as universal, Dworkin simply recounts and then reinstates the same situation which she sees as operating within pornography. To the pornographic images of women which she hates, Dworkin adds her own imagery of women being "fucked over"; forever passive, powerless and open. Dworkin's account precludes any notion of sexuality as changeable as her argument frames women, once again, as entirely and only "fuckable". Dworkin's refusal to contextualise sex, to acknowledge that "sex" as an experience is not universal, or that there is such a universal body as the "female body", indicates that for her every act of heterosexual sex operates as a reinforcement of violence,<sup>339</sup> an assault on women - not only the women involved, but all women, as a "gender-class". The notion of women as a gender-class is one which paves the way for

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<sup>338</sup> Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* 23.

<sup>339</sup> The conflation of heterosexual sex with violence is predicated on assumption that it is a "masculine" and penetrative violence. Just as violence and pornography are inseparable, according to Dworkin, penile penetration of a woman is conflated with murder in an argument which essentialises phallic power and all specificities of male subjectivity and sexuality. "One can know everything and still be unable to accept the fact that sex and murder are fused in the male consciousness, so that the one without the imminent possibility of the other is unthinkable and impossible". Andrea Dworkin, "Pornography and Grief" 288. Completely precluding the possibility of penetrative sex without violence, Dworkin conflates penetration with murder. Explicitly marking this connection is the suggestion that the "penis/sperm" is "an agent of female death". Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* 55.

feminists to adopt the authoritarian position of "speaking for" or dictating to women their needs, desires, and indeed their pleasures.

While Dworkin positions women as a gender-class, she also assumes that there is a collective male consciousness. The reinforcement of these essentialist categories reinscribes the notion that all men experience sex in the same way (and have the same drive - which is to obtain sex as frequently and forcefully as possible). This in turn perpetuates the notion that all women also experience sex in the same way (finding it humiliating, painful and demoralising - and if seeming to enjoy it, then under the threat of violence). This suggests that not only does much pornography perpetuate the "spurious archetypes"<sup>340</sup> about which Carter writes, additionally that, anti-pornography feminists contribute to the reification of these positions. Elizabeth Wilson writes that "the whole anti-porn campaign is an absolute disaster in so far as it is based on a monolithic and over-simplified view of masculinity and male sexuality".<sup>341</sup> Dworkin's entire conception of pornography is founded on dichotomous archetypes of sexuality, and her desire to protect women from pornography operates within, and thus perpetuates mythical notions of universal male and female sexuality. Much anti-pornography discourse has effected a silence around heterosexuality, and a perpetuation of the use of its reified terms of reference.

Wilson reminds us that we need to resist the unproblematic use of "pornography" as a category,<sup>342</sup> assuming that we can know in advance its effects on women or its viewers. While many texts and images are referred to as pornographic, these decisions are not arbitrary. Rather, they are highly motivated and constructed value judgements demarcating that which is "good" and "bad" within our culture. "Good intentions" aside, any judgement

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<sup>340</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 6.

<sup>341</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, "Against Feminist Fundamentalism", *New Statesman Society* 23 June 1989 : 32.

<sup>342</sup> Wilson, "Against Feminist Fundamentalism" 31.

as to what is good/bad or acceptable/unacceptable serves a normative agenda. To establish a centre from which there must necessarily be a periphery is to perpetuate the binary inequity which is not only the product of normative regulation but also its structural necessity.

There have been side-line debates within the anti-pornography feminist movement regarding the classification of certain texts as "art", "literature", "erotica", or exercises in "freedom of speech". The political motivation and implication of the maintenance of these boundaries need to be questioned, as do the means by which certain material is exempt from the criticism afforded pornography due to elitist judgements regarding its status as "art" or "literature". Similarly, the distinction between erotica (often taken to be consensual and mutually pleasurable) and pornography (defined etymologically as the "graphic depiction of whores")<sup>343</sup> is one which Carter deconstructs, with her suggestion that "eroticism [is] the pornography of the elite".<sup>344</sup> Carter's statement indicates once again the motivation for the designation of pornography as that which is "bad", by a group which defines itself, in opposition, as that which is "good". A similar suggestion has also been made by Linda Williams and others, who note that anti-pornography feminists designate male sexuality as pornographic and female sexuality as erotic.<sup>345</sup> For Williams, the effect of this is "setting the seemingly authentic, acceptable (erotic or soft-core) sex of the self against the inauthentic and unacceptable (pornographic, violent, or obscene) sex of the 'other'".<sup>346</sup> Williams argues that it is "enormously important" to challenge the "categories of 'normal' and 'abnormal' on all levels".<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* 9.

<sup>344</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 17.

<sup>345</sup> Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the "Frenzy of the Visible"*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) 6.

<sup>346</sup> Williams 6.

<sup>347</sup> Williams 7.



Elizabeth Wilson also suggests that distinctions such as this are problematic, in that not only do they assume that pornography is a "single definable entity", but they also exclude other less sexually explicit representations of women from analysis. "If sex is seen as represented in this separate way, we are then prevented, for the most part, from perceiving how photographs in *Vogue*, for example, make use of protocols similar to those of erotic pictures, as also do works of art".<sup>348</sup> Wilson makes the argument that it is in the interests of the dominant sexual ideology of our culture for sexuality to be seen as a separate "case," as it is with pornography. Thus, for Wilson, we need to analyse sexual imagery as it occurs in a wide range of cultural texts, rather than simply designating certain texts as pornographic, and in excluding others from the definition also excluding them from analysis.<sup>349</sup>

Perhaps, then, as Angela Carter suggests, the problem with pornography is not in fact the sexually explicit imagery, but rather the means by which we use pornography to appropriate "sex" as that which is somehow anterior to our lives. If we were instead to consider pornographic material as a productive site in which to analyse the means by which we are culturally produced as sexed bodies, we might begin to operate outside the constricting debates which effectively allow pornography to operate as a perpetuation of the status quo. Carter argues that pornography is a means by which attention is diverted from the potentially destabilising effects of "sexuality".<sup>350</sup> It is only by restoring "sexuality" to pornography, that the latter might be seen as a site for analysing how this "sexuality" is produced socially and culturally. For Carter, "[S]ince sexuality is as much a social fact as it is a human one, it will therefore change its nature according to changes in social conditions".<sup>351</sup> It is from this constructivist premise that Carter sees the role of the moral pornographer as one which might effect real change in the ways in which female sexualities

<sup>348</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, "Feminist Fundamentalism: The Shifting Politics of Sex and Censorship", *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate* eds. Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh (London: Virago Press, 1992) 25.

<sup>349</sup> Wilson "Feminist Fundamentalism" 24.

<sup>350</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 19.

<sup>351</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 17.

are conceptualised, produced and lived. Carter's suggested approach to pornography would ensure the centrality of "sex" as an object of analysis and interrogation.

For Carter, the moral pornographer is one who would contextualise sexuality historically, socially and culturally. Rather than providing the viewer or the reader with images of archetypal sexualities, the moral pornographer would provoke the audience to question the construction of their sexuality:

Nothing exercises such power over the imagination as the nature of sexual relationships, and the pornographer has it in his power to become a terrorist of the imagination, a sexual guerilla whose purpose is to overturn our most basic notions of these relations, to reinstitute sexuality as a primary mode of being rather than a specialised area of vacation from being.<sup>352</sup>

Carter's theory of the moral pornographer offers us a paradigm for the creation of a pornography which is more truly offensive, a pornography which refuses to pander to the archetypes. In approaching pornography in a way which makes our masturbatory inclinations just a little less comfortable, the *construction* of sexuality, and not just its function, might be on display. This is not in some way a denial of the sexual pleasure/gratification that pornography might offer, but rather an emphasis on the potentially interrogative aspects of pornographic texts. The argument here is that sexual pleasure and an awareness of sexuality as a construct need not be mutually exclusive, but rather that for these to operate simultaneously may prove a transgressive force. It is in exploring the space in which these two agendas converge that we might propose a queer conceptualisation of pornography viewing practices.

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<sup>352</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 21-22.

Carter argues that the elision of sexual specificities in pornography operates as a means by which sexualities are more easily regulated. This argument can be read as a precursor for a queer reading of pornography, in which sexual identifications and desires that do not fit within the boundaries of archetypal sexualities are celebrated as a means of rupturing or destabilising these very fixities. Carter goes on to indicate the potential that the moral pornographer might have for encouraging an acceptance of *all* genders:

The moral pornographer would be 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 the current relations between the sexes.<sup>353</sup>

While the notion that pornography might indicate a world of "absolute sexual licence for all the genders" sounds rather utopian, I would suggest that a reading of pornography which takes up some of Carter's precepts would open up a site in which we might at least glimpse a world where sexual licence is characterised less by prohibition than by fluidity.

Many conventional analyses of pornography are limited to a consideration of the text as a sealed unit, in which power relations and their effects can be easily identified. Penetration and power are collapsed, as are penetration and activity, positioning the woman as passive to both her penetration by the penis and her "objectification" by the penetrating "gaze" of the ubiquitous male viewer. Yet readings of pornography inflected by contemporary theoretical practice problematise the notion that there is one set of understandings of

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<sup>353</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 19.



power relations to be determined as easily as this. By allowing for a more complex figuration of the viewer in the reading of a pornographic text, contemporary theory sees pornography as of a process of production, rather than an act of "straight" consumption.

To conceptualise a pornographic text as a site of negotiation rather than consumption, shifts the focus from pornography as a sealed unit of instruction for sexual identities to one where pornography is a text, or field of significations in which desires, sexes, and practices, even looks, are considered more as negotiations, or options than as hard and fast rules. In other words, we might see our consumption of pornography as more an act of production than has been traditionally thought, as Jennifer Wicke writes:

it needs to be accepted that pornography is not "just" consumed, but is used, worked on, elaborated, remembered, fantasised about by its subjects. To stop the analysis at the artefact, as virtually all the current books and articles do, imagining that the representation is the pornography in quite simple terms, is to truncate the consumption process radically, and thereby to leave unconsidered the human making involved in completing the act of pornographic consumption.<sup>354</sup>

In considering pornography as a site of negotiation, then, we might understand that our readings of any pornographic text or image are characterised by contradictions, compromises and multiple or fluid identifications that are determined to a large degree by what we bring to the text, rather than what might be read off it. Lynda Nead also writes that we need to challenge "the view that the pornographic resides *in* the image, that it is a

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<sup>354</sup> Jennifer Wicke, "Through a Gaze Darkly: Pornography's Academic Market", *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography and Power*, ed. Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson (London: British Film Institute, 1993) 70.

question of content rather than form, of production rather than consumption".<sup>355</sup> In shifting our analysis to pornography as a process of production, we might use queer as a mechanism to explore some of the means by which this production occurs.

Before continuing, it might be best to qualify that this chapter is concerned largely with a theoretical approach to understandings of pornography that is ostensibly *heterosexual*. This is not to say that the concepts discussed here do not apply to gay, lesbian, s/m or other forms of pornography, nor that we can determine categories of pornography dependent on either the bodies and sexual practices of performers, or the bodies and sexual practices of assumed audiences. Rather, there seems to be considerable existing theoretical discussion in which pornographic material featuring and "targeting" men is seen as transgressive of binary conceptualisations of sexuality.<sup>356</sup> While theorists recognise the potential for multiple identifications and desires in gay pornography, nothing that I have read suggests the same for pornography thought to be "straight". David Buchbinder writes that the viewer of gay male pornography is able to identify as either subject or object, with these positions becoming interchangeable.<sup>357</sup> For Buchbinder, this fluidity is not accessible in viewing heterosexual pornography.<sup>358</sup> Richard Fung also argues that in gay porn, but not in straight, "the spectator's positions in relation to the representations are open and in flux".<sup>359</sup> Earl Jackson, Jr. reworks Laura Mulvey's argument regarding the construction in dominant cinema of a "tension between an active male viewer and a passive female object of that male gaze".<sup>360</sup> For Mulvey, the scopophilic drive and the narcissistic drive form the

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<sup>355</sup> Lynda Nead, "The Female Nude: Pornography, Art and Sexuality", Segal and McIntosh, *Sex Exposed* 280-281.

<sup>356</sup> In addition to the texts mentioned in this chapter, there are several significant analyses of gay male pornography. Notable examples of these are: John Burger, *One-Handed Histories: The Eroto-Politics of Gay Male Video Pornography* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1995). David Buchbinder, *Performance Anxieties: Re-Producing Masculinity* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1998).

<sup>357</sup> David Buchbinder, "Pornography and Male Homosocial Desire: The Case of the New Men's Studies", *Social Semiotics* 1.2 (1991): 63.

<sup>358</sup> Buchbinder, "Pornography" 63.

<sup>359</sup> Richard Fung, "Looking for my Penis: the Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn", *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991) 154.

<sup>360</sup> Earl Jackson, Jr. "Graphic Specularity: Pornography, Almodovar and the Gay Male Subject of Cinema", *Translations/Transformations: Gender and Culture in Film and Literature East and West*, Vol. 7, eds. Valerie Wayne and Cornelia Moore (Hawaii: University of Hawaii, 1993) 75.

two mutually exclusive components of conventional spectatorship.<sup>361</sup> The radical separation of scopophilia, as a pleasure derived from looking, and narcissism, a pleasure derived from identification, "implies a separation of the erotic identity of the subject from the object on the screen".<sup>362</sup> Jackson insists that spectatorship positions are fixed for heterosexual males,<sup>363</sup> adhering to the heteronormative alignment of binaries of narcissism/scopophilia, or identification/objectification, as they necessarily line up with male/female. However, Jackson presents a model of gay male spectatorship in which these two drives are in flux. "The gay male spectator, on the other hand, regularly identifies with the figure he objectifies. In other words, he experiences a coalescence of drives that are radically dichotomized in his heterosexual male counterpart".<sup>364</sup> Is it not possible, though, that a similar fluidity to that which is celebrated in gay porn might also be available to viewers of "straight" pornography? Jackson's construction of the "gay male spectator" according to "options for identification" can be extended to an analysis of "heterosexual" spectatorship positions also.

For Jackson to insist that heterosexual spectatorship cannot operate in terms of a slide between identification and desire reinscribes the terms through which the heteronormative functions. An insistence that "heterosexual" viewers will attain pre-determined effects from viewing pornography implies that either the "heterosexual" is pre-discursive, and thus such a viewer is guaranteed to read according to innate and universal "heterosexual" codes, or that the text transparently conveys a strictly heterosexual meaning, predictably and readily internalised by the viewer. Either way, heterosexuality here is accorded more power than it either deserves or indeed possesses.

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<sup>361</sup> Jackson 75.

<sup>362</sup> Laura Mulvey qtd in Jackson 75.

<sup>363</sup> Jackson 75.

<sup>364</sup> Jackson 75.



Certainly, according to the hegemonic ideal of the heteronormative, there *should* be a radical separation of identification and desire. A male heterosexual viewer *should*, according to the hegemonic code, view only heterosexual pornography and clearly identify as male, desiring only the “available” female body on the screen. This would, were it the case, accord with Mulvey’s contention that “[m]an is reluctant to gaze on his exhibitionist like”.<sup>365</sup> Yet both Mulvey’s statement and a knowledge of pornographic conventions indicate that the heteronormative imperative might not be fulfilled quite as easily as this when it comes to pornographic viewing practices. It is important here to remember that the heteronormative is a hegemonic *ideal*, and as an ideal there is space for destabilisation, for momentarily failing to accord to each of the prescriptions of the heteronormative. That is, unless heteronormativity is framed as a wish already fulfilled. To continually perform the heteronormative as omnipotent contributes to its regulatory power. For this reason, it is vital to question the means by which “heterosexuals” and “heterosexual practice” are conventionally framed.

The elision of the specificities of sexual practices, identifications, desires, bodies, erogenous zones, etc., maintains the ease with which a reified “heterosexuality” becomes an all-powerful, and unquestionable regulatory regime. If we assume that we can pre-determine clean and fixed lines among subject, object, penetrator, penetrated, and power and powerlessness, does this not contribute to the means by which certain sexualities are validated on these grounds, and others repudiated? Assuming that we know in advance not only the audiences of pornographic representations but also the *effects* of these images, perpetuates the reification of both the terms and outcomes of pornography. To restore pornography as a site of excess signification rather than closure, prescription and proscription, it is necessary to refigure not only the audiences, images and viewing/sexual practices, but also the terms by which these are discussed. “Objectification”, “penetration”,

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<sup>365</sup> Mulvey qtd in Jackson 77.

"identification", for instance, are terms which conceal a greater complexity than that which is conventionally inscribed within heteronormative discourses on pornography.

If we assume that gay pornography is characterised by fluidity and interchangeability, and heterosexual pornography by stasis and restriction, then does this not contribute to the means by which heterosexuality is assumed to be monolithic, unchanging and exclusive rather than inclusive? What would be the implications of an admission that heterosexuality and heterosexual pornography may actually be characterised by more than it seems? The potential inclusivity of heterosexuality, as that which it must work hard to deny, renders it unstable. What is of interest in this chapter is an exploration of ways in which we might highlight and celebrate the queer *within* the straight. This is by no means a suggestion that the queer is subsumed by the straight, but rather that the straight is implicitly permeated and characterised by the queer moments and identities which it simultaneously produces, excludes and yet ironically requires. By seeing straight pornography and straight viewers as engaging in moments or practices which transgress boundaries previously thought to be maintained by the category of straight, we might move toward a greater understanding of the ways in which sexualities are regulated in the economy of heteronormativity. By refusing to deny the contradictions of which we are composed, we might move toward a space in which "straight" and "queer" are no longer contradictions. Rather than polarities from either from which we are either repelled or to which we are compelled, "straight" and "queer" might signify only two in a multitude of options or possibilities.

Following Alexander Doty, we might surmise that the straight is already and necessarily queer. For Doty, *queerness* is "a mass culture reception practice that is shared by all sorts of people in varying degrees of consistency and intensity".<sup>366</sup> While many subjects experience their sexualities in this manner, these "moments" are not culturally recognised,

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<sup>366</sup> Alexander Doty, "There's Something Queer Here", *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, eds. Corey Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) 72.

and certainly not encouraged. An emphasis on these permutations of the heteronormative provides access to alternative systems of meaning-making, but also alternative pleasures:

While we acknowledge that homosexuals as well as heterosexuals can operate or mediate from within straight cultural spaces and positions - after all, most of us grew up learning the rules of straight culture - we have paid less attention to the proposition that basically heterocentrist texts can contain queer elements, and basically heterosexual, straight-identifying people can experience queer moments. And these people should be encouraged to examine and express these moments as queer, not as moments of "homosexual panic", or temporary confusion, or as unfortunate, shameful, or sinful lapses in judgement or taste to be ignored, repressed, condemned, or somehow explained away within and by straight cultural politics - or even within and by gay or lesbian discourses.<sup>367</sup>

Doty's argument is interesting in terms of the way in which it highlights the attempts to cover over or "explain away" potential desires or identifications which do not adhere strictly to the boundaries which demarcate "intelligible" sexualities (whether these be heterosexual, gay or lesbian). Hence, these desires and identifications, which might be out of keeping with the prescribed alignment of desires and identifications of any particular sexual identity signal points of rupture, indicating the fragility and artifice which underlies sexual identities even as they are projected as seamless and unified, even prediscursive or ordained. Doty argues that we need to resist the explanation and thus the appropriation of these desires or moments, by discourses of either straight sexuality, or gay and lesbian. In this, Doty acknowledges the regulatory power inherent in category affirmation, whether the latter consists of "endorsed" subjectivities, or of liminal sexual identities. Rather, Doty suggests a

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<sup>367</sup> Doty, "Something Queer Here" 72.



celebration of these points or moments of desire as ruptures and permutations in the polarised seamless sexual identities that constitute "intelligible" gender performances.

Perhaps, then, in queering pornography we might consider the ways in which pornography might signify a *lack of control*. A queer reconceptualisation of pornography can be seen as that which allows us to read pornographic images in terms of the excesses of sexuality which escape the confines of a formulaic or archetypal conceptualisation of intercourse. This *lack of control* might be thought of not just in the physicality of sexual intercourse, but also in terms of the regulation of identities crucial for the perpetuation of heteronormativity. *Lack of control* might signify a *failure* of the assumed causal connections between, for instance, penetration and power, or desire and practice. Similarly, if that with which one identifies and that which one desires are one and the same, then this certainly escapes the control of heteronormative requisites for an "intelligible" identity.

How might we account for those aspects of sexuality which cannot be contained neatly within the boundaries of binary sexual identity categories? The blurring and shifting of boundaries in pornography reveal the inconsistencies and permutations in the "monolith" that heteronormativity constructs of itself. By shifting our reading practices, then, by reading *queerly*, pornography need not necessarily be seen to operate in the service of the status quo. Instead it might be read in terms of the potential that it has for destabilising the hegemonic construction of sexualities. Queer approaches to pornography might be seen as those which reveal points of friction in the regulation of identities. In focusing on and thus exacerbating these contradictions and slips in performativity, the queer viewer might uncover the untruths of binary sexuality and heteronormativity. This destabilisation of the performance of heteronormativity reveals that which it strives to hide; that is, the seething mass of multiple and conflicting desires, bodies, spaces, sexes and pleasures which are embraced by queer.

Such a reconfiguration of pornography would open up a site of challenges, questions and negotiations, in which porn perhaps raises more questions or possibilities than it provides answers or instructions for sexual behaviour. In this way pornography can be refigured as a "lack of control" rather than as a means of accessing or securing power through sexual behaviour. Perhaps, then, it is possible to think of pornography not as an instrument of control or regulation, but rather as a field of excess signification in which there is the possibility of fracturing or rupturing the archetypes conventionally thought to be perpetuated by pornographic imagery.

To begin to form an understanding of the ways in which this fracturing or rupturing might occur, we must return to the central assumption underpinning the majority of anti-pornography arguments. The understanding that the act of penetration signifies power and that the person being penetrated is aligned with a position of powerlessness has a long and fraught history both for women and homosexual men. The continued pervasiveness of this assumption relies on the conflation of the penis as an anatomical feature (though no less constructed or inscribed) with the phallus as the signifier of ultimate social and cultural power. The elision of the distinction between the phallus and the penis is not only maintained not only by discourses which might be identified as hegemonic or masculinist, but is also perpetuated largely by feminist discourses. This is something which is evident in the preceding discussion of anti-pornography feminism's conflation of intercourse and rape, and is also indicated more recently by lesbian debates about women who use dildos in their sexual practices. I will suggest not only that the conflation of the phallus and the penis needs to be resisted, and systematically deconstructed, but that, further, we might use pornography as a means of questioning the ascription of power to penetrative acts, whether these be within "homosexual" or "heterosexual" sex.

The perpetuation of the conflation of the phallus with the penis, is dependent on and, in a circular fashion, contributes to the ubiquity of polarised conceptualisations of sexuality.

Phallic/castrated, or phallic/lack binaries are both the cause and the outcome of the stringently policed boundaries of masculinity and femininity. Feminists have long had problems with the figuration of women in terms of lack, yet rather than seeking an inversion of this position, contemporary theoretical perspectives might seek to displace the binary notion which allocates a space such as this at all. This largely involves a deconstruction of the means by which female is produced as Other to male and, crucial to this, a dislocation of the ascribed power to the penis and to penetrative acts. The connection between the possession or use of a penis and a position of power is one that is constructed through understanding, as Lynne Segal writes:

The wider social relations which have constructed men's power within all the institutions of public life, designated men rather than women the symbol of humanity, and everywhere shore up men's authority both inside and outside the family, are all absorbed into the symbolic meaning of the phallus. The power of men - created, maintained and also today increasingly challenged, within both institutional and discursive settings - has been expressed in different ways at different times. It is far from monolithic.<sup>368</sup>

We might understand, then, that the "power" which we assume men have access to is neither monolithic nor innately due to the possession of a penis. Rather, the power accorded the penis is granted through practices of *understanding* the penis, or those who possess the penis, as powerful. Again there is a circularity of argument, in which the more we understand, believe, or "perform" phallic power, the more difficult it becomes to conceptualise this as a construction. In this sense, too, it is not solely through "straight" men but also through straight and lesbian women, gay men and countless institutional and

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<sup>368</sup> Segal, "Sweet Sorrows, Painful Pleasures", Segal and McIntosh, *Sex Exposed* 72.



discursive sites that the power of the phallus is reiterated. Catherine Waldby offers way of understanding the necessity of challenging "performances" of power, as these are constructed and experienced as lived actualities:

A more sophisticated investigation of the bodily imagos of sexual difference and their implications for subjectivity must take into account a certain instability in what they mean and how they are lived out. . . . The penis does not *act* the phallus in sex unless it is lived by one or both partners as the phallus.<sup>369</sup>

In understanding the conflation of the penis with the phallus as a reiterative habit, we must recognise firstly that this conflation exercises its effects through its reiteration, rather than through a pre-existent privilege or power. The forms that are repeatedly inscribed with phallic power; the knife, sword, or pillar of rock, bear little resemblance to the penis. Rather than being a sharp, fierce, hard and perpetual instrument of power, the penis is a soft tissue, subject to threat, disease, unreliability, and malfunction. Thus, there is little actual cause for the commonplace elision of the penis with the phallus; however, through a recognition of this we can determine the insecurity and tenuousness of this power. I would encourage a recognition of the effects of the phallus as a history of reiterative performances and suggest that this reiteration also provides a site of potential destabilisation.

To return, then, to the theoretical perspective of Judith Butler outlined in the previous chapter, we might remember that successful performances of subjectivity are reliant on reiterative processes. It is only through continually repeating performances of "gender" that

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<sup>369</sup> Catherine Waldby, "Destruction: Boundary Erotics and Refigurations of the Heterosexual Male Body", *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Camalities of Feminism*, eds. Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn (London: Routledge, 1995) 270.

a "convincing" or "intelligible" gender is produced and understood.<sup>370</sup> Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation provides a further means of understanding the "imagined" distinction between the original and the copy. This throws into question the notion that there might be a "real" sexuality or gender which is being replaced or masked by "performances". To take this further, we might use the notion of the precession and the procession of the simulacra<sup>371</sup> to understand that "power" exists as a simulacrum, for which there is no original. This is not to say that there are no effects of power on the contrary, Baudrillard suggests that the simulacrum becomes "more real than real",<sup>372</sup> exercising its effects through its continual and reiterative institutionalisation as power. In light of this, then, we might understand the correlation between phallic power and the penis, or penetrative acts, to be constructed through a reiterative history in which the penis has "acted" powerfully, and has been "treated" as powerful, thus successfully appearing and becoming inscribed as "intrinsically" powerful.

Conceptualising power in these terms facilitates a shift in perspective from an understanding of power as adhering to specific acts or genitalia, and instead seeing its ascription to these acts as itself an *act*. In understanding phallic power to be a simulation or a performative act, we might explore ways of destabilising the seamless appearance of this *act* and, by revealing it as such, we might reduce or rupture the control that it commands through its reiterative history. Catherine Waldby alludes briefly to the potential that a dislocation of the penis/phallus conflation might have for the exploration of sexual identities which escape the bounds of binary heteronormativity:

If the allegedly natural relation between the penis and the phallus can be severed, and the phallus can be demonstrated to be a transferable

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<sup>370</sup> Butler, *Bodies* 225.

<sup>371</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations* 5.

<sup>372</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations* 4.

property, then the bodily imagos it guarantees are made available for reworking. Or as Butler puts it, it may become possible to "delineate body surfaces that do not signify conventional heterosexual polarities" (1993:64).<sup>373</sup>

The contribution of binarised conceptualisations of sexuality to the notions of "penis as phallus" and "women as lack", is concomitant with the degree to which the phallic/castrated binary operates as a means of shoring up the boundaries of sexual polarities. This indicates that whether the project be to explore more fluid conceptualisations of sexuality or to gain access to an imagined or otherwise repository of power, the means by which this might be accomplished is through a destabilisation of the notion that power might "reside" in any particular sex, sexual practice or genitalia.

Alan McKee argues that we need to challenge conceptualisations of power as traditionally ascribed to particular sex acts or bodies. According to McKee, "in many efforts to make sense of power in penetrative acts, there is a suggestion, almost ridiculous when stated in its most blatant form, that possession of a penis automatically denotes the possession of power in a given penetrative situation".<sup>374</sup> McKee's problematisation of the relationship between penetration and power is supported by Mark Gibson's argument that we reconceptualise power as a fiction, in light of the cultural and media studies positioning of truth as such.<sup>375</sup> McKee suggest that we need to resist all attempts to secure power to particular acts:

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<sup>373</sup> Waldby 274.

<sup>374</sup> Alan McKee, "Penetration and Power", *Media International Australia : Too True to be Good?* eds. Matthew Allen and Sue Turnbull, 84 (1997) : 12. Although the argument that McKee makes here can be read as an inversion of the notion that the phallus is all-powerful, his problematisation of power relations within a pornographic text forms an interesting point of discussion.

<sup>375</sup> Gibson qtd in McKee, "Penetration and Power: 15.



This is not an appeal for more sensitive, more contextual readings of power in its specific manifestations. It is rather a call to abandon entirely the way in which power has previously been conceptualised. It is a suggestion that if it is to be possible to adequately discuss penetration and power, power can no longer be understood to be an object.<sup>376</sup>

If power really is a fiction, as McKee suggests, then it is certainly a fiction with pretty serious effects, exercising itself as a *believed* or *lived* fiction. I would prefer to consider power as a practice or a series of citational practices, with a history but also with constitutive effects. Power might best be seen as both the cause and outcome of a rehearsal of conventions, with the very rehearsal or reiteration of power operating as the effect or implementation of power. What might such a conceptualisation of power have on our understanding of the reading practices of pornography? By considering power as a rehearsal of conventions, we might see sexualities (as bodies, desires, identifications and practices invested with varying degrees of power) as sites where these conventions are simultaneously rehearsed, and thus exercised, yet also threatened with their own destabilisation. In reading pornography as a site of this rehearsal, we might see it as a type of *metapornography*, which becomes a parody of the means by which power is ascribed to, and inscribed in, specific sexual acts. In this sense pornography is potentially much more self-reflexive than has previously been thought. This functions to create a space in which to isolate and analyse the features of a pornographic text.

Lynne Segal writes of the three recurring features within many pornographic narratives as being the "ubiquitously sexually desiring, visibly sexually satisfied female. . . the image of the huge, hard, magical, male member - always erect, forever unflagging" and in more recent pornographies, scenarios with two or more men and one woman.<sup>377</sup> For Segal, the

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<sup>376</sup> McKee, "Penetration and Power" 14.

<sup>377</sup> Segal, "Sweet Sorrows, Painful Pleasures" 68.

continual repetition of these images in pornographic texts indicates the foundational anxiety, insecurity or instability of masculinity:

The most conspicuous of male emotions, and the anxieties they express, are surely not-so-hidden in the relentless repetition of these themes. Do we not see only too clearly here fear of female rejection, terror of phallic failure and homosexual feeling disguised as heterosexual performance?<sup>378</sup>

In this sense pornography forms a site in which the conventions or understandings of power are played out, yet at the same time this operates as a site where this power is threatened, as in its very playing out instabilities are revealed. Segal argues that the phallus operates as a means by which anxieties attached to the penis are both hidden and sustained.<sup>379</sup> At the same time, however, Segal warns against reading pornography as a clear indication of men's lack of power, suggesting that to do so would be to overlook the degree of power that men have access to, relative to women.<sup>380</sup> This chapter is not intended as an inversion of the feminist anti-pornography position, nor as a reversal of power relations by highlighting the insecurities associated with constructions of masculinities. Rather, I see pornography as a site where it is possible to destabilise or unfix *all* sexual identities and, by doing so, destabilise the normative regulation of sexualities. The focus on the deconstruction of masculinities in this chapter derives from an understanding that the elision of the distinction between the phallus and the penis is one of the crucial apparatuses for the current binary conceptualisations of sexuality. Sexual specificity is determined largely through difference and opposition. To destabilise the fixity of one term within this structure necessarily effects a destabilisation of all terms. To

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<sup>378</sup> Segal, "Sweet Sorrows, Painful Pleasures" 68.

<sup>379</sup> Segal, "Sweet Sorrows, Painful Pleasures" 83.

<sup>380</sup> Segal, "Sweet Sorrows, Painful Pleasures" 77.

destabilise that which moors each of these terms in place, then, is to set these terms in a state of referential flux in which they might take on and incorporate new significations. In turning to a discussion of constructions of heterosexuality in pornography, we might explore certain of the other connections which are threatened with a *lack of control*. By making explicit the fragility of these connections, we might exacerbate those points of friction in the appearance of heteronormativity as monolithic.

Judith Butler writes of the need for heterosexuality to continually assert itself through reiterative processes, in order to present itself as monolithic and immutable.<sup>381</sup> For Butler, this belies the precariousness of the construction of heterosexuality as seamless and impermeable: "One of the reasons that heterosexuality has to re-elaborate itself, to ritualistically reproduce itself all over the place, is that it has to overcome some constitutive sense of its own tenuousness".<sup>382</sup> Instrumental to the effectiveness of heterosexuality as a normative paradigm is the pressure imposed on individuals to adopt an intelligible – that is, binary sexed - position. The sanctions and punishments against those who fail or refuse to do so are severe. Yet for all this, Butler suggests that the taking up of a particular sexual position

*always* involves becoming haunted by what's excluded. And the more rigid the position, the greater the ghost, and the more threatening it is in some way . . . one is defined as much by what one is not as by the position that one explicitly inhabits.<sup>383</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> Judith Butler, "Imitation" 23.

<sup>382</sup> Judith Butler, interview published in *Radical Philosophy*, qtd in Jonathan Dollimore, "Bisexuality, heterosexuality and wishful theory", 536.

<sup>383</sup> Butler, interview 536.



If all sexualities are constituted at least as much by exclusion as inclusion, and yet the very understanding of these sexual identities as discrete is dependent on the denial and exclusion of all other possibilities, then perhaps the acknowledgment of these already constitutive possibilities might prove a destabilising force. In seeing "straight" pornography as a rehearsal of attempts to shore up the tenuousness of heterosexuality as homogeneous and discrete, we might also see it as a means of access or exposure to the ghosts which, through their exclusion, both constitute and threaten binary identity categories. For "straight" viewers, then, there are a multiplicity of ways in which the security of identity is permeated by that which is usually denied or covered over in the interests of presenting an "intelligible" gender performance. Jonathan Dollimore writes that "what this means for the thoughtful is that their sexual subject positions are not necessarily petrified identities forever haunted by what they ruthlessly exclude; they may actually facilitate access to scenes of sexuality which are always already, *and pleasurably* in-formed by what in other respects they exclude".<sup>384</sup>

Dollimore's work here provides an interesting account of the means by which subjectivities are both constituted by and pleased by mobile identifications, desires, practices, etc. However, Dollimore's study itself appears to be constrained by the boundaries of identity categories, effectively undermining the argument that subjectivities can work across and through these categories. Dollimore's discussion of "damaged subjects" privileges the "fascinating complexity" of bisexuals, and, to a lesser extent, homosexuals, as those whose subjectivities are in some sense more complex. "[W]e are not all damaged in equally interesting ways. Bisexuals, like homosexuals, are definitely interesting".<sup>385</sup> This statement appears to establish a hierarchy in which subjectivities are rated on a scale of "interest" according to identity categories. Furthermore, Dollimore does not qualify the context in

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<sup>384</sup> Dollimore, "Bisexuality" 536.

<sup>385</sup> Dollimore, "Bisexuality" 529.

which he uses the term "damaged", permitting the possible reinscription of already marginalised sexualities as "broken" or "damaged", in contrast to the "original" or "whole" of heterosexuality. Dollimore considers bisexuals and homosexuals to have more complex desires and identifications, denying the possibility that heterosexuals might have subjectivities that are similarly beset by such "complexities" or "ghosts". This facilitates an elision of sexual specificity within heterosexual practice and identity, perpetuating the reluctance to question the power accorded the heteronormative.

To reiterate an earlier point, the power of the heteronormative does not exist apart from the effect of power in performance. The continual claim that heteronormativity is powerful and the concomitant reluctance to question or destabilise this power, contribute to the ubiquity of the performance of heteronormativities. Dollimore's article contributes to this performance, critiquing Butler's work and her suggestion that heterosexuality occupies a position of tenuousness due to its continual need for reiteration.<sup>386</sup> Part of Dollimore's argument here is that Butler "gives us a representation of heterosexuality that is at once universalized, essentialized and reductive, far removed from the diversity of what most people are, and what they might do".<sup>387</sup> This critique is interesting in terms of Dollimore's subsequent reification of heterosexuality in order to privilege bisexuality and, secondarily, homosexuality as more complex and more "damaged" subjectivities. By failing to consider the potential exclusions of heterosexuality as "radically enabl[ing]",<sup>388</sup> Dollimore perpetuates the conflation of all "heterosexual" practices with the heteronormative. Dollimore reinscribes the means by which marginal sexualities are figured as necessarily more transgressive. This amounts to a reification of heterosexuality, but also a reification of bisexuality and homosexuality in a move which serves a binary function.

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<sup>386</sup> Dollimore, "Bisexuality" 534.

<sup>387</sup> Dollimore, "Bisexuality" 534.

<sup>388</sup> Dollimore, "Bisexuality" 537.

In the following scenario Dollimore surmises the possible desires and identifications of a bisexual man, yet it might be argued that similar possibilities are available to a self-identified heterosexual man or woman viewing the same scene. Pornography which is ostensibly "straight" might prove a useful site to explore such possibilities, revealing "straight" subjectivities as similarly "damaged":

a bisexual male partakes of a threesome in which he watches a man fucking with a woman. His identifications here are multiple: he identifies with the man (he wants to be in his position, having sex with the woman) but he also wants to be her. And I mean *be* her: he does not just want to be in her position and have the man fuck him as himself (though he wants to do that too); no, he wants to be fucked by the man with himself in the position of, which is to say, as, the woman. He knows of no pleasure greater than to be fucked by a man, but in this scenario he also wants to be the woman; he wants to be fucked by the man in a way that he imagines - fantasizes - only a woman can be. Maybe he desires the man through her. And in this same scenario there is a further kind of pleasure where desire and identification are inflected by voyeurism: for our bisexual male the sexual attractiveness of the male is heightened by the fact that the latter is apparently desired by the woman; he excites the more because he is desired by her.<sup>389</sup>

Dollimore's figuration of the fluidity of desires and identifications appears to privilege the queer within that which is already ostensibly queer, that is, bisexuality and homosexuality. Despite this, I would suggest that Dollimore's exploration of the contradictory and multiplicitous nature of viewing practices is useful for an exploration of what might be seen

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<sup>389</sup> Dollimore, "Bisexuality" 529.



to be queer moments or identifications within an ostensibly straight sexual identity. Dollimore writes of the effects of such an understanding of viewing practices:

in this scenario, desire circulates between sexual subject positions but not necessarily as a free flow; there may be a tension, conflict, even an impossibility here. Put simply, this bisexual male may desire to be where he cannot be, and desire to become what he cannot become. Here his identity as a coherent sexual subject is very much in question.<sup>390</sup>

This figuration of viewing practices places identity in question, rather than functioning to secure it. To consider pornography in these terms, then, effectively challenges the traditional conceptualisations of pornography as that which secure masculine identity through the "objectification" of women. Objectification might then become grounds for further confusion of attempts to secure power to particular bodies or sexual acts. Traditionally, objectification has been aligned with passivity and, in readings of heterosexual porn it has been considered that the woman remains the object of the male "gaze", even in scenes where male bodies are also available to the viewer. It is interesting that these male bodies are not considered as subject to "objectification", even though they may be looked at.

According to this position, then, being looked at is not the same as being objectified, indicating that while male or female viewers might look at male bodies in heterosexual pornography, the assumption is implicit that these bodies are not objects of desire. Not only does this deny the possibility and likelihood that female viewers of straight porn desire the male bodies shown but further, this disallows or disputes the possibility of the desire

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<sup>390</sup> Dollimore, "Bisexuality" 529.

that male viewers might have for male bodies in straight porn.<sup>391</sup> Can we assume that we know the difference between objectification and looking? Does objectification imply a degree of pre-existent power, or the power to appropriate in some way? Similarly, does being desired necessarily equate with disempowerment? Can it not be empowering to be desired? Thus, "objectification" is not something that is easily determined, as the boundaries between looking at something and objectifying it, between identification and desire are indeterminable and permeable. As the lines between each of these categories diffract and intersect in unpredictable ways, it becomes clear that we cannot determine prior to, and for all cases, the power relations attached to specific sexual acts.

For this reason also, we cannot determine what desires and identifications are apparent in the individual viewing practices of those watching straight pornography. The visual presence of male bodies in straight pornography problematises arguments that suggest an objectification only of female bodies. With same-sex desire between female bodies thought to be the ultimate heterosexual male desire, we might question why male bodies are visualised in straight pornography in the first place. The potentialities enabled by the camera focus on male bodies in addition to female bodies frustrates implicitly heteronormative arguments that ensure only female bodies might be "objects of desire". The combination of male and female bodies on the screen, in their varying numbers and positions, obscures the clarity with which conventional approaches to pornography assume that male viewers objectify female porn actors. This sees pornography as a means by which subjects might have access to desires and identifications that are normally excluded from intelligible performances of identity.

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<sup>391</sup> This potentiality is evident in the visual focus on male pleasure in much pornographic film. Camera fetishisation of male pleasure, at times auto-erotic (masturbation, caressing of nipples, etc.), allows the viewer a dual identification and desire for a male body.

Lynne Segal suggests that pornography allows for more complex pleasures and identifications than have been recognised by anti-pornography feminists:

Cross-sex identification (present in men's enjoyment of the ubiquitous lesbian number in pornography) and homosexual attachment (present in men's pleasure in watching other penises in action) all inform the content of pornography and men's responses to it.<sup>392</sup>

Perhaps Segal's point can be contextualised by an investigation of the apparently clear demarcation between fantasy and reality. If we assume that fantasy informs and is present in sexual practice, can we assume that fantasies are always of the same kind as the sexual act performed? Equating fantasy and sexual practice seems problematic, and we have no way of investigating the degree to which fantasies line up with individual sexual practices. Similarly problematic, I would suggest, is the way in which "sexual reality" is framed as something distinct from sexual fantasy. For instance, a "straight" male fantasy of sexual intercourse with more than one woman is usually either dismissed - "in your dreams" - or framed as misogynist. Likewise, "straight" male pleasure in the fantasy of lesbian sexual practice is seen as in some way harmful and disrespectful to women. Yet what if there were another way to consider these "fantasies"? What if these fantasies need not be seen as completely discrete from the sexual practice of that "straight" male subject? If fantasies of same-sex practice inform that subject's sexual fantasies, could this not inform the "performance" or "experience" of that subject's sexual practice? To dislocate the binary of sexual fantasy/sexual reality in this way potentially provides a conceptualisation for a more inclusive or open sexuality. Is it possible that a "straight" male subject might identify as a woman in sexual practice, and in this way "perform" the fantasy of same-sex practice? Does this necessarily indicate a derangement or an inability to experience "sexual reality", or

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<sup>392</sup> Segal, "Sweet Sorrows, Painful Pleasures" 73.



does it simply take its place among the many sexual games, fantasies and sexual narratives identifications and desires that inform and constitute sexual practice? It is important that we recognise that these fantasies are not subsidiary to sexual practice, nor outside of it, but rather they *are* in fact sexual practice.

To figure the same scenario in terms of pornography, we might consider the male viewing representations of lesbian or female same-sex practice, and the pleasure derived from this. Potentially, male viewers could identify with one or both of the women involved, rather than simply desiring and "objectifying" them as conventional conceptualisations of pornography would suggest. For a "straight" male to identify as a lesbian (even if only temporarily) and to gain pleasure from this constitutes sexual practice. This is no less sexual "reality" for that subject than the physical contact of sexual acts in which he/she might engage with another person. To recall that sexual identities are simulacra, and exist only in terms of their effects through reiterative performances, the means by which the intersections of fantasy, desire, identification, practice are performed constitutes the sexual subjectivity of that person. We might consider sexual subjectivities as a field of significations which gains intelligibility only through a history of citations, identifications, desires, fantasies, practices, etc. In this sense, there is no causal means by which we should privilege any one of these factors over another or, privilege any combination or connection of these factors. In this sense, then, pornography might not be associated with an inferior realm of "fantasy", but be seen rather as "sexual practice" itself. To celebrate the disjunctures in the binary of sexual fantasy/sexual reality or pornography/practice creates a space conducive and open to the haunting by those sexual possibilities which hegemonic structures encourage sexual subjectivities to exclude. To figure the "straight" male viewer in these terms is only one possibility in the literally limitless potentialities which are available to and constitutive of the sexual subject.

Another potentiality might be the male viewer's fascination with the ever-erect penis in straight pornography. The isolation of this viewing pleasure as a manifestation solely of identification fulfils a heteronormative agenda. However, even the slightest blurring of identification and desire here provides access to the excluded ghosts of homoeroticism. With the extreme close-up of the penis/vagina or penis/anus interface the trope of heterosexual pornography, it is impossible to demarcate clearly between desires to "be" and desires to "have". It is in this sense that straight male viewing of penises in action may disjoin normative understandings of what straight pornography signifies and the effects that straight pornography produces. This is exacerbated by the overlap between the boundaries of "homosocial" culture of men viewing "straight" pornography blurring with the "homoerotic" effects of men viewing "straight" pornography. For "straight" men to view penises in action in groups or even to encourage one another in these viewing habits creates a space for the possible transference of identification and desire among one another in addition to those bodies on the screen. Once again, the power of these "transgressions" derives from the fact that on the one hand they cannot be dismissed as fantasies, but, on the other themselves constitute sexual "acts".

Baudrillard's notions of hyperreality provide us with the means to systematically deconstruct and resist notions of a sexual "real". There is no "real" from which to oppose a "false" or even "fantasy" sexuality. This prevents pornography from being continually reinscribed as "childish" and "harmful" to those represented, those viewing, or those engaged in "actual" or "real" sexual practices with others who view pornographic material. In this sense, not only must pornography be taken as a legitimate discursive site in the construction of sexual subjectivities, but also the *effects* of pornography must be considered components of sexual subjectivities and contributors to sexual practice.

Queer conceptualisations of pornography might recognise, then, that the demarcations of activity and passivity, identification and desire, and the subject and object of the "gaze" are

much more fluid than conventional readings of pornography acknowledge. Such conceptualisations see pornography as a means of accessing the multiplicity of desires and identifications which might escape the bounds of a sexuality as it is performed day to day. Jonathan Dollimore writes that "exclusion/inclusion is one of the most unstable of all binaries".<sup>393</sup> Far from assuming, then, that only homosexuality and other "unintelligible" subjectivities are haunted by the spectre of heterosexism, we might recognise that heterosexuality and the means by which its tenuous power is secured are constantly threatened by all the sexual possibilities which it excludes. By virtue of this necessary exclusion in order to shore up the boundaries of heterosexuality, these excluded potentialities are imbued with a destabilising force. Sexual subjectivities might thus be mapped as reiterative paths or histories forged from an excess field of significations. In this sense, the tenuous path of subjectivity tracks through an amorphous and endless field of possibilities and alternatives which surround the subject as these options simultaneously constitute and "haunt" the subject. This "haunting" suggests that pornography might operate both as a site where viewing subjects might explore and celebrate the multi-faceted dimensions of their sexualities and, at the same time, that these viewing practices might operate as a destabilisation of the hegemonic production of sexualities through binary opposition.

Each of the theoretical aspects of this queer pornographic position finds a fictional exposition in Carter's work. The theoretical density of much of Carter's fiction and the self-reflexiveness of her style encourage the reader to question each of these aspects as they contribute to the social fictions of masculinity and femininity. It is in this sense that the project of the moral pornographer, as explained in *The Sadeian Woman*, can be seen to be demonstrated in much of Carter's work. Carter suggests that the task of the moral pornographer would be to "use pornography as a critique of the current relation between

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<sup>393</sup> Dollimore, "Bisexuality" 536.



the sexes".<sup>394</sup> Carter also contends that masculinity and femininity are "believed fiction[s]"<sup>395</sup> or "myths" used to "dull the pain of particular circumstances".<sup>396</sup> Carter sees much pornography as perpetuating these mythologies through a representation of masculinity and femininity as graffiti, which reduces these latter to the probe and the fringed hole.<sup>397</sup> However, she sees the moral pornographer as interrogating these representations and, by socially and historically contextualising the representations of sexuality, encouraging a critique of their relations and construction.<sup>398</sup> Arguably, much of Carter's fiction participates in this task of contextualisation. The combination of socio-cultural contextualisation, with the explicit foregrounding of sexuality ensures that Carter's fiction fulfils many of the requisites for "moral pornography".

Carter's fiction rarely adheres to realist conventions. However, even the worlds that she presents in her most speculative fictions, *The Passion of New Eve*, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, and *Heroes and Villains*, are not divorced from cultural context. Rather, I would suggest that these novels parody particular social, cultural and historical discourses, events and institutions. As Sally Robinson suggests, "it is through Carter's strategic engagement with various master narratives of Western culture that her critique of the politics of representation emerges".<sup>399</sup> Thus, while *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* reads as a fantastic and episodic narrative exploring alternate worlds, spheres and temporalities, it can also be understood as a specific parody of the conventions of the masculinist narrative of the quest and coming of age, as well as a parody of the imperialist narrative, and of the specific ways in which cultural difference is inscribed

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<sup>394</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 19.

<sup>395</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 7.

<sup>396</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 5.

<sup>397</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 4.

<sup>398</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 19.

<sup>399</sup> Sally Robinson, "The Anti-Hero as Oedipus: Gender and the Postmodern Narrative in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*", *Critical Essays on Angela Carter*, ed. Lindsey Tucker (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998) 172.

through figurations of savagery, ignorance and Otherness. Similarly, Doctor Hoffman and his Desire Machines might be read as a parody of the twentieth-century Western and masculinist aspirations of megalomania which determine and regulate even that which is conceived of as reality. *The Passion of New Eve* also appears to be constructed in terms of alternate apocalyptic worlds. However, most of the narrative is set in the United States, functioning as a parody of American greed as well as of the conservative, racist and homophobic ideologies which characterise much of Western culture. This text thematises the specific means by which bodies are culturally inscribed and sexed, and the power relations implicit in this regulatory procedure. Carter also provides a specific critique of the film narrative, and film industry. This invites metaphorical readings of American life or "reality" and film narrative, and problematises binaries of fantasy/reality. In this sense, while Carter's novels appear to be abstractions from "reality", distortions or fantasies of "reality", they can clearly be read as specifically contextualised in terms of social, cultural and historical events and discourses.

Arguably, the speculative aspect of Carter's fiction derives from the overwhelming display of artifice, the visual explication of that which is usually unseen, the clockwork and apparatus of construction that drive cultural movements, regulate bodies and determine subjectivities. In this sense, those textual elements which appear fantastic often serve as the most telling effects of Carter's relentless cultural critique. Often this cultural clockwork is represented through explicit means. For instance, in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* the clockwork mechanism that drives the pornographic imagery in the peepshow operates as an explicit critique of the construction of sexualities and the construction of the positions of voyeurism, objectification, activity and passivity. In this instance especially, Carter's text operates in terms of her theoretical expectations for the moral pornographer. Carter contextualises the specific means by which sexualities and sexual practice are constructed, prompting the reader to question the degree to which cultural machines produce desires, fantasies, bodies, and pleasures.

This is thematised textually when Desiderio becomes aware that the imagery to which he is exposed in the desire machines actually begins to inform and construct his desires. With Doctor Hoffman behind the pornographic peepshow, the novel explores the degree to which the manipulation of the subject is effected through the control of desire. In this sense, Carter's text invokes the Foucaultian notion that "power . . . produces effects at the level of desire".<sup>400</sup> As Grosz suggests, "power, according to Foucault, utilizes, indeed produces, the subject's desires and pleasures to create knowledges, truths, which may provide more refined, improved and efficient techniques for the surveillance and control of bodies".<sup>401</sup> Further, Desiderio becomes aware that he is indeed constructing his own experiences according to these desires, suggesting that Albertina is "a series of marvellous shapes formed at random in the kaleidoscope of desire".<sup>402</sup> For much of the novel, Desiderio is unsure as to whether his desires are the product of the manipulations of Doctor Hoffman and, moreover, he is uncertain as to whether his experiences are simply expressions or manifestations of these constructed desires. In this sense, the text can be read as an explicit thematisation of the degree to which subjectivities are regulated through the production of desires. Moreover, this blurs the distinction between desire and practice, between fantasy and reality, and the consequences of Desiderio's viewing habits blurs the distinction between pornography and "real" sex.

Chapter Four provides a more extensive discussion of these textual issues, however, in terms of the argument regarding pornography made in this chapter, there are a few narrative events which warrant discussion. The pornographic peepshow in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* parodies the degree to which the regulation of

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<sup>400</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, trans. Colin Gordon et al. ed. Colin Gordon, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980) 59.

<sup>401</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994) 146

<sup>402</sup> Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (London: Penguin Books, 1972) 13.



sexualities is reliant on the perpetuation of binaries of sexuality. With subjects reduced to their anatomy in the pornographic imagery, Carter's novel has many examples of "the probe and the fringed hole"<sup>403</sup> on display. Further, Carter thematises the means by which violence is imbricated in the regulation of sexualities, complete with fake blood and the fetishistic props of the pornographic trade. When Desiderio and the Count are captured by Hoffman, they are reduced to parodic representations of their function, clothed in hooded phallic garments which display their genitalia by means which render them at once vulnerable and ridiculous. This highlights the means by which Carter's fiction parodies the phallic power attached to the penis, and the degree to which anatomy is taken as the final and unquestionable marker of the "self". This is evident also in the ridiculous phallic ceremony of the pirates which results in drunken frivolity, and in the engulfment of their phallic power by the amorphousness of the sea which drowns them.

Carter's critique of the regulatory power of binary sexuality and the means by which power is attributed to specific sexual acts and genitalia is evident also in *Heroes and Villains*. For Jewel, Marianne is a threat, as "[i]t's a well-known fact that Professor women sprout sharp teeth in their private parts to bite off the genitalia of young men".<sup>404</sup> While Marianne's rape is horrific, experiencing a pain which "split to the core",<sup>405</sup> when she asks Jewel why he violated her, his response is, "There's the matter of our traditional hatred. And, besides, I'm very frightened of you".<sup>406</sup> Carter's use of the trope of the *vagina dentata* inverts the phallic power traditionally accorded the penetrator. The fear of engulfment and castration motivates Jewel's rape, rather than a representation of his own phallic power. Similarly, although Zero violently rapes Eve in *The Passion of New Eve*, his sexual violence is motivated by his belief that he is rendered impotent by the transvestite Tristessa, whom he

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<sup>403</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 4.

<sup>404</sup> Carter, *Heroes and Villains* (London: Penguin Books, 1969) 49.

<sup>405</sup> Carter, *Heroes and Villains* 55.

<sup>406</sup> Carter, *Heroes and Villains* 56.

mistakenly refers to as a "dyke".<sup>407</sup> For Zero, whose very name parodies his situation, lesbian sexuality threatens his phallic power. One-eyed and one-legged, Zero is already castrated, and the assault on his masculinity is compounded by the lesbian relationships that form among the women of his harem.

The preceding chapters have suggested that "heteronormativity" is reliant on the oppositional status of male/female genitalia which function as the unquestionable markers of sexual authenticity. Taking this "natural" starting point, then, there are a series of other connections and behaviours which are also framed as natural. Following on from the foundational sexual prescriptions are a series of other regulations related to sexual identity, i.e., the specific body parts to be eroticised, the sorts of socially and culturally endorsed behaviours, the degree of activity and enjoyment of sex, as well as the sorts of positions and type of sex. Normatively, the chain that follows "male" consists of the authentic marker of identity (penis/phallus); the natural adoption of masculine behaviours; identification as a male; desires for the female; and being an actively penetrative sexual subject. Conversely, "female" is defined by the authentic non/marker of identity (vagina); the natural adoption of feminine behaviours; identification as female; desires for the male (or at least desire to be desired by the male); and being a passively penetrated or receptive sexual object.

This indicates that heterosexuality is highly regulated, characterised by prohibition rather than choice. Heteronormativity is not natural, it is not prediscursive and for all the references in the world to "compulsory heterosexuality", neither is it compulsory. For this reason, it must continually appear and perform as more powerful, more pervasive and more in control than it really is. Heteronormativity's very reliance on the oppositional status of male/female and the means by which these set in place a string of further regulations indicates that it is not omnipotent, that it does not exist without continually policing its

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<sup>407</sup> Carter, *The Passion of New Eve* 1977. (London: Virago Press, 1982) 91.

boundaries, and by re-producing itself as a category - and as a central and normalising category.

Pornography can be read as a site for the exploration of the processes by which this reproduction of the normative are sustained. Drawing on Carter's proposal for the moral pornographer as one who would contextualise the production of sexualities, this chapter has traced a theoretical approach to pornography which might destabilise the heteronormative production of sexualities. In mapping the arguments made by anti-pornography feminists, it becomes necessary to reconceptualise not only the means by which pornography is assumed to be uniformly "harmful", but also to challenge the perpetuation of binary terms employed in critiques of pornographic texts. This chapter has suggested that pornography is a useful site for the dislocation of the penis from phallic power, and the critique of binary codes of active/passive, subject/object, penetrator/penetrated. Similarly, the iconoclastic, parodic and over-determined style of Carter's fiction also provides potentiality for reconceptualising readings of sexual practice as constitutive of sexual identity. In the fullest sense, then, Carter's fiction fulfils the requisites for a reading position derived from the proposal for a "moral pornographer". The final two chapters of this dissertation will comprise an analysis of certain of Carter's fictional texts according to the queer theoretical approach developed in this chapter and Chapter Two.



## Chapter Four

### Those Infernal Passions: The Iteration of Identity in Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of New Eve*

In the opening of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, Angela Carter quotes Ludwig Wittgenstein: "Remember that we sometimes demand definitions for the sake not of the content, but of their form. Our requirement is an architectural one: the definition is a kind of ornamental coping that supports nothing".<sup>408</sup> Published a decade apart, Carter's two novels *Infernal Desire Machines*, and *The Passion of New Eve* both invoke contemporary cultural theories to explore the nexus of ontology and mythology. Both *Infernal Desire Machines* and *The Passion of New Eve* can be read in terms of a satirical indictment of contemporary mythology for its construction of the rigid and regulatory demarcations and borders of identity. Further, both novels interrogate the degree to which the definitions of things/sexualities, etc., are mistaken for the actual existence of those things/sexualities.

The chapter will view *Infernal Desire Machines* and *The Passion of New Eve* in terms of the queer perspective established in the previous chapters. Chapter Two argued that there is no "real" of sexuality, that sexualities come into being only through the proliferation of symbols through which they are signified. This facilitates a reading of the novels in terms of the elision of the distinction between the sign and its referent, and the implications that this has for the assumption of gender as the necessary and innate corollary of biological sex. The final section of this chapter is concerned with the ways in which this then informs our

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<sup>408</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, qtd. in Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 7.

thoughts on the demarcation of sexual identities through the heterosexualisation of sexual practices.

As explored in Chapter Two, "intelligible sexualities" are maintained only through the reiterative performances of sex. Just as the "reproducibility" of images as simulacra denies the distinction between the "real" and its "representation", so too the necessary and reiterative performances of identity deny the distinction between the essence of a sexuality and its effects or representations. In other words, just as simulacra are models without a "real-life" referent or origin, sexes are repetitive performances without an essence. It follows, then, that the simulations or performances of sex are all that there is of sexual identity, the truth of sexuality being only that there is no truth of sexuality.

Jean Baudrillard's theories on simulation and simulacra find striking parallels in *The Passion of New Eve* and *Infernal Desire Machines*. Baudrillard's critique of the means by which images are thought to refer to a real is paralleled by the confusion effected by the diabolical Doctor Hoffman's proliferation of images. *Infernal Desire Machines* will be read as a parody of the processes which ensure that there is a misrecognition of heterosexuality as the "real" rather than as a third-order simulacrum. Instead of attempting to determine a "truth" beneath the simulacrum, this exploration of Carter's text engages a queer reading strategy or "play of appearances" which opens an exploratory site for queer, in which identities are not regulated by reiterative processes or performance and utterance, but rather exist as a series of phantasmagoric potentialities.

Angela Carter's two speculative fictions can be read as an exploration of the denial and destabilisation of the "authenticity" of sexuality - an "authenticity" which necessarily functions through exclusion and denigration of an "inauthentic". This challenge can be seen to operate through means which are two-fold. Firstly, the novels can be read as parodic illustrations of the reiterative processes by which the third-order simulacrum of

"heterosexed bodies" and "heterosexualised normativity" are maintained as a monolithic trajectory. Secondly, an analysis of *The Passion of New Eve* and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* includes an exploration of the ways in which this heteronormative monolith might be destabilised. "Queer moments", or moments of seduction, will be identified by a preoccupation with the pure play of appearances, and these will be shown to undermine or destabilise the reiterative simulacrum of heteronormativity. This extends to an exploration of a site which could be seen as queer, in which identities are not regulated by reiterative processes of performance and utterance, but rather exist on a continuum of erotic potentialities.

Notions of performativity are acquiring increasing currency among contemporary theorists of sexuality and various feminisms. Since Joan Riviere's notion of feminine "masquerade",<sup>409</sup> notions of the constructed nature not only of genders but also of sexes and sexualities are becoming increasingly accepted. Following the influential studies of performativity by Judith Butler, sexuality is becoming more often understood as an image or habit, a performative trajectory of citations and reiterations. Yet there are a number of things which are continually and persistently taken as unquestionable referents, signs or markers of this "image" - things which we like to believe indelibly code or determine our bodies as specifically sexed. It is important to recognise that these markers - specifically the markers of anatomy, or the genitalia - are no less simulacra, in a sense, no less performed, than the sexual "identities" which they are thought to indicate or inspire.

*The Passion of New Eve* functions as a reflexive exploration of the "perversity"<sup>410</sup> of the relation between the image and the referent. In other words, the novel reads as a figurative

<sup>409</sup> Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade", *Formations of Fantasy*, eds. Victor Bugin, James Donald, Cora Kaplan (London: Methuen, 1986) 35-44. This article was first published in *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 10 (1929).

<sup>410</sup> Baudrillard uses the term "perversity" to describe the confusion which sees appearances taken as indicating in some sense, the "real". "It is precisely when it appears most truthful, most faithful and most in conformity to reality that the image is most diabolical". *The Evil Demon of Images* 13.



journey through the illusory space between the image and the referent in a search for origins or an ontological security which is always and only illusory. The text operates as an exploration of the means by which we seek to establish a "security" of identity, largely through identity categories and the boundaries of the corporeal. Due to the implosion of the image and its referent, we might understand that not only the identities that we "project" but also those that we seek are nothing more than simulacra. In coming to terms with the notion of hyperreality, we find that not only sexual identities but even the very notion of differently and oppositionally sexed bodies exist only in the realm of simulations.

Iconographically over-determined, and parodic in style, *The Passion of New Eve* exploits a double-gendered focalisation and narrative mode. This, in addition to the persistent frustration of sequential temporality, causal narrative, and reiterative identity performances, ensures that the novel functions as a field of excess and free-floating signification. The fluidity which results from these ruptures in ontological and narrative stability ensures that Eve/lyn's search for the "self" becomes also that of the reader. Similarly, Eve/lyn's realisation that such a search is futile encourages the reader to recognise that without a fixity of time, space, narrative convention or even corporeality, ontological security becomes an impossibility. Denying the affirmation of conventional discourses, *Infernal Desire Machines* is a text in which "every assumption we make is undermined".<sup>411</sup>

The first section of the novel is focalised through the masculine and the masculinist Eve/lyn, who attempts to shore up the boundaries of his "self" through the objectification and mistreatment of women. The focalisation of the narrative shifts to the female Eve following Mother's sexual and psycho-surgery. Yet the "cock" in Eve/lyn's head continues to twitch,<sup>412</sup> preventing the clarity of identity afforded by a normative "match" between

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<sup>411</sup> Manlove, 153.

<sup>412</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 75.

anatomy and identity. The fact that Eve/lyn feels no such match results in an ontological insecurity, regardless of anatomical assignment. Further, the confusion of Eve/lyn's self-conceptualisation cannot be secured through relation to others. Those characters and figures against whom Eve/lyn has defined her/himself are also continually shifting. This disrupts the conventional (and textually evident) attempts to code these figures as Others against whom Eve/lyn and/or the reader might define a "self". Temporarily, s/he is able to secure the appearance of her/his identity through her/his ill-treatment of Leilah, whom s/he refers to as "a perfect woman; like the moon, she only gave reflected light".<sup>413</sup> Eve/lyn refers to the objectified, abused, impregnated and mutilated Leilah as "dressed meat".<sup>414</sup> Yet when Leilah is revealed as the strong, politically proud Lilith, Eve/lyn can no longer use Leilah's "Otherness" as a marker for her/his own ontological and sexual stability. No longer secure in the acquiescence of Leilah, Eve/lyn realises the illusory nature of his/her own (power/gender) relation to her. This necessitates an uncomfortable self-reflexivity as s/he then questions her/his past desires and even memories:

Leilah but no longer Leilah; what's become of the houri of Manhattan? Had she all the time been engaged on guerrilla warfare for her mother? Had that gorgeous piece of flesh and acquiescence been all the time a show, an imitation, an illusion? Her hair still sprang out in a contention of small curls and her skin looked, still, like refreshed velvet, but the deadly passivity of the naked dancer had been washed off with the paint.<sup>415</sup>

Eve/lyn finds that his past appropriation and objectification of Leilah/Lilith are frustrated by the latter's feminine strength and fluidity of appearance. Tristessa is another figure whose ambiguity evades attempts at objectification. When Tristessa is revealed to be an ageing

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<sup>413</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 34.

<sup>414</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 31.

<sup>415</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 172.

transvestite, the history of Eve/lyn's masculinist objectification is undermined and confounded by notions of same-sex desire. In recognising the void of which Tristessa is constructed, Eve/lyn finds her/himself on "the brink of an abyss". As with many of Carter's character's who are confronted with selfhood as an ontological void, Eve/lyn panics when recognising her/his own "emptiness":

to go beyond the boundaries of flesh had been your occupation and so  
you had become nothing, a wraith that left only traces of a silver powder on  
the hands that clutched helplessly at your perpetual vanishings.<sup>416</sup>

Eve/lyn, Leilah, Tristessa and Mother fail to respect the boundaries of corporeal stability or intelligible gender performance. This ensures that the text functions as an excessive display of performativity, a process which is rendered textually explicit through the double-gendered narrative mode and the over-determined iconography of Mother's sexual and psycho-surgery in the "womb" of the earth. In this sense, objectification of an "Other" is displayed as an unreliable means of accessing ontological stability, as both Eve/lyn and the reader become aware that boundaries of authentic identity are permeable and interchangeable.

The novel is driven by the controlling metaphor of a re-birth, signalling a search for origins and a longing for a primordial state of wholeness and completion. Through the extended metaphor of a forced sex re-assignment procedure, the text facilitates an exploration of Eve/lyn's ontological and existential angst as s/he grapples with the realisation that there is no more to her/his identity than the chimerical forms that it takes. Furthermore, the implosion of the image and the referent ensures that the institutionalised signifier of maleness - the penis, in which Eve/lyn invests the security of his identity - is no less

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<sup>416</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 110.



constructed, no less simulacrum, than the sculptured silicon form that Mother constructs of Eve.

What this effects, then, is a critique of the foundations of biologically reductionist thought. Eve/lyn's realisation that her/his female form is no more constructed than her/his male form makes futile the search for innate or "natural" characteristics. Moreover, this parodies our search for origins and/or a primordial state from which we assume we came, but also to which we long to return. While prompting such analysis, the text might also be read as facilitating a critique of the mythology of historicity as a discursive means by which myths and beliefs in origins are legitimated and sustained.

The novel begins with the English Eve/lyn arriving into a modern civil war in America. In an indictment of the rampant production and consumption of American mythology, the America in *The Passion of New Eve* finds itself crumbling under the weight of its own construction. The dissident groups that launch sniper attacks on the mainstream are the disenfranchised, those at whose expense the mythology of the New World has been established. In this sense, the disastrous state of the New World not only functions as a metaphor for hyperreality but also indicates the degree to which the mythology on which it is predicated threatens to collapse into itself. Existing only as simulacra, existing only in terms of their effects, the identity categories on which the New World has been established are continually threatened by what they exclude, continually threatened by the notion that they do not exist, apart from the militant and reiterative claims that they do exist. What this opens up, then, is a site rich with imagery in which to explore Baudrillard's notion of the seductive nature of simulacra. This will also provide a means of exploring the exclusions or "ghosts", as they are called by Dollimore, that are continually haunting our sexual identities, both threatening them with destabilisation and offering them a means of access to new modalities of pleasure.

According to Baudrillard, hyperreality is characterised by a “panic-stricken production of the real and the referential”<sup>417</sup> in an attempt to secure an authenticity of origin: “When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity”.<sup>418</sup>

The novel is framed as a search for mythical origins and, in a broader sense, a search for ontological stability. Eve/lyn sets off to America from England with the idea of discovering just such a security, hoping to find a city with “hard edges” and “a special kind of crisp-edged girl with apple-crunching incisors and long, gleaming legs like lascivious scissors - the shadowless inhabitants of a finite and succinct city where the ghosts who haunt the cities of Europe could have found no cobweb corners to roost in”.<sup>419</sup>

Eve/lyn is in search of a quantifiable and “finite” space, in which he might escape the “shadowless figures” or “ghosts” to which he is used. Instead, he descends on a city in the chaos of war and is enveloped in a “Gothic darkness that closed over my head and entirely became my world”.<sup>420</sup> Rather than finding the security which he seeks, then, Eve/lyn finds a world which poses even greater threats to his belief in his own identity. Following his disastrous relationship with Leilah, he flees to the desert in search of “pure air and cleanness” and a space free of “ghosts”:

I would go to the desert, to the waste heart of that vast country, the desert on which they turned their backs for fear it would remind them of emptiness - the desert, the arid zone, there to find, chimera of chimeras, there, in the ocean of sand, among the bleached rocks of the untenanted part of the

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<sup>417</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations* 13.

<sup>418</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations* 12.

<sup>419</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 10.

<sup>420</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 10.

world, I thought I might find that most elusive of all chimeras, myself. And so, in the end, I did, although this self was a perfect stranger to me.<sup>421</sup>

Eve/lyn sees himself as the “most elusive of all chimeras”, haunted by ghosts which prevent him from having a secure knowledge of “who he is”. Eve/lyn’s longing for stability results in a search for origins, and is ultimately frustrated by the realisation that this quest is futile. After being “reborn” as a woman in Mother’s womb-like surgery and then at the close of the text crawling through the many wombs and entrails of the “Mother Earth”, Eve/lyn leaves America by sea still in search for her/his birthplace. “Ocean, ocean, mother of mysteries, bear me to the place of my birth”.<sup>422</sup> Through two countries, through the dust of the desert and the stench of the metropolis, first bearing the sexual markers of a male and then those of a female, Eve/lyn is unable to identify either him/herself or her/his origin. Baudrillard suggests that “we need a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin to reassure us as to our ends, since ultimately we have never believed in them”.<sup>423</sup> Thus, just as Eve/lyn suggests that Americans turn their backs on the desert “for fear it would remind them of emptiness”,<sup>424</sup> Eve/lyn must remain on the move and in search of her/his origin, in order to deny the realisation that s/he does not possess an identity apart from the chimera of its appearance.

As noted in Chapter Three, Judith Butler suggests that the taking up of a particular sexual position “always involves becoming haunted by what’s excluded”.<sup>425</sup> In order to maintain the appearance of binary sexualities, the heteronormative trajectory of sexual simulations must continually exclude that which threatens to contradict or undermine its “unity”. For

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<sup>421</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 38.

<sup>422</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 191.

<sup>423</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations* 19-20.

<sup>424</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 38.

<sup>425</sup> Judith Butler, interview 536.



Eve/lyn, whose sexual simulacrum is that of a misogynistic and heterosexual male, this is problematic. Eve/lyn has long had an admiration for the ageing Hollywood film star Tristessa, whose ambiguous sexual allure serves as a symbol for the ghosts of sexual fluidity which Eve/lyn attempts to evade through his trek across the American desert.

Tristessa is a figure comprising only shifting and elusive significations, a pure simulacrum serving as a source of teenage fantasy for Eve/lyn, and an icon of angst for "sentimental queers".<sup>426</sup> Existing only as simulacrum, a proliferation of images which lack a reference point in the "real", "Tristessa had no function in this world except as an idea of himself; no ontological status, only an iconographic one".<sup>427</sup>

Rather than evading or suppressing the "ghosts" which haunt his fraught identity, Eve/lyn stumbles across the object of his boyhood affection: "You were an illusion in a void. You were the living image of the entire Platonic shadow show, an illusion that could fill my own emptiness with marvellous, imaginary things".<sup>428</sup> Tristessa serves as a symbol for the ambiguity which both characterises and threatens Eve/lyn's identity. The very ghosts which haunt the trajectories of sexuality and threaten them with inversion, or destabilisation are the ghosts of which they are comprised. As Jonathan Dollimore writes, "we are defined as much, if not more, by what our identity excludes as what it includes, and our desire, in all its perversity, is drawn to the very exclusions which constitute it".<sup>429</sup> Thus, while Eve/lyn craves a finite space free of ghosts, with "crisp edges", Tristessa serves as a source of queer identification for Eve/lyn, who revels in the instability of the phantasmagoric effects which comprise her "identity":

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<sup>426</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 5.

<sup>427</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 129.

<sup>428</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 110.

<sup>429</sup> Dollimore, "Bisexuality" 529.

And all you signified was false! Your existence was only notional; you were a piece of pure mystification, Tristessa. Nevertheless, as beautiful as only things that don't exist can be, most haunting of paradoxes, that recipe for perennial dissatisfaction.<sup>430</sup>

Eve/lyn realises the ephemeral or simulated nature of Tristessa, commenting on her lack of an essence and on the construction of her identity through the generation of its images and appearances: "I swam in and out of your sickness, your ache of eternal longing, your perpetual reverie, your beautiful lack of being, as if your essence were hung up in a closet too good to be worn and you were reduced to going out in your appearance".<sup>431</sup> Recognising that Tristessa comprises appearances and images, Eve/lyn is careful not to apply the demarcations of gender which would produce Tristessa as either male or female:

He, she - neither will do for you, Tristessa, the fabulous beast, magnificent, immaculate, composed of light. The unicorn in a glass wood, beside a transforming lake. You produced your own symbolism with the diligence of a computer.<sup>432</sup>

As hyperreality brings about the implosion of the image and the referent, identities are constituted only by the phantasmagoric effects that they take. Focalised though Eve/lyn in terms of perceived threats to his masculinity, the war of the New World seems one that is fought in opposition to and denial of such chimerical "appearances" of identities. Battle lines are drawn according to identity boundaries, and warfare is employed to protect and to validate identities that are represented only by, and exist only in terms of, their symbols. Women, identified by their insignia of vicious teeth within the female symbol, exist in militant

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<sup>430</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 6.

<sup>431</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 72.

<sup>432</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 143.

opposition to men and take as their project the undermining of the symbols of their masculinity:

The city was scribbled all over with graffiti in a hundred languages expressing a thousand griefs and lusts and furies and often I saw, in virulent dayglo red, the insignia of the angry women, the bared teeth in the female circle. One day, a woman in black leather trousers who wore a red armband printed with this symbol came up to me in the street, shook back her rug of brown curls, reached out a strong, gnarled hand, coarsely mouthing obscenities as she did so, handled my cock with contemptuous dexterity, sneered at the sight of my helpless erection, spat in my face, turned on her booted heel and walked scornfully away.<sup>433</sup>

The narrative is characterised by a recurrent destabilisation of phallic power. While Eve/lyn is content to revel in the phantasmagoria of Tristessa, he continues to fear affronts, or threats to that which he perceives to be his continuous appearance of masculinity. Eve/lyn comments that he fears these sorts of affronts more than the commonplace drive-by shootings and random murders, as "the Women [sic] practised humiliation at random and the bruised machismo takes longer to heal than a broken head".<sup>434</sup> This indicates that while real shots are being fired and real lives lost, this is an ideological rather than a military war.

When Eve/lyn is captured in the desert by the women of Beulah, it becomes apparent that his worst fears regarding his masculinity are to be realised, for what he has understood as the unquestionable determinant of his sexuality is to be rendered powerless by Mother:

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<sup>433</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 12-13.

<sup>434</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 17.



Before this overwhelming woman, the instrument that dangled from my belly was useless. It was nothing but a decorative appendage attached there in a spirit of frivolity by the nature whose terrestrial representative she had, of her own free will, become. Since I had no notion how to approach her with it, she rendered it insignificant; I must deal with her on her own terms.<sup>435</sup>

Aware that negotiations are now taking place in an alternative system of signification, Eve/lyn finds that there is no power invested in the previously powerful signifier of the phallus. Still reeling from his rape by Mother which completely frustrates the connection between penetration and power and the connection of the penis with phallic power, Eve/lyn is horrified to find that his "continuous effort" of masculinity is soon to be interrupted by the blade of Mother's scalpel. In Beulah, "where myth is a made thing, not a found thing",<sup>436</sup> the myth of the new Eve as archetypal woman is formed from the mythological stuff of the misogynistic Eve/lyn: "To be a *man* is not a given but a continuous effort.' My knees were buckling under me . . . I could not breathe; I knew I was at the place of transgression".<sup>437</sup>

Eve/lyn's transgression or transmogrification functions to highlight the degree to which identities are determined by and exist only in terms of their symbols. Once the silicon symbols of femininity and femaleness are manufactured and in place, Eve is thought to be woman, not just a woman, or any woman, but the archetypal woman - the New Eve for the New World. Prior to Eve/lyn's surgery, her/his concerns about the success of the process indicate the degree to which the symbols of identity determine, and construct what is commonly thought to be the essence of identity:

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<sup>435</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 60.

<sup>436</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 56.

<sup>437</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 63.

[I] was about to suffer an operation which would transform me completely. A complete woman, yes, Sophia assured me; tits, clit, ovaries, labia major, labia minor . . . But, Sophia, does a change in the coloration of the rind alter the taste of the fruit? A change in the appearance will restructure the essence, Sophia assured me coolly. Psycho-surgery, Mother calls it.<sup>438</sup>

Clearly, the notion that essences can be restructured operates as a parody which undermines the very concept of an "essence". Following the surgery which transforms Eve/lyn's male form into the physically female form of Eve, Eve/lyn undergoes a process of *learning* femininity. Femininity or femaleness is something that can be learned through what Mother refers to as "psycho-surgery", demonstrating the degree to which sexualities and identities are constructed of sustained practices and habits rather than constituted by innate or essential aspects. This is evident in Eve's opinion that after her surgery she remains a "lyrical abstraction of femininity".<sup>439</sup>

I KNOW NOTHING. I am a tabula rasa, a blank sheet of paper, an unhatched egg. I have not yet become a woman, although I possess a woman's shape.<sup>440</sup>

The silicon construction of Eve/lyn's new genitalia reveals that which is taken as the cornerstone of biological reductionism to be simulacrum. For, as Baudrillard suggests, the duplication is sufficient to render both artificial, and the in-depth description of Mother's surgical processes undermines the "truth" or "reality status" that we have historically attributed to our anatomy. Eve/lyn recognises that the possession of the most salient

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<sup>438</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 68.

<sup>439</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 74.

<sup>440</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 83.

markers of femaleness - breasts and a vagina - do not by any means ensure the production of a woman. The text maximises the irony of Mother's attempts to "create an essence" or to "alter the taste of the fruit", clearly operating as a critique of the essentialist assumption that gender is the necessary and innate corollary of biological sex:

although I was a woman, I was now also passing for a woman, but, then, many women born spend their whole lives in just such imitations. However, the result of my apprenticeship as a woman was, of course, that my manner became a little too emphatically feminine. I roused Zero's suspicions because I began to behave *too much* like a woman and he started to watch me warily for signs of the tribade.<sup>441</sup>

Despite the rigorous and expert surgery and the ongoing psycho-surgery which comprises largely the screening of Hollywood images of femininity, Eve/lyn does not feel as though she possesses the "essence" of "woman". Yet this is not because she still feels as though she possesses a male essence, as her transmogrification has made her aware of the illusory status of both. Eve/lyn is now aware that her sexuality is a simulation. Despite her surgical skill, Mother has an unwavering faith in the essential aspects of sexuality, and considers it only a matter of time before Eve/lyn achieves the essence of femininity which will be fixed in her as securely as the essence of masculinity was, prior to her capture by the women of Beulah. As Baudrillard suggests, "simulators try to make the real, all the real, coincide with their simulation models".<sup>442</sup> However, the crucial difference between the two is lost. Mother's attempts to reconcile the simulacrum with the real, or the body with the "essence", operates as a parodic exemplification of the way in which the desire for ontological security operates through strategies of ignorance and denial.

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<sup>441</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 101.

<sup>442</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations* 2.



The precession and procession of the simulacra illustrated by Mother's surgery has effectively effaced the very notion of an essence. Eve/lyn is now a perfect and progressive model for an original that does not exist. Zero cannot find fault with her, for she is now more perfect and more real than real. This is the irony of the insecurity that Eve/lyn feels about the authenticity of her sexuality. Eve/lyn worries that the psycho-surgery was not altogether successful, and that Zero might find in her some indication of masculinity, or other gender treachery. Yet the symbols are in place and, as a shiny new simulacrum of femininity, Eve/lyn is more "real than real":

Something in me rang false; he knew it by some atavistic intuition. One Sunday night, after he brusquely ordered me to undress, he took into his head to examine me with almost a jeweller's eye; he could have been inspecting a diamond he feared might be flawed. He made me stand on the desk and poked the barrel of a rifle in my ribs to make me turn round and round. Then he made me lie down on his bed, where he went over me point by point, breasts, belly, the junction of the thighs, knees, elbow and peered up my asshole; he told me I had too much hair around it and he also took exception to my hips, although their width was no fault of mine, Mother had widened the pelvis by means of bone grafts to facilitate the exit of the new Messiah. With the ears of my imagination, I heard the girls stirring with vicarious lust beyond the wooden wall and I was very much afraid in case he found a flaw in my disguise, that Mother might have left some unknown-to-me clue impressed in my flesh that showed I'd been reupholstered and, a few short months before, just as much a man as Zero. More of a man, in fact; hadn't my manhood sent Leilah off to the Haitian abortionist? Yet, when he righted me again, I saw, in spite of his little jibes,

almost pure envy in his eyes for Mother had made me unnatural only in that I was perfect. Venus herself had risen from the surgery.<sup>443</sup>

Zero's scrutiny of Eve/lyn only to find her "too perfect" operates as a parody of the imperative of authenticity. The "truth" of the simulacrum is that there is indeed no truth. For Zero this is a frustration, as it threatens his ontological security, which he invests squarely in his illusory masculinity. As Baudrillard argues, "One can live with the idea of a distorted truth. But . . . metaphysical despair . . . [comes] from the idea that the images concealed nothing at all".<sup>444</sup> Zero, an archetypal figure of both brutality and sterility, serves as a character who clearly illustrates this "metaphysical despair". The sexually ambiguous Tristessa inspires not only despair but also fury in the impotent Zero, and he refers to Tristessa as "PUBLIC ENEMY NUMBER ONE".<sup>445</sup> Convinced that she is responsible for his impotence, Zero sees Tristessa as both an affront and a threat to his sexuality. Until Zero violates and thus conquers and controls that which he does not understand, he will continue to feel that his sexuality is threatened, to the extent of sterility, by the enigma of Tristessa's sexuality:

"This is the lousiest lady in the world, d'you hear me?" he announced.

"She eats souls. She's magicked the genius out of my jissom, that evil bitch! And it won't come back until I stick my merciless finger into this ultimate dyke, like the little Dutch boy. Dyke; she's a dyke, a sluice of nothingness".<sup>446</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 106-107.

<sup>444</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations* 8.

<sup>445</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 91.

<sup>446</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 91.

Referring to Tristessa as "the ultimate dyke",<sup>447</sup> Zero makes clear his angst regarding the ambiguity of her sexuality. The one-legged, one-eyed, impotent Zero, himself a metaphor for sterility, has created a harem in the centre of the largest metaphor for sterility - the desert. Spending his days circling the desert in his helicopter in search for Tristessa, his need to demarcate, name and thus control sexual difference is clear.

On finding Tristessa's home, Zero attempts to rape Tristessa, believing that this display of sexual power will clarify her position as a woman and secure his own virility and, ultimately, his masculinity. On the discovery that the woman billed "the most beautiful in the world" conceals a penis, Zero flies into a fit of rage. Zero recognises that if Tristessa (with a penis not unlike his own) has been passing as a woman before the entire world, this undermines the power that Zero attributes to his magical member as that which he relies on to secure his masculinity. Newly insecure in his sexuality, he attempts to force her into a female role once and for all through the institution of heterosexual marriage. The irony of Zero's attempt to revert to the most traditional of heterosexualised institutions is the queer outcome of this union. Zero's plan is frustrated not only by the double inversion signalled by Tristessa and Eve/lyn in drag, but also by the queer and exploratory consummation of their marriage. Far from the return to heterosexual order which Zero anticipated,<sup>448</sup> the resultant queer love prompts Eve/lyn to question even the concepts of male and female:

Masculine and feminine are correlatives which involve one another. I am sure of that - the quality and its negation are locked in necessity. But what the nature of masculine and the nature of feminine might be, whether they involve male and female, if they have anything to do with Tristessa's so long neglected apparatus or my own factory fresh incision and engine

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<sup>447</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 91.

<sup>448</sup> Order is temporarily restored, as the only hours-old-marriage is ended when Tristessa's penis is torn from Eve/lyn's newly fashioned vagina, and Tristessa is murdered. In a parody of classic right-wing retribution for sexual deviance, Tristessa is killed by a band of fundamentalist Christian children.



turned breasts, that I do not know. Though I have been both man and woman, still I do not know the answer to these questions. Still they bewilder me.<sup>449</sup>

Eve/lyn's discovery that the genitalia of a sexed body do not determine and do not necessarily line up with the sexual identifications or desires of a sexed body allows the text to operate as an exemplification of many interesting and queer combinations of sex, gender, desire and identification. Following her/his sex re-assignment surgery, Eve/lyn has a queer masturbatory experience in front of the mirror. Eve/lyn discovers that her/his identity is characterised more in terms of fluidity and possibilities than contradictions, or struggles between the older effects of "maleness" and the newer, plastic effects of "femaleness":

But when I looked in the mirror, I saw Eve; I did not see myself. I saw a young woman who, though she was I, I could in no way acknowledge as myself, for this one was only a lyrical abstraction of femininity to me, a tinted arrangement of curved lines. I touched the breasts and the mound that were not mine; I saw white hands in the mirror move, it was as though they were white gloves I had put on to conduct the unfamiliar orchestra of myself. . . . I was a woman, young and desirable. I grasped my tits and pulled out the dark red nipples to see how far they'd go; they were unexpectedly elastic and it did not hurt to tug them sharply. So I got a little more courage to explore myself further and nervously slid my hand between my thighs. But my over-taxed brain almost exploded, then, for the clitoris transplant had been an unqualified success. The tactile sensation was so well-remembered and gave me so much pleasure, still, I could

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<sup>449</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 149-150.

scarcely believe the cleft was now my own. Let the punishment fit the crime, whatever it had been. They had turned me into the *Playboy* center fold. I was the object of all the desires that had ever existed in my own head. I had become my own masturbatory fantasy. And - how can I put it - the cock in my head, still, twitched at the sight of myself. The psycho-programming had not been entirely successful. But, where I remembered my cock was nothing. Only a void, an insistent absence, like a noisy silence.<sup>450</sup>

Here, the traditional conceptualisation of the objectification of the female form takes on a decidedly queer aspect, as the cock in Eve/lyn's head twitches at the sight of herself/himself. Eve/lyn considers the cock to be an "insistent absence", a phenomenon generated from a void, but with considerable effects nevertheless. The copy without an original, and in this case without a fleshly manifestation, persists, and exists only in its effects. The combination of the tactile sensation that Eve/lyn experiences as s/he caresses her/his own clitoris, in addition to the newly experienced pleasure of this stimulation, frustrates the conventional opposition of subject/object pleasures. Eve/lyn suggests that s/he has become her/his "own masturbatory fantasy". Following the sex re-assignment surgery, Eve/lyn's sexual experience has become one that is inclusive rather than exclusive. Instead of operating as a means of shoring up the illusory boundaries of his prior masculinity, Eve/lyn's sexuality is now characterised by a queer fluidity of identifications, pleasures and desires. Tactile and physical pleasures mix and meld, as the boundaries between active/passive, subject/object, desire/identification and male/female are effaced in favour of a queer and fluid experience of sexuality.

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<sup>450</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 74-75.

As Butler remarks, any performance of a binary sexuality requires the exclusion of elements which might threaten its illusory simulacra of unity. Furthermore, for Butler the taking up of a particular sexual position ensures a continual haunting by these excluded elements.<sup>451</sup> What Carter's novel presents, then, is an excessive textual exemplification of this process through which these exclusions or "ghosts" are covered over and denied in order to maintain the binary simulacra of sexuality. Simultaneously, though, the text provides queer descriptions of sexual encounters which are not restricted by categories of identity, and which incorporate what would otherwise be exclusions, as pleasurable acts and desires. As Dollimore writes, these ghosts not only signal a destabilisation of binary conceptualisations of sexuality, but also provide access to variant modalities of pleasures, desires and identifications.<sup>452</sup>

Eve/lyn's journey through the American desert allows us to explore her/his figurative journey through the illusory "space" between the image and the referent. In realising the dilemma which Eve/lyn experiences regarding the "ghosts" of her/his sexuality, we might understand that this is the bind in which all sexual simulacra are caught. Through the implosion of the image and the referent, we recognise that what we take to be our "sex", or our "sexuality", is simulacrum, a processive and perfect copy for which there is no original. Yet the simulacrum is *not* perfect; existing as it does in the realm of hyperreality, it is "more real than real". Characterised by this excess, the simulacrum is seductive, a processive series of slippery surfaces denying and effacing the existence of a depth. Yet these appearances are continually drawn to and threatened by what they exclude. Eve/lyn's shiny new simulacrum of femininity strives to deny the possibility of images which might contradict this "more real than real" representation of gender. This provides not only a destabilisation of the notion that the simulacra of femininity might point to something further, but also

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<sup>451</sup> Butler, interview 36.

<sup>452</sup> Dollimore, "Bisexuality" 536-537.



provides access to variant and multiple pleasures and identifications. This queer potential is more fully explored in the following section of the chapter which studies Carter's earlier speculative fiction, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*.

*The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* is framed as an exploration of the loss of referentiality. This section of the chapter will serve as an exploration of the queer implications of this loss of referentiality, particularly in terms of the destabilisation of the hitherto immutable trajectories of heterosexuality and homosexuality. This facilitates a reading of *Infernal Desire Machines* as a site rich with images of queer sexuality. Using Baudrillard's notion of seduction, we can read bodies, sexes and pleasures as slippery surfaces which efface the very notion of a stable or innate depth.

Framed as an ideological war fought at the level of mis/representations, *Infernal Desire Machines* parodies totalising and determinist thought which insists that the boundaries of the "Real", of "Knowledge" and of "Truth" are not only natural, but also impermeable. The opening of the text indicates the over-determination of even the narrative mode, with an aged and war-weary Desiderio claiming, "I remember everything. Yes. I remember everything perfectly".<sup>453</sup> Set up, then, to hear Desiderio's unqualified account of the war, the reader is unaware on the first page that Desiderio's narrative authority and reliability is a guise. Only four pages later, Desiderio's admission that "I cannot remember exactly how it began"<sup>454</sup> reveals the narrative omniscience to be a pretence, and that the determination of linearity and truth is clearly out of reach. The old Desiderio's account of the war years accords with the normative structures which have replaced the tumultuous times of "unreason" in which Doctor Hoffman "was waging a massive campaign against human reason itself".<sup>455</sup> Framed in terms of historical detachment and masculinist authority,

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<sup>453</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 11.

<sup>454</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 15.

<sup>455</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 11.

Desiderio's earliest account of the effects of Hoffman's mirages renders them ineffectual, and his own ontology and selfhood secure:

I became a hero only because I survived. I survived because I could not surrender to the flux of mirages. I could not merge and blend with them; I could not abnegate my reality and lose myself for ever as the others did, blasted to non-being by the ferocious artillery of unreason. I was too sardonic. I was too disaffected.<sup>456</sup>

Rather than possessing a strength to resist the "flux of mirages", Desiderio lacks the ability to internalise them. Too intent on perpetuating stasis and ontological security, Desiderio's retrospective account laments his determinist imperative. The irony of Desiderio's retrospective account is that subsequent text, also focalised by Desiderio, indicates that he *was* completely subsumed by the flux of mirages, and not only did he merge and blend with them, he was and still is constituted by them by the end of the novel.

While Desiderio serves the Minister of Determination, he does not believe in his cause, and could not be less interested in the outcome of the war. This contradicts his earlier statement that "In those tumultuous and kinetic times, the time of actualized desire, I myself had only the one desire. And that was, for everything to stop".<sup>457</sup> Throughout the entirety of the text, Desiderio's desires are far from singular, and are usually determined by the various manifestations and embodiments of Hoffman's daughter, Albertina. In this sense, while the novel's conclusion appears to privilege the "Reason" of the Minister of Determination with the destruction of Hoffman's diabolical machines and Desiderio's execution of Albertina, the novel's frame contextualises this in terms of loss rather than

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<sup>456</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 11-12.

<sup>457</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 11.

triumph. Desiderio's attitude to his status as a hero is self-deprecating and, rather than positioning Albertina as an enemy, Desiderio continues to mourn her in a world in which "all the objects are emanations of a single desire":<sup>458</sup> "the heroine of my story, the daughter of the magician, the inexpressible woman to whose memory I dedicate these pages . . . the miraculous Albertina".<sup>459</sup>

References to continuity, objectivity and truth are textually self-conscious with Desiderio insisting, "I must not run ahead of myself. I shall describe the war exactly as it happened. I will begin at the beginning and go on until the end".<sup>460</sup> All this undermines the narrative omniscience declared at the opening of the text, and Desiderio's continual claims to "history", "evidence" and the infallibility of memory parody notions of authorial omniscience and singularity of narrative. It is in this sense that the text provides signs early on that the focalisation is doubled, diffracted, and dissolved to such a point that there is no point of reliability or security on which to pin certainties. Desiderio's simultaneous claims to truth and objectivity, and his admissions of circularity and confusion encourage the reader to recognise that there is not a fixed or singular narrative to follow, but also that this confusion points to a parody of the search for one in the first place.

It is in this sense that the novel operates within a textual frame which encourages the reader to view the war between the Minister of Determination and Doctor Hoffman as a parody of hegemonic discourses. Both Hoffman and the Minister desire power, yet both assume power to reside in different places. The pursuit of this ever-elusive power facilitates a textual display of the discourses and normative structures which are employed as a means of controlling, demarcating and regulating lives according to a hegemonic imperative. While both Hoffman and the Minister employ these normative discourses, both are represented

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<sup>458</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 14.

<sup>459</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 13.

<sup>460</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 13.



as according with hegemonic codes. In this sense, the novel forms a critique of both the regulatory function of essentialist and determinist paradigms of thought, but also a parody of the means by which postmodernist notions of representation are sometimes appropriated to normative ends.

Doctor Hoffman's destabilisation of the idealistic fallacy of an essential and authentic reality is framed in terms of the Minister's desperate and futile attempts to demarcate and maintain the boundaries of an illusory real. Prior to Hoffman's assault on the reality principle, the city is characterised by images of institutionalised heterosexuality. Part of the means by which the text parodies notions of an "authentic reality" consists of the Minister's and Desiderio's attempts to come to terms with the destabilisation of "the economy of (hetero)sexuality".<sup>461</sup>

Doctor Hoffman's desire machines can be read as a graphic parody of the means by which the simulacrum of heterosexuality is maintained. This is indicated in exhibit one of the desire machines, which provides an explicit illustration of the means by which female sexuality is framed within heterosexist discourses. The wax figure in the exhibit does not have a torso, nor for that matter a head, indicating not only the objectification and fetishism of female genitalia, but also the reification of the body and experience of "Woman". This is indicated in the title of the exhibit, "I HAVE BEEN HERE BEFORE",<sup>462</sup> positioning the essentialised "Woman" as a place to be visited or conquered, rather than as a person or representative of individual people. Furthermore, the language in which the viewing of the waxen image is framed is one of conquest. Descriptions such as "triumphal arch", "coat of arms" and "circular proscenium" are used in reference to the waxen genitalia, indicating the "triumph" over the figure in the image, as representative of "Woman".<sup>463</sup> Simultaneously,

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<sup>461</sup> This is a phrase used by Steven Angelides to indicate the normative regulation of sexualities according to the heterosexual/homosexual matrix. "Rethinking the Political" 28.

<sup>462</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 44.

<sup>463</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 44.

though, within the vagina, Desiderio views an incredibly inviting, yet intoxicating and sinister "landscape". Flowers that exude perfumes of "extraordinary potency" and the appearance of a castle which appears to hold many torture chambers<sup>464</sup> align with traditional notions of women and the sexuality of women as something to be both desired, yet feared. This invocation of the "monstrous feminine" indicates that the conquest of the "Woman" is one not without the possibility of peril.

The parody of the objectification and fetishism of female sexuality is continued in exhibits three and four of the desire machines. Exhibit three consists of "two perfectly spherical portions of vanilla ice-cream, each topped with a single cherry so that the resemblance to a pair of female breasts was almost perfect".<sup>465</sup> Exhibit four parodies the naturalisation of violence toward women and, again, the fetishism of the headless body. The terms of reference for this description clearly draw attention to the "artifice" of the image, with constant mention made of the means by which the construction is achieved:

The right breast had been partially segmented and hung open to reveal two surfaces of meat as bright and false as the plaster sirloins which hang in toy butcher's shops while her belly was covered in some kind of paint that always contrived to look wet and, from the paint, emerged the handle of an enormous knife which was kept always a-quiver by the action (probably) of a spring.<sup>466</sup>

The perpetual naturalisation of the objectification, fetishism and violence against women is crucial in maintaining the binary of sexuality necessitated by heteronormativity. These images work against such a naturalisation, and can be read as parodic, in terms of the

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<sup>464</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 44-45.

<sup>465</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 45.

<sup>466</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 45-46.

continual and overt references that are made to the artifice of the samples and Desiderio's voyeuristic spectatorship. Exhibits six and seven, however, exemplify the strongest parody of the heterosexist imperative. Exhibit six, tellingly entitled "THE KEY TO THE CITY", parodies the phallocentrism on which this system and indeed "the city" are predicated:

A candle in the shape of a penis of excessive size, with scrotum attached, in a state of pronounced tumescence. The wrinkled foreskin was drawn far enough back to uncover in its importunate entirety the grossly swollen, sunset-coloured tip as far as a portion of the shaft itself and, at the minute cranny in the centre, where the wick must have been lodged, burned a small, pure flame.<sup>467</sup>

The language used to describe the penis is derisive rather than erotic, indicating the possibility of reading the sample as ridiculing rather than reinforcing phallocentrism. There are many other instances in the novel in which phallocentrism is parodied, serving to undermine the basis for binary sexuality and compulsory heterosexuality. Having undermined the phallocentrism on which compulsory heterosexuality is constructed, exhibit seven draws attention not only to the entirely constructed status of heteronormativity, but also to the banality of its naturalisation and internalisation:

As I expected, here a man and a woman were conducting sexual congress on a black horsehair couch. The figures, again exquisitely executed in wax, looked as though they might have been modelled in one piece and, due to a clockwork mechanism hidden in their couch, they rocked continually back and forth. This coupling had a fated inevitable quality. One could not picture a cataclysm sufficiently violent to rend the twined forms asunder

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<sup>467</sup> Carter, *Infelmal Desire Machines* 46.



and neither could one conceive of a past beginning for they were so firmly joined together it seemed they must have been formed this way at the beginning of time and, locked parallel, would thus go on for ever to infinity.<sup>468</sup>

Desiderio's comment that he "expected" the image indicates the extent to which images of heterosexual couples are coded culturally as normal. Similarly, his comments that they "looked as though they might have been modelled in one piece" and "must have been formed this way at the beginning of time" illustrate the pervasiveness of the naturalisation of heteronormativity.

The overt parody and "artifice" of the images indicates the possibility that they are in place to disguise the fact that there is no "real" or "original" of which they are (seemingly bad) copies. In Baudrillard's terms, the images represent "truth effects", functioning to generate a "truth" where there is none. There is no "truth" of compulsory heterosexuality, apart from or prior to the waxen, (or digital, celluloid, etc.) images which purport to represent it. Far from being "bad copies" of the real, these images, in fact, are "more real than real" in that their existence necessarily gestures to their artificiality. The continual references to the apparent "artifice" of the images allow a reading of them as a parody of the production of "truth effects" for sexuality. This is indicated in exhibit one when Desiderio says, "although the hairs had been inserted one by one in order to achieve the maximal degree of verisimilitude, the overall effect was one of stunning artifice".<sup>469</sup>

The narrative of *Infernal Desire Machines* is constructed around what is ostensibly a war between The Minister of Determination and the "Diabolical Doctor Hoffman", who aims to

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<sup>468</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 46.

<sup>469</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 44.

gain control of the world through rewriting history. Hoffman attempts to do this through the harnessing of eroto-energy, which consists of the fluids collected from the sexual activity of caged heterosexual couples. This energy is used to drive the desire machines and other unspecified electronic image technologies, which disseminate many and varied images in a "ferocious artillery of unreason".<sup>470</sup> Hoffman believes that it is through the dissemination of these images that he will simultaneously gain control of the world and "liberate the potentiality of phenomena". This is evident in Hoffman's methodology, which indicates that his project might be read as a model of simulation:

First theory of Phenomenal Dynamics. . . The universe has no fixed substratum of fixed substances, and its only reality lies in its phenomena. . .  
 Second theory of Phenomenal Dynamics: only change is invariable. . . .  
 Third theory of Phenomenal Dynamics: the difference between a symbol and an object is quantitative not qualitative.<sup>471</sup>

In suggesting that the universe's "only reality lies in its phenomena", Hoffman appears to recognise that "reality" only exists through its effects or, in other words, that there is no reality apart from, or prior to the simulacrum. He interrogates the notion that there is a fundamental difference between a symbol and an object, or between representations and a real. This finds a parallel in the work of Baudrillard, for whom the difference between a symbol and an object is quantitative, with objects existing in terms of their "reproducibility". In Baudrillard's theory of simulation, "reality disappears as the process of reproducibility is pushed to its limit".<sup>472</sup> This forms the basis of Hoffman's assault on the "reality principle" as he engages in exercises of mass reproducibility in order to liberate phenomena from the strictures of reality.

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<sup>470</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 12.

<sup>471</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 96.

<sup>472</sup> Schoonmaker 171.

While this marks a point of similarity between Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and Hoffman's project, it also indicates a deviation. For Baudrillard, reproducibility ensures that "reality disappears". However, Hoffman sees reproducibility as a means of uncovering "reality", of liberating the until-now-repressed "reality of sexuality". Thus, while for Baudrillard the proliferation of images is "potentially infinite",<sup>473</sup> Hoffman attempts to uncover the "infinite potentiality of phenomena". For Baudrillard, there is no reality apart from "images of reality", whereas for Hoffman the dissemination of images is a convenient way of liberating "reality". Hoffman's use of "reproducibility" in this project is made explicit within the novel. This forms a parody of the normative processes through which the simulacra are naturalised as the "real". This is described in terms of the eroto-energy which beams via transmitters:

- (a) synthetically authentic phenomena;
- (b) mutable combinations of synthetically authentic phenomena;
- (c) sufficient radiation to intensify a symbol until it becomes an object according to the law of effective evolving, or, if you prefer a rather more explicit term, complex becoming.<sup>474</sup>

This effacement of the real, through the reproduction of "synthetically authentic phenomena", ensures that there is no longer a distinction between the real and its representation. This "complex becoming", in which a symbol becomes an object, is the very process which Baudrillard outlines as that in which the image replaces the real. In other words, for Baudrillard the precession of the model renders the "real" always and only ever a simulation:

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<sup>473</sup> Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images* 29.

<sup>474</sup> Carter, *Infemal Desire Machines* 208.



It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself, that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes.<sup>475</sup>

Effectively, this is the process in which Hoffman engages, his desire machines being read as the means by which "signs of the real" are substituted for the real itself. The production of the images within Hoffman's desire machines are such that they render the "reality" to which the Minister of Determination so strongly adheres only one in a series of simulacra. Baudrillard suggests that the duplication of an object "is sufficient to render both artificial".<sup>476</sup> This reveals the difference between the original and copy as redundant, with the reduplication of images so prolific that it is impossible to distinguish a difference.

That which Baudrillard refers to as the "collusion between images and life" is what Hoffman creates with his desire machines. The seven exhibits which comprise the first set of samples which Desiderio views in the desire machines collude with the action that is to follow in the novel. It is unclear whether Desiderio's experience of the desire machine or the action which occurs in the text are to be considered the "reality" of the experience. This serves to demonstrate the conflation of the real and its representation, ultimately indicating the fabricated nature of what is considered to be reality: "As for the anticipation of reality by images . . . the connection between cause and effect becomes scrambled and it becomes impossible to tell which is the effect of the other".<sup>477</sup>

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<sup>475</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations* 4.

<sup>476</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations* 18.

<sup>477</sup> Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images* 19.

This challenge to the notion that images are a reflection or a representation of reality is demonstrated recurrently within the novel. Desiderio's experience of the HUSH! SHE IS SLEEPING, I COME, A KISS CAN WAKE HER, and DEATH AND THE MAIDEN samples within the desire machine is followed by his having sex with the somnambulant Mary Anne, and his subsequent necrophilic desire for her. This is something which confuses both Desiderio and the reader, as neither can be sure whether the images in the desire machines are influencing or controlling his experience, or whether they do in fact substitute for and thus constitute his experience. The narrative uncertainty ensures that this cannot be determined, yet the importance of these events lingers in their confusion. That is, there is no distinction to be made between an "authentic" experience and the disseminated images or simulations of this experience:

I was overwhelmed with shock and horror. I felt I was in some way instrumental to her death. I crouched over the sea-gone wet doll in an attitude I knew to be a cruel parody of my own the previous night, my lips pressed to her mouth, and it came to me there was hardly any difference between what I did now and what I had done then.<sup>478</sup>

Unsure of the distinction between "image" and object, between "reality" and "memory", Desiderio's consequential guilt signals not only the power of images and iconography, but also marks the onset of his inevitable ontological loss in the face of proliferating images that efface the real. Baudrillard suggests that it is this inversion which inspires the greatest "metaphysical despair" because it makes apparent the notion that "the images conceal nothing at all" and that it is only the simulacrum which exists:<sup>479</sup>

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<sup>478</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 61.

<sup>479</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations* 8.

For some time now, in the dialectical relation between reality and images (that is, the relation that we wish to believe dialectical, readable from the real to the image and vice versa), the image has taken over and imposed its own immanent, ephemeral logic; an immoral logic without depth, beyond good and evil, beyond truth and falsity; a logic of the extermination of its own referent, a logic of the implosion of meaning in which the message disappears on the horizon of the medium.<sup>480</sup>

This "ephemeral logic" is that which the Doctor produces with his desire machines, in that it is not a false logic or a false reality but rather the very possibility of its existence, that marks as illusory notions of "reality" or "falsity". While Hoffman's assault on the "Reality Principle" might be read as an illustration of the operations of "hyperreality",<sup>481</sup> he is also caught in this realm, and is unaware that he cannot operate outside of it. Hoffman fails to realise that the distinction between the image and the object is destroyed not only for the Minister of Determination, but also for himself. In other words, in order for Hoffman to construct his own "reality" (or to liberate the "reality of sexuality"), he must destroy the processes by which the Minister tabulates "reality". He fails to realise, however, that the processes which he engages to do this destroy the very possibility of a "reality". For this reason, Hoffman's project to "liberate the potentiality of phenomena" is one that will never be realised. Similarly, the war of representation between the Minister and Doctor Hoffman is one that can never be won, constituted as it is by a "representational imaginary".<sup>482</sup>

While the narrative positions the Minister of Determination and Doctor Hoffman as adversaries in the war of representation, Desiderio as focaliser prompts the reader to

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<sup>480</sup> Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images* 23.

<sup>481</sup> Hyperreality is the realm in which the distinction between reality and illusion is dissipated. Sarup, *Post-structuralism and Postmodernism* 165.

<sup>482</sup> The notion that there is an essential difference between the real and the means of representation is what Baudrillard refers to as a "representational imaginary". Baudrillard, *Simulations* 3. This follows, then, that the control of the means of representation for which the Doctor and the Minister struggle will not secure the hold on the real that both men desire.



recognise that the strategies of the two are more similar than they are inimical. Both Hoffman and the Minister recognise the role that images have in constructing what is taken to be "reality". Both assume that there is a substantive content of power to be gained from the dissemination of images, their only difference being that they wish to construct different "realities". Hoffman is intent on rewriting history (and thus gaining control of the world) by "liberating the potentiality of phenomena". In attempting to guard "reality" from Hoffman, the Minister is attempting to defend something which literally does not exist. Both the Minister and Hoffman fail to recognise that their motives rest on what Baudrillard refers to as a "representational imaginary", or an assumption that there is an essential difference between the real and its representation. Hoffman demonstrates this through his belief that the Minister's labelling and quantifying of phenomena is repressive. This indicates the assumption that there is somehow more to reality than that which is produced in images. Thus, while Hoffman is engaged in a war against the "Reality Principle" his aim is to uncover and liberate the "reality" of sex. Both the Minister and Hoffman fail to recognise that there is no sexuality beyond or prior to the simulacrum, and that any notion of a centralised power is in itself only a simulation.

The similarities between Hoffman and the Minister position them both as "agents" of "the real". Effectively, both men want to control the proliferation of images in order to secure for themselves the position of power which they see as innate to the control of bodies and sexualities. Both men "want to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum", the only difference being that the images which one man holds to be "real" are simulacra for the other.

Hoffman appears to believe that it is within his capabilities to unleash the forms or phenomena of sexuality which have previously been restrained by the Minister. Fundamentally, Hoffman believes that "societal structures" are artifice, and that it is his project to liberate phenomena from them. The major contradiction in Hoffman's theory is

indicated in the means by which his strategy operates. Hoffman's attempt to establish what Albertina refers to as a "regime of total liberation" operates by controlling bodies, pleasures and energies, by caging desire and attempting to distil its essence. Hoffman is unaware, however, that his search for an "essence of sexuality" is futile and actually contradicts his objectives. Hoffman uses caged heterosexual couples as the energy source for the production of images. This indicates that while he is attempting to "liberate phenomena", the means by which he is doing so are firmly grounded in a notion of the "authentic reality" of heterosexuality. Furthermore, in his conviction that there are phenomena to be liberated, Hoffman falls into the trap of assuming that there is in fact a fundamental difference between the representation and the real. This contradicts his "First Theory of Phenomenal Dynamics", and indicates that his project cannot but fail. Hoffman's theory is based on contradictions, misunderstandings, and senseless slogans such as "DR HOFFMAN PISSES LIGHTNING".<sup>483</sup> In fact, Desiderio spends the entirety of the novel searching for an understanding of Hoffman's theory, and concludes, "the essence of the Hoffman theory was the fluidity of its structure".<sup>484</sup>

Despite the contradictions and confusions which comprise Hoffman's methodology, it holds much interest for its continual and persistent frustration of and play with appearances. Although Hoffman's project is based on a series of theoretical paradoxes, it does nonetheless provide many instances which might be read as queer moments, or moments of seduction. Hoffman makes his preoccupation with the destabilisation of notions of "authenticity" explicit, one of the maxims of his theory being "nothing . . . is ever completed; it only changes . . . . No hidden unity".<sup>485</sup> Not only do the desire machines represent a parody of the means by which the simulacrum of heterosexuality is maintained,

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<sup>483</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 40.

<sup>484</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 100.

<sup>485</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 99.

but also many of the other images which Hoffman disseminates by unspecified means provide textual illustrations of the queer project of fluidity.

From the opening of the text, the war that Hoffman wages against reason can be read as a metaphor for the relationship between the queer project of fluidity and the means by which heterosexist imperatives are maintained. The city, prior to Hoffman's siege, was overtly masculine:

It was a solid, drab, yet not unfriendly city. It thrived on business. It was prosperous. It was thickly, obtusely masculine. Some cities are women and must be loved; others are men and can only be admired or bargained with and my city settled serge-clad buttocks at vulgar ease as if in a leather armchair. His pockets were stuffed with money and his belly rich with food.<sup>486</sup>

Into this sphere of established ease which is "just a little nervous all the same"<sup>487</sup> enters Hoffman, who claims that his project is to "storm the ideological castle" of which the Minister is king.<sup>488</sup> This involves the liberation of the streets from directions and clocks from time, as Hoffman considers social structures to be artifice.<sup>489</sup>

Of the impact that Doctor Hoffman has had on the city, Desiderio says, "This phantasmagoric redefinition of a city was constantly fluctuating for it was now the kingdom of the instantaneous".<sup>490</sup> Perhaps this is the reason the war that Doctor Hoffman wages is

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<sup>486</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 15-16.

<sup>487</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 16.

<sup>488</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 33.

<sup>489</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 35.

<sup>490</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 18.



considered so diabolical by the Minister of Determination. Any destabilisation of the ontological security of categories of identity is bound to induce a certain degree of panic as the notions of "truth" or "reality" come under question. For Baudrillard, the interest of images, yet also their potential to inspire despair stems from the fact not that they might represent a false reality, but rather, that they destroy the very possibility of the notion of reality: "They are sites of the *disappearance* of meaning and representation, sites in which we are caught quite apart from any judgement of reality, thus sites of a fatal strategy of denigration of the real and the reality principle".<sup>491</sup>

Initially, the Minister, who "had never in all his life felt the slightest quiver of empirical uncertainty",<sup>492</sup> reacts to "the Hoffman effect" as the dissemination of "counterfeit phenomena" or "lawless images" which simply need eradication in order to restore order and reality. With time and the Doctor's dissemination of increasingly "synthetic authentic phenomena", the Minister's empiricism is sorely tested, the boundaries between "authenticity" and "artifice" becoming indistinguishable. When the realisation of this impacts on the Minister and the inhabitants of the city, the result is widespread panic:

The cumulative psychological effect of all these distortions, combined with the dislocation of everyday life and the hardship and privations we began to suffer, created a deep-seated anxiety and a sense of profound melancholy. It seemed each one of us was trapped in some downward-drooping convoluted spiral of unreality from which we could never escape.<sup>493</sup>

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<sup>491</sup> Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images* 29.

<sup>492</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 22.

<sup>493</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 20.

The Minister is a man obsessed with the restoration of reality and the reality principle, a project which involves the maintenance of boundaries, authenticity and a fundamental belief in the ontological status of things. As a parodic figure, he signals the structural necessity of language and processes of labelling in the maintenance of structures of masculinist "reason". Of the Minister the Ambassador says, "You are in the process of tabulating everything you can lay your hands on. In the sacred name of symmetry, you slide them into a series of straitjackets and label them with, oh, my God, what inexpressibly boring labels"!<sup>494</sup>

The Minister is consistently parodied in the novel for the extreme lengths to which he would go in order to identify and qualify a reality which will remain ever elusive. For Baudrillard, it is a mistake to attempt to discern a difference between the real and its representation, and thus an authentic and an artificial object. As already noted, for Baudrillard the nature of simulations is to make void that very distinction. It is this fluid, phantasmagoric and chimerical frustration of the "reality principle" which so shakes the Minister's ontological stability and structures of reason. With the loss of referentiality, and the excessive proliferation of images which refuse to uniformly "represent" the "real", the Minister's quest for order and reality is thwarted at every turn by the postmodern and queer representationality of Doctor Hoffman.

Much of Carter's novel consists of a satire of the Minister's persistent quest to demarcate and maintain the boundaries of that which he believes to constitute the real. For the Minister, the distinction between that which is "authentic" and that which is "counterfeit" is one of the fundamental structures of reality. The naturalisation of this distinction is parodied in the novel, with the Minister incinerating objects in order to determine whether they are in fact "authentic":

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<sup>494</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 37.

I rarely had the stomach to pass Reality Testing Laboratory C for the smell of roast pork nauseated me and I wondered if the Minister, out of desperation, intended to write the Cartesian cogito thus: 'I am pain, therefore I exist', and base his tests upon it for, in cases of stubborn and extreme confusion, they operated a trial by fire. If it emerged alive from the incineration room, it was obviously unreal and, if he had been reduced to a handful of ash, he had been authentic.<sup>495</sup>

The Minister's confusion is a consequence of Mendoza's theory that "if a thing were sufficiently artificial, it became absolutely equivalent to the genuine".<sup>496</sup> If the Minister were able to destroy only those images which appeared artificial, then he would be able to restore his elusive realm of reality. However, this is impossible, as hyperreality is a sphere in which the existence of the artificial entirely effaces the possibility of a genuine. The frustration which results from this sees the Minister and the inhabitants of the city destroying objects/images at random as they attempt to cling to the notion of a "reality" which can no longer hold:

The superstitious fear of the citizens rose to a pitch of feverish delirium and they often raised hue and cries against any unfortunate whose appearance smacked in some way of transparency or else who seemed suspiciously too real. The suspects were often torn to pieces. I remember a riot which began when a man snatched a baby from a perambulator and dashed it to the ground because he complained that its smile was "too lifelike".<sup>497</sup>

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<sup>495</sup> Carter, *Inferral Desire Machines* 22.

<sup>496</sup> Carter, *Inferral Desire Machines* 102.

<sup>497</sup> Carter, *Inferral Desire Machines* 18-19.



The Minister's continued search for "authenticity" within structures which preclude the existence of such a thing satirises the arbitrary means by which the "reality status" of heterosexuality is maintained. Much of the Minister's energy is channelled into the construction of a computer centre which he believes capable of "calculating the verifiable self-consistency of any given object".<sup>498</sup> The Minister believes that the identity of a thing lies "only in the extent to which it resemble[s] itself".<sup>499</sup> On this basis, he designates as artificial those images or identities which do not repeatedly or consistently "perform" the same identity. This might be read in terms of the processes by which the dominant discourse, in this instance compulsory heterosexuality, is maintained through continual processes of reiteration. The vulnerability of compulsory heterosexuality is revealed through its need to "resemble itself", as its existence depends on the reiterative institutionalisation of the simulacra of identity categories. In attempting to prevent Doctor Hoffman from allowing a shadow to fall between the word and the thing described, the Minister's actions indicate that there is no "reality status" for the thing described, apart from its continual implementation through processes of naming. He indicates this in his persistent and paranoid attempts to cover over this fact through his formation of the project which he refers to as "The Rectification of Names":

He decided he could only keep a strict control of his actualities by adjusting their names to agree with them perfectly. So, you understand, that no shadow would fall between the word and the thing described. For the Minister hypothesized my father worked in that shadowy land between the thinkable and the thought of, and, if he destroyed this difference, he would destroy my father.<sup>500</sup>

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<sup>498</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 23.

<sup>499</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 23.

<sup>500</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 194.

The Minister recognises that one of the primary ways in which order is maintained is through the persistent production and regulation of identities. He also appears to recognise the danger of the Doctor's "play of appearances" which reveals even those objects granted a "three star reality rating" as simulacra. He indicates this when he declares that "any thing or person seen to diverge significantly from it or his own known identity is committing an offence and may be apprehended and tested".<sup>501</sup> While the Minister attempts to maintain the "reality status" of objects and individuals, he demonstrates that he is also keen to maintain the status quo, which is one of masculinist heterosexual ease. The above declaration for reality testing indicates the Minister's commitment to maintaining binary sexuality, in referring to identities as being either "it", or "his".

With the multiplicity of ways in which the repetitive trajectory of heterosexuality is sustained, there is a danger that any strategy of opposition may be appropriated as a "truth effect" in the model of simulation. The result of this is that the means of resisting the simulations of heteronormativity seem difficult and unlikely. Interestingly, the means of resistance which Baudrillard suggests might be read as a precursor for the queer strategy can be explored within *Desire Machines*. Madan Sarup writes that for Baudrillard the only means of resistance possible is the refusal of the search for "meaning" in signifieds:

We are just bombarded with information-rich images every moment of our lives, and the only way we can cope with this, the only way we can resist the power of this information to take over our lives, is to accept the images as only signifiers, only as surfaces, and to reject their meanings their signifieds.<sup>502</sup>

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<sup>501</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 62.

<sup>502</sup> Sarup 165.

Baudrillard's refusal of the existence of a "meaning" for a "signifier", or "depth" for a "surface", is evident also in *Seduction*, many parts of which might also be seen as a precursor for queer's project of fluidity. Baudrillard writes of the destabilising force of seduction, suggesting that to play with the surface problematises the distinction between a surface and a depth:<sup>503</sup>

The capacity immanent to seduction to deny things their truth and turn it into a game, the pure play of appearances, and thereby foil all systems of power and meaning with a mere turn of the hand. The ability to turn appearances in on themselves, to play on the body's appearances, rather than with the depths of desire. Now all appearances are reversible . . . only at the level of appearances are systems fragile and vulnerable . . . meaning is vulnerable only to enchantment.<sup>504</sup>

The destabilising potential that Baudrillard attributes to the "play of appearances" is similar to the notion explored in the theoretical section on queer. In Chapter Two it was suggested that identities are constructed through reiterative practices and the citational legacy of performative utterances such as identity categories. This highlights a vulnerability of heterosexuality, then, which might be utilised in this particular queer project through the resignification of sexualities as that which cannot be signified. Baudrillard suggests that "the state of sex's liberation is also that of its indetermination. No more want, nor more prohibitions, and no more limits: it is the loss of every referential principle".<sup>505</sup>

*Desire Machines* can be read as a series of moments of seduction, or queer moments, which function to destabilise this "representational imaginary of sexuality". Both Carter's

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<sup>503</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction* 10.

<sup>504</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction* 8.

<sup>505</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction* 5.



novel and the characters within it read as a set of images characterised by doubling, mirroring, contradiction and dissolution. The text demonstrates a preoccupation with the interrogation and frustration of boundaries. The narrative instability and continual frustration of narrative expectations force the reader to explore and revel in the "slipperiness" of the text, where nothing is what it seems.

The text is peppered with characters who occupy sexualities and identities which are fleeting and transient, denying entirely sexual referentiality. All images within the text are highly sexual or sensual in nature; yet it does not necessarily follow that they are "recognisably" human or animate forms. There are many lengthy sections in the text in which the images of characters most clearly destabilise any notions of unity within the dichotomous boundaries of male/female, human/animal, animate/inanimate. One example of the implosion of these discursive polarities is found in *The House of Anonymity*:

The dazed, soft-eyed head of a giraffe swayed on two feet of dappled neck above the furred, golden shoulders of one girl and another had the striped face of a zebra and a cropped, stiff, black mane bristling down her spine. But, if some were antlered like stags, others had the branches of trees sprouting out of their bland foreheads and showed us the clusters of roses growing in their armpits when they held out their hands to us. One leafy girl was grown all over with mistletoe but, where the bark was stripped away from her ribcage, you could see how the internal wheels articulating her went round. Another girl had many faces hinged one on top of the other so that her head opened out like a book, page by page, and on each page printed a fresh expression of allure. All the figures presented a dream-like fusion of diverse states of being, blind, speechless beings from a nocturnal forest where trees had eyes and dragons rolled about on wheels. And one girl must have come straight from the whipping parlour for

her back was a ravelled palimpsest of wound upon wound - she was neither animal nor vegetable nor technological; this torn and bleeding she was the most dramatic revelation of the nature of meat that I have ever seen.<sup>506</sup>

When Desiderio first enters the room, what he sees is "perhaps, a dozen girls in cages", representing the "undifferentiated essence of the idea of the female". Desiderio's expectations to find the essence of "Woman" caged, precede and override any notion that what is contained in the cages might not align so neatly with essentialist polarities. This is why, when he actually views the figures in the above description, he is surprised to find that "none of them were any longer, or might ever have been, woman".<sup>507</sup> The shock that Desiderio experiences as his phallogentric expectations are denied is evident in his shivering with fear despite the "odoriferous heat that filled the salon".<sup>508</sup> Of the figures he says, "all, without exception, passed beyond or did not enter the realm of simply humanity. They were sinister, abominable, inverted mutations, part clockwork, part vegetable, part brute".<sup>509</sup>

The revulsion and fear that Desiderio experiences when viewing these images reinforces the text's parody of the means by which heterosexuality denies, and implicitly fears, all forms of sexuality or sexual expression which do not ultimately serve to maintain its position. Further, this reinforces the idea that there is a naturalised understanding of what constitutes "Woman" as the reified singular. While these "abominable, inverted mutations" are still coded as feminine, they are not endorsed culturally according to the archetype of "Woman". Rather, they are figured as the "monstrous feminine".

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<sup>506</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 132-133.

<sup>507</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 132.

<sup>508</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 133.

<sup>509</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 132.

Both the Count and Desiderio stand before (and below) the images in costumes which are a cruel and uncomfortable parody of phallocentrism. Of the costumes which they are forced to wear on entry to the House of Anonymity, Desiderio says:

she took from a cupboard two pairs of black tights made in such a way that, once we put them on, our genitals remained exposed in their entirety, testicles and all. . . . Then the maid handed us hood-like masks which went right over our heads, concealing them, and were attached by buttons to buttonholes in the collars of our waistcoats, so that our heads were changed into featureless, elongated, pinkish, rounded towers. The only indentations on these convex surfaces of pink cardboard were two slits, to look through. These masks or hoods completed our costumes, which were unaesthetic, priapic and totally obliterated our faces and our self-respect; the garb grossly emphasized our manhoods while utterly denying our humanity.<sup>510</sup>

This demonstrates the novel's dual preoccupation with the destabilisation of phallocentrism and the essentialism of binary sexuality as these function to maintain compulsory heterosexuality. Additionally, though, this section provides an exploration of sexualities which are not constrained by these means, but rather elude the rigid boundaries of sexuality through their play of appearances, or queer fluidity. The implosion of the discursive polarities of male/female, human/animal, animate/inanimate leave Desiderio and the Count with no means whatsoever to understand, or appropriate the figures before them. With their own sexuality reduced to a satirical representation of an essence, the two men are deprived of the structures and means by which they could easily dismiss the figures as "Other" or as aberrations of an "authentic sexuality". While the Count appears to

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<sup>510</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 129-130.



launch into a maniacal fit of sexual rage at the sight, Desiderio states that he "came to the conclusion that he was only lamenting his own frigidity".<sup>511</sup>

Other queer images which confront Desiderio in his travels also serve to inspire fear in him and an uncertainty as to the ascendancy of his own sexuality. When Hoffman's samples are buried under the landslide, he can no longer control the proliferation of images, and the "liberation of sexuality" escapes his control. This sees the onset of Nebulous Time in which "desires must take whatever form they please",<sup>512</sup> indicating a time in which sexualities and images are entirely uninhibited by the referentiality of discursive polarities. It is at this point that desires, bodies and pleasures proliferate along lines which are not regulated, but exist instead in a spectrum of erotic potentialities. Desiderio encounters "trees whose trunks were scaled like fish", clucking bushes with speckled plumage which lay eggs, crawling, one-eyed marsupials that taste like celery, and a "buzzing, bi-partite thing, half horse, half tree" with visible skeleton and entrails, containing a throbbing, and pulsing green sap.<sup>513</sup> In finding himself no longer part of the dominant or "authentic", Desiderio begins to feel a revulsion for his physical form; "I felt myself dwindle and diminish. Soon I was nothing but a misshapen doll clumsily balanced on two stunted pins, so ill-designed and badly functioning a puff of wind would knock me over".<sup>514</sup>

Many of the other queer images in the text are associated with the carnival, which is queer in itself, demonstrating no regard for rules or boundaries: "The fairground was a moving toyshop, an ambulant raree-show coming to life in convulsive fits and starts whenever the procession stopped, regulated only by the implicit awareness of a lack of the rules".<sup>515</sup>

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<sup>511</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 135.

<sup>512</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 169.

<sup>513</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 170-171.

<sup>514</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 176.

<sup>515</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 99.

Again, the queer figures in this section of the novel demonstrate an implosion of discursive binaries. bearded ladies, and alligator men refuse to adhere to only one side of the polarities which would designate an "intelligible" identity.

Most obviously, though, Hoffman's daughter Albertina exhibits this refusal to repeatedly "perform" the same identity. Not only does Albertina appear under a variety of guises in the novel but, significantly, s/he also refuses to allow a reiteration of the performative utterance which in the repetitive process of naming would produce her as an effect of that name. Albertina appears only as simulacrum, refuting the assumption that there is a "real" to her/his sexuality. Some of the guises in which Albertina appears within the novel include: a transsexual Ambassador, a black swan, a gipsy girl, a suspended head, the waif-like Lafleur, and the beautiful transvestite intermediary. Just as Albertina can transgress the boundaries separating one identity from another without warning, so there is no coherence in any of her appearances. These permutations are not limited to sexuality, but can also be transgressions among animal and human forms, for instance, the figure of the transsexual Ambassador as s/he appears in the first part of the novel:

the nails on his long hands were enamelled dark crimson, to match the nails on his similarly elegant feet, which were fully exposed by sandals consisting of mere gold thongs. He wore flared trousers of purple suede and used several ropes of pearls for a belt around his waist. All his gestures were instinct with a self-conscious but extraordinary reptilian liquidity; when we rose to go to eat, I saw that he seemed to move in soft coils. I think he was the most beautiful human being I have ever seen - considered, that is, solely as an object, a construction of flesh, skin, bone and fabric.<sup>516</sup>

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<sup>516</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 32.

Textually thematised here is the processes of Albertina's construction. Reduced to her/his constituents, Albertina is seen not in terms of gender, indeed not even in terms of animal/human, but rather as a construction of flesh. The multiplicity of allusions and metaphors employed in similar descriptions of Albertina ensure that s/he is comprised of combinations and contradictions, rather than gesturing toward a "coherent" performance of identity. Desiderio does not recognise nor can he reconcile anything within the identity of Albertina. The one thing of which he is sure, however, is that s/he is a construction. In fact, of Albertina Desiderio says, "I see her as a series of marvellous shapes formed at random in the kaleidoscope of desire".<sup>517</sup>

In reading Albertina as an illustration of the queer exploration of sexualities, we might see her fluidity and ambiguity as a possible way in which subjects might resist the effective application of signifiers (necessarily politically invested) to their sexualities. Despite the fact that the Minister and Desiderio both have ostensibly more "intelligible" or "acceptable" sexualities, they find themselves unable to reconcile the contrarities of the Ambassador. This situation ensures that Albertina has the upper hand in their first and subsequent encounters, refusing to let them fully understand and thus produce her identity. Desiderio says of the Ambassador:

He was a manicured leopard patently in complicity with chaos. Secure in the armour of his ambivalence, he patronized us. His manner was one of wry supercilious reserve.<sup>518</sup>

Steven Angelides suggests that "the more slippery and elusive the object of discourse the more difficult is the process of observation, specification and codification".<sup>519</sup> Perhaps this

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<sup>517</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 13.

<sup>518</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 32.

<sup>519</sup> Angelides, "Rethinking the Political" 38.



is the case with Albertina: not only is each of her appearances slippery and elusive, but also the fact that she appears in so many different forms in the novel makes her all the more difficult to categorise and thus control. This is the very strength that Baudrillard attributes to seduction, suggesting that, "every discourse is threatened with this sudden reversibility, absorbed into its own signs without a trace of meaning".<sup>520</sup>

If we read Carter's text as a series of moments of seduction, we can examine the threat that this "play of appearances" poses to discourses which maintain notions of "truth" and "authenticity". Images of seduction or queer images of fluidity challenge the phallocentrism, binary sexuality, and rigid demarcation of identity categories which form the means by which the "persistence of vision" maintains the "truth effect" of heterosexuality.

*The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* can be read as an exemplification of Baudrillard's fatal strategy - a realm of hyperreality in which there is the loss of every referential principle. The struggle between the Minister of Determination and Doctor Hoffman exemplify the tensions between a belief in the idealistic fallacy of an essential or authentic reality, on the one hand, and, on the other, the implosion of the discursive polarities which render such a belief mythical. The notion that sexualities and the reiterative trajectory of "compulsory heterosexuality" are simulacra undermines any notion that there is an "authentic reality" or, indeed, "authentic sexualities". Rather than attempting to determine a "truth" beneath the simulacrum, this exploration of Carter's text has engaged a queer reading strategy or "play of appearances". This reading of the text in terms of "surfaces" undermines the notion that there is a "depth". This destabilises the means by which sexualities are designated as either "true" or "false", and opens an exploratory site for queer in which identities are not regulated by reiterative processes of performance and utterance, but rather exist in a spectrum of erotic potentialities.

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<sup>520</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction 2*.

Both the *Infernal Desire Machines* and *The Passion of New Eve* can be read as textual interrogations of the quest for ontological stability. Desiderio seeks stasis, wishing only for “everything to stop”,<sup>521</sup> as does Eve/lyn, who seeks a “finite and succinct city”.<sup>522</sup> Yet like Walser in *Nights at the Circus*, Desiderio and Eve/lyn do not find not the stasis that they seek. Rather, their masculinist quest for ontological stability leads all three characters and the reader to a space of ontological, existential and sexual dissolution. All three texts operate as an interrogation of the normative structures of reason, causality, sequential time, reality. This results in the diffraction and dissolution of identity and the destabilisation of the regulatory power which notions of essential identity exercise. While *Infernal Desire Machines* operates as a critique of the normative discourses and imageries which constitute the “real”, *Passion of New Eve* facilitates an interrogation of the notion of essential identity and binary sexuality. Framed also as a critique of the “real” and ontological security is Carter’s 1984 text *Nights at the Circus*. The following chapter will examine how, through Walser’s masculinist and reasoned quest for journalistic “truth”, the novel interrogates conventional understandings of “objectification”, “Other”, and the binary distinction of mind/body. The textual invocation of the Bakhtinian carnival enables the refiguring of the interface between the body and the world, and a deconstruction of the normative regulation of the corporeal.

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<sup>521</sup> Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 44.

<sup>522</sup> Carter, *The Passion* 10.

## Chapter Five

### Queer Nights and Circus Freaks: A Bakhtinian Tour of Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*

Carter's final two novels are the most celebrated of her oeuvre and this chapter is concerned with the earlier of these: *Nights at the Circus*. *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children* are recognised as more accessible and less didactic than Carter's earlier work, and many critics cite this as a maturation of her style. Certainly in comparison with the intertextually dense theoretical and philosophical aspects of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, Carter's later work does appear to adopt a tone which is more celebratory and accessible. However, the continued self-reflexiveness and theoretically interrogative aspect of Carter's work appears to align with the "demythologising business"<sup>523</sup> evident throughout her oeuvre. As Gamble suggests, Carter was "[f]ormidably well-read in literature and theory, [and] she tended to anticipate critical responses to her work in a way that is distinctly disconcerting to the critic".<sup>524</sup> While there are stylistic differences between Carter's earlier and later works, her interrogative, iconoclastic and demythologising project is sustained throughout the entirety of her writing. Rather than framing a perceived change in Carter's style as a sign of authorial maturity, I suggest that these later texts continue the interrogative and intertextual style of Carter's previous novels. Carter is quoted as having said "my fiction is very often a kind of literary criticism",<sup>525</sup> and indeed, all of Carter's work tests and torments the reader with intertextual allusions to philosophy, literary and cultural theory, art movements and artists, musical composers and

<sup>523</sup> Carter, "Notes From the Front Line" 38.

<sup>524</sup> Gamble 2.

<sup>525</sup> Angela Carter, interview, *Novelists in Interview*, By John Haffenden, (London: Methuen, 1985) 79.



scores, as well as political ideas and leaders. *Nights at the Circus* is also a text which can be read “on as many levels as you can comfortably cope with at the time”.<sup>526</sup>

I have already suggested that bodies, sexes, pleasures and identities are regulated by the inscription and labelling of terms of difference. I have argued that the reiterative nature of the inscription of difference masks a potential for fragmentary and momentary destabilisation, allowing moments in which the apparatus which regulates identities fails to function according to conventional codes. In this chapter I will read *Nights at the Circus* as an invocation and critique of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque and the transgressive potential of the grotesque. Carter's use of the carnivalesque and the grotesque in *Nights* will be examined according to a queer perspective, thereby dislocating of several of the means by which difference is inscribed. In extending the previous chapter's concern with identity performances, *Nights* will be read as a celebration of the “ever incompleated character of being”.<sup>527</sup> Objectification, voyeurism and the naming of identities contribute to the production and demarcation of difference or “otherness”. The textual thematisation of these processes facilitates a reading of the text as examining the duplicitous problematics of perception and performativity.

The previous chapter provided a reading of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of New Eve* in terms of the reiterative function of performative utterance as “producing” that which they name. This chapter will examine traditional conceptualisations of perception and the gaze, particularly in terms of conventional appropriations of voyeurism and objectification, and the implications that these have for the way in which the body is figured. Not only is objectification credited with fixing or securing the body as final or finite, but also with defining the way in which the body is seen, which

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<sup>526</sup> Carter, interview, *Novelists in Interview*, 86.

<sup>527</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 1965. trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 32.

parts of the body are seen, and whether the body is seen as *bodily* at all. *Nights at the Circus* provides a site for queer exploration of the implications of these issues in terms of the regulation of identities through corporeality.

Published in 1984, *Nights at the Circus* is noted in much of the later Carter criticism for the theatrical aspects linked directly to performativity, as discussed by Judith Butler. While all of Carter's fiction contains elements of the theatrical<sup>528</sup> or carnivalesque, Carter's last two longer fictions, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*, deal most explicitly with aspects of staging, performance and theatre. Many of the critics merely conflate theatricality with Butler's notion of performance, a move which fails to recognise the subversive potential of either gender performativity or Carter's fiction. Indeed, these last two novels read as explicit explorations and thematisations of the mutability and instability of the fictions of identity, issues also foregrounded in *The Passion of New Eve* and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*.

In drawing comparisons between theatrical performance/spectatorship and the performativity of identity, it is important to recognise that the two ought not be conflated. As Butler warns, gender performances are not merely voluntary, but in fact mandatory for the maintenance of the "intelligible" subject:

performance as bounded "act" is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer's "will" or "choice"; further, what is "performed" works to conceal, if not to disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious,

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<sup>528</sup> Britzolakis suggests that "If there is a single theme that appears central to criticism of Carter's writing, that theme must surely be theatricality". Britzolakis 43.

unperformable. The reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake.<sup>529</sup>

The elision of this significance positions performativity as wilful play, without recognising that it is in this *play* that the subject is constituted and formed in the first instance. There is much within Carter's fiction to facilitate a reading of the theatrical aspects in terms of performativity. However, it is not enough to take the signs of the theatrical as signs of the performative. Not all images of performers and theatrical performance necessarily interrogate the means by which the subject is socially and culturally constituted through reiterative performances of identity. For critics to assume that this is the case is to underestimate the efficacy of normative apparatuses that regulate the subject, as it assumes that the subject can play with identity at will. As this chapter will suggest, the means by which the subject is constituted may be momentarily destabilised via an interrogation of these very apparatuses. In other words, it is only by working within the bounds of these regulatory effects - as we must - that we might destabilise their reiterative and hegemonic power. Simply assuming a costume and *playing* gender or identity does not necessarily destabilise the means by which an identity is figured or performed.

*Nights at the Circus* has been celebrated by many feminists for a perceived commitment to a sense of female community previously unexpressed or, as some suggest, denied in Carter's earlier fiction.<sup>530</sup> While there are elements in the text which might facilitate such an approach, I suggest that to appropriate Carter's fiction in these terms is to underestimate the novel's broad scope of cultural critique. In her interviews and other non-fiction publications, Carter has often expressed a frustration regarding the notion of a

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<sup>529</sup> Butler, *Bodies* 234.

<sup>530</sup> Palmer notes a shift in Carter's writing from representations of "female puppets" to a perspective which is "increasingly woman-centred", marking the "celebration of a female counter-culture". Palmer, "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman" 179-180. This is a view also expressed by Blodgett, who suggests Carter's later work signifies "woman's strength through community". Blodgett 51. Chapter One provides a more extensive discussion of these issues.



"universalisation of female experience".<sup>531</sup> Each of her novels is expressly concerned with the masculinisation of cultural texts and institutions, and their function in determining a role, place or mythology for women. Similarly, Carter's texts warn against a ready internalisation of these roles, implicating women as complicit with the systems and structures which produce them as social fictions.

In light of this, I hesitate to embrace performativity as an exclusively feminist concept or tactic. Both Butler's and Carter's texts are largely concerned with the social fictions which regulate our lives. Masculinity and femininity are two such fictions, inseparable from the roles, functions, pleasures and powers with which these intersect and operate. To attempt to liberate one fiction from the other is to remain constrained within the constitutive terms of the mythological framework. I would suggest that both Carter and Butler can be read as freeing up space for subjects not within categories, but rather around, across and through the categories which constitute subjects in the first instance. Rather than working with terms of inversion, or what Bakhtin called the 'world upside down',<sup>532</sup> I read both Carter and Butler as exploring the process of "hybridization",<sup>533</sup> of working through and across terms, refusing to accept them as "truth".

To see performativity solely as a means for women to free themselves from patriarchal control is to seriously underestimate the potential of Butler's work. Likewise to celebrate Carter's later texts as presenting a strong female community is to underestimate the significance and scope of issues under scrutiny. The presence of circus performers in *Nights* does not necessarily or automatically indicate a textual concern with performativity. Rather, I would contend that Carter's invocation and critique of Bakhtin operates through a textual over-determination of issues regarding masking, performance, spectatorship, and

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<sup>531</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 12.

<sup>532</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986) 56.

<sup>533</sup> Stallybrass and White 43.

identity. This provides a representational space for a grotesque performativity which radicalises understandings not only of gender, but of the performances of time, space, narrative and history as well.

Bakhtin's utopian theory of the transgressive potential of the carnivalesque continues to hold significance for contemporary theorists and cultural commentators. There are those who detract from Bakhtin's work, like Terry Eagleton, who suggests that "Carnival, after all, is a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony".<sup>534</sup> While there is certainly some validity in Eagleton's point, it is also arguable that a dislocation of Bakhtin's theory from a utopian celebration of the carnival in its specifics can serve as a means of disrupting those apparatuses which serve as the mainstays of hegemony. As Stallybrass and White suggest, "carnival as an *analytic* category can only be fruitful if it is displaced into the broader concept of symbolic inversion and transgression".<sup>535</sup> In reading Carter's text in terms of Bakhtin's work, it will become apparent that the transgressive implications of the carnivalesque extend beyond the specific ritualised implementations of carnivalistic mirth, and might themselves permeate and permutate those structures and rituals which demarcate the norm from which they are reinscribed as deviations.

Understandings of the carnivalesque might be used as a means of destabilising certain of those apparatuses credited with a regulatory function. Bakhtin's notions of heteroglossia and the language of the marketplace might be read as a destabilisation of the normative function of linguistic inscription and naming. Similarly, notions of the gaze, spectatorship, audience and visual appropriation can be reconceptualised through an understanding of Bakhtin. Finally, Bakhtin's notion of hybridization and the body in the act of becoming is a means by which normative understandings of bodies can be destabilised. This allows a

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<sup>534</sup> Terry Eagleton qtd. in Stallybrass and White 13.

<sup>535</sup> Stallybrass and White 18.

critique of the way bodies are regulated by the three aspects under discussion in this chapter: language and the power of naming, the gaze, and the appropriation of the corporeal.

In what reads as a journey of regression, a journey in search of origins and self - or rather a parody of such a search - *Nights at the Circus* is similarly structured to both *The Passion of New Eve* and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*. Reminiscent of Desiderio and Eve/lyn, Walser's "habit of suspending belief extended even unto his own being".<sup>536</sup> Walser is "unfinished", needing to "hear his bones rattle . . . That was how he knew he was alive".<sup>537</sup> Clearly not terribly secure in his sense of "self", Walser takes solace with the masculinist tradition in his voyeuristic appropriation of the winged *aérialiste* Fevvers for his series of stories cynically entitled "Great Humbugs of the World".<sup>538</sup> Contradictory to and perhaps because of the existential and ontological insecurity regarding his own self, Walser begins a quest to ascertain the "true" nature of Fevvers, with the resonant motif: "Is she fact or is she fiction"?<sup>539</sup> Framed in terms of masculinist reason and journalistic objectivity, Walser's right to ascertain Fevvers' fictionality or otherwise functions as a metonymic representation for the masculinist and normative structures and discourses which determine what is authentic, inauthentic, fact or fiction. Reminiscent of Eve/lyn, Walser functions as a parody of the way in which ontology is "secured" through difference and the demarcation of that which is "Other". With a self-conscious attention to the gendered nature of Walser's voyeuristic interview, Carter writes:

In his red-plush press box, watching her through his opera-glasses, he  
thought of dancers he had seen in Bangkok, presenting with their plumed,

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<sup>536</sup> Carter, *Nights* 10.

<sup>537</sup> Carter, *Nights* 10.

<sup>538</sup> Carter, *Nights* 11.

<sup>539</sup> Carter, *Nights* 7.



gilded, mirrored surfaces and angular, hieratic movements, infinitely more persuasive illusions of the airy creation than this over literal winged barmaid before him. "She tries too damn' hard," he scribbled on his pad.<sup>540</sup>

Densely coded, this passage highlights Walser's participation in the masculinist and class informed history of voyeurism and objectification, seated comfortably as he is in the dominant position of his "red-plush box" and with the aid of opera-glasses to frame the "spectacle" before him. Through the metaphorical opera-glasses that Walser wears throughout the first section of the novel, his critique of Fevvers operates in terms of her failed approximation of a bird, but also her failed approximation of femininity. It seems that Walser takes Fevvers' performance of a winged creature as a foregone conclusion, with his statement that she "tries too damn' hard" implying that she *must* try, and that she is not *naturally* a bird and perhaps not *naturally* a woman. With masculinist sexual arousal as the criteria, Walser reads Fevvers as a failed performance or over-performance, in comparison with the "infinitely more persuasive illusions" of the Bangkok dancers. Implicit in Walser's assessment of Fevvers, is the failure of Fevvers' performance according to notions of authentic and inauthentic femininity. Contradicting his suggestion that she "tries too damn' hard", Walser comments directly on the performative nature of Fevvers, suggesting, "You did not think of calculation when you saw her, so finely judged was her performance".<sup>541</sup> While Walser sits comfortably in judgement of Fevvers, pencil poised for the inscription of his decision as to whether she is indeed fact or fiction, there is much which undermines the security of his masculinist reason and apparatus of appropriation. Rather than framing the interaction between Fevvers and Walser as one in which her femininity and authenticity as a "feathered intacta" is appropriated and objectified, the narrative subverts these

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<sup>540</sup> Carter, *Nights* 15-16.

<sup>541</sup> Carter, *Nights* 12.

expectations by Fevvers' consistent emphasis on her "self" in terms which signify production rather than consumption:

On her red mouth there was an artificial smile.

Look at me! With a grand, proud, ironic grace, she exhibited herself before the eyes of the audience as if she were a marvellous present too good to be played with. Look, not touch.

She was twice as large as life and as succinctly finite as any object that is intended to be seen, not handled. Look! Hands off!

LOOK AT ME!<sup>542</sup>

Dislocating the conventional connection between the masculinist gaze and objectification or possession, Fevvers demands to be looked at, subverting notions of female object passivity. Fevvers thrives on the audience attention, not only of the audiences at her staged performances but also that the attention of Walser, Lizzie, all those around her who are audience to the performativity of her femininity and her performance as a winged *aérialiste*: "LOOK AT ME". The audiences of Fevvers' performativity are coded as consumers, but as part of the process of production. For Fevvers, the audience perception and reaction to her appearance are necessary to maintain the performance of her identity as winged *aérialiste*. This is evident towards the end of the novel, when Fevvers loses contact with the audience - both the circus audience and Walser - and she can no longer maintain the performance of her identity. Significantly, though, it is Fevvers who determines the conditions of her theatrical display, a part of which is the maintenance of ambiguity. Fevvers encourages the uncertainty and speculation regarding her status as a winged *aérialiste* and as a woman, with the poster above her dressing room mirror boldly asking, "Is she fact or is she fiction"? Fevvers derives a comfort from this ambiguity, knowing that it makes her both

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<sup>542</sup> Carter, *Nights* 15.

unique and safe from the appropriations of those she invites to "Look, not touch".<sup>543</sup> Fevvers' ambiguous performativity frustrates attempts to secure her identity through the application of a fixed and fixing classificatory term.

The excessive use of metaphors to describe Fevvers highlights her performative and transgressive nature. She is variously described in terms of "The Cockney Venus",<sup>544</sup> "Winged Victory",<sup>545</sup> "Cupid",<sup>546</sup> "The Angel of Death",<sup>547</sup> "Helen of Troy",<sup>548</sup> "The English Angel",<sup>549</sup> "a rocket",<sup>550</sup> "a voice that clanged like dustbin lids",<sup>551</sup> "the prow of a ship",<sup>552</sup> "an Iowa cornfield",<sup>553</sup> "a meatdish",<sup>554</sup> "beefsteak red",<sup>555</sup> "Red-Riding Hood's Grandmother",<sup>556</sup> "a dray mare",<sup>557</sup> and "a hump-backed horse".<sup>558</sup> Most of these metaphorical references to Fevvers parody the excessive gestures or features of her performance which render it suspicious. Those aspects of Fevvers' performance which do not align with conventional femininity are not coded as masculine, but are instead signalled through a disparate range of metaphors both animal, human, animate and inanimate. Fevvers frustrates more than conventional binaries of masculine/feminine as her metaphorical presence challenges the discretion of the corporeal form as human. The narrative repeatedly evokes literary and

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<sup>543</sup> Carter, *Nights* 15.

<sup>544</sup> Carter, *Nights* 7.

<sup>545</sup> Carter, *Nights* 37.

<sup>546</sup> Carter, *Nights* 23.

<sup>547</sup> Carter, *Nights* 79.

<sup>548</sup> Carter, *Nights* 7.

<sup>549</sup> Carter, *Nights* 8.

<sup>550</sup> Carter, *Nights* 7.

<sup>551</sup> Carter, *Nights* 7.

<sup>552</sup> Carter, *Nights* 15.

<sup>553</sup> Carter, *Nights* 18.

<sup>554</sup> Carter, *Nights* 12.

<sup>555</sup> Carter, *Nights* 13.

<sup>556</sup> Carter, *Nights* 18.

<sup>557</sup> Carter, *Nights* 12.

<sup>558</sup> Carter, *Nights* 19.



historically fetishised feminine figures in an attempt to *place* the enigmatic Fevvers. In a critique of the power that these iconographies wield in forging feminine behaviours, Fevvers exploits and discards each conventional appropriation. By means of continuous references to Fevvers through intertextual allusions and incongruous metaphors such as “angel” and “meatdish”, the reader becomes aware that her identity is forged through contradiction and an incorporation of disparate elements which critique the conventional structures of femininity. The “essence” of Fevvers is infinitely displaced by metaphor, ensuring that the locus of her identity is deferred far beyond that which is accessible, prompting the realisation there is nothing more to Fevvers than metaphor and make-up.

Additionally, Fevvers is continually described in terms of bird imagery. She is variously referred to as a “swan”,<sup>559</sup> her plumage as “just like the fluff on a chick”,<sup>560</sup> “as gaudy as that of a Brazilian cockatoo”,<sup>561</sup> and her wing span referred to as “a polychromatic unfolding fully six feet across, spread of an eagle, a condor, an albatross fed to excess on the same diet that makes flamingoes pink”.<sup>562</sup> Further, Fevvers did not come into this world through “normal channels”: she was “[h]atched out of a bloody great egg”.<sup>563</sup> Hatched from an egg and raised by Lizzie, Fevvers reveals that she is bird-identified, problematising Walser’s (and, by association, the reader’s) instinct to decide clearly whether the *aérialiste* is indeed, fact or fiction. Fevvers’ reluctance to eat birds of any kind indicates her self-conceptualisation as a bird:

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<sup>559</sup> Carter, *Nights* 7.

<sup>560</sup> Carter, *Nights* 12.

<sup>561</sup> Carter, *Nights* 15.

<sup>562</sup> Carter, *Nights* 15.

<sup>563</sup> Carter, *Nights* 7.

if there's the option, I won't touch a morsel of chicken, or duck, or guineafowl and so on, not wanting to play cannibal. But, this time, in my extremity, I whisper a prayer for forgiveness to my feathery forebears and tuck in.<sup>564</sup>

The fact that Fevvers abandons her scruples and familial respect so easily parodies notions of identification, belonging and origin. This casts Fevvers' identity further adrift, suggesting to the reader that she is neither human nor fowl, and that tendencies to categorise her as either will come unstuck in her ambiguity of identification, appearance and performativity. Fevvers herself does not seem sure of the ontological status of her identity as winged *aérialiste*, articulating the tension between the perceptions of her identity and the "essence" or "truth" of that identity:

She felt her outlines waver; she felt herself trapped forever in the reflection in Walser's eyes. For one moment, just one moment, Fevvers suffered 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?"<sup>565</sup>

This highlights the tension between self-conceptualisation and the perceptions of those who witness the performances of her identity. Parodying humanist notions of the essential self, the narrative encourages the reader to recognise that the "truth" of Fevvers identity is not secured by either Walser or Fevvers. Fevvers' anxiety at the displaced locus of her identity does not itself signify a search for identity, but rather a recognition that identity exists only in repetition and the varied perceptions of these repeated performances:

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<sup>564</sup> Carter, *Nights* 77.

<sup>565</sup> Carter, *Nights* 290.

I existed only as an object in men's eyes after the night-time knocking on the door began. Such was my apprenticeship for life, since it is not to the mercies of the eyes of others that we commit ourselves on our voyage through the world? I was closed up in a shell for the wet white would harden on my face and torso like a death mask that covered me over, yet inside this appearance of marble, nothing would have been more vibrant with potentiality than I! Sealed in this artificial egg, this sarcophagus of beauty, I waited, I waited, . . . although I could not have told you for what it was I waited. Except, I assure you, I did not await the kiss of a magic prince, sir! With my two eyes, I nightly saw how such a kiss would seal me up in my *appearance* for ever!<sup>566</sup>

Framed in terms of the regulatory function of the masculinist gaze and objectification, Fevvers fears being forever appropriated according to gendered narratives of romance, beauty and femininity. Significantly, Fevvers fears the entombment of the potentiality of her identity in the inscriptions of beauty and femininity. "Sarcophagus of beauty" signifies at once a death and a concretisation of the inscription of identity in language and according to codes of beauty and desirability. There are other occasions when Fevvers fears the regulatory power of language and naming. This is significant in terms of the argument made in chapter two. Identities, bodies and behaviours are regulated partially through reiterative processes of naming and linguistic inscription. For this reason, there is a subversive potential in displacing the reiterative performative utterance, and it is this displacement which Fevvers demonstrates in her reluctance to be named. Butler writes that performativity is only successful to the degree that it reiterates past performances.<sup>567</sup> This need for repetition to maintain the naturalised status of identity categories provides a space for discursive interruption and instability.<sup>568</sup> Identity categories operate as regulatory

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<sup>566</sup> Carter, *Nights* 39.

<sup>567</sup> Butler, *Bodies* 226.

<sup>568</sup> Butler, *Bodies* 237.



performatives, exercising the effect of their name as they name it. To disrupt the repetition of identity categories or strategies of naming is to indicate the illusory nature of these categories (evident in the necessity to repeat them), and to destabilise the production and perpetuation of identities in terms of the linguistic performatives through which they are constituted.

The celebration of Fevvers' performativity is contextualised in terms of an historical struggle for women to determine and define not only the means by which they are conceptualised, but also the conditions under which they live. This is evident throughout the text, specifically with reference to the means by which the female characters are appropriated according to traditional masculinist structures, traditions and assumptions. Fevvers is referred to in terms of countless historical, mythological and literary figures and images, proving on each occasion to confound them all. There is no prior mythology or role with which Fevvers' subjectivity accords; she is not Helen of Troy, Leda, the Angel of Death, nor Cupid. Fevvers' continual frustration of attempts to constrain her identity in terms of mythology of femininity, celestial beings or birds is counterpointed by that which other female characters suffer at the hands of similar textual, historical and discursive traditions.

"The Ape-Man beat his woman as though she were a carpet".<sup>569</sup> With "marks of fresh bruises on fading bruises on faded bruises",<sup>570</sup> Mignon does not have a voice, and therefore does not have access to the same tools that Fevvers uses to construct her subjectivity. As Boehm suggests, "Mignon's history is the history of women without voices to speak themselves; she is entirely an object, to be used by the various men who mistreat her, and it would be impossible for her to tell her own story to Walser or Fevvers".<sup>571</sup> Mignon

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<sup>569</sup> Carter, *Nights* 115.

<sup>570</sup> Carter, *Nights* 129.

<sup>571</sup> Beth A. Boehm, "Feminist Metafiction and Androcentric Reading Strategies: Angela Carter's Reconstructed Reader in *Nights at the Circus*", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 37.1 (1995) : 43-44.

is just one of the women in Carter's text who suffers according to a tradition of masculinist domination. The women in Madame Schreck's Museum of Women Monsters are daily appropriated by the masculinist gaze which constructs them as Other. Similarly, there are scores of women imprisoned in the Panopticon of the tundra for murdering their violent and abusive husbands. Yet *Nights at the Circus* does not merely chart the means by which masculinist discourses continually appropriate women according to the gaze, the regulatory function of language, historical, and classical traditions of domination and, of course, through violence. Rather, for each of these women there is a point at which pressure is applied to the systems which regulate their lives, as they forge their own subjectivities outside of the prescribed normative means. For Mignon, for instance, this is through a friendship with and lesbian love attachment to the Princess of Abyssinia. For Mignon and the Princess language can no longer determine the means by which they live, as they communicate through music. The women in the "Museum of Women Monsters" are freed when Fevvers kills Madame Schreck, and the imprisoned in the panopticon form lesbian relationships with the guards, (similarly imprisoned) and escape. While each of these instances of masculinist violence and oppression serves as a contextual backdrop to the Bakhtinian celebration of Fevvers' subjectivity and grotesquerie, Fevvers is also forced to negotiate each of these issues herself. This serves as a textual reminder of the fact that subjectivity must necessarily be a negotiation, but also that women can be empowered enough to forge their own identities in the face of masculinist or normative attempts at regulation.

Fevvers finds herself several times under the threat of male violence, most particularly at the hand of Rosencruetz and the Duke, yet through non-conventional means Fevvers resists the traditional outcome of these narratives. Similarly, Fevvers is continually subject to the masculinist gaze; however, she insists that this is not an appropriating gaze, and that her identity is determined on her own terms. Further, language and naming are employed as an attempt to regulate the amorphousness of Fevvers' identity, a strategy which she

simultaneously avoids and thwarts. Continually refusing to be coded in conventional terms, Fevvers effectively resists the conventional apparatus of masculinist and normative regulation. By failing to offer the phallus the power it commands, and by matching it with her own phallic power (Ma Nelson's sword) or evading it through non-phallic means (flying away, laughter, etc.), Fevvers continually frustrates the connection between the penis and phallic power. By refusing to be a victim or object of the gaze, Fevvers has the last Bakhtinian laugh, with readers/voyeurs left to ponder their mistake in attempting to appropriate the identity of Fevvers.

Fevvers' fears that her identity will be fixed according to the perception of her performances provides a means of examining the duality or duplicity of performativity. While Fevvers' performativity indicates a wealth of potentiality and ambiguity, the need for the audience to secure those performances as indications of an identity means that there is also the risk that one aspect of her performance will be reified as a role or mythology to which she must adhere, thus freezing her "identity" according to perception. As Butler writes, performativity is necessary and that which we are "forced to negotiate".<sup>572</sup> Performativity is not a choice, a wilful play of the subject, but rather, the means by which the subject is constituted in the first instance. For this reason Fevvers fears the stasis signified by the tundra, as opposed to the masculinist trajectory of the train. Butler contends that "constraint calls to be rethought as the very condition of performativity. . . . this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject".<sup>573</sup>

Without the continued repetition of the performance of her identity, Fevvers would cease to exist in normative terms. She would become "unintelligible". This is the bind of performativity. It is only through the reiterative performances of identity that the subject is

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<sup>572</sup> Butler, *Bodies* 237.

<sup>573</sup> Butler, *Bodies* 94-95.



constituted as “intelligible”. However, the normative measures of “intelligibility” produce that subject as displaced, abject or Other. This is the outcome for the unfortunates who inhabit Madame Schreck’s Museum of Women Monsters, occupying roles determined according to the reification of one aspect of their performance reiteratively produced as “identity” within structures of voyeurism, objectification and naming. Fevvers is fully aware of the degree to which the audience is necessary for the simulacrum of identity, perception being vital to the performance, but also of the danger that this might forever “trap” her according to “what he thinks I am”.<sup>574</sup> This danger is contextualised by the continual references to the history of voyeurism and objectification as constructing and regulating the identities of women. The text might be read in terms of a warning of the power of naming, objectification, and reiterative performances to secure the identity of a subject according to a pre-established perception or role.

Fevvers performs an essence (ironically an essence of ambiguity) only through the continual and reiterative audience perception of her performance. The latter part of the text sees Fevvers temporarily separated from her audience, represented by Walser, but also by the broader readership of her story, as Fevvers loses the narrative voice which she had in the earlier part of the novel. It is this temporary loss of the means to determine or perform her own subjectivity of ambiguity which most distresses Fevvers. Part of Fevvers’ otherwise liberating ability to fashion her own identity is an ironic reliance on audience perception to validate her performative trajectory. It is for this reason that she suffers in her separation from Walser, as he can no longer be interpellated by her words, her eyes and the performance of her identity. Similarly, she can no longer confirm her ontology through his belief in her: “The young American it was who kept the whole story of the old Fevvers in his notebooks; she longed for him to tell her she was true”.<sup>575</sup> Fevvers recognises that her

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<sup>574</sup> Carter, *Nights* 290.

<sup>575</sup> Carter, *Nights* 273.

identity is one in process, in continual performance, and without a prior essence to sustain it. Claiming that she has “misaid some vital something of herself”,<sup>576</sup> Fevvers teases the reader with essentialist tropes.

Yet while it parodies the genres of romance and the quest for self-discovery, this text conforms to the conventions of neither. Rather, *Nights at the Circus* might be read in metafictional terms<sup>577</sup> as continually employing and deconstructing traditional fictional conventions and allusions in order to thematise the fictionality of identity and the performative power of self-styled subjectivity. Fevvers clarifies that what she has lost is the “sense of her own magnificence which had previously sustained her trajectory”.<sup>578</sup> An explicit reference to Fevvers’ subjectivity as a continual and reiterative process, this statement also indicates that the magnificence of Fevvers’ trajectory/identity is of her own design. Far from feeling the loss of Walser in romantic terms, Fevvers longs for his presence only to secure and reflect her own: “She longed to see herself reflected in all her remembered splendour in his grey eyes”.<sup>579</sup>

Fevvers is entirely responsible for her self-styled subjectivity, yet is reliant on audience reception and perception to confirm it. Without an audience to perceive and frame her, Fevvers recognises the ontological void on which her identity is founded. This is clear as she trudges through the snow, representative of the *tabula rasa*: “[t]he white world around them looked newly made, a blank sheet of fresh paper on which they could inscribe whatever future they wished”.<sup>580</sup> This is framed as both liberating, in terms of the fresh start

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<sup>576</sup> Carter, *Nights* 273.

<sup>577</sup> Boehm provides a reading of *Nights at the Circus* in metafictional terms, suggesting that Carter “refer[s] to the canon irreverentially or parodically. Instead of using literary allusions to shore up the male tradition of great literature, Carter often alludes to worlds of the past parodically, thereby challenging the unacknowledged politics of aesthetic representation, particularly representations of femininity”. Boehm 43.

<sup>578</sup> Carter, *Nights* 273.

<sup>579</sup> Carter, *Nights* 273.

<sup>580</sup> Carter, *Nights* 218.

or primordial space prior to the inscription of identity, but also as threatening, undermining as it does any notion of an essence or locus of identity or individuality. This ambivalence is evident in Fevvers' reaction to Lizzie's parenting as that which launched Fevvers on the performative trajectory of the winged *aérialiste*:

'I never asked you to adopt me in the first place, you miserable old witch!

There I was, unique and parentless, unshackled, unfettered by the past, and the minute you clapped eyes on me you turned *me* into a contingent being, enslaved me as your daughter who was born nobody's daughter-'

But there she stopped short, for the notion that nobody's daughter walked across nowhere in the direction of nothing produced in her such vertigo she was forced to pause and take a few deep breaths, which coldly seared her lungs. Seized with such anguish of the void that surrounds us, she could have wept.<sup>581</sup>

Indicating Carter's preoccupation with the restrictive subject position of the daughter,<sup>582</sup> the indictment of the Mother in this instance gestures to the complicity of women in histories of masculinist and normative femininities. Fevvers displays the tension between a desire for the potentiality and freedom of constructing her own self, yet remains somewhat constrained by the formative ideologies of femininity inscribed on her past. Reluctant to cast herself adrift without a history, an origin or ratification of her femininity by masculinist discourses, Fevvers articulates the paradoxical situation both of women and of feminist discourses attempting to inscribe a future of freedom within the bounds of restrictive and regulatory histories of "femininity".

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<sup>581</sup> Carter, *Nights* 279-280.

<sup>582</sup> Peach suggests "there is an absence of mothers in Carter's fiction". 16. The significance of this absence is found in Carter's recurrent emphasis on displacement, marginality and the search for origins. Many of Carter's characters are dislocated from the perpetual chain of familial instruction, and serve as a critique of historical traditions and mythologies of origin. This is exhibited particularly in the carnivalesque and bawdy femininity of Fevvers in *Nights*, and Dora and Nora Chance in *Wise Children*.



Having deviated from the fixed and phallic trajectory that the train cut through the Siberian snow, Fevvers is for the first time without the apparatus used to sustain her performance of the “essence” of Fevvers. Having lost Ma Nelson’s sword, the dye and bleach necessary to maintain the more cosmetic aspects of her performance, Fevvers fails to recreate herself each day, each performance, each moment, as the likeness of herself. The essence of Fevvers fades, for each performance is a reiteration of a diminished copy, due partly to her inability to find the audience necessary to maintain the sustained image of Fevvers. Surrounded only by snow, with a broken wing, and without the Talisman of the Sword, Father Time, or Lizzie’s handbag containing the chemicals necessary for her feathers, Fevvers’ trajectory is uncertain, and it is this which causes her feathers to fade and her “essence” to dim. The necessity to continually reiterate performances of identity is clear, yet Fevvers can no longer reiterate the *same* performances that have made her unique as the winged *aérialiste*. For fear of freezing her identity according to her current appearance and performance (symbolised by the earlier threat of the frozen Fevvers sculpture),<sup>583</sup> Fevvers trudges on, yet she knows not where. If identities consist of and are only constituted in terms of repeated performances, a failure to reiterate at all signifies a non-existence by normative means. The directionless turn of Fevvers’ performativity is represented by the blanket of snow, in comparison with the clean and determined line of the train to which she longs to return to be once again secure in the ambiguity generated by the reiterative performance of her identity as the Cockney Venus:

Trudge on, trudge on, girl, and let events dictate themselves.

But, although we trudged long and far, we stayed in the forest, seemed to get no nearer to the railway track than when we’d started out, and the Escapee adopts a worried look. He has taken a wrong turning, out here, where there

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<sup>583</sup> Carter, *Nights* 186.

are no turnings? Or, rather, in this trackless waste, at any single point one stands at an imaginary crossroads, at the confluence of all directions, none of which might be the right direction. And on we go, for fear of freezing to the spot if we stand still.<sup>584</sup>

Fevvers' fears about having her identity secured in terms of the perception of her identity indicate a textual thematisation of the regulatory power of the gaze. Yet she also recognises the regulatory power of naming. When the Sadeian figure Rosencruetz refers to Fevvers by her birth name, she is immediately on edge:

"Queen" of ambiguities, goddess of in-between states, being on the borderline of species, manifestation of Arioriph, Venus, Achamatoth, Sophia".  
 "I can't tell you what a turn it gave me when he called me "Sophia". How did he stumble over my christened name? It was if it put me in his power, that he should know my name, and, though I am not ordinarily superstitious, now I became strangely fearful."<sup>585</sup>

Rosencruetz displays a fetishisation of Fevvers' ambiguity, and is intent on harnessing the liberatory power of her potentiality. It is not until he refers to Fevvers by her christened name that she feels his appropriative strategies "ground" her. Fearful of being reduced to the history of her performances, Fevvers recognises the significance of Rosencruetz' performative utterance of the referent "Sophia". Significant also, are the myriad names by which Rosencruetz refers to Fevvers, and her obvious status as liminal. It is in this ambiguous and liminal status that Fevvers is most secure. Having her identity fixed by perception or naming would replicate the means by which she is produced unqualifiedly as

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<sup>584</sup> Carter, *Nights* 245.

<sup>585</sup> Carter, *Nights*, 81.

"Other", returning her to the stasis of identity which she suffered in the subterranean prison of Madame Schreck. The imagery in Madame Schreck's Museum of Woman Monsters<sup>586</sup> thematises the history of the way in which violence, voyeurism and objectification collude in the inscription of difference:

"Who worked for Madame Schreck, sir? Why, prodigies of nature, such as I. Dear old Fanny Four-Eyes; and the Sleeping Beauty; and the Wiltshire Wonder, who was not three foot high; and Albert/Albertina, who was bipartite, that is to say, half and half and neither of either. . . . The girls was all made to stand in stone niches cut out of the slimy walls, except for the Sleeping Beauty, who remained prone, since proneness was her speciality. And there were little curtains in front and, in front of the curtains, a little lamp burning. These were her "profane altars", as she used to call them".<sup>587</sup>

Enshrined on altars of difference, framed by theatrical curtains and lighting effects, these exemplars of "Otherness" serve as a textual reminder to the reader of the possible "Otherness" of Fevvers. Yet Fevvers insists on maintaining the power to forge her own subjectivity. Resisting and challenging conventional appropriations of her via the gaze, the phallus and the regulatory function of language, Fevvers creates her own identity by appropriating non-conventional means. Fevvers' near rape and murder by Rosencruetz is thwarted when Fevvers "uses her wings to escape the gentleman's grasp by simply flying out of his window and, therefore, uses a power that is not phallic in nature".<sup>588</sup>

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<sup>586</sup> Carter, *Nights* 55.

<sup>587</sup> Carter, *Nights* 59-61.

<sup>588</sup> Magali Michael, "Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*: An Engaged Feminism Via Subversive Postmodern Strategies", *Contemporary Literature* 35.2 (1994) : 512.



As with many of Carter's other novels, *Nights at the Circus* contests the power which is socially and culturally invested in the phallus. In a similar style to that employed in *Desire Machines*, Carter parodies the conflation of the penis with phallic power. This is evident in the matriarchal appropriation of the phallic power invested in Ma Nelson's sword and bequeathed to Fevvers. Similarly, parodic representations of the instability of male sexual power, render the penis an object of ridicule, rather than awe or fear. *Nights at the Circus* highlights the tenuousness of masculine power, by dislocating the penis from phallic power. As Michael suggests, "The novel depreciates male dominance with its depiction of men who are so fearful of losing their positions of mastery in the hierarchy of conventional heterosexual relationships that they are reduced to jerking themselves off while looking at women freaks in a damp basement".<sup>589</sup>

Despite the fact that the essence of Fevvers is only ever an illusion, and there can never be an answer to the question "Is she fact, or is she fiction", the novel operates in such a way as to encourage readers to recognise their complicity with Walser's voyeuristic quest for the truth. The opening section of the text is alternately focalised through the rational, composed and objective journalist Walser, and Fevvers' first-person narration of her life experience. The effect here fosters a disbelief in the authenticity of Fevvers, framed as it is by Walser's scepticism and the obvious scam in which Father Time stands still with the Big Ben chiming midnight three times throughout the course of the interview. Additionally, Walser's focalisation is studded with a number of intimate addresses to the reader, and with phrases and questions of disbelief and scepticism. While listening to Fevvers' tales, Walser will stop and jot down on his note pad, or ponder to himself, "how does she do that?"<sup>590</sup> "a touch of sham?"<sup>591</sup> or he simply makes a mental reminder to "check"<sup>592</sup> a particular aspect of

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<sup>589</sup> Michael 511. Further, Michael suggests that the performance of phallic power obscures masculine violence and that this is undermined by the parodic representation of the penis in *Nights at the Circus*. "Fevvers's description of the gentleman's useless and passive penis both ridicules the notion that man's dominating position is grounded in his *natural* aggressiveness and exposes the means by which men dominate in actuality: through violence". Michael 512.

<sup>590</sup> Carter, *Nights* 8.

<sup>591</sup> Carter, *Nights* 8.

her story. Walser's parenthetical, "objective" and "logical" point-form assumptions regarding Fevvers encourage complicity from the reader, fostering an active interest in the conclusion to the question continually posed, "Is she fact, or is she fiction?" He writes: "First impression: physical ungainliness. Such a lump it seems! But soon, quite soon, an acquired grace asserts itself, probably the result of strenuous exercise. (Check if she trained as a dancer)".<sup>593</sup> Similarly, Walser interpellates the reader as an accomplice to verify his assumption that "(surely . . . a *real* bird would have too much sense to think of performing a triple somersault in the first place)".<sup>594</sup>

While Walser seems unsure as to the authenticity of Fevvers, he never questions the desire to know, or the grounds on which a demarcation of authenticity and artifice are secured. Nevertheless, the textual self-consciousness continually reminds the reader that Walser appropriates Fevvers according to the tradition of Western masculinist reason. For Walser, she must be one or the other, either fact or fiction, although a possible permutation of this is that she may be a "factual fiction", a real bird-woman pretending to be a pretend bird-woman: "For, in order to earn a living, might not a genuine bird-woman - in the implausible event that such a thing existed - have to pretend she was an artificial one?"<sup>595</sup> Walser's narrative authority here is textually self-conscious, with Fevvers and Lizzie continually referring to him as "Sir". Interestingly, the significant length of each of the alternating narratives ensures that when Fevvers addresses Walser as "Sir", it appears out of place, and seems as though it is the reader who is addressed as "Sir". This further aligns the reader with Walser and with the masculinist tradition of objectification, voyeurism and the normative necessity to demarcate and label identities and sexualities according to the binary of authentic and artificial, true and false.

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<sup>592</sup> Carter, *Nights* 14.

<sup>593</sup> Carter, *Nights* 16.

<sup>594</sup> Carter, *Nights* 17.

<sup>595</sup> Carter, *Nights* 17.

While parts of the second section of the novel are also focalised through Walser in much the same way, this section is interspersed with sections in which Fevvers focalises her experience. This section of the text provides an opportunity for the reader to be exposed to the spectacle of performativity among each of the characters of Colonel Kearney's Circus. It is the final section of the novel, entitled "Siberia", that enables the confused, sceptical and exhausted reader to assume that there may at last be the answer to the question asked from the opening pages of the novel. Narrated by Fevvers, and focalised according to her perspective, the reader may be encouraged to think that with the trickery of Father Time aside, they may see through the circus artifice and ascertain the truth of Fevvers' identity. Anne Fernihough suggests:

The novel sets up expectations that the mask will eventually be stripped away to reveal a hidden self, only to show how, on the contrary, Fevvers' identity is constituted in and through performance, with Walser as the prime audience.<sup>596</sup>

As Fevvers' hair fades and her feathers moult, "every day, the tropic bird looked more like the London sparrow as which it had started out in life, as if a spell were unravelling".<sup>597</sup> As the spell unravels, the expectation is that the enigma of Fevvers will also unfold. However, as the text ends, with Fevvers' sights set on the nearest bottles of bleach and dye, the reader recognises that there is nothing to Fevvers but her performance. The failure of Fevvers to reiterate her "essence" does not provide access to the true Fevvers, but rather constitutes a textual display of the performativity which is "mistaken" as an "essence". Fevvers' mirthful laughter at the conclusion of the text parodies the desire to know, and to demarcate and perpetuate notions of truth and artifice: "To think I really fooled you!" she

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<sup>596</sup> Fernihough 94.

<sup>597</sup> Carter, *Nights* 271.



marvelled. 'It just goes to show there's nothing like confidence'".<sup>598</sup> Far from an admission of inauthenticity, the ambiguity of Fevvers' statement leaves the reader still pondering the question - truth or fiction — knowing full well, that such curiosity is engineered by Fevvers, and that this is in fact her confidence trick. As Fernihough suggests:

As *aérialiste*, Fevvers dramatizes not only the lack of a "ground" to gendered identity and its performing trajectory through time, but also its dependence on repetition, for she performs the same circus-act day after day. For Butler, moreover, it is at those moments when the repetition is disrupted that the "groundlessness" of gender reveals itself.<sup>599</sup>

Fevvers' performativity operates as a means by which the "groundlessness" of her own identity is revealed, but also that of Walser, and the reader, in the interpellation of the reader into the quest for the "truth". The masculinist position with which Walser is aligned, and periodically that with which the reader is invited to identify, is undermined and threatened by Fevvers' performativity in a number of ways. Importantly, the frustration of the expectation that eventually the text will work towards an exposure of Fevvers' feathers as fraudulent undermines the discourses and apparatus of appropriation with which Walser comes armed when he interviews Fevvers and then later when he joins Colonel Kearney's circus. Additionally, though, there are many textual descriptions of Walser's fear of Fevvers, fear of her excessiveness, fear of her body, fear of her confidence. While these could be interpreted as misogynist fears of the feminine grotesque, once again Fevvers' playful capitalisation on these features renders such an approach problematic.

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<sup>598</sup> Carter, *Nights* 295.

<sup>599</sup> Fernihough 95.

Walser's greatest desire is to determine the truth of Fevvers, and his most frightening experience comes with the realisation that her identity is one ever in deferral, so that the point for which he strives is infinitely displaced, as there is no locus of her identity. Looking into her eyes, the "window of the soul", Walser expects to find the unmediated "truth" of Fevvers. Instead he finds himself in an ever-spiralling, ever-increasing void, a void which threatens the security of his own identity:

she turned her immense eyes upon him, those eyes "made for the stage" whose messages could be read from standing room in the gods. Night had darkened their colour; their irises were now purple matching the Parma violets in front of her mirror, and the pupils had grown so fat on darkness that the entire dressing-room and all those within it could have vanished without trace inside those compelling voids. Walser felt the strangest sensation, as if these eyes of the *aérialiste* were a pair of sets of Chinese boxes, as if each one opened into a world into a world into a world, an infinite plurality of worlds, and these unguessable depths exercised the strongest possible attraction, so that he felt himself trembling as if he, too, stood on an unknown threshold.<sup>600</sup>

Walser's fear in looking into Fevvers eyes is not unfounded. He does in fact suffer an identity crisis, losing his memory, his mind, his language, and his masculinity, and at times even his corporeality as human in the wastes of the Siberian scape. As with Desiderio in *Desire Machines* and Evelyn in *The Passion of New Eve*, Walser forms another of Carter's young men cast adrift in a barren landscape, on a quest for security of identity and reason, but kidnapped (often by women) and forced to suffer a re-birth and the resultant realisation that the quest for ontological security is an illusory one. Buried under the wreck of the phallic trajectory of the train is the Eurocentric, masculinist, reasoned, objective and

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<sup>600</sup> Carter, *Nights* 29-30.

objectifying Walser, and buried with him are the tools with which he (as a representation of normative structures) had regulated the potentiality of Fevvers' performativity. Without his "eyes the cool grey of scepticism"<sup>601</sup> and the language used to inscribe difference, Walser is cast adrift in the timeless, directionless Siberian snow, signalling a feminist inversion, as Walser emerges re-born, child-like and reduced to the function ascribed his genitalia by the lesbian prison-escapees who take his semen.

As an ultimate lesson for the pragmatic Walser, his quest for the truth of Fevvers' identity results in his finding the truth of his own. When in Petersburg, Walser's masculinity is undermined through his inheritance of the Ape-Man's woman and her subsequent engagement in a lesbian love affair. Similarly, his role in the clown performance as the chicken, in which he is required to spring from under a serving platter and cry "cock-a-doodle-do",<sup>602</sup> undermines his ascendancy as a human, transgressing as he is the same boundary which he investigates in Fevvers, namely, the bird/human divide. For Walser though, this transformation is not figured entirely in terms of loss; rather, he begins to see in himself the transformative possibilities which he cannot yet recognise in Fevvers. Walser begins to see a liberating quality in the blurring of the distinction between truth and fiction, between the mask and that which lies behind it:

When Walser first put on his make-up, he looked in the mirror and did not recognise himself. As he contemplated the stranger peering interrogatively back at him out of the glass, he felt the beginnings of a vertiginous sense of freedom that, during all the time he spent with the Colonel, never quite evaporated; until that last moment when they parted company and Walser's very self, as he had known it, departed from him, he experienced the freedom

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<sup>601</sup> Carter, *Nights* 10.

<sup>602</sup> Carter, *Nights* 176.



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.<sup>603</sup>

This functions as yet another recognition of the degree to which language functions to construct the subject, or that which Walser refers to as "being". Walser implicitly comments on several features of carnival here, indicating the liberating aspects of "the freedom to juggle with being". Following the train de-railment, Walser loses his memory and apparently his mind, reverting to the status of a child, requiring mothering, and re-entry into the system of signification in which he is professionally trained - language. While trapped in the barren landscape of the Siberian tundra, and without language, Walser functions as a representation of the primordial and pre-symbolic self, open to re-signification and prior to the establishment of the reiterative trajectory of identity performances: "Like the landscape, he was a perfect blank".<sup>604</sup> This state also represents the regenerative principle of the carnivalesque, embodying both death and birth as Walser's previous self is buried under the train. With the new century he emerges as the "New Man", fit for the "New Woman". The end of Walser's previous self is marked by his loss of language, "that which is vital to our being".<sup>605</sup> The regenerative principle, as it is illustrated by Walser, is characterised by a new language, what Bakhtin refers to as "special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came into contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency".<sup>606</sup>

Bakhtin's utopian and transgressive approach to the carnivalesque comprises several aspects. Understood broadly, carnival signifies "ritual spectacles such as fairs, popular

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<sup>603</sup> Carter, *Nights* 103.

<sup>604</sup> Carter, *Nights* 222.

<sup>605</sup> Carter, *Nights* 103.

<sup>606</sup> Bakhtin 10.

feasts and wakes, processions and competitions . . . parodies, travesties and vulgar farce".<sup>607</sup> Expressed in such events, however, is the celebration of those aspects often denied or repressed, signified by the carnival embrace of laughter, the language of the marketplace and those aspects of the corporeal which signify the "grotesque body". carnival can be figured then, as exploring and celebrating the alternative aspects of those institutions and functions which regulate and oppress. Characterised by an inversion of hierarchy, carnival celebrates bodily excess and a corruption of classicism: "in the marketplace pure and simple categories of thought find themselves perplexed and one-sided".<sup>608</sup> Stallybrass and White argue that the concept of the grotesque has a transformative power, in that it unsettles the concepts through which our thinking and way of approaching the world is structured:

the grotesque tends to operate as a critique of dominant ideology which has already set the terms, designating what is high and low. . . . This logic could unsettle "given" social positions and interrogate the rules of inclusion, exclusion and domination which structured the social ensemble. In the fair, the place of high and low, inside and outside, was never a simple given.<sup>609</sup>

Bakhtin's conceptualisation of culture places just such a "high/low binarism"<sup>610</sup> as fundamental. For Bakhtin, the fair, the marketplace and the carnival operate as sites for the interrogation and transgression of this integral binary. The subversive potential of a queer reading of the carnivalesque might be best gauged through a reading of *Nights at the Circus* in terms of the implications of the grotesque body. According to Stallybrass and White:

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<sup>607</sup> Stallybrass and White 8.

<sup>608</sup> Stallybrass and White 27.

<sup>609</sup> Stallybrass and White 43.

<sup>610</sup> Wilson qtd. in Stallybrass and White 16.

Grotesque realism images the human body as multiple, bulging, over- or under-sized, protuberant and incomplete. The openings and orifices of this carnival body are emphasized, not its closure or finish. It is an image of impure corporeal bulk with its orifices (mouth, flared nostrils, anus) yawning wide and its lower regions (belly, legs, feet, buttocks and genitals) given priority over its upper regions (head, "spirit", reason).<sup>611</sup>

Bakhtin also suggests that "the essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body".<sup>612</sup> "To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly, the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, pregnancy and birth".<sup>613</sup>

Those images Bakhtin refers to as belonging to "the material bodily principle" are also "images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life".<sup>614</sup> However, Bakhtin tends to reify the body as "something universal, representing the people",<sup>615</sup> thus allowing the body to be figured only as an abstraction of a larger materiality and unifying cosmic principle. I would critique the universalisation of the corporeal and, in particular, the attribution of the corporeal with potential to unify by way of a "cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character".<sup>616</sup> Rather than figuring the corporeal as a means of representing or gaining access to the locus of truth, unity and materiality, I would contend that the corporeal is a useful site to destabilise conventional and essentialist notions of truth and

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<sup>611</sup> Stallybrass and White 9.

<sup>612</sup> Bakhtin 19-20.

<sup>613</sup> Bakhtin 21.

<sup>614</sup> Bakhtin 18.

<sup>615</sup> Bakhtin 18.

<sup>616</sup> Bakhtin 19.



identity. Thus, despite Bakhtin's essentialist privileging of the corporeal and materiality as a means of achieving unity in place of division, there are aspects of his theorisation of the grotesque which may prove useful when read according to a queer perspective.

Engaging in postmodern parody, *Nights at the Circus* continually juxtaposes classicism and corporeality as a means of critiquing the means by which sexes, bodies and modes of behaviour are regulated. The text critiques the conventional appropriation of whores through its incorporation of the Bakhtinian elements of grotesque into the representations not only of their lifestyle but also of the whorehouse itself. In a grotesque parody of the demarcation of the high and low, the whorehouse takes its place among culturally ratified institutions, discourses and traditions. Michael suggests "Fevvers' outrageous depiction of the house as having an 'air of rectitude and propriety', as being 'a place of privilege' in which 'rational desires might be rationally gratified' (26) further challenges the status quo by deploying adjectives generally reserved for officially sanctioned institutions".<sup>617</sup> When not working, the prostitutes in Ma Nelson's whorehouse engage in pursuits more commonly coded as classical. "Grace practised her stenography" and Esmeralda the flute, "upon which [she] was proving to be something of a virtuoso".<sup>618</sup> Within the walls of the whorehouse which was built by the "Age of Reason",<sup>619</sup> the classical clashes with the grotesque. In keeping with the Bakhtinian emphasis on the "lower bodily stratum", the house has a staircase that "went up with a flourish like . . . a whore's bum", yet at the top of the staircase we find the classical imagery of "garlands of fruit, flowers and the heads of satyrs".<sup>620</sup> The philosophical Ma Nelson,<sup>621</sup> the spiritual Lizzie<sup>622</sup> and the prostitutes with

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<sup>617</sup> Michael 507.

<sup>618</sup> Carter, *Nights* 39.

<sup>619</sup> Carter, *Nights* 26.

<sup>620</sup> Carter, *Nights* 26.

<sup>621</sup> Walser refers to Ma Nelson as "a one-eyed, metaphysical Madame". Carter, *Nights* 28. Ma Nelson encourages the women in the house to read Baudelaire. Carter, *Nights* 38.

<sup>622</sup> Lizzie explains to Walser, "I'd never been any great shakes as a whore, due to an inconvenient habit I had of *praying*". Carter, *Nights* 26.

their classical pursuits confound the conventional conceptualisations of prostitution, ensuring that a site usually coded in terms of the grotesque becomes a Bakhtinian juxtaposition of the classical and the grotesque, the spiritual and the bodily. The very house itself is coded in such terms of contradiction and ambivalence, with the white blinds like eyes, "as if the house were dreaming . . . turning a blind eye to the horrors outside", and the mantelpiece supported by "smiling goddesses"<sup>623</sup> in juxtaposition to the staircase reminiscent of a "whore's bum", and the fire lit so that the drawing room was as "snug as a groin".<sup>624</sup>

The Bakhtinian grotesque is also evident in the juxtaposition of representations of the objective, reasonable and trained mind with the fleshly, smelly and protuberant body. The clash between Walser's rational objectivity and Fevvers' foetid corporeality are foregrounded, interrogating the means by which the mind/body split is conventionally gendered. This is evident in the opening of the text which counterpoints the objective, and reasoned masculinist perspective of Walser with the fleshly and fishy Fevvers. Textually swallowed in the following paragraph of Fevvers' playful performativity and grotesquerie, is the ever-ready reporter Walser:

The blonde guffawed uproariously, slapped the marbly thigh on which her wrap fell open and flashed a pair of vast, blue, indecorous eyes at the young reporter with his open notebook and his poised pencil, as if to dare him: "Believe it or not!" Then she spun round on her swivelling dressing-stool - it was a plush-topped, backless piano stool, lifted from the rehearsal room - and confronted herself with a grin in the mirror as she ripped six inches of false lash

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<sup>623</sup> Carter, *Nights* 26.

<sup>624</sup> Carter, *Nights* 27.

from her left eyelid with an incisive gesture, and a small exploding, rasping sound.<sup>625</sup>

Carter's emphasis on the bodily in her representation of Fevvers illustrates the dual function of degradation. At once a parody of classicism, mysticism and the spiritual, Fevvers, both bawdy and brash, is always depicted in terms of her physicality and, in particular, the lower stratum of her body. Depicted "bums aloft",<sup>626</sup> the farting, foetid expanse of Fevvers' flesh continually reminds the reader, and the alarmed Walser, that it is incomplete, in flux and incapable of being confined. In a parody of classicism, and perhaps also spiritual appropriations of femininity associated with a virginity and purity devoid of corporeality, the giant Fevvers performs as an angelic cupid in Ma Nelson's whorehouse until such time as her menstruation shifts the representation to the grotesque emphasis on orifices, excretion, genitalia and reproduction. This imagery serves as both a Carter-esque parody of spiritual and romantic pretensions and a clear reminder to the reader of the threat that the body in the act of becoming poses to classicism and "classic images of the finished, completed man, cleansed, as it were of all the scoriae of birth and development".<sup>627</sup> The potential of the grotesque body to undermine classicism is indicated by Bakhtin:

Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unity; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the

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<sup>625</sup> Carter, *Nights* 7.

<sup>626</sup> Carter, *Nights* 7.

<sup>627</sup> Bakhtin 25.



genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, child-birth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body.<sup>628</sup>

According to Bakhtin, the classic canon's notion of the closed and completed body is challenged by the grotesque and the material bodily principle. In reading Carter's use of the grotesque as a reminder of the body in the act of becoming, we are aware that there can be no finite or final body. A conceptualisation of the body as closed implies not a performance, but rather a prior essence which marks bodies in terms of difference and perpetuates a faith in individualism. According to this view, apertures and orifices are closed and non-existent, denied or covered over both as sites of pleasure or function. This both facilitates and perpetuates a series of restrictions and repressions not evident in the grotesque's principle of denigration which celebrates the body in the act of becoming.

Representations of the grotesque body in Carter's fiction include a series of literal, figurative, spiritual and psycho-sexual births. Pregnancy is also another means of demonstrating the grotesque's simultaneous concern with the becoming body and regeneration. As Lee writes, "Carter uses pregnant woman characters as a way of cheating closure, because pregnancy is a state of becoming and potential".<sup>629</sup> This becoming body and the potentiality it implies, are significant in terms of a queer approach to Carter's work. The emphasis on apertures and orifices of all kinds opens a site for the diffraction and multiplication of erogenous zones. Emphasis on the orifices of men as well as women dislocates the means by which female bodies are associated with lack and void, and male bodies with the phallus, by the conflation of the penis with the phallus, and of penetration

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<sup>628</sup> Bakhtin 26.

<sup>629</sup> Alison Lee, *Angela Carter* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997)110.

with power. Additionally, the grotesque concern with leaking and seeping orifices acknowledges in both male and female bodies the materiality of bodily fluids and functions. Elizabeth Grosz suggests that the ontological status of women has been constructed “as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping . . . a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order”.<sup>630</sup> In reading the Bakhtinian aspects of *Nights* from a queer perspective, this construction of the female body as at once amorphous, leaking and engulfing can be seen as a means by which the boundaries of the body are displaced or erased. The conventional means by which a body is framed and regulated, orifices understood, used and fetishised can be destabilised through a grotesque emphasis on the lower bodily stratum, body fluids, and boundaries of the bodies of both male and female subjects. As Grosz suggests:

Body fluids attest to the permeability of the body, its necessary dependence on an outside, its liability to collapse into this outside (this is what death implies), to the perilous divisions between the body's inside and its outside. They affront a subject's aspiration toward autonomy and self-identity.<sup>631</sup>

What this amounts to, then, is a destabilisation of some of the means by which difference is inscribed on bodies. By denying a final body as either male or female, there is also a disavowal of essentialism which posits a prior identity, gendered as either male or female. By embracing the leaking, open and incomplete body, the grotesque displaces the conventional fetishisation of male and female genitalia. This makes way for a diffraction of erogenous zones, and a displacement of the binary structures of phallus/lack, and power/powerlessness, as these adhere to and are inscribed in traditional conceptualisations of male and female bodies.

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<sup>630</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 203.

<sup>631</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 193-194.

While all of the action in *Nights at the Circus* can be seen to be situated within the Bakhtinian grotesque, it is the clowns, and Buffo in particular, who embody most clearly principles of inversion, hybridization and regeneration. The clowns' emphasis on corporeal disruption provides a means of investigating the construction of the body as a discrete and closed system. Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque comprises "two fundamentally important symbolic processes . . . inversion (the world turned upside down), and hybridization".<sup>632</sup>

According to Stallybrass and White:

Inversion addresses the social classification of values, distinctions and judgements which underpin practical reason and systematically inverts the relations of subject and object, agent and instrument, husband and wife, old and young, animal and human, master and slave. Although it re-orders the terms of the binary pair, it cannot alter the terms themselves.<sup>633</sup>

There is much imagery in Carter's novel representative of this symbolic inversion. Many of the animals in Colonel Kearney's circus are in positions of power over their "owners" or "trainers". Further, they are often of elevated intelligence, expressing themselves through alternate languages, inverting even the systems of signification through which they are usually coded as "Other". For instance, the Professor and his students are a class of chimpanzees, secretly deciphering complicated diagrams.<sup>634</sup> Similarly, the Colonel's pig Sybil is a venerated oracle, nosing out instructions through a series of cards.<sup>635</sup> The ambivalence of the pig places it as an important symbolic figure of Bakhtinian inversion,<sup>636</sup>

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<sup>632</sup> Stallybrass and White 56.

<sup>633</sup> Stallybrass and White 56.

<sup>634</sup> Carter, *Nights* 108.

<sup>635</sup> Carter, *Nights* 169.

<sup>636</sup> Stallybrass and White suggest that "Amongst the menagerie of fairground creatures, it was undoubtedly the pig which occupied a focal symbolic place at the fair (and in the carnival)". Stallybrass and White 44.



with the figure of "Toby the Real Learned Pig"<sup>637</sup> a possible source for Carter's representation of Sybil. As Stallybrass and White suggest, "The hierarchy that elevated human above animal could always be mobilized more or less politically, more or less self-consciously, as a direct message about social inequality".<sup>638</sup> In thematising such an inversion of the hierarchy of human/animal, *Nights at the Circus* problematises the clear distinction between the two. Problematisations of the ontological distinction between human and animal frustrate not only class-like distinctions between "high" and "low", but also the means by which the boundaries of the human body are secured.

The degree to which the human body takes up space in the world and the boundaries of that body are continually problematised by the Bakhtinian grotesque. This is highlighted in the grotesque emphasis on orifices as well as bodily functions: "all of these acts are performed on the confines of another world".<sup>639</sup> With ontology secured largely through exclusion, and corporeal stability figured in similar terms, it is useful to employ the Bakhtinian grotesque as a means of exacerbating the interface between the body as it is figured, and the world or space which it occupies and within which it is formed. As Bakhtin suggests, "The unfinished and open body (dying, bringing forth and being born) is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects".<sup>640</sup>

Corporeal inversion is symbolised in *Nights at the Circus* by Buffo, who wears his bladder in place of a hat. In irreverent grotesque style, Carter's representation of Buffo conforms to the emphasis on the "lower bodily stratum". However, this representation also moves out of

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<sup>637</sup> Stallybrass and White 58.

<sup>638</sup> Stallybrass and White 57.

<sup>639</sup> Bakhtin 317.

<sup>640</sup> Bakhtin 26.

the symbolic realm of inversion, and into that of "hybridization", as Buffo's bladder hat does not merely represent "the world upside down", but also the "world inside out".<sup>641</sup>

mockery of mockeries, under his roguishly cocked, white, conical cap, he wears a wig that does not simulate hair. It is, in fact, a bladder. Think of that. He wears his insides on his outside, and a portion of his most obscene and intimate insides, at that; so that you might think he is bald, he stores his brains in the organ which, conventionally, stores piss.<sup>642</sup>

With "mockery of mockeries" urging the reader to consider the significance of this representation, Carter's invocation of Bakhtin fulfils a metafictional strategy. In a grotesque destabilisation of the "classical" pursuits of the mind and the "closed body", Buffo's excretory hat permeates the boundaries of the body and the ontological boundaries of the self. In a parody of the mind/body split, the boundaries between Buffo's brains and his bodily excretions are not only inverted, but also made indeterminable. Buffo's excretory hat also problematises the terms through which such distinctions are made, securing this textual representation as one of Bakhtinian "hybridization". Stallybrass and White suggest that "Hybridization . . . generates the possibility of shifting *the very terms of the system itself*, by erasing and interrogating the relationships which constitute it".<sup>643</sup>

"One of the main attributes of the medieval clown was precisely the transfer of every high ceremonial gesture or ritual to the material sphere".<sup>644</sup> This is represented through Buffo's irreverent parody of the Last Supper, the rebirth of Jesus Christ, and the subsequent

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<sup>641</sup> Bakhtin suggests that the Carnival is characterised by "a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings. A second life, a second world of folk culture is thus constructed; it is to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a world inside out". Bakhtin 11.

<sup>642</sup> Carter, *Nights* 116.

<sup>643</sup> Stallybrass and White 57-58.

<sup>644</sup> Bakhtin 20.

dance of disintegration which results in a celebration of anality. This imagery is clearly Bakhtinian, as "in the comic banquet there are nearly always elements parodying and travestying The Last Supper".<sup>645</sup> This banquet is referred to as the "Clown's Christmas Dinner": "Buffo takes up his Christ's place at the table"<sup>646</sup> which is complete with fishes and loaves, although copious quantities of vodka are substituted for the wine. This is followed by Buffo's dance of disintegration:

At the climax of his turn, everything having collapsed about him as if a grenade exploded it, he starts to deconstruct himself. His face becomes contorted by the most hideous grimaces, as if he were trying to shake off the very wet white with which it is coated: shake! shake! shake out his teeth, shake off his nose, shake away his eyeballs, let all go flying off in a convulsive self-dismemberment.<sup>647</sup>

While framed as a parody of the Last Supper, this scene also serves as a textual representation of the tenuous and hierarchical links and connections of the anatomical features which constitute corporeality. When Buffo dies, and fails to fit in the coffin, the other clowns wish to "hack bits off him, to cut him down to coffin-size",<sup>648</sup> emphasising a disrespect for the culturally endorsed boundaries of the corporeal form. Similarly, after Buffo has become resurrected in a clear parody of the death and resurrection of Christ, the clowns repeatedly dismember and juggle with a series of polkadotted and star-spangled penises.<sup>649</sup> Combining an iconoclastic parody of the Christian tale of resurrection and the grotesque notion of symbolic rebirth, this imagery utilises anality and various references to

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<sup>645</sup> Stallybrass and White 296.

<sup>646</sup> Carter, *Nights* 117.

<sup>647</sup> Carter, *Nights* 117.

<sup>648</sup> Carter, *Nights* 118.

<sup>649</sup> Carter, *Nights* 124. This dismemberment, and subsequent juggling is reminiscent of the acrobats in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, whose juggling pieces of themselves is also closely associated with anality. Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 113-114.



the “lower bodily stratum” to invoke a critique of the limits of corporeality and the Western masculinist traditions which inflect them with hierarchised and binarised power relations. Representing at once the grotesque emphasis on death and rebirth, the “clown [who] is the very image of Christ”<sup>650</sup> engages in the “dance of disintegration; and of regression; celebration of the primal slime”.<sup>651</sup> In a clear inversion of the classic and the corporeal, that which begins by invoking Christ’s Last Supper ends in true grotesque - and Carter-esque - style through a celebration of shit and anality. This is firmly coded in terms of hybridization as the liminalities of the corporeal are not just inverted, but entirely disjoined through dismemberment, juggling and excretion.

Fevvers is also continually represented in terms of the Bakhtinian grotesque. A buxom “giant”, Fevvers is described in terms of her bodily functions (farting, eating, and bodily smells), marking a similarity to Bakhtin’s notion of the “lower bodily stratum”. The indecorous quality of Fevvers’ dressing room is continually framed in terms of marine allusions and the self-styled feminine grotesquerie that contributes to the performance of Fevvers. Walser expresses distaste at the:

ice that must have come from a fishmonger’s for a shiny scale or two stayed trapped within the chunks. And this twice-used ice must surely be the source of the marine aroma - something fishy about the Cockney Venus - that underlay the hot, solid composite of perfume, sweat, greasepaint and raw, leaking gas that made you feel you breathed the air in Fevvers’ dressing room in lumps.<sup>652</sup>

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<sup>650</sup> Carter, *Nights* 119.

<sup>651</sup> Carter, *Nights* 125.

<sup>652</sup> Carter, *Nights* 8.

For Walser, the presence of “elaborately intimate garments, wormy with ribbons, carious with lace, redolent of use” ensures that the room is a “mistresspiece of exquisitely feminine squalor”.<sup>653</sup> Clearly linking the feminine with decay and the foetid are the consistent use of marine allusions to describe the odour of the room, and the personification of the underwear. The two kinds of description combine in the image of the corset “like the pink husk of a giant prawn emerging from its den, trailing long laces like several sets of legs”.<sup>654</sup> Not only is this grotesquerie specifically feminine, it is also bodily. Walser is described only in terms of his professional and objective status as a well-travelled journalist. Personal descriptions of this character indicate an ontological insecurity, particularly as he is not given a fleshly manifestation; rather he functions as the generic “hero” of formulaic fiction. The brief physical description provided of Walser reinforces his restraint, self-control and objectivity: “His avocation suited him right down to the ground on which he took good care to keep his feet”.<sup>655</sup> As *aérialiste*, Fevvers is completely contrasted with the “grounded” Walser, his “eyes the cool grey of scepticism”.<sup>656</sup> Sitting throughout the entire interview, Walser’s only acknowledgment of his own body comes at the bidding of the corporeal Fevvers, as her presence arouses him, and he feigns a need to use the toilet in the hope of escaping the room for just a few minutes. Making it clear that the fleshly presence of Fevvers affects the physicality of Walser, if not also his objectivity and reason, this opening section also provides ample scope for reading Fevvers as the “grotesque body, the body in the act of becoming”.<sup>657</sup>

Grosz suggests that “women have been defined on the side of the body and men on the side of the mind”.<sup>658</sup> In keeping with this binary, the text interrogates Walser’s reactions to

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<sup>653</sup> Carter, *Nights* 9.

<sup>654</sup> Carter, *Nights* 9.

<sup>655</sup> Carter, *Nights* 10.

<sup>656</sup> Carter, *Nights* 10.

<sup>657</sup> Palmer, “From ‘Coded Mannequin’ to Bird Woman” 198.

<sup>658</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 203.

the fleshly Fevvers as he teeters on the edge of the abyss which is represented by the amorphousness of her grotesque femininity. This representation recalls the point made by Grosz regarding the abyss represented by the female body, and the perceived threat that this poses to the boundaries of mind/body, self/other, male/female. There are many occasions in Carter's fiction where feminine sexuality is seen as threatening or engulfing, often signified by imagery or references to the *vagina dentata*. In reading the imagery in terms of the grotesque body in the act of becoming, the novel can be seen to problematise conventional understandings of the way in which subjectivities are sexed through conceptualisations of the corporeal, boundaries and liminalities.

For Moss, "the significance of the grotesque resides in its power to compel the subject towards either alienation or authenticity".<sup>659</sup> Walser is framed by Moss as a "character who moves from a static world of objectivity, or anti-experience, into a dynamic world of shared human connections, or authentic experience".<sup>660</sup> Moss essentialises "authentic experience" as love, as that which is finally discovered by Walser and Fevvers at the end of the text. While it is problematic to read "experience" here as somehow dislocated from cultural determinants, there is a transgressive potential in an exploration of the notion of the alienation or abyss of the grotesque. By exploring the notion of the abyss, we can examine the potentialities of an ontological void. This is in juxtaposition to the reason and order which structure the hierarchical system of identity categories represented by Walser at the opening of the novel. For Wolfgang Kayser, the grotesque has a decidedly frightening aspect:

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<sup>659</sup> Moss 119.

<sup>660</sup> Moss 127.



the [perceived] order [of the world and of thought] is destroyed and an abyss opened where we thought to rest on firm ground . . . the grotesque totally destroys the order and deprives us of our foothold.<sup>661</sup>

There are a number of occasions in the text when Walser fears he stands on the edge of an abyss, or that he might be drawn into an ever spiralling void. Fevvers' effect on Walser represents the challenge of the grotesque to the systematic order and reason which he symbolises. Reminiscent of Bakhtin's notion of the ever-open orifices of the body as representative of the grotesque, Fevvers' eyes, mouth, armpits, and cavernous voice represent the greatest threat to Walser's ontological security. When looking into the plurality of worlds within Fevvers eyes, Walser feels that he stood "on an unknown threshold".<sup>662</sup>

The grotesque poses a threat to Walser's self, and his own sense of self. Standing on the edge of a precipice, Walser fears that his identity would be lost in the "plurality of worlds" represented by the grotesque "body in the act of becoming". This is not the first reference to the infinite displacement and abyss represented by Chinese boxes in Carter's fiction. Peter, in the short story "Peter and the Wolf", expresses fear when confronted with the void represented by his female cousin's genitalia:

Her lips opened up as she howled so that she offered him, without her own intention or volition, a view of a set of Chinese boxes of whorled flesh that seemed to open upon another into herself, drawing him into an inner, secret place in which destination perpetually receded before him, his first, devastating, vertiginous intimation of infinity.<sup>663</sup>

<sup>661</sup> Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963) 59.

<sup>662</sup> Carter, *Nights* 30.

<sup>663</sup> Angela Carter, "Peter and the Wolf", *Black Venus* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1985) 57.

This reminds the reader of Carter's contention in *The Sadeian Woman* that female genitalia as represented as "negative": "Between her legs lies nothing but zero, the sign for nothing, that only becomes something when the male principle fills it with meaning".<sup>664</sup> Moreover, the intertextual connection of Walser and Peter, as well as the "wolf-girl" with Fevvers, facilitates the connection of femininity as grotesque with female genitalia as that which represents an abyss, rather than a signifier of identity. Reading the existential and ontological angst of both Walser and Peter when confronted with orifices of any kind, we can see Carter's texts as parodying the fear of phallic castration<sup>665</sup> by the monstrous woman. More than this, though, we can use these fictional sites, in conjunction with Bakhtin's "body in the act of becoming", as a means of studying the displacement of that which is seen as the locus of identity. By destabilising binary distributions of phallic power, Carter's representations of castrating and phallic women<sup>666</sup> function as a textual display of the ontological void of which not only masculinities but indeed all sexualities are comprised. Demonstrations of active female sexuality are elided with an intent to castrate, and the *vagina dentata*, coupled with the phallic woman, symbolises the radical split between the penis and the phallus in Carter's fiction. Indicative of the "loss of self", the whorls of flesh represented in the Chinese boxes of female genitalia remind the reader of the degree to which phallocentric notions of sex ensure the misrecognition of identities, particularly male identities, as ontologically stable.

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<sup>664</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* 4.

<sup>665</sup> This masculine fear is parodied also in *Heroes and Villains*, where Jewel believes that Anne-Marie has teeth in her vagina, and his subsequent rape of her signifies a loss of power for him, and her assumption of power within the relationship. Carter, *Heroes and Villains* 55-56. Mythologies of phallic castration by the "monstrous woman" are parodied extensively in *The Passion of New Eve*, where the misogynist Eve/lyn is castrated by Mother; "The Castratrix of the Phallocentric Universe". 67.

<sup>666</sup> There are a number of phallic women in Carter's fiction, each serving as objects of simultaneous fascination, repulsion and, most usually, fear. The women of the remote "river people" manipulate the clitoris to form "a splendid quivering growth at the head of the dark red nether lips". Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 84-85. Desiderio does not realise that the clitoris "as long as my little finger" symbolises female power, and that he is scheduled to be killed by the phallic blade of his child bride. Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines* 84. Mamie Buckskin represents "a paradox - a fully phallic female with the bosom of a nursing mother and a gun, death-dealing erectile tissue, perpetually at her thigh". Carter, *The Passion* 108. Mother represents the ultimate Phallic Castratrix, raping Eve/lyn in a scene of "engulfment", followed by the desperate irony of his realisation: "Oh the dreadful symbolism of that knife! To be castrated by a phallic symbol". Carter, *The Passion* 70.

The contention of Chapter Two was that there is no prime or pre-discursive guarantor of identity. The assumption that anatomy is destiny is instrumental in the maintenance of heteronormative sexuality. However, there is nothing to indicate that sexuality, sexual preference, sexual performance or desire are a foregone conclusion. Rather, there is no finality of the corporeal, there is no final body, and there is no final, pre-discursive or anatomically authentic locus of identity. In other words, we cannot look for anatomical proof of identity. The body is always one "in the act of becoming", a work in progress without a completion date. Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque body, the "body in the act of becoming", facilitates a reading of Fevvers and sexuality in terms of an endless displacement of the authentic. This signifies a persistent disruption of the simulated causality of the connection between anatomy and identity.

When Walser stands on the "threshold" staring into the abyss, he recognises that identity is constantly in deferral, and that to define himself in terms of difference does not secure the ontology of his identity. The connection of this ontological insecurity, with the figure of anatomy as an endless void, expressed literally in "Peter and the Wolf" and, through metonymy and intertextual allusion in *Nights as the Circus*, ensures that anatomy fails to be the ultimate signifier of sexuality. This at once parodies the masculinist notion of the "Other", of phallic primacy, the fear of the monstrous woman and the *vagina dentata*, but also reveals that the faith which we place in genitalia as the "truth" of corporeality is misguided.

Additional to the text's displacement of an ultimate signifier of identity or sexuality, all bodies are bodies in the act of becoming, consisting as they do of reiterative performances. *Nights at the Circus* makes a similar point to that in *The Passion of New Eve*. Just as Evelyn's male born genitalia no more secure an "authentic" identity than his surgically rendered femaleness, so Walser's identity is no less performed than that of the obviously



constructed Fevvers. One point that we might draw from Carter's work here is that those identities which seem "natural" are of course as "performed" as those represented in terms of displayed artifice or performance, such as the new Eve, Albertina in *Desire Machines*, and Fevvers. The question as to fact or fiction is no less appropriate for Walser than for Fevvers.

Further, the problematisation of Carter's characters' identities also provides a space in which the reader's own ontology is cast in doubt. To figure all subjects as "performers", then, displaces conventional notions of performance and spectatorship.<sup>667</sup> A re-reading of Bakhtin's utopian conceptualisation of performance and spectatorship might provide a means for destabilising the power conventionally attached to subjects or groups thought to be spectators. Remembering that all identities are performances, and that all subjects are at once performers and spectators destabilises the means by which certain sexualities are produced as Other, the object of the gaze or figures for the visual pleasure for others. Of the elision of the boundary between performers and spectators in the carnivalesque, Bakhtin writes:

carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people, they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people.<sup>668</sup>

While Bakhtin's notion of carnival as "embrac[ing] all the people" seems utopian, I would suggest that there is value in a discussion of the carnivalesque as a destabilisation of the

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<sup>667</sup> Britzolakis writes, "Carnavalesque is Carter's way of puncturing the commodifying link between the spectator and the specular female object". Britzolakis 55.

<sup>668</sup> Bakhtin 7.

binary oppositions through which difference is defined and maintained. To view performance in terms other than those of actors and spectators, undoes the binaries of active/passive, subject/object as they are conventionally framed in terms of theatrical spectatorship. As Stallybrass and White suggest, "the observer at the fair is also a participant and so the *relation* between observer and observed is never fixed".<sup>669</sup> This fluidity in terms of conventional spectatorship positions has implications in terms of the way the gaze is figured. This is thematised in Carter's novel through the resonance with Foucault's Panopticon, in which the prison wardress is no less imprisoned than the incarcerated because no less subject to observation: "In that room she'd sit all day and stare and stare and stare at her murderesses and they, in turn, sat all day and stared at her".<sup>670</sup> This circularity of observation frustrates the intent of the Countess' gaze: "not a single one of the objects of her gaze had shown the slightest quiver of remorse".<sup>671</sup> The murderesses resist the appropriation of the gaze, via their refusal to accept the fixed terms of observer and observed, subject and object.

In a reversal of the conventional masculinist appropriation of the spectacle of femininity, many of the male characters in Carter's fiction become framed by a female gaze. In *The Magic Toyshop*, Finn's spying on a naked Melanie through a peep-hole is subverted when she peers through to see him walking on his hands.<sup>672</sup> Similarly, Evelyn, whose physical mistreatment of Leilah includes an abject fascination with the spectacle of her appearance, becomes subject to similar treatment following Mother's physical and psycho-surgery.<sup>673</sup> In *Heroes and Villains*, it is Jewel who is objectified as Other, and as a Barbarian by Marianne's

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<sup>669</sup> Stallybrass and White 42.

<sup>670</sup> Carter, *Nights* 210.

<sup>671</sup> Carter, *Nights* 213.

<sup>672</sup> Angela Carter, *The Magic Toyshop* 1967. (London: Virago Press, 1981) 109.

<sup>673</sup> Zero inspects Eve/lyn's genitalia with a "jeweller's eye". Carter, *The Passion* 106. This functions in counterpoint to Eve/lyn's earlier statement that he "made her lie on her back and parted her legs like a doctor in order to examine more closely the exquisite negative of her sex". Carter, *The Passion* 27.

"sharp, cold eyes"<sup>674</sup> when she leans from the tower window of her home.<sup>675</sup> In *Nights at the Circus* also, the tables are turned on Walser whose masculinist objectification of Fevvers is reversed as he takes his place centre stage in Colonel Kearney's circus. Upon joining the circus, it is Walser who must become "dressed meat" as a human chicken, the object of ridicule and objectification in the circus performance.<sup>676</sup>

Reading more broadly, this Bakhtinian destabilisation of actor/spectator relations of Carnival also problematises conventional aspects of literary consumption, appropriation and objectification. It has already been mentioned that there are a number of textual devices which encourage an association, if not identification, of the reader with the objectivity and reason of Walser as a metonymic representation of masculinist structures of appropriation. Moreover, there is the displacement of the reader's security in this position, as the grotesque body of Fevvers casts doubt on the traditional apparatus of appropriation, measurement and labelling. Dislocated from Father Time, the Symbolic Order of language and the comfort of the observer's chair with opera glasses to frame the spectacle, both Walser and the reader are subject to the interrogation not only of Fevvers' identity but also of their own. The result of this ontological investigation is that the actor/spectator relationship is broken down in the usual postmodernist terms, through reading as a process of production rather than of consumption. Fevvers serves as the prompt for an investigation into the performativity of all identities, encouraging a recognition that the reader's identity is no less constructed, performed or metaphorical than hers. Displaced from the conventional site of literary consumption and objectification, the journey through the Siberian tundra may prompt the reader to recognise that their own identity is a reiterative performance rather than a manifestation of a prior or pre-symbolic essence. As Fevvers' carnivalesque laughter resounds long after the text, so do the significance of her

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<sup>674</sup> Carter, *Heroes and Villains* 1.

<sup>675</sup> Carter, *Heroes and Villains* 5.

<sup>676</sup> Carter, *Nights* 102.



words: "To think I really fooled you! . . . It just goes to show there's nothing like confidence".<sup>677</sup> Fevvers' last words also recall the earlier words of the Indian Charlatan: "Is not this whole world an illusion? And yet it fools everybody".<sup>678</sup> This statement prompts readers to question their perception of reality, and contextualised in terms of the text's investigation of Fevvers' identity, readers question the "reality" of identities and the means by which these are appropriated.

Extending Carter's cultural critique, then, *Nights* can be read as a textual displacement of the means by which corporeality is assumed to secure ontology. Notions of difference attached to, and inscribed on and in bodies are interrogated via the intertextual invocation of Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque body and the destabilising potential of the carnival. The foetid, fleshy and feminine representation of Fevvers undermines notions of classic closure of corporeality and masculinist ontological security, as both Walser and the reader experience the abyss that represents the illusory status of identity. Recognising that identities are complex constructions, projections and sustained imageries rather than pre-existent and ordained, both Walser and the reader are subjected to the over-determined textual scrutiny of historical imageries and mythologies and their power to determine "natural" subjectivities. Distrustful of naming strategies and the power of language to regulate, *Nights* also frustrates conventional romance narratives, interrogates masculinist structures of objectification, phallic power and the reification of women according to ideologies of the virgin/whore dichotomy. Explicitly thematised by this novel then is the recognition of identity as a series of performances, imageries, and sustained trickeries. The fluidity of identity performance operates as an effective means of eluding conventional regulatory practices, including sexual objectification and violence. Framed not by a "loss" of identity, the novel suggests that there is a power in the potentialities offered by the mask that indicates that there is no such thing as "identity".

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<sup>677</sup> Carter, *Nights* 295.

<sup>678</sup> Carter, *Nights* 16.

## Conclusion

This dissertation engages in a detailed exploration of the queer possibilities within the fiction of Angela Carter. The diffraction of narrative mode, the excesses of symbolism, intertextuality and theoretical critique ensure that Carter's fiction proves a destabilising force rather than a reassuring one. The reader of Carter's fiction finds narrative expectations frustrated, ideological beliefs challenged and the bounds of ontological security disrupted. This encourages a self-reflexivity regarding the production of one's own sexuality, insisting on an awareness of the normative discourses that regulate the subject. The multiplicity of corporealities, pleasures, desires and sexual iconographies encourages the reader to engage in identifications characterised by sexual fluidity and potentiality rather than fixity along normative lines.

Chapter One suggests that the existing Carter criticism covers ground as varied as it is contentious. The changes in style and preoccupation throughout Carter's oeuvre are reflected by shifts in theoretical emphasis in the Carter criticism. The predominant concern with sexual politics in her fiction has proven a source of contention among the earlier Carter critics. Sexual violence, voyeurism and the masculinist gaze and narrative mode are identified as primary sites of criticism prior to Carter's death. Coinciding with her death in 1992, the increased focus on theories of performativity in much of the later Carter criticism emphasised the construction of identities. Yet, to date, the performative potential in Carter's fiction has been explored according to perspectives that are predominantly feminist. Chapter One argues that in keeping with a feminist affirmation of boundaries, this criticism precludes an analysis of the queer fluidity of the performativity of Carter's fiction. In recognising the shift from the earlier emphasis on sexually explicit and sometimes violent imagery in Carter's work, to a feminist emphasis on performativity as a means of "feminine resistance", this dissertation has identified a space for a queer approach to the sexually

explicit material in Carter's fiction according to a transgressive and fluid understanding of sexual identity.

Chapter Two outlined the ways in which efforts to elicit acceptance or tolerance through the affirmation of identity categories often unwittingly contribute to the regime of normative identity production. For this reason, a destabilisation of the tools of this regime would seem the most likely means of effecting a fluidity and potentiality in our understandings of sexuality. By frustrating the expected links between the various aspects or activities thought to constitute sexual "identity", the processes of normative regimes can be destabilised. Challenging the conventional expectations of what each identity category signifies, disrupts the stereotypical and normative performative effects of these categories. The recognition that the signifier "lesbian", for instance, does not always reflect a quantifiable or predictable series of characteristics, bodies, pleasures, activities, etc., destabilises the means by which this signifier accords with a normative agenda. In deconstructing the conventional and normative understandings of the signifier "heterosexuality", the conventional and normative operations of that signifier are also challenged. Since identity categories produce as their "effects" that which they name, and identities are constructed and maintained only through reiterative performances, this naming and these performances prove likely sites of destabilisation.

Carter's fiction proves a rich site for the investigation and extrapolation of this theoretical perspective for a number of reasons. The iconoclastic and interrogative nature of her work indicates a propensity for resistance of the "normative" rather than an adherence to its effects. The postmodern emphasis on identity construction, evident particularly in Carter's later fiction, provides ample scope for the exploration of the permutations of performativity. This is especially the case in terms of the postmodern emphasis on the discursive production of the subject. The variety of ways in which language is employed to produce and regulate the subject are parodied throughout each of the Carter texts under discussion. Further, Carter's emphasis on the cultural significance of imagery and iconography indicates a resonance with Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal and the



proliferation of the simulacra. The argument sustained in Chapter Two frames identities and sexualities as simulacra, indicating significant parallels with the postmodern concerns of Carter's fiction.

Indicative of Carter's provocative style, her polemical defence of de Sade, *The Sadeian Woman*, was published at the height of the feminist resistance to pornography. While ensuring Carter's problematic place in terms of the feminist movement, this text also provided a significant and timely revision of conventional approaches to pornography. As is suggested in Chapter Three, Carter's Foucaultian perspective reminded readers of *The Sadeian Woman* that sex "comes to us out of history". In maximising the potential for Carter's "moral pornographer", this dissertation has proposed a refiguration of the discourses through which we produce pornography as "harmful". In reconceptualising pornography as a "lack of control", it is viewed as a site for the analysis of the processes through which sexualities are constituted. Rather than operating as a series of prescriptive and proscriptive rules for sexual behaviour, pornography can be figured as a site in which to access and explore those desires, pleasures, bodies and identifications excluded by the normative.

Chapter Four contends that *The Passion of New Eve* operates as an explicit exploration of the cultural production of not only gender, but also of the body as specifically sexed. Masculinity and femininity are revealed to be discursive productions, emanations of the heteronormative social and cultural "ideals" of Hollywood, and in accordance with binary requisites for masculine aggression and feminine passivity. The recognition that Eve/lyn's "constructed" identity, body and sexual desire as a "woman" are no less constructed than the "prior" masculine/male identity sustains the critique of "anatomy" as the first, final and utterly unquestionable marker of identity. This text also frustrates the humanist search for origins, or the search for the true and prior "self". Disallowing Eve/lyn the ontological security that s/he seeks, the novel drags its readers from one continent to another, through the *tabula rasa* of the desert, through the primordial womb in search of ontological stability via the identification of origins, only to cast them adrift (inadequately equipped) upon a sea

of free-floating significations. The novel resonates with highly parodic imagery of births and re-births, and encourages a recognition in readers of the means by which the subject is constituted through processes of construction and regulation, rather than reiterating the "primordial" and ordained status of the humanist "self". In a postmodern inversion of the *Bildungsroman*, Eve/lyn discovers only that the impetus for the quest of "self" discovery is fundamentally flawed.

*The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* engages in a similarly parodic and episodic "journey", tracing the tensions between the totalising impulses of the Minister of Determination and Doctor Hoffman's "diabolical" proliferation of images in which signs refuse to represent the "real". Chapter Four suggests that the dual emphasis of this novel effects a parody of phallic and heteronormative "power" and, following this parodic destabilisation, an exploration of the queer possibilities for bodies and pleasures. Taking a Baudrillardian perspective, this chapter suggests that *Infernal Desire Machines* operates as a parody of the processes which ensure that heterosexuality is mis/recognised as real rather than a simulacrum.

Frustrating the boundaries of the "Real", of "Knowledge" and of "Truth", *Infernal Desire Machines* engages in a queer "seduction", a phantasmagoric display of bodies, sexes, and desires which denies the possibility of an "authentic". The slipperiness of the simulacrum, the seductive image, the shifting and reproducible nature of the surface, negates the existence of a "depth". Myriad characters, images and iconographies display this queer fluidity, exacerbating the effects of the Minister's loss of referentiality.

As with *The Passion of New Eve* and *Infernal Desire Machines*, *Nights at the Circus* exploits the mutability and performativity of identity. Chapter Five reads *Nights* as a display of excessive performativity in a Bakhtinian celebration of the bodily grotesque. In analysing this novel, Chapter Five identifies the specific means by which the corporeal is regulated according to normative codes. The grotesquerie of Fevvers' performativity rejects the conventional and classical notions of the closed body. In a further textualisation of the

discursive significance of identity categories, this novel exploits processes of naming, indicting historical and mythological structures for the regulation of subjects according to normative codes. With an emphasis on the regulatory power of historical, literary and mythological discourses, both the reader and Walser are forced to confront their own identities as constructed from an ontological void, rather than a prior, or innate essence.

Once again identity is revealed to be a sustained effort as Fevvers' trickery masks nothing, only the fact that her world famous performance does not conceal a "truth". As an embodiment of the grotesque, Fevvers represents the body in the act of becoming. The fleshly and foetid Fevvers, with her trickery and shifting significations, serves as a reminder that there is no final or finite body. The closed and complete body of classicism is the ultimate trickery, as all bodies are those perpetually in the act of "becoming".

This dissertation provides a detailed examination of four of Carter's texts. All of Carter's work exhibits a preoccupation with the discourses and institutions that construct and regulate identities. There is much queer imagery within Carter's earlier work, and in her last novel *Wise Children*. This indicates that Carter's oeuvre holds a broad potential for exploration in queer terms and the recurrent textual concern with sexual regulation provides scope for further research of queer reading practices.

My review of the existing Carter criticism reveals that at present, a queer approach to Carter's fiction has been largely overlooked. Further, as much of the existing Carter criticism exhibits appropriative strategies which do not embrace this transgressive potential, there is an opening in these discourses for sustained analyses and debates of this kind. This dissertation contributes to what might prove an ongoing and sustained queering of Carter's fiction. The process of reading Carter queerly opens an exploratory site in which readers might access those bodies, desires and identifications not endorsed by binary codes. Further, by disrupting the performance of the heteronormative as homogeneous and hegemonic, these reading practices point to a continued and profound destabilisation of the normative codes by which our bodies, desires and pleasures are "sexed".



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