

**The Feminist Postmodern Fantastic: Sexed, Gendered, and Sexual Identities**

**By**

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## The Feminist Postmodern Fantastic: Sexed, Gendered, and Sexual Identities

The thesis investigates a diverse range of feminist postmodern philosophy, distinguished by its varying rearticulation of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism and feminism's own position vis-à-vis that debate. Drawing on postmodernism's primary tenet that substantive, binary identity categories comprise discursive, performative constructs, feminist postmodernism theorises a range of strategies for their subversive re-performance. This is realised in the mobilisation of parodic, "failed" repetitions and identities embodied, for instance, by transsexual, transgender, and transvestite personae. Hence the reformulation of postmodern versions of agency, resistance, and choice.

In the second instance, the thesis examines the combination of feminist postmodern philosophy with the narrative techniques of postmodernism and its sister genre, the fantastic mode. As a heterogeneous, open-ended, self-reflexive form, the "postmodern fantastic" challenges conventional realism and its correlative sovereign subject. The postmodern fantastic is redeployed by feminist practitioners, whose inscription of both textual and topographical re-performance, such as is manifest in the cyborg and the grotesque, represent the literary counterparts of feminist postmodern agency.

The above provide critical contexts for a reading of four late-twentieth-century women writers, focusing in particular on their intervention in the modernism/postmodernism debate and their deployment of the feminist postmodern fantastic as a means of destabilising sexed, gendered, and sexual identity. The selected authors - Hélène Cixous, Monique Wittig, Jeanette Winterson, and Angela Carter - represent distinct and diverse, culturally specific, literary and feminist traditions, reformulating the relationship between modernism and postmodernism in different ways and with varying degrees of success. They coalesce, however, in their contribution to the feminist postmodern fantastic. It is the general purpose of the thesis to demonstrate how this particular mode embodies one of feminist postmodernism's most powerful means of literary and ideological critique.

Michelle Denby

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**To my parents**



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## Introduction

The general purpose of this thesis is an investigation of feminist postmodernism - the combination of feminism with postmodern concepts as a means of challenging gender oppression. However, rather than formulating a single position, a task which reveals itself as impossible in the light of feminism's problematic relationship to both postmodernism *and* modernism, the thesis employs "feminist postmodernism" as an umbrella term to denote a contradictory range of positions linked by their positive engagement, at some level, with postmodern ideas. This alliance, albeit uneasy, is made possible by feminism and postmodernism's shared terrain: like postmodernism, feminism challenges the founding assumptions of the modernist legacy, in particular its androcentric knowledge rooted in the subject/object, rational/irrational dichotomies. In the latter case, however, it is the gendered nature of the dualisms, which comprises the primary impulse. However, notwithstanding a plurality of feminisms, the relationship between feminism and postmodernism is problematised by feminism's historical and theoretical inception as a modernist movement, whose origins lie in both eighteenth- and nineteenth-century liberal humanism and Marxism - primary targets of the postmodern critique. Thus, on the one hand, more orthodox positions within postmodernism have tended to reject any alliance with feminism on account of the latter's recourse to humanist universals; while, on the other, many feminisms oppose postmodernism because of its alleged political quietism.

One response to this problematic situation derives from the pluralisation of postmodernism itself: at the turn of the new century, a range of "ethical", "social", and "political" postmodernisms have joined a number of other postmodernisms - both progressive and fatalistic - which had emerged since the movement's inception in the 1960s. In this sense, despite its rejection by both feminist and postmodern camps, feminism and postmodernism's precarious alliance is validated by its growing presence as well as its possible affinity with other "social"/"political" postmodernisms allied to tendencies in post-Marxism and postcolonialism. Furthermore, the self-image in some quarters of a "pure" or "neutral" postmodernism reveals itself as a myth. Not only is human existence unable to operate without the bounds of socio-discursive constructions, the more familiar and popularised forms of postmodernism (deriving from Lyotard and Baudrillard) have recourse themselves to a patriarchal

metanarrative, on the one hand, and a metanarrative of anti-rational-knowledge, on the other. In the age of postmodern theory anti-knowledge has become *the* legitimating discourse, or the new “truth”. On another level, feminism's paradoxical position vis-à-vis the modernism/postmodernism debate is dependent on an understanding of the terms “modernism” and “postmodernism” themselves. While a number of postmodern theorists evince a horror of being labelled modernist, this fear is rooted itself in an equally modernist binary conceptualisation of the distinction between modernism and postmodernism as historical periods and intellectual movements. Indeed, rather than a monological phenomenon, modernism itself comprises a range of contradictory intellectual debates some of which directly espouse a “postmodern” perspective. Modernism and postmodernism are themselves, therefore, closely imbricated and this further problematises feminism's relationship to both. This is manifest in feminist postmodernism's recourse, albeit provisional and anti-essentialist, to the humanist universals of identity, sex and gender that its adherents aim to critique.

If feminist postmodernism distinguishes itself, on the one hand, therefore, from, for example, liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, and radical feminism, and their subscription to modernist discourse, it inevitably itself evinces a variety of positions. While feminist postmodern “purists” espouse a complete rejection of modernism as part of an uncompromising commitment to postmodernism, “modernist revisionists” endeavour to reformulate modernism for a postmodern age. Between these poles a range of feminist postmodern theorists have recourse in various guises to some aspects of modernity, revealing the difficulty for any political endeavour of completely distancing itself from universalising humanist values or principles, however provisionally these are framed. Opposed to a monological feminist postmodernism, therefore, this thesis intends, firstly, to highlight its internal contradictions and shifting allegiance to postmodernism *and* modernism and, secondly, to interpret and assess the attempts by individual theorists and writers to successfully negotiate this problematic relationship.

At the same time, however, the thesis seeks to demonstrate, both theoretically and in a reading of selected literary texts, that an alliance between feminism and postmodernism provides the most successful means of challenging gender oppression.

It rejects a range of other feminisms whose various investments in modernism - and hence gender-dichotomous Enlightenment epistemology - inevitably perpetuate dualistic power relations in which woman is either relegated to an inferior station or engaged in a struggle to reverse power. Feminist postmodernism's central argument, therefore, derives from postmodernism's basic tenet: that the textual, performative, and discursive construction - and hence possible reconstruction - of meaning, reality, and identity invalidates universal theories and binary thinking. Thus, whereas within modernism, sex, gender, and sexuality tend to comprise essentialist, pre-social givens, which assign men and women specific roles in society, for feminist postmodernism, they are constituted, firstly, through socio-historical discourses embedded in power regimes and, secondly, through the subject's performative repetition of signifying acts and corporeal styles. As constructs rather than fixed essences, which acquire meaning through the signifying process, sex, gender and sexuality are open to reconstruction. Hence the theorisation within postmodern feminism of specific strategies for the subversion of substantive sex and gender roles and of sexuality, or the theorisation of postmodern versions of choice, resistance, and agency. Postmodern agency derives, firstly, from the conscious awareness of conflicting sexed, gendered, and sexual subject-positions and, secondly, from parodic, "failed" repetitions or identities such as are manifest in transgender, transvestite, and transsexual personae. From this perspective, the destabilisation of binary sex, gender, and sexuality, including freedom from juridical power and socio-political constraints, will increase the subject's individual range of social roles and behaviour and integrate all individuals in the struggle against oppression.

The thesis engages with these questions most directly in its opening chapter. My chief interest lies in the combination of feminist postmodern philosophy and the postmodern narrative techniques of the fantastic mode and their joint contribution to the subversion of gender oppression. I use the term "fantastic postmodernism" to refer to literary postmodernism's recuperation of other non-realist modes, namely the Gothic, the fantastic, science fiction, the grotesque, and utopian/dystopian tropes - often in residual or topographical form - within its own open-ended narrative strategies. Indeed, an examination of the formal, thematic, and philosophical similarities between postmodernism and in particular Gothicism and the fantastic reveals the latter as sister genres, and postmodern fiction as their most recent avatar.

Recalling postmodern philosophy's rejection of Enlightenment epistemology, these hybrid forms coalesce, on one level, in their opposition to realism and its concomitant rationalist philosophy. Thus, whereas realism draws on the notion of communal reality and the transparency of language in order to predicate "reality" and "truth" on experiential reality and objective representation, the self-reflexivity of postmodernism, Gothicism, and the fantastic problematises language and representation to reveal the narrative construction of reality, truth and identity. Further similarities are manifest in their symbiotic relationship to realism, which enables an examination of cultural limits and concepts of the real; their emergence in response to intense periods of cultural heteroglossia, in particular secularisation, industrialism, and capitalism; their narrative and topological indeterminacy; and, their rejection of the Enlightenment sovereign subject through a destabilisation of the boundaries between self and other. My investigation centres on the way the postmodern fantastic's narrative destabilisation of modernist notions of reality and identity is deployed by its feminist practitioners in their endeavour to destabilise sexed, gendered, and sexual identities.

In particular I explore the ways in which the feminist postmodern fantastic draws on the ability of open-ended, heterogeneous narrative genres, firstly, to challenge cultural norms through a range of narrative techniques which comprise the literary counterparts of feminist postmodern philosophy's destabilisation of meaning, reality, and identity and, secondly, to produce new conceptions of agency through repeat performance and the mobilisation of failed identities. Hence the thesis focuses on the feminist postmodern fantastic's characteristic textual performativity, subversive re-enactments of other texts and genres, and production of indeterminate personae such as the female grotesque and the cyborg. Furthermore, while historical non-realisms ultimately reinforce Enlightenment notions of sex, gender, and sexuality, their various obsessively transgressive, radically tabooed, or highly formulaic sexist depictions, render them attractive to feminist postmodern fantastic writers. The feminist postmodern fantastic reworks these features in two ways. Firstly it deploys historical non-realisms' strategies for the destabilisation of sexed, gendered, and sexual identity – in its use, for example, of the motifs of dualism, invisibility, and transformation as well as androgyny, cannibalism, necrophilia, and incest - albeit without the former's ultimate reinstatement of gender norms. Secondly, it parodically re-enacts formulaic

gendered conventions, such as Gothicism's good/bad woman, marriage ending and virtuous, virginal heroine for ironic and subversive ends.

With these issues in mind, the opening two chapters of the thesis establish two critical paradigms from which to examine late-twentieth-century feminist postmodern fantastic writers. The first chapter examines a variety of approaches to identity, sex and gender, and sexuality including their destabilisation through feminist postmodernism's own performative model based on transvestite, transsexual, and transgender personae. The second chapter establishes the relationship between postmodern fiction and non-realist genres, and examines in particular their combined ability - in the guise of the postmodern fantastic - to subvert social categories and mores through their transgression of realist narratology and correlative humanist rationality. The conventional association of the Gothic and grotesque and other non-realist genres with sex, gender and sexuality render them an ideal vehicle for the production of the feminist postmodern fantastic.

The remaining four chapters of the thesis reposition examples of late-twentieth-century women writers within the above contexts. They aim, in particular, to highlight the combination of the subversive strategies of feminist postmodern philosophy and feminist postmodern fantastic narratology. I choose to concentrate on four writers, Hélène Cixous, Monique Wittig, Jeanette Winterson and Angela Carter as examples of prominent figures working in different traditions with different relations to and conceptions of both modernity and feminism. "Chapter 3. Hélène Cixous: Postmodern Feminism and *Écriture Féminine*", examines the unique position of "feminine writing" within modernism/postmodernism which, on the one hand, contributes explicitly to postmodern feminism's deconstruction of binary thinking, and, on the other, invests in female experience and the body as essentialist universals. "Chapter 4. Monique Wittig: Postmodern Feminism and the *Nouveau Roman*", similarly explores a dual perspective vis-à-vis modernism and postmodernism. This is seen as partly reflected in a split between Wittig's theory and fiction, and as deriving from her equally individual position as modernist revisionist. I explain, firstly, how Wittig's theoretical approach combines her challenge to the social construction of gender with an unerring belief in sovereign subjectivity, and, secondly, how, at a textual level, she invests in the (*nouveau*) *nouveau roman* (the French counterpart of

literary postmodernism) and the feminist postmodern fantastic's subversive re-enactment of conventionally masculine genres and intertexts and its depiction of unstable sexual identities. "Chapter 5. Jeanette Winterson: The Lesbian Postmodern", examines feminist postmodernism's inscription of unstable sexual identities in a challenge to modernist lesbianism's identity-based politics and homo-hetero binary. Winterson's investment in transcendent love, the autonomy of art, and the re-integration of fragmented subjectivity within certain universal theories is seen nevertheless as evidence of a refusal to relinquish modernism in its entirety. Finally, "Chapter 6. Angela Carter: The Enigmas of the Feminist Postmodern Fantastic" closely examines the ambiguities of feminist postmodernism's redeployment of the fantastic's subversive strategies, focusing in particular on theories of the carnival, the panopticon, the female grotesque, and female masquerade. Here too modernist elements are retained and are manifest in Carter's depiction of the transformative power of love and simultaneous adherence to both feminist postmodernism and socialist (materialist) feminism.

The four writers examined derive from different, culturally specific, literary traditions and traditions of feminism. They engage also in different ways with postmodern practice and modernist tenets. As a pre-eminent French feminist, Cixous' critical and literary works encapsulate the uneasiness of an alliance between *écriture féminine*'s investment in a deconstructionist programme and the *scriptible, jouissant* text, on the one hand, and a conflation between postmodern fluidity and both the feminine and the essentialist female body, on the other. Wittig, by comparison, is representative, in many ways, of 1970s "materialist deconstructionism" or "essentialist anti-essentialism", an early attempt to relocate materialist feminism's modernist principles within poststructuralism's challenge to gender construction. However, in spite of her deconstructionism, Wittig's uncompromised retention of sovereign subjectivity manifests an unresolved tension throughout her critical writings and literary texts. Occupying an individual position within the field, Winterson subsumes decentred subjectivity within a series of transcendent, universal schema – Art, love, and Eastern philosophy – suggesting the necessity of retaining some point of reference or sense of self vis-à-vis postmodern fragmentation. This position is rendered frictionless by Art, love, and Eastern spiritualism's own delineations of fractured subjectivity. Embodying a recent, more systematically integrated synthesis of postmodern



feminism and socialist (materialist) feminism, Carter examines both the subversive, resignificatory practices and personae of the feminist postmodern fantastic as well as their limitations. This combination of postmodern deconstruction with a belief in the materiality of the signifying system allows Carter to simultaneously challenge gender construction and examine the material effects of its cultural production. In spite of their espousal of diverse positions, these writers nevertheless combine, I believe, in developing the hybrid mode of the “postmodern feminist fantastic”. It is my purpose to demonstrate how this mode provides one of feminist postmodernism’s most powerful means of literary and ideological critique.

## Chapter 1. Feminist Postmodernism

### i. Identity, Subjectivity, Agency

Postmodern notions of identity, subjectivity, and agency are broadly informed by two branches of postmodern enquiry: firstly, postmodern “philosophy,” “anti-philosophy,” or “counter-philosophy” which deconstructs the (Western) philosophical tradition; secondly, postmodern sociology which examines social development and organisation in the late-twentieth-century postmodern condition. The central tenet of postmodern “philosophy” – the linguistic and discursive construction of social reality and individual consciousness – provides the common impulse underlying a diverse range of postmodernisms. This project - alternately labelled “the death of Man” and “the decentring of the subject” - wages an attack on humanist identity and subjectivity in all its guises (Enlightenment humanism, liberalism, liberal feminism, humanist Marxism, radical feminism), including prevailing common sense discourses. Within humanism, identity and subjectivity denote the unique characteristics and inner experience of conscious, unified, and rational subjects; what represents the unique “essence” of identity shifts according to the specific humanist discourse in question. For postmodernists, however, identity and subjectivity are constituted either “textually,” “performatively,” or “discursively,” in the latter case by historically specific discourses both inherent in social institutions and practices and enmeshed in webs of power. Hence, in postmodernism, the stable, constituent humanist subject – encapsulated by Descartes’ dictum “*je pense, donc je suis*” [“I think therefore I am”] (Descartes 1988 [1637]: 65) - becomes a permanent site of disunity, flux, and conflict. On another level, theories concerning the fragmented subject have been developed by branches of postmodern sociology examining material social relations (economic, technological) in the late twentieth century. Firstly, globalisation, affecting the rate, flow, and direction of finance, information and individuals, has amplified, albeit problematically, the theorisation of fluid identity. Secondly, advanced (bio)technologies, disrupting the boundaries human/machine and human/animal, further problematise notions of integral identity. Nevertheless, postmodern responses to fluid identity and subjectivity significantly differ: whereas purely aesthetic and “pessimistic” postmodernisms present a subject whose very textuality and dispersion forecloses both action and politics, other postmodernisms – variously designated “ethical”, “social”, “radical”, and “transnational” – retheorise notions of choice,

resistance, agency, and coalition – without recourse to their political modernist counterparts. Indeed, whereas modernist agency emanates from its subscription to the sovereign subject and social contract, postmodern agency derives, firstly, from the individual's awareness of his/her own fragmentation and status as a construct, and secondly, through the subject's subversive repetition of substantive identity via re-significatory practices. It is to this latter group that postmodern feminism belongs.

Postmodernism's challenge to the humanist subject emanates on one level from its roots in poststructuralist counter-philosophies - post-Saussurean and Derridean linguistics, Althusserian Marxism, Gadamerian hermeneutics, and Foucauldian notions of discourse and power. Central to each of these is language: postmodernism rejects the notion of language both as a transparent medium and as the expression of unique individuality; instead, language is seen to constitute social reality, identity and the individual's sense of subjectivity. Thus, in one sense, postmodernism's origins can be traced to the central precepts of Saussure's structuralist linguistics: national languages and discourses within the same language confer meaning on reality in different and irreducible ways; as a consequence, the individual subject is no longer the guarantor of meaning; finally, if meaning is created through the relation between "signs" then language is arbitrary, social, historical, and plural. Nevertheless, it is the above founding thinkers - and their development beyond Saussure - who are perceived as having collectively forged the mainstay of the postmodern position; their work has become the departure point for all subsequent discussion of postmodern identity, subjectivity, and agency – including that within feminist postmodernism.

Whereas structuralist Saussurean linguistics postulated the sign as a stable unity, Derrida's *post*structuralist theories of "deferral" and "différance" expose the fluid distinction between signifier/signified and word/thing. The continual (dis)(re)connection of signifiers and signifieds, and their capacity to reverse position, produces an infinity of potential combinations; thus, each sign prompts another and is determined by the "trace" of other signs which remain inevitably absent. The impossibility of locating an ultimate signified renders meaning permanently unstable: no longer attached to a single, integral sign, signification continually flees along a chain of signifiers varying according to context and the particular sequence in which it is located. The (con)textuality of meaning has radical implications for notions of self

and identity; hence, Eagleton's conclusions drawn from Derridean analysis: "to use signs at all entails that my meaning is always somehow dispersed, divided and never quite at one with itself. Not only my meaning, indeed, but *me*: since language is something I am made out of, rather than merely a convenient tool I use, the whole idea that I am a stable, unified entity must also be a fiction" (1996 [1983]: 112). Derrida's theory culminates with the development of "deconstruction" which incorporates these linguistic precepts into an approach to philosophical and literary texts. Deconstruction challenges the traditional hermeneutical endeavour to uncover authorial meaning and intention; instead of pursuing "true" interpretation the reader's understanding of the work is "grafted" onto the text itself producing a legitimate and unique creation. Literary deconstruction – the decentring of the author-as-subject – bears witness to Derrida's central project to displace Western dualisms and to both situate the subject and deconstruct its constitution vis-à-vis a discrete object. However, while deconstruction examines the textuality of meaning, it neglects to emphasise the social power relations within which meaning is situated. Foucault's "genealogy," by comparison, demonstrates, firstly, that discourses create both subjects and objects and, secondly, that all discourses deploy regimes of power.

In opposition to totalising, linear historiography, genealogy seeks, firstly, to critique present discourses and practices by locating them in the past and, secondly, to preserve the multiplicity, contingency, and local-specificity of history through an exposition of "difference" and discontinuity. Hence, Foucault's attack on the modern *épistème* – acme of the rise of "Man" – comprises a genealogical analysis of the (rational/moral) subject's trajectory through the history of western thinking. The autonomous "moral subject" finds its inception in Greek philosophy: access to the subject position was based, in part, on the ideal of moderation – mastery over virile sexual desire and "feminine" self-indulgence; lacking virility, both women and young boys were relegated to the status of passive, governable objects. Similarly, the cultivation of the self - self-determination, self-knowledge, and androcentrism - in Roman and early Christian discourses also anticipates (political) modernist subjectivity. By revealing the specific cultural and historical foundation of the autonomous, abstract subject, Foucault collapses the very foundations of modernist epistemology: knowledge is not obtained through the separation of the autonomous

subject from a passive object; instead knowledge, subjects and objects are constituted by discourses.

Foucault's subsequent work develops this basic premise to incorporate an examination of the individual's entrapment within a network of historical power relationships. In contrast to feudalism's monarchical power, modernity witnesses the inception of disciplinary power, based on the Panopticon's model of ubiquitous observation and internalisation of self-surveillance; hence, "panopticism," Foucault's metaphorical model for analysing the nature of contemporary modes of power. Rather than residing in a single, coercive authority (e.g. sovereign, state, law, class) dominating assentient subjects through punitive measures, modern power emanates from a variety of discourses of (scientific) knowledge (e.g. medicine, psychiatry, political science) based on the surveillance and assessment of individuals via a "confessional" model of enquiry. However, despite the polyvalency of power in modern societies, "one remains attached to [the former] image of power-law, of power-sovereignty, which was traced out by [...] the monarchic institution" (Foucault 1998 [1976]: 90). Notwithstanding, the prevalent perpetuation of this representation of power in modern societies, its "juridico-discursive" nature limits the comprehension of power to "the negative and emaciated form of prohibition" (86) – negation, limitation, suppression, and taboo. Indeed, according to Foucault, it is this reductive representation of power as limitation, and the subsequent production of a potential liberation, which renders power acceptable. Foucault's analysis aims to substitute a more complex and positive model of power in modern societies for that of the negative, reductive juridico-discursive; indeed, employing Deleuzian terminology (discussed below), the latter's status as an "anti-energy" which is "in no condition to produce," is challenged by a vision of modern power as productive, aleatory, mobile and provisional:

Power's condition of possibility [...] must not be sought in the primary existence of a central point, in a unique source of sovereignty from which secondary and descendent forms would emanate; it is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable. (93)

Thus, Foucault's emphasis on the ubiquity of power, its self-reproduction, limitless contact points and location within "the over-all effect that emerges from these mobilities" (93), challenges the binary matrix – oppressor/oppressed; ruler/ruled – at the heart of the juridico-discursive model. Indeed, it is the simultaneous omnipresence, provisionality and non-dichotomous nature of power which locates resistance – and hence subversion – within rather than beyond its bounds. Power operates in relation to "a multiplicity of points of resistance [...] present everywhere in the network" (95) whose adversarial or supporting role vis-à-vis power refutes the conventional situation of resistance within a single locale, or a "pure law of the revolutionary" (96). Instead, resistance is multiple, spontaneous, solitary, rampant, varying in density, and productive of specific effects and mobilizations at precise moments in time. As the site of conjunction between power and knowledge discourse reveals itself similarly polyvalent and rooted within the field of force relations: hence firstly, Foucault's displacement of the binary conceptualisation of "a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse" (100); secondly, his demonstration of discourse's simultaneous support and opposition to power which it "transmits and produces [...] but also undermines and exposes" (101); and thirdly, his analysis of the existence of "different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy" (102). Finally, therefore, no longer restricted to the "repressive hypothesis," power characterises itself through its capacity to define, delimit and constitute social reality, truths, objects, and the subject – now perceived as the locus of a struggle between competing discourses enmeshed in webs of power. These notions of the manifestation of counter-resistance and counter-discourse within the terms of power itself appear in Carter and Winterson's novels in Chapters Five and Six in the guise of specifically female communities and realms.

On one level, feminist postmodernism defines itself through both its development of the above analyses and its departure from the founding fathers. Notwithstanding debate concerning their neglect, ambiguity, or sexism vis-à-vis women, feminist postmodernism generally maintains that these thinkers need not be feminist themselves for their analyses to be adapted by feminism; indeed, on the contrary, their works provide the rudiment for a feminist postmodern politics. At its most basic level, the central distinction lies in the emphasis granted by feminist postmodernism to gendered identity: whereas the former decentres generic "man" and the

subject/object dichotomy, the latter “challenges ‘man’ as both a gendered *and* generic concept” (Hekman 1990: 20) and reveals the hierarchical, gendered foundation of subject and object positions. In this sense, feminist postmodernism is perceived as extending postmodernism’s attack on the subject-centredness of the modern *épistème* and merits, according to Hekman, inclusion among those “counter-sciences” (e.g. ethnology, linguistics, psychoanalysis) hailed by Foucault as presaging the demise of “man.”

Thus, Derridean and Foucauldian analyses of the specifically phallogocentric nature of Western thinking are fundamental to feminist postmodernism’s examination of constituted, gendered identity. Derrida’s deconstruction provides a model for undermining the ideological, hierarchical, and dichotomous nature of a “metaphysics of presence,” including its central binaries - man/self/subject; woman/other/object. Furthermore, forewarning the danger for women of constituting themselves as subjects as a masculine ploy, Derrida implicitly attacks the endeavours of a variety of feminisms (discussed below) to reconceptualise the Cartesian subject: “Constituting women as subjects entails making them part of that system, neutralising them, and, Derrida claims, giving power to men. The only alternative, he claims, is to deconstruct the philosophical system that gave men that power in the first place” (Hekman 1990: 68). Derrida’s concepts “deferral” and “différance” are also pertinent to feminist postmodern politics: the impossibility of fixing language renders meaning – and, hence also social organisation, identity, and gender – subject to change. Nevertheless, feminist postmodernism’s vested interest in social power relations reworks Derrida’s asocial theory into a critique of “the social and institutional context of textuality” (Weedon 1998 [1987]: 25) and “the historically and socially specific discursive production of conflicting and competing meanings” (82). Hence, the privileging of Foucault’s work among feminist postmodern theorists (e.g. Butler, Hekman, Weedon): firstly, in view of its displacement of “man” and the subject/object dichotomy; secondly, on account of its examination of social power networks, multiple modes of power, and the inherence of discourses in social institutions. Finally, however, Foucault’s theory incorporates postmodern notions of resistance and agency – the core of the subsequent discussion on feminist postmodern politics and action in which “the individual is an active but not sovereign protagonist” (Weedon 1998 [1987]: 40).

Feminist postmodern sociology's analyses of the high-tech "global village," exemplified by Haraway's "cyborg manifesto" and Grewal and Kaplan's "transnational feminism," also feature the decentred postmodern subject. Haraway's cyborg operates as a metaphor for two basic albeit related types of postmodern selfhood: firstly, hybrid, fluid identities occasioned by the social reality of late-twentieth-century advanced (bio)technologies, cybernetics, and global economics; secondly, (bio)technologically composite, utopian, identities created by the political imagination of feminist cyberpunk writers. Thus, while in Haraway's own terms the cyborg is "a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (1990 [1985]: 191), it is the former element in which this particular discussion is interested (the latter is taken up in Chapter Two). The birth of the "homework economy," which restructured social organisation and gendered and raced stereotypes, has destabilised previously held notions of fixed identity. On another level, the individual's (re)location within a world system of high-tech (re)production, communications sciences, modern biologies, and microelectronics has shifted the interface human/animal and human/machine. Hence, the advent of cyborg identities which are, firstly, hybrid, anti-essentialist, and (dis)(re)assembled and, secondly, capable of displacing the matrix of domination inherent in the subject/self;object/other dichotomy: "To be One is to be autonomous, to be powerful, to be God; but to be One is to be an illusion and so to be involved in a dialectic of apocalypse with the other. Yet, to be other is to be multiple, without clear boundaries, frayed, insubstantial. [...] High-tech culture challenges these dualisms in intriguing ways" (Haraway 1990 [1985]: 219). For Haraway, therefore, the cyborg constitutes not merely a reflection of postmodern subjectivity, but a politically-postmodern socialist-feminist myth capable of effecting radical transformation. Indeed, its incorporation of new hybrid racial ethnicities, produced by globalisation, provides the model (discussed below) for a feminist postmodern coalition of marginalised peoples: "'women of color' might be understood as a cyborg identity, a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider identities" (Haraway 1990 [1985]: 216). Thus, while most contemporary postmodern feminists call attention to race (e.g. Butler, Weedon), it is within feminist postmodern sociology that raced identity and global (as opposed to hegemonic Western) postmodernism are analysed at length – hence, Grewal and Kaplan's notion of "scattered hegemonies," which focuses exclusively on the effects of globalisation on ethnic, racial, and gendered identities.



Postmodern feminism's critique of the political quietism and prevalent white-male-middle-class bias of "aesthetic" postmodernisms, is mirrored, albeit problematically, by postcolonialism – or, in other terms, "black," "racial," and "transnational" postmodernisms. This potential alliance is embodied most successfully by decolonising feminist postmodernisms – hooks' "postmodern blackness" and Grewal and Kaplan's "transnational feminism" – which emphasise, firstly, the gendered and raced constitution of identity, and, secondly, the prevailing Western-male character of the supposedly decentred postmodern subject. From this perspective, aesthetic postmodernisms, comprising a predominantly Western theoretical opposition to high modernism, lack political engagement, reproduce modernism's exclusion of (female) racial-minority writers, and replicate the latter's obsolete centre-periphery model of world culture. Hence, Grewal and Kaplan's contention that "the most compelling definitions or analyses of postmodernism make a clear distinction between the aesthetic effects of postmodernism in contemporary culture and the historical situation of postmodernity" (1997b [1994]: 4). Decolonising feminist postmodernism also reveals the ways in which political postmodernism's claims to radical political engagement, alterity and multiplicity are obviated by its concealed exclusivity and consequent ineffectuality: firstly, many "appropriate [...] the experience of 'difference' and 'Otherness' to provide oppositional meaning, legitimacy and immediacy" (hooks 1996 [1989]: 341); or, secondly, "fall[...] into a kind of relativism" (Grewal and Kaplan 1997b [1994]: 2); and thirdly, risk becoming their "own master narrative with [their] own exclusive, elitist rhetorics and academic gatekeeping" (6).

As a political postmodernism, postmodern feminism risks inclusion in the category of those political postmodernisms limited by a hegemonic Western frame. Indeed, exclusively first-world feminist postmodernists who "do not utilize a transnational frame or consider colonial discourse or discourses of race" (1997b [1994]: 3) are charged by Grewal and Kaplan with neo-imperialist homogenisation. Similarly, Western feminist postmodernism's endeavour to embrace difference, encapsulated by the "holy trinity" (1997b [1994]: 19) of the sex-race-class identity paradigm, is perceived as a reification of first-world subjectivity and a delimitation of the diverse categories involved in subject formation in different locations around the globe. Thus, one of the central projects of a genuinely political postmodernism – labelled

“ethical,” “radical,” and “social” by hooks, Grewal and Kaplan – lies in its displacement of hegemonic Western postmodernisms: inclusion of minority identities; incorporation of globally diverse social theories and political practices; deconstruction of the modernist self/other binary inherent in Western postmodern notions of difference and hybridity. This type of decolonising feminist postmodernism, based on alliances among oppressed groups (e.g. Women Against Fundamentalism), contributes to the subsequent discussion on “coalition” – rather than identity politics – as a new foundation for feminist postmodernism. It is this thinking which is endorsed here and examined in the chapters on individual authors.

On another level, feminist postmodernism defines itself in relation to other feminisms: while all coalesce in their critique of the sexist foundation of the subject/object dichotomy, their proffered solutions entail radically different implications for the conceptualisation of subjectivity. Although several principal positions divide the contemporary field, the discussion here is necessarily limited to liberal, reformulated modernist, and postmodern feminisms. On one level, liberal feminism derives from liberalism, an emancipatory humanist discourse which predicates rationality as the basis of each individual’s rightful access to equal opportunity and individual freedom. Notwithstanding its exclusionary roots, recent forms claim to have granted a variety of minorities the rights of sovereign subject – autonomy, agency, freedom – which are dissolved by feminist postmodernism’s displacement of identity and subjectivity. On another level, liberal feminism stems from Beauvoir’s humanist-existentialist, bipartite analysis of “the second sex,” which constitutes the first sustained analysis of the subject/object dichotomy vis-à-vis women – “Il est le Sujet, il est l’Absolu: elle est l’Autre” (1989 [1949]: 15).<sup>1</sup> However, while *Le Deuxième Sex II* posits woman as a constituting *and* constituted subject, *Le Deuxième Sex I* espouses woman’s accession to the position of subject – the realm of men – through transcendence from nature and, by implication, the feminine. Thus, from a feminist postmodern perspective, this position’s adherence to fixed essences and sovereign subjectivity, firstly, forecloses radical change, secondly, risks serving “as a [...] justification of existing social relations” (Weedon 1998 [1987]: 80-1), and, thirdly, retains an inevitably sexist

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<sup>1</sup> “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.” (Beauvoir 1988 [1949]: 16)

dichotomy which “relegates women and the qualities that have been labelled feminine to an inferior role” (Hekman 1990: 78).

In one sense, the subsequent group of feminists (Benhabib, Lovibond, and Prokhovnik), who seek to revise modernism for a postmodern age, resolve such disputation by “carv[ing] out a space between the Cartesian subject and the postmodernist ‘death of man’” (Hekman 1990: 80). Hence, they proffer a simultaneously constituting *and* constituted subject capable of reflection and agency while embedded in social, cultural and historical contexts. Benhabib adopts a “weak” approach to the postmodern decentring of Man, theorising a subject both socially situated and subjected to regulative rational ideals, which aims to “articulat[e] a more adequate, less deluded [...] vision of subjectivity” (1995 [1990]: 20), autonomy, rationality, and accountability. However, she rejects the “strong” espousal of the “death of Man” thesis, embodied by Judith Butler, on account of its obviation of agency through the postulation of a wholly determined subject. In Lovibond’s terms, this project manifests itself as a “mutually correcting or ‘dialectical’” synthesis (1994 [1991]: 74) of modernist and postmodernist attitudes to rationality and selfhood. This is rooted in a synthesis of “that measure of integration which is a precondition of our being able to speak to each other and inhabit a common emotional world, and [...] the attempt to suppress differences coercively out of a sheer inability to live with them” (71). Finally, Prokhovnik’s “relational” mode defines itself as the mid-point between liberalism’s “commitment only to ‘thin’ theories of the individual” (1999: 15) and postmodern “fragmentation brought about by pure difference [which] leaves no basis upon which the solidarity and common goals of political reform can be mobilized” (16). This notion of “partial historical and social construction” similarly intends to retain the notion of agency – newly located in the subject’s ability to critically reflect on its own construction. Collectively, these theorists create a subject provisionally unified in the purpose of meaningful communication – elements deemed fundamental to the feminist project of female emancipation. They provide a crucial comparison for Wittig’s criticism and novels in Chapter Four, who similarly, albeit less successfully, aims to reformulate modernism for a postmodern age.

Although the above theorists contribute to the wider field of postmodernism, they receive criticism from “pure” feminist postmodernists who generally disparage any

reformulation of political modernism; in this respect, French feminism, which informs Chapter Three below, is privileged on account of its more radical challenge to the unified subject. Postmodern feminism's critique of Lovibond et al focuses primarily on the reconceptualisation of the Cartesian subject. Firstly, the latter's eclecticism is criticised as untenable, for "It is impossible to retain the concepts of an 'inner world' and autonomous agency and reject the other qualities to which these concepts are so intimately tied" (Hekman 1990: 81). Secondly, for stronger positions of postmodern feminism, only a complete displacement of the inevitably sexist subject/object dichotomy will realise equality. Finally, by presuming that to be linguistically and socially constituted is equivalent to determination these critics "assume a dichotomy between the constituting Cartesian subject and the constituted, wholly determined subject" (Hekman 1990: 81) and "remain[...] trapped within the unnecessary binarism of free will and determinism" (Butler 1990a : 147). However, as Butler and Weedon demonstrate, the fully decentred subject does not foreclose the possibility of choice, resistance, and agency. From a Butlerian perspective, the constitution of identity through the discursive process of signification displaces agency from its traditional locus in the prediscursive, transcendental sovereign subject; instead, "the question of *agency* is reformulated as a question of how signification and resignification work" (Butler 1990a: 144). As Butler argues, to view identity as a "signifying *practice*" rather than a founding act, which operates through the (conscious and unconscious) regulated "repetition" of rules, removes the subject from determination by those very rules which predicate its identity. Furthermore, agency newly manifests itself through variations within repetitive signifying practices – failed interpellations, multiple and incoherent configurations, a convergence of conflicting subject-positions, and the subversive "troubling" of categories:

the reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*, opens up possibilities of "agency" that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed. For an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary. [...] Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible. [...] The critical task is [...] to locate

strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them. (Butler 1990a: 147)

Similarly, for Weedon, postmodern choice, resistance, and agency derive from the individual's conscious awareness of, firstly, their own construction, and, secondly, the contradictory variance of subjectivities. Choice becomes evident through the individual's continual exposure to competing discourses, their shifting adherence to diverse modes of subjectivity, and "the memory of previous discursive interpellations" (Weedon 1998 [1987]: 98): "The individual, who has a memory and an already discursively constituted sense of identity, may resist particular interpellations or produce new versions of meaning from the conflicts and contradictions between existing discourses. Knowledge of more than one discourse and the recognition that meaning is plural allows for a measure of choice on the part of the individual, and even where choice is not available, resistance is still possible" (102). Both Weedon and Butler adapt Foucault's theorisation of "reverse discourse" (discussed above): each discourse's bestowal of one privileged subject-position, which defines itself in distinction to others, implicitly alludes to and thus creates further contradictory subjectivities. Resistance manifests itself in the discrepancy between the individual's allegiance to the proffered subject-position and the alternative subjectivities: "Where there is a space between the position of subject offered by a discourse and individual interest, a resistance to that subject position is produced" (Weedon 1998 [1987]: 109). Finally, as the above analysis of Foucault demonstrated, if modern power inheres in multiple relations then resistance is likewise multifarious and emergent in diverse locales.

## ii. Sex and Gender

The preceding section grounds the debate on sex and gender: theories of postmodern identity incorporate notions of *sexed* and *gendered* identity; hence, (conventional) postmodernism's "death of Man" thesis finds its counterpart in feminist postmodernism's destabilisation of the categories "sex" and "gender." Indeed, this project similarly derives from the two generalised branches of postmodern enquiry encountered above: (feminist) postmodern philosophy and (feminist) postmodern

sociology. Thus, on one level, feminist postmodernism destabilises sex and gender through its espousal of poststructuralist (counter)philosophies incorporating, firstly, a genealogical analysis of Western humanisms – phallogocentric, feminist, and medico-legal doctrine – and, secondly, an analysis of the discursive, performative construction of sex and gender including strategies of subversion. Within humanism, sex and gender comprise the central constituent categories of identity: sex denotes the differentiation of individuals according to a universal, binary blueprint of reproductive characteristics; gender designates the substantive core deriving from sexual difference which determines individual behaviour along the binary axes of masculinity and femininity. For feminist postmodernism, however, sex and gender are constituted, firstly, by socio-historical discourses enmeshed in regimes of power and, secondly, through the individual's performative repetition of specific signifying acts and corporeal styles. Thus, as opposed to essentialist, pre-social givens, both sex (the body) and gender (behaviour, psychology) acquire meaning through the process of signification. As outlined above, therefore, the source of the subversion of sex and gender resides within the signifying process itself, or, in Butlerian terms, by butch, femme, and drag king/queen identities. On another level, although globalisation and advanced (bio)technologies have generated, on the one hand, a neo-conservative reification of identity categories, for feminist postmodern sociologists these markers of the postmodern condition presage the demise of sex and gender. Firstly, the new industrial revolution's increasing reduction of (traditionally) male employment through robotics and computerisation and mobilisation of a primarily (third-world) female workforce has restructured gendered roles – both working and domestic – questioning Western philosophy's universalisation of the public (male)/private (female) dichotomy. Similarly, despite their generally reactionary deployment, new reproductive technologies, rendering biological birth one of many forms of human propagation, provide a means of challenging the biologically essentialist congealment of sexed and gendered social roles. Finally, therefore, feminist postmodernists coalesce in their belief that the destabilisation of sex and gender (man, woman, masculinity, femininity) – either through the subversive strategies of poststructuralism (Butler 1990a; Hekman 1990; Weedon 1998 [1987]) or the investment in a postgender social era (Grewal and Kaplan 1997b [1994]; Haraway 1990 [1985]) – will result both in the overthrow of individual oppression and the inception of an anti-foundationalist (feminist) politics based on “open” coalition. From this perspective, the elimination

of binary sex and gender, and hence the subject's freedom from juridical power and socio-political constraints, will, firstly, augment individual potential vis-à-vis social roles, behaviour, and sexuality and, secondly, integrate *all* individuals in the struggle against oppression.

Deriving from Derridean and Foucauldian poststructuralism, feminist postmodern philosophy's destabilisation of the categories sex and gender draws on theories of identity subversion outlined above – *différance*, discourse and power, deconstruction and genealogy. According to *différance*, the meaning of gender varies depending on the context in which it is located; thus, rather than being fixed, the signifiers “man” and “woman” are continually subject to reinterpretation: “woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification” (Butler 1990a: 33). This awareness of contradictory modes of gender, which “introduce[s] the possibility of political choice between modes of femininity in different situations and between the discourses in which they have their meaning” (Weedon 1998 [1987]: 83-4), provides a locus for agency and subversion. Indeed, for postmodern feminist philosophy, Derridean linguistics replaces humanism's metaphysically substantive gender with multiplicity, plurality and potentially limitless reinvention. Similarly, from a Foucauldian perspective, gendered subject positions are constituted by discourses in the service of social institutions and practices embedded in regimes of power. Hence, Foucault's contention that the categories of sex play a major role in the social control of sexuality, artificially unite a disparate set of sexual functions, and, finally, claim to derive from an interior essence (gender) which renders all forms of desire sex-specific (heterosexual) (1998 [1976]: 154). Furthermore, operating through both (un)conscious consent and coercion – images, regulations, pleasures, medico-legal doctrine, and punishment – the interpellation of individuals vis-à-vis various modes of femininity and masculinity by competing discourses involves an exercise of power. Indeed, according to Foucault, binary sex and gender have recourse to the juridical configuration of power – the binary relationship of oppressor and oppressed – which essentialises sex in order to conceal both its historicity and its existence in specific relations of domination (1998 [1976]: 83).

Drawing on Foucault, postmodern feminist philosophy proposes a genealogy of abiding (humanist) notions of sex and gender. The location of binary, essentialist sex and gender in specific socio-historical discourses exposes the false foundations of Enlightenment discourses, contemporary humanist feminism, and the prevailing medico-legal canon. Indeed, Butler, Hekman and Nicholson's genealogical analyses draw extensively on Foucault's own tripartite study, *The History of Sexuality* (1990 [1984]; 1992b [1984]; 1998 [1976]), which reveals how binary sex identity and gender correlatives are rooted in specific seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Western discourses – or, in the transition between the pre-modern and modern *épistèmes*. Whereas the materialism of the early modern age, which conflated naturalist and materialist notions, interpreted selfhood both as an expression of the body and external, social forces, modernity reconceptualised physical characteristics as predicates of differential human nature. As a consequence, the male/female binary and man and woman's core “nature” were perceived henceforth as deriving from biology itself. Thus, in the pre-modern era, although woman was linked to nature through her inferior rank in the cosmological order, the organic conceptualisation of nature prevented the natural world – and by extension woman – from being rationalistically exploited. By comparison, modern science's mechanistic universe of cause and effect legitimated the domination of both passive nature and woman by the rational man of science. Although the nature/culture (woman/nature, man/culture) dichotomy already prevailed in Western thought, as outlined above, therefore, it reached its apogee in Enlightenment discourse. Furthermore, modernity's biological essentialism sought justification for woman's oppression through her sex-specific, reproductive approximation to a natural world passively awaiting male manipulation. Butler, Hekman, and Nicholson's genealogical analyses reveal, therefore, that sex and gender are the *effects* of specific Enlightenment discourses – materialist metaphysics, mechanism, Cartesianism, and New Philosophy – inherent in phallogocentric and heterosexist institutions whose constitution of sexed and gendered identity involves an exercise of (political) power over individual subjects.

Postmodern feminism's genealogical analysis of Enlightenment discourses founds the basis of its position vis-à-vis a divergent range of essentialist feminisms, which interpret sex and gender in a variety of ways. However, while Marxist/socialist, radical, and French feminisms are all subject to critique, the discussion here is



primarily limited to an examination of second-wave gynocentrism's specific sex/gender dichotomy. Postmodern feminism's genealogy (Butler 1990a; Flax 1990; Nicholson 1999b) targets in particular second-wave feminism's sex/gender dichotomy – centrepin of prevailing feminist and commonsense thinking – which intends to eschew the full-scale biological determination of both patriarchal and women's liberation discourse. As Nicholson argues, on one level, the sex/gender model derives from the reintegration of two Western humanist schools – materialist metaphysics and early materialism (outlined above). In order to undermine the prevailing exclusivity of the former's immutable sexual differentiation, 1960s second-wave feminists reinstated the latter's component of social construction. Thus, "sex" designated henceforth the raw biological material, the pre-discursive, physiological self on which "gender" was constructed; similarly, previously denoting forms of language, "gender" newly encapsulated socially constituted, sexual, behavioural differences. Hence, the inception of "biological foundationalism," "a range of positions bounded on the one side by a strict biological determinism and on the other side by a complete social constructionism" (Nicholson 1999b: 64). Notwithstanding the element of social construction, however, which enables the theorisation of a varied social culture, second-wave biological foundationalists posit women's sex-specific, reproductive genitalia as the common basis of both female experience and political collectivity. On another level, second-wave feminism draws on structuralist anthropology, which reinforced Western dichotomous thinking through its interpretation of society in terms of relations of difference – hence, the oppositional relationship between sex and gender where sex is to nature as gender is to culture.

Postmodern feminism displaces the binary sex/gender model through its examination of both sex *and* gender as social, cultural, historical constructs. Firstly, the "natural," sexed body is challenged through a genealogical analysis of sexed identity (outlined above); secondly, through the recognition that binary, sexed "anatomical differentiation is a descriptive fact, one of many observations we might make about the physical characteristics of humans" (Flax 1990: 50-1); and, finally, through culturally and globally diverse interpretations revealing that "there appears no one set of criteria constituting 'sex identity' from which one can extrapolate anything about the joys and oppressions of 'being a woman'" (Nicholson 1999b: 57). Hence, in postmodern feminism, the body becomes a cultural historical variable, constituted in

the West according to an arbitrary, gendered, binary matrix; hence, Butler's assertion that "Bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of gender" (1990a: 8). Indeed, this analysis reveals the false disjunction between the two terms held in the sex/gender dichotomy, for "sex by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along" (Butler 1990a: 8). Within second-wave feminism, however, gender comprises the very means by which sex is established as a neutral receptacle for culture; indeed, by locating the duality of sex in a pre-discursive realm, second-wave feminists effectively perpetuate both the internal stability of sex and its binary frame. In this sense, gender constitutes an inevitable, "quasi-deterministic" cultural law leading, on the one hand, as Nicholson argues, to an "additive" or "pop bead" analysis which suggests that gender coexists alongside rather than intersects with other elements (e.g. race, class) in the formation of identity; and, on the other, to an investment in the problematic culture/nature dichotomy and the matrix of domination – male/female, active/passive, public/private – in which it is enmeshed. This postulation of the "natural," pre-discursive female body as the basis of political unity inevitably neglects both variant (raced, working-class) and deviant (lesbian, transsexual, male-identified women, female-identified men) positions; indeed, transsexualism, especially male-to-female (M2F) "lesbian feminists," is explicitly rejected by second-wave feminism on the basis that an individual in possession of male genitals could never house a female essence. In contradistinction, postmodern feminism theorises not only the instability of the term "woman" and hence an anti-foundationalist feminism, but locates one source of the subversion of sex and gender as residing within such indeterminate personae themselves.

Indeed, postmodern feminism demonstrates that as the central constituents of identity in Western society, the categories of sex and gender maintain the subject's internal coherence; hence, individuals failing to conform to sexed and gendered norms are not merely incomprehensible but identity-less. Furthermore, the heterosexist nature of this cultural matrix, which renders binary sex and gender intelligible, indeed necessary, invalidates identities where, firstly, gender is not resultant from sex and, secondly, where desire neglects to ensue from either sex or gender. From a Butlerian perspective, however, such invalidated identities – "developmental failures or logical impossibilities" (1990a: 17) – provide a means of "troubling" gender through their exposure of the confines and regulatory designs of the ruling ideology. Indeed,

theorising gender as public performance, Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990a) investigates strategies of binary sex and gender displacement manifest in forms of subversive resignification such as parody, proliferation, and ambiguity – or, butch/femme lesbian and drag king/queen identities. From this perspective, substantive gender, produced through the repeated regulation of the subject's attributes (acts, gestures, desires) according to specific rules of cultural intelligibility, is inscribed on the bodily surface as a "corporeal style": "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler 1990a: 33). Hence, Butler's renowned contention that gender constitutes a "performatively enacted signification": "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (1990a: 25).

However, if sexed and gendered identity comprise a repeat performance of specific signifying acts, then subversion lies not in transcendence, or a "utopian beyond" – variously perceived as "outside," "before," or "after" the law – but in resignification: forms of repetition revealing the temporality and contingency of sex and gender categories. For Butler, butch and femme lesbian identities, whose "replication of heterosexual constructs [...] brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original" (1990a: 31), are paradigmatic of this type of subversive repetition. Similarly, by revealing the process of gender construction, drag and cross-dressing equally occupy a position vis-à-vis gender encapsulated by copy-to-copy as opposed to copy-to-original. Indeed, drag and cross-dressing play on the discrepancy between the artist's anatomy and the gender performed, which displaces the distinction between inner and outer space – or, the causal relation between sex and gender. Hence, unlike Jameson, Butler's theory of parody invokes laughter through its revelation that the "original" was in fact a copy all along:

The notion of gender parody defended here does not assume that there is an original which such parodic identities imitate. Indeed, the parody is of the very notion of an original; [...] gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation

without an origin. [...] [I]t is a production which, in effect - that is, in its effect - postures as an imitation. This perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization; parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities. Although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynistic culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization. (Butler 1990a: 138)

In Chapters Five and Six, Carter and Winterson's texts exemplify the literary embodiment of such personae - butch/femme, drag king/queen, transsexual - for the subversive re-enactment of substantive gender identity.

On another level, postmodern feminism's displacement of "sex" and "gender" emanates from sociological enquiries similarly encountered above – Grewal and Kaplan's "transnational feminism" and Haraway's "cyborg politics" – which analyse the fragmentation of sex and gender by globalisation and biological, reproductive technologies. Grewal and Kaplan combine an examination of the radical changes in global economic structures since the mid-twentieth century with the theorisation of a "multinational," "multilocal" approach to gender; hence, the eschewal of single, universal definitions of "woman," "gender," "patriarchy" and "oppression" employed by colonial discourse critiques, psychoanalytical models, and exclusionary Western poststructuralisms. As Grewal and Kaplan argue, "We need to articulate the relationship of gender to scattered hegemonies such as global economic structures, patriarchal nationalisms, 'authentic' forms of tradition, local structures of domination, and legal-judicial oppression on multiple levels" (1997b [1994]: 17). This analysis necessarily incorporates an examination of its inverse trend – the counterstrategies of newly emerging nationalisms and ethnic, racial fundamentalisms seeking to rehomogenise sexed and gendered social roles. The alliances of globally diverse, anti-fundamentalist collectives (e.g. Women Living Under Muslim Laws; Women Against Fundamentalism) against the interests of the patriarchal power groups in their own communities provide one model of postmodern feminist coalition discussed at the end of this section.

While Haraway similarly examines the erosion of sex and gender in the social condition of postmodernity, including the reintensification of sexed and gendered roles by neo-conservative groups, her analysis specifically targets the new industrial revolution, the homework economy, late capitalism (multinationalism), and advanced (bio)technologies. According to Haraway (1990 [1985]), the expansion of robotics and “the automated office” in the West have gradually eroded male employment, escalating the rate of redundancy beyond that of women. Similarly, although third-world men encounter permanent unemployment, teenage women comprise the target labour force of electronics-assemblage multinationals in remote, industrial locations. While, on one level, this “homework economy” is characterised by exploitation and isolation, its specific recruitment of female labour and integration of factory, home and market has, firstly, displaced the Western conflation of woman with the private domain and, secondly, inaugurated a new generation of female breadwinners and woman-headed households. Indeed, for Haraway, difficulties occasioned by the homework economy for both women and men, as well as the increased authority of female voices, provides the potential basis for a cross-gender coalition with an emphasis on issues of community and basic life support unfamiliar to the Western-male industrial union. Indeed, while all four subsequent authors present cyborg women, Carter and Winterson, in particular, draw on the cyborg's non-reproductive origins in order to position women beyond Oedipal binaries.

Finally, while new reproductive technologies (artificial insemination by donor, in-vitro fertilisation, surrogate motherhood, Lavage embryo transfer, tissue farming) generally reify biologically essentialist social roles, for Haraway and Griggers advanced (bio)technology – rendering biological birth one form of human replication – has the potential to liberate sex and gender from reductive definitions. Hence, Haraway's contention that “Sexual reproduction is one kind of reproductive strategy among many, with costs and benefits as a function of the system environment. Ideologies of sexual reproduction can no longer reasonably call on notions of sex and sex role as organic aspects in natural objects like organisms and families” (1990 [1985]: 204). Griggers' (1994) examination of cross-uterine egg transplants, enabling one lesbian to bear another's child, provides one example of the ways in which advanced (bio)technology lends itself to the displacement of essentialist sex and gender categories. Indeed, Grigger's analysis reveals the power struggle at the centre

of the paradoxical reintensification and erosion of sex and gender in the high-tech, postmodern era: “When we take up Haraway’s cyborg project *for* lesbianism [...] the sites of political struggle over lesbian cyborg affinities will solidify around the historically and materially determined pragmatics of *who* gets to produce cyborg bodies, and who becomes and who buys the commodities reproduced” (1994: 129). Hence, Haraway’s call to feminists to embrace science and technology, rather than reject it as a male domain – for, whether as the real-life product of high-technology, the expression of identity in postmodernity, or as the subversive, mythical icon of feminist cyberpunk writing, “the cyborg is a creature in a postgender world” (Haraway 1990 [1985]: 192).

Drawing on elements of both (anti)philosophical and sociological enquiry, the above analysis demonstrates how postmodern feminism distinguishes itself through its rejection of other discourses’ identity-based foundationalism. As philosophically illusory, and fragmented in any case through the social condition of postmodernity, sex and gender no longer constitute a stable basis for (feminist) political collectivity. Indeed, as both Butler and Haraway argue, a genealogical analysis of juridical power demonstrates that feminism, like other discourses of emancipation, discursively constructs the subject it claims to represent and liberate. Hence, Butler’s contention that “there may not be a subject who stands ‘before’ the law, awaiting representation in or by the law. Perhaps the subject, as well as the invocative ‘before’, is constituted by the law as the fictive foundation of its own claim to legitimacy” (Butler 1990a: 2-3). Thus, in pursuit of a common voice and single subject, foundationalist feminisms have both suppressed “the important and discomfiting voices of persons with experiences unlike our own” (Flax 1990: 48) and established a model of women’s oppression served by a totalising (Western) structure of patriarchal domination. Similarly, sociological analyses, emphasising the diverse construction of gender in different locations, crucially reveal the ways in which women are also enmeshed in relations of power against other women – often first- to third-world. From this perspective, phallogocentrism is not only inextricably enmeshed in other forms of power (e.g. colonialism, heterosexism, capitalism) depending on its locality – hence, Grewal and Kaplan’s term “scattered hegemonies” - but its familiar “dialectical appropriation and suppression of the Other” (Butler 1990a: 14) represents only one of its oppressive strategies among others. This anti-foundationalist, self-reflexive

impulse, shared also by late modernists Benhabib and Lovibond, has inaugurated a new politics based on open coalition. As opposed to presupposing the interests of ready-made, delimited subjects, feminist postmodern coalitions – modelled on the aleatory, provisional, and mobile circuits of Foucauldian resistance – eschew structural, political, and geographical closure:

An open coalition [which] will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure. (Butler 1990a: 16)

Both the definition and participants of feminist postmodern coalitions are variously articulated. On one level, decolonising postmodern feminists (hooks, Grewal and Kaplan) pursue a crucial alliance, firstly, between academics and the general community and, secondly, between feminists in diverse locations around the globe. Grewal and Kaplan's model of coalition – based on “affinity” rather than essential identity – pursues the mobilisation of multilocal women against the links supporting diverse patriarchal practices; hence, the call to first-world women to oppose state policies that collude with fundamentalisms affecting women in other global locations. Similarly, hooks and Haraway's sociological postmodern feminism explicitly identifies “empathy,” “yearning,” “affinity” and “political kinship” as the basis of a committed affiliation of ethnically diverse, geographically specific, oppressed groups. In this sense, terms such as “yearning” intend to denote both the collective psychological experience of uncertainty and alienation in the postmodern condition and postmodernism's eschewal of demarcated, essentialist categories in favour of a voluntary, affinitive alliance. Adapted from Sandoval's (1984) notion of “oppositional consciousness” – the experience of exclusion from conventional classes of race, sex, or class – Haraway's model aims to integrate all oppressed groups regardless of race and ethnicity. However, Haraway's model is also rooted in changes to gender, sex, race and class brought about by new high-tech social relations and the new industrial revolution; indeed, difficulties produced by the homework economy for both men and women, as well as the emergence of female breadwinners and woman-headed households, has occasioned, even necessitated, possibilities for a cross-gender

coalition involving “community, sexuality, and family issues never privileged in the largely white male industrial union” (1990 [1985] : 214). Examples of feminist postmodern coalition appear topographically in the subsequent authors’ numerous female communities and alliances of female grotesques (see Chapter Two).

### iii. Sexuality

In comparison to “sex” and “gender,” which conventionally designate the physical and cultural differentiation of men and women, “sexuality” encapsulates the individual’s specific sexual orientation(s), desire(s), practice(s), and identity/ies. Like the theorisation of sex and gender, postmodern sexuality is grounded in the fundamental deconstruction of stable identity – in this case, *sexual* identity. However, whereas the former derived from largely distinct philosophical and sociological inquiries, postmodernism’s analysis of sexuality in particular, especially in the late 1990s, emanates chiefly from (post)Butlerian queer theory, including the “queering” of boundaries between academic disciplines. On one level, therefore, postmodern feminism destabilises sexual identity through its familiar recourse to poststructuralist (anti-)philosophy: firstly, a genealogical analysis of sexuality and sexual desire vis-à-vis both Western humanisms (the Enlightenment, humanist feminism, sociobiology) and oppositional psychoanalytical discourses (Freudian, Lacanian, feminist); secondly, the theorisation of subversive strategies and models of desire.

Within humanism sexuality postures as the desire issuing from natural anatomical-reproductive and psychic distinctions between men and women – sex and gender – which secures the natural immutability of sexual identity, binary categorisation, and heterosexuality. While psychoanalysis presents a radical departure from such biologically essentialist accounts of sexuality, its unilinear narrative of psycho-sexual maturation equally predicates culturally intelligible sexual identity – in fact, both social and kinship relations – on the displacement of an allegedly primary homosexuality by the inherently heterosexual symbolic and the causal relationship between sex, gender, and desire. Indeed, both humanism and psychoanalysis perpetuate Western philosophy’s postulation of sexuality (along with sex and gender) as the central component of human identity and its interpretation of sexual desire as rooted in need or lack. From a feminist postmodern perspective, however, sexuality



comprises, firstly, a socio-historical construct produced through a variety of discourses inherent in institutions and regimes of power; secondly, a discourse itself deploying power through its regulation of the subject's sex, desire, and body; finally, one intersecting element among others in the constitution of human identity. Similarly, rather than based in a fundamental lack, which inevitably entails the relegation of woman to the status of passive object, sexual desire is newly theorised as manifest in productive, gratuitous, fleeting, non-reproductive surface connections and energies. As a free-floating artifice, rather than a fixed essence, sexuality is open to preference, reconstruction, and subversion, located, as above, within resignificatory strategies as opposed to transcendent, liberationist gestures.

Butler's theorisation of performative (sexual) identity and parodic homosexual identities, introduced above, forms the departure point for a range of queer theorists whose analysis of sexuality bridges the conventional academic gap between philosophy, sociology, business and media. Queer theory examines the proliferation and redeployment of traditional sexual categories in homosexual, transvestite, transgender, and transsexual practices resulting in the destruction of, firstly, the trinity sex-gender-desire, secondly, the allegedly natural heterosexual original, and thirdly, the binaries male/female, homo/hetero, active/passive, and butch/femme. Furthermore, from queer theory's interdisciplinary perspective, the fragmentation of sexuality in the social condition of postmodernity renders all desires, genders and sexualities *trans*; or, all individuals transsexual. In this sense, the "transsexual" recalls the rupturing of binary, substantive identity by Haraway's anti-Oedipal "cyborg." Finally, postmodern feminists collude in their belief that the destabilisation of sexual identity and desire will result, firstly, in the eradication of juridical constraints and, secondly, in the access of all individuals to limitless social, personal potentialities.

Thus, on one level, postmodern feminist notions of sexuality are grounded in poststructuralist (counter)philosophy: firstly, Deleuze and Guattari's deconstruction of sexual desire in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1994 [1972]) and, secondly, Foucault's tripartite genealogy of sexual identity, introduced above, *The History of Sexuality* (1990 [1984]; 1992b [1984]; 1998 [1976]). Deleuze and Guattari's theory of schizoanalysis postulates a psychologically and politically rooted

libidinal desire capable of disrupting the subject's oppression by (capitalist, psychoanalytical) totalities: "The schizoanalytic argument is simple: desire is a machine, a synthesis of machines, a machinic arrangement - desiring machines. The order of desire is the order of *production*; all production is at once desiring production and social production" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994 [1972]: 296). However, "schizophrenic desire," associated with revolutionary societies, small organisations, collective action, flight, and *detrterritorialization*, finds its counterpart in "paranoiac desire" manifest in fascist (authoritarian, hierarchical) states and systems whose reificatory representations *territorialize* desire, subjects and reality. Hence, the critique of Freudian psychoanalysis, which reduces the complexity of the individual's life and productions to a ready-made formula - the "family romance," or, the Oedipus complex; its representation of desire as entrenched in lack or need and the imposition of this lack, along with culture and the law, onto the unconscious, acts as a form of repression. "The task of schizoanalysis," by comparison, comprises "a whole scouring of the unconscious, a complete curettage" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994 [1972]: 311), aimed at unleashing its productive, revolutionary character in the guise of a libidinal force capable of challenging the body politic.

Thus, Deleuze and Guattari's Lacanian desire surmounts socio-political repression, occasioned by the authoritarian laws of the symbolic, through its recourse to the "imaginary" as a locus of limitless libidinal energy, primitive desire, and fusional relationships. Hence, the privileging of partially Oedipalised subjects – primitives, children, the mad, and the schizophrenic – whose evasion of the personal/social dichotomy, repression of the unconscious, and structural totality exhibits a contiguity with flux and fragmentation that is the unachieved potential of all individuals. Notwithstanding their idealistic emphasis on the pre-symbolic and employment of feminine tropes, schizoanalysis has been adopted by postmodern feminist and lesbian theorists interested in inventive and aleatory notions of desire. Indeed, the (re)interpretation of desire as energy, surface effect and the (dis)(re)assembly of machinic parts supports an anti-essentialist sexuality: an eschewal of sexual desire structured by the universal phallic signifier, reproduction, genitality, and lack which inevitably maintain the male/female binary. As Grosz argues: "Such a theory cannot but be of interest for feminist theory insofar as women are the traditional repositories of the lack constitutive of desire and insofar as the oppositions between presence and

absence, between reality and fantasy, have conventionally constrained women to occupy the place of men's other. Lack only makes sense to the (male) subject insofar as some other (woman) personifies and embodies it for him. Such a model of desire, when explicitly sexualised, reveals the impossibility of understanding lesbian desire" (1994: 76). This new model of postmodern (lesbian) desire is embodied by Wittig and Winterson's novels in Chapters Four and Five.

Foucault's work, by comparison, examines "the way in which sex is 'put into discourse,'" "the polymorphous techniques of power" involved, and "the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on [Western] human sexuality" (Foucault 1998 [1976]: 11). The first volume refutes both repressive and liberationist sexual paradigms, associated with the last three centuries of Western history (especially the Victorian age) and the twentieth century respectively. According to the "repressive hypothesis," the sexual frankness of the seventeenth century was dispelled by the Victorian age's mechanism of repression – the "injunction to silence [and] affirmation of nonexistence" (4) of un(re)productive sexuality. For Foucault, however, this hypothesis postulates a "promised freedom" which, firstly, lies only in a complete removal of prohibitions and, secondly, transforms any discussion of sex into an "opportunity to speak out against the powers that be" (6); hence, the construction of sexuality as an inner truth, "*the secret*" (35), whose revelation is capable of overturning the law. Foucault's analysis reveals that while, on the one hand, the seventeenth century bore witness indeed to the inception of sexual policing, "at the level of discourses [...] practically the opposite phenomenon occurred. There was a steady proliferation of discourses concerning sex-specific discourses [...]: a discursive ferment which gathered momentum from the eighteenth century onwards" (18). Furthermore, the endeavour to institute sexual utility and conservatism through the demarcation of the unnatural and the perverse (e.g. the mentally ill, women, criminals, homosexuals) had the effect of creating "a world of perversion" (40); hence, the supposed exclusion of aberrant sexualities gave rise to their "specification" and "solidification." Indeed, rather than *a* discourse on sex, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed the production of multiple discourses on sexuality operating in the service of different institutions and practices (biology, medicine, psychology, ethics, political criticism) which constituted "a regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse" (34) and "an immense apparatus for producing truth" (56). Thus, whereas

the repressive hypothesis is predicated on a juridico-discursive representation of power (discussed above), which reduced it to prohibition and a reflection of the allegedly univocal law, Foucault reveals how “power [...] lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing” (45) and emanates from multifarious centres of distribution.

For Foucault, it is the nineteenth century’s particular combination of scientific discourse with the confession – a *scientia sexualis* – which ultimately consolidated the relation between truth and sex inherited by the twentieth century. In contradistinction to the oriental *ars erotica*, whose truth is grounded in a mastery and accession to pleasure itself, the West drew on one of its traditional rituals for the production of truth – the confession. Notwithstanding the long-standing centralisation of sex(uality) as a principal confessional theme, the confession masked its power through the postulation of a secret truth whose articulation affords liberation; however, the subjection of the speaker reveals itself through the presence of an interlocutor whose interpretation guarantees veracity. Thus, Foucault argues that “The society that emerged in the nineteenth century [...] did not confront sex with a fundamental refusal of recognition. On the contrary, it put into operation an entire machinery for producing true discourses concerning it” (69) which ultimately consolidated the Western conflation of subjectivity and sexuality. While, for Foucault, the *scientia sexualis* distinguishes itself from the tradition of *ars erotica*, its pursuit of “pleasure in the truth of pleasure” functions nevertheless as an erotic art which bears witness to a “multiplication and intensification of pleasures connected to the production of the truth about sex” (71).

Foucault further examines the historical deployment of sexuality through a variety of discourses on sex and its status as the principal locus of power in modern society. Beginning in the eighteenth century, Foucault identifies four specific strategies of knowledge and power surrounding sex(uality), “*A hysterization of women’s bodies*,” “*A pedagogization of children’s sex*,” “*A socialization of procreative behavior*,” and “*A psychiatrization of perverse pleasure*” (103-5) and its correlates “the hysterical woman,” “the masturbating child,” “the Malthusian couple,” and “the perverse adult.” Indeed, it is the body itself – both social and physical – which becomes the principal object of knowledge and power relations in this deployment of sexuality. Thus, operating in accordance with contingent and mobile techniques of power, the

deployment of sexuality has been proliferating since the seventeenth century thereby producing, rather than restricting, sexuality.

Sexuality became the primary site of alliance (e.g. marriage, kinship, possessions) and power in the eighteenth century, whose privileged location within the family created a new familial structure of alliance which similarly supported rather than prohibited sexuality. Indeed, according to Foucault, the incest taboo's primary object of prohibition is not incestuous desire but the potential proliferation of the deployment of sexuality beyond its restriction to the system of alliance. Thus, if the incest taboo comprises "one of the points through which every society is obliged to pass on the way to becoming a culture, [...] this is because it was found to be a means of self-defense, not against an incestuous desire, but against the expansion of and the implications of this deployment of sexuality which [...] had the disadvantage of ignoring the laws and juridical forms of alliance" (109). Hence, the advent of psychoanalysis as a method for examining sexualities contravening familial control. However, rather than repositioning sexuality beyond family jurisdiction, psychoanalysis's interpretative matrix based on the incest taboo reconsolidated the relationship between sexuality and alliance (marriage, kinship). By rooting sexuality in the parent-child relationship, psychoanalysis restricted the deployment of sexuality to the system of alliance, for "There was no risk that sexuality would appear to be, by nature, alien to the law: it was constituted only through the law" (113).

It is the nineteenth century, however, that marks the point of origin of the theory of repression due to the bourgeoisie's redefinition of its specific sexuality in differentiation to other groups, including the subjection of all sexuality to the law and the classification of taboos according to the social classes. As Foucault comments, "Henceforth social differentiation would be affirmed, not by the 'sexual' quality of the body, but by the intensity of its repression" (129). The inception of psychoanalysis was similarly linked to the above deployment of sexuality and its process of differentiation, particularly its theory of the interrelation of the law and desire and its simultaneous prohibition and expression of incestuous desire. Thus, Foucault concludes that "The history of the deployment of sexuality, as it has evolved since the classical age, can serve as an archaeology of psychoanalysis" (130).

Hence, Foucault's critique of all allegedly subversive and emancipated sexualities (e.g. psychoanalytical, various feminist), which are as constructed by discourse and as enmeshed in power dynamics as the repressive culture they claim to liberate; indeed, their location within discursively constituted modes of temporality – “before,” “during,” or “after” the law – constitutes a diversionary strategy seeking to suggest that subversion resides within a sexuality beyond the prohibitive law. The law, however, produces a narrative account of its own genealogy, in the guise of a repressed sexuality or desire, in order to justify its own self-aggrandising designs and mask its entrenchment in power relations. Indeed, Foucault's genealogy demonstrates that binary sex, perceived as the cause of sexual identity and desire, is postulated as foundational in order to conceal sexuality's own discursive production and inherence in relations of power. Instead, the arbitrary relation between power (perceived as repression) and sex (perceived as authentic selfhood) extends power and conceals its multifarious forms by suggesting that it only operates vis-à-vis the repression or liberation of an essential sex. Hence, Foucault's subsequent works examine those sexualities, practices and identities whose resignification rather than transcendence of the (heterosexist, phallogocentric) law effects a subversion from within the terms of power itself. For Foucault, the nineteenth-century hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin, both bi-sexed and bisexual, represents a proliferation of binary sex and sexuality and a disaggregation of sex-gender-desire that is the unattained potential of each subject.

Foucault's genealogy of sexuality provides the primary basis of postmodern feminist philosophy's own project – firstly, the reinvention and proliferation of sexual identities and desires and, secondly, the deconstruction of essentialist sexualities manifest in Enlightenment, humanist-feminist, and psychoanalytical discourse. This critique challenges Cixous' French feminist (Chapter Three) and Wittig's modernist lesbian feminist (Chapter Four) search for a true “feminine sexuality”, “maternal libidinal economy”, or “transcendent lesbianism” repressed by patriarchy/heterosexuality. According to feminist postmodernism, therefore, “The feminists who argue that we should define feminine sexuality apart from the distortions of patriarchal thought are mimicking the Enlightenment epistemology that is cast in terms of universals and a-historical constructs” (Hekman 1990: 72). Similarly, according to Foucauldian postmodern feminism (Butler 1990a; Grosz 1994), the Freudian incest taboo's *repression* of primary drives – bi-, homo-, and

polymorphous sexuality – constructs the desire it professes to repress in order to legitimise both its own genesis and production of displaced heterosexuality. Finally, however, Foucault's analysis provides the basis of postmodern feminism and queer theory's destabilisation of sexual identity and desire from within the terms of the law itself; hence, the multiplication and de-essentialisation of sexualities through the subversive resignificatory practices of proliferation, ambiguity, and parody. Nevertheless, Butler reveals an occasional contradiction in Foucault's work on both sexuality and the journals of Herculine Barbin, which is conventionally overlooked. Despite his principal assertion that sexuality is coextensive with discourse and power, at times Foucault suggests that the dissipation of binary sexed and sexual identity – literalised in Herculine Barbin – will proliferate desire beyond the binary matrix thereby liberating an original, multiple sexuality. Butler, in contradistinction, demonstrates how Herculine's sexuality is constructed by the ambivalent discourses of female homosexuality within convent ideology, classics, French Romanticism, sentimentalism, and Christian legend, resulting in a correspondingly ambivalent (rather than liberated) sexual (dis)position, which despite its disruption of the relationship between sex-gender-desire and homo-hetero "testifies to the law's uncanny capacity to produce only those [...] subjects who, utterly subjected, have no choice but to reiterate the law of their genesis" (Butler 1990a: 106). Furthermore, according to Butler, Foucault's suggestion of a "pre-discursive libidinal multiplicity," which posits an original sexuality awaiting liberation from the law, "is not so far afield from the psychoanalytic postulation of primary polymorphousness or Marcuse's notion of an original and creative bisexual Eros subsequently repressed by an instrumentalist culture" (1990a: 96).

As the above analyses of Deleuze, Guattari, and Foucault demonstrate, psychoanalysis comprises postmodernism's primary object of genealogy: firstly, on account of its influential position within contemporary theory; secondly, due to its centralisation of sexuality in identity formation, universal, power-invested narrative of sexual maturation, and nomination of loss or lack as the wellspring of sexual desire. However, while a variety of feminist psychoanalyses are subject to critique, the discussion here is necessarily limited to the founding fathers - Freud and Lacan. According to Freud, the child's polymorphous perversity – or initial bisexuality – is gradually organised by its trajectory through three concurrent stages: the "oral stage,"

associated with the drive to incorporate objects; the “anal stage,” surrounding the erotic expulsion and retention of the faeces; and the “phallic stage” which finally inaugurates adult genitality. Hence, at this stage, prior to the development of the ego and correlative centred selfhood, the child comprises a range of fluctuating forces unaware of the distinction between the self and the external world; indeed, subjected to the “pleasure principle” the child is anarchic, sadistic, pleasure-seeking, ungendered, and *incestuous*. The inception of the Oedipus complex – the relinquishment of the mother as a sexual object – acts, therefore, to structure the child’s sexuality and selfhood according to a pre-established, culturally intelligible matrix. The boy’s renunciation of incestuous desires emanates from castration fear wielded by the father and associated with the fate of the sister, which results in submission to the “reality principle” in the form of repression of the mother and identification with the father. By comparison, disappointment issuing from the girl’s perceived “castration” occasions her rejection of the similarly “castrated” mother in favour of the father and the resolution of penis envy in the desire to bear a child. During this transition from polymorphousness to individual ego, incest to external relations, and from nature to culture, the child’s primary repression of the desire for the mother marks his/her entry to the symbolic (society), the foundation of the unconscious as the locus of the repressed, and hence the irrevocable division of the subject.

Freud’s prioritisation of the loss of a love-object indicates the role of melancholia in the formation of gendered and sexual identity. Melancholia, the mourning process subsequent to the subject’s loss of a love-object, occasions, firstly, the ego’s endeavour to maintain the other through incorporation and imitation, secondly, the internalisation of anger and blame surrounding the loss, and, thirdly, the ego’s creation of an “ego ideal” through its investment of the former with moral agency. Similarly, while the ego internalises the mother to endure her loss, the ego ideal represses desire for the parent and maintains that desire in an interior space thereby regulating gender consolidation and (hetero)sexuality. Thus, if the boy relinquishes both the object (the mother) *and* the mode of desire (heterosexuality), he not only incorporates the mother but establishes a feminine superego whose libidinal dispositions disrupt the consolidation of masculinity. In comparison, by renouncing the mother as an object of sexual love, the girl rejects her masculinity - Freud’s



interpretation of female homosexuality – and consolidates her heterosexual femininity; her relinquishment and subsequent melancholic incorporation of the father similarly risks instating a masculine disposition (in the guise of female homosexuality) which is resolved through the deflection of the mode of desire towards other opposite-sex objects. For Freud, therefore, both successful ego formation and gender consolidation are dependent on the sublimation of a primary homosexuality, rooted in a bisexuality composed of masculine and feminine dispositions; whereas heterosexuality postures as the sexual norm, mental illness and homosexuality figure as unsuccessful examples of psycho-sexual maturation.

A postmodern feminist genealogy reveals the Freudian narrative's investment in socio-historical discourses and regimes of power, in particular through an analysis of homosexuality, gender, and sexual desire. Hence, Butler's Foucauldian critique of Freud's failure to examine the simultaneous melancholic denial and preservation of homosexuality in the production of gender within a heterosexual framework. From this perspective, the Oedipal complex not only resolves gender identification through the incest taboo, but also through an unacknowledged prior taboo against homosexuality; indeed, it is the prior taboo against homosexuality which produces the very heterosexual dispositions which are the protagonists of the Oedipal drama. Thus, the Freudian psychoanalytic law constructs the narrative of repressed desire in the guise of a primary homosexual disposition in order to sanction the displaced phenomenon of heterosexuality – through the presentation of homosexuality as an unsocialised "form of cultural unintelligibility" (Butler 1990a: x) – and conceal both its own self-aggrandising manoeuvres and inherence in relations of power. This unacknowledged taboo against homosexuality is manifest in Freud's theorisation of the child's primary bisexuality, composed of masculine and feminine dispositions, which by failing to acknowledge the possibility of the child's sexual desire for both the opposite-sex *and* same-sex parent reveals the heterosexism of the Freudian matrix. Hence, Butler's contention that:

The conceptualization of bisexuality in terms of *dispositions*, feminine and masculine, which have heterosexual aims as their intentional correlates, suggests that for Freud *bisexuality is the coincidence of two*

*heterosexual desires within a single psyche* [...] there is no homosexuality, and only opposites attract. (1990a: 61)

Indeed, although bisexuality defines itself through the masculine or feminine behaviour employed by the child to seduce the same-sexed parent, Freud declares his own inability to demarcate what precisely a masculine or feminine libidinal desire consists of. Thus, according to Butler, the boy's adoption of heterosexuality emanates from a fear of "feminisation" rather than castration, reconfirming homosexuality as opposed to incestuous desire as the primary object of prohibition. Similarly, within the Freudian narrative the girl's rejection of the mother as love-object creates a positive gender identification and consolidation of the (heterosexual) feminine component of her primary bisexuality; the potentially homosexual love for the mother which requires repression is perceived as emanating from the masculine libidinous drive revealing, firstly, that, for Freud, desire's position as an activity renders it inherently masculine and, secondly, that female homosexuality is by consequence rooted in masculinity. Thus, while the (normal) heterosexual woman replaces the masculine activity of desiring with the passive, feminine act of being loved and desired, the female homosexual, suffering a "masculinity complex," actively pursues desire at the cost of her femininity and loves as a man rather than a woman.

Furthermore, according to feminist postmodernism, Freud perpetuates the Western notion of desire as lack, attributing this lack to the process of socialisation, based on the pursuit of an endless series of substitutes for the primal, forbidden, lost object and pre-symbolic plenitude. In addition, the Freudian narrative encodes desire in terms of the dichotomies masculine/feminine and man/woman, invoking characteristics traditionally associated with the feminine – absence, incompleteness, dependency – which "desexualise" the female body and binarise and heterosexualise desire by "enabl[ing] the two sexes to be understood as (biological, sexual, social and psychical) complements of each other" (Grosz 1994: 71). Finally, however, postmodern feminism's fundamental critique of Freudian psychoanalysis emanates from its a-historical, univocal narrative of psycho-sexual maturation which despite its "radical break with biological determinism by making the structures of psychic development the foundations of *social* organization [...] [is] neither historically nor culturally specific" (Weedon 1998 [1987]: 45).

Drawing, on (post)structuralist anthropology and linguistics, Lacan's rewriting of Freud's humanist theory intends to reopen the psychoanalytic law to social, historical change by resituating the subject, the body, sexuality, and the unconscious within the linguistic domain. Thus, for Lacan, kinship laws (the incest taboo and Oedipus complex) are the correlatives of linguistic laws, instituting order, preferences and taboos for the purpose of signification. Born into the undifferentiated state of the "imaginary," the child's accession to subjectivity coincides with its entry to the symbolic realm of language whose linguistic laws of kinship determine identity according to the child's difference from other subject-positions (e.g. mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers). This trajectory commences with the "mirror stage," the child's seduction by its own seemingly unified spatial reflection, which initiates the separation of the mother-child dyad and the process of self-recognition through difference from the other. However, despite the child's subsequent formation of a static self-image, the acquisition of self-knowledge by means of an external reflection gives rise to an irreparable division and alienation – between the watching and watched "I" – which frames the subject's succeeding identifications and mental development. The mirror phase comprises the three stages of the Oedipus complex: in the first stage, the ego compensates the loss of the mother through an act of identification and incorporation; indeed, the child completes the mother by unconsciously functioning as the phallus she herself lacks. In the second stage, the symbiosis of mother and child is disrupted by a third term - the father - who by prohibiting the former's phallic object and the latter's love-object acts as a signifier of difference over pre-cultural similitude reestablishing the phallus as the mother's object of desire and occasioning the child's subsequent symbolic castration. Indeed, as in Freud, unsuccessful Oedipalisation results in mental illness, or psychosis, often in the guise of homosexuality, which Lacan perceives as a rejection of sexuality per se and the absence of desire. Thus, the symbolic is attained through identification with the father - or, the paternal law - which organises identity through its determination of the subject's name and relations of difference to other linguistic subjects. However, admission to the symbolic realm of language also marks the foundation of the unconscious as a realm of repression, expulsion from the plenitude of the imaginary, and disconnection from direct access to "reality" – hence, the subject's misrecognition of itself as sovereign subject and propulsion along an endless linguistic signifying chain of desire in search of self-completion.

Indeed, by substituting the "Name-of-the-Father" for Freud's potentially biological Oedipal father, Lacan redefines the symbolic as a world of language, reassigns the protagonists of the Oedipal drama symbolic roles, and relocates paternal power in the linguistic rather than the corporeal. Similarly, whereas in Freud the penis suggests physical relations with the mother and a biological equation of the law and the father, the Lacanian phallus - which neither man nor woman possesses - emphasises the linguistic nature of these roles as well as of sexual difference. However, despite his subscription to the Derridean (con)textuality of meaning, Lacan rejects the latter's notion of signification as a continual chain of signifiers to which the phallus belongs; instead, the phallus operates as a transcendental signifier, albeit based in absence rather than presence. Freud's notion of melancholia in the formation of gendered and sexual identity reemerges as Lacanian "masquerade," a similar process of incorporation and concealment intended to resolve loss. Thus, according to Lacan, the feminine linguistic position, which signifies lack and appears to be the phallus, is both quintessentially melancholic and rooted in a masquerade aimed at resolving masculine identification. Paradigmatic of female masquerade, the lesbian's masculine identification is seen to emanate from a desire to participate in the phallogocentric signifying economy rather than from sexual desire.

Despite Lacan's endeavour to emphasise the linguistic and hence social construction of the subject, sexuality, the body, and the unconscious, postmodern feminism reveals, nevertheless, the universalism, sexism and self-aggrandising strategies of his psychoanalytic law. On one level, as Weedon demonstrates (1998 [1987]), Lacan fails to examine language historically in terms of specific discourses existing in social practices and institutions; further, he neglects to identify its own status as one discourse among many with competing constructions of sexuality. Similarly, whereas Lacan's dependence on Lévi-Strauss notion of the "Law of the Father" leads to his postulation of the phallus as a transcendental signifier, whose determinism ultimately forecloses possibilities of socio-historical change, "it is precisely the instability of signs that opens them to history, so that shibboleths like the phallus may change their meaning according to the values and prejudices of the age" (Ellmann 1994: 26). Indeed, despite his emphatic disavowal, postmodern feminists collude in their belief that "Lacanian theory employs an anatomically grounded elision between the phallus and the penis which implies the necessary patriarchal organization of desire and

sexuality [that is] as fixed as the Oedipal structure itself" (Weedon 1998 [1987]: 53); men's possession of the penis grants them power within the symbolic, whereas women's power emanates from their relation to men alone. Thus, while, on the one hand, Lacan's emphasis on the socio-linguistic foundation of women's oppression promises social change, on the other hand, "in his formulation of this structure as an inevitable law, patriarchal dominance is not so much challenged as displaced, from biology to the equally unchangeable socio-linguistic law of the father" (Sarup 1993 [1988]: 29).

Postmodern feminism reveals the way in which the Lacanian psychoanalytic law's foundation in the incest taboo produces culturally sanctioned heterosexuality *and* pre-symbolic, transgressive homosexuality. From this perspective, Lacan's nostalgia for a lost pre-symbolic plenitude, which wields power by demarcating the boundaries of the culturally intelligible, comprises a "narrative strategy, revolving upon the distinction between an irrecoverable origin and a perpetually displaced present, [which] makes all effort at recovering that origin in the name of subversion inevitably belated" (Butler 1990a: 78). Like the Freudian narrative, this depiction of the construction of femininity through, firstly, the prohibitive laws of incest taboo and the Oedipus complex and, secondly, the consequent generation of an unconscious sexuality within the imaginary, has given rise to feminist psychoanalytic endeavours to retrieve a "true," repressed femininity (Cixous), bisexuality (Cixous), homosexuality or maternal body (Kristeva). Indeed, feminist postmodernism's rejection of Freudian and Lacanian bisexuality problematises Cixous' own endeavour (Chapter Three) to eliminate substantive, binary gender through a bisexuality conceptualised as the coalescence of the masculine and the feminine within a single psyche. For, as the above demonstrates, if sexuality is constructed through the law's own narrative genesis there can be no sexuality before or outside the law; furthermore, the postulation of homosexuality as rooted in a bisexual compound which breaks into its heterosexual elements through the process of Oedipal culturalisation is produced by the very law it professes to precede in order to support that law's regulation of binary culture.

Furthermore, like the Freudian narrative, the representation of female homosexuality as a developmental failure, a manifestation of psychosis, and an absence of desire,

desexualises lesbianism and renders it culturally unintelligible. From Butler's "alternative gay/lesbian perspective," the heterosexist psychoanalytic law's construction of sexual subject-positions which are impossible to embody renders heterosexuality an "inevitable comedy," "a constant parody of itself" (1990a: 122). Thus, while Lacanian masquerade has been interpreted by some feminist psychoanalysts as a suppression of a prior femininity, bisexuality or homosexuality capable of destabilising the paternal law (Rivière 1986), Butler radically retheorises Lacan's undeveloped notion of male and female gender as comedic failures and advances a notion of masquerade as parody and mimicry whose "performative production of sexual ontology," "parodic (de)construction" and examination of "the distinction between 'appearing' and 'being'" (Butler 1990a: 47) reveals the non-essentialism of sexed, sexual, and gendered identity. Butler's re-theorisation of "female masquerade" provides a departure point for its literary deployment as a subversive strategy embodied by Fevvers in Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1994b [1984]). Hence, Butler's familiar recourse to Foucauldian reverse discourse (discussed above) in order to theorise strategies of subversion from within the terms of the law itself. In its endeavour to sanction reductive heterosexual identities through the repression of non-heterosexual identities, the juridical psychoanalytic law inadvertently produces a variety of sexed, gendered and sexual subject-positions, or, indeed, multiple identifications which dissolve both coherent, hierarchical gender configurations and the apparent univocity of the law itself – the mobilisation of such identities provides the foundational impulse for a range of (post)Butlerian queer theory.

In contradistinction to other feminisms' various efforts to transcend the law, like its approach to sex and gender, therefore, Butler's postmodern feminism mobilises "illegitimate" sexual identities, desires, and practices – or "developmental failures" and "logical impossibilities" – in order to expose the boundaries and regulatory designs of the psychoanalytic narrative and engender subversion from within the terms of the law itself. While postmodern feminism emphasises the role of other discourses in the production of sexed, gendered, and sexual identity (e.g. biological science, medico-legality), the prominence of discourses such as psychoanalysis centralises heterosexuality as its primary target; however, the very multiplicity of sexual constructs increases the possible sites of subversion. Hence, a return to

Butler's masquerading personae – butches, femmes, and drag kings/queens – whose recontextualised or parodic mimicry of the heterosexual template stages the denaturalisation of the so-called original itself. Despite various humanist, psychoanalytic and feminist postulations of a rigid homo/hetero binary, or an integral homosexuality and heterosexuality, postmodern feminism reveals the ways in which both these sexualities are constructed and intersecting; hence, like postmodern feminism, postmodern lesbianism and Queer theory retheorise a coalition politics which eschews other (political) lesbianisms' recourse to identity politics. Indeed, rather than a simple reflection of heterosexual masculinity within a lesbian context, butch identity, for example, juxtaposes "masculinity" against an allegedly "female body" occasioning an eroticism which derives from the destabilisation of both terms.

The idea that butch and femme are in some sense "replicas" or "copies" of heterosexual exchange underestimates the erotic significance of those identities as internally dissonant and complex in their resignification of the hegemonic categories by which they are enabled. Lesbian femmes may recall the heterosexual scene, as it were, but also displace it at the same time. In both butch and femme identities, the very notion of an original or natural identity is put into question; indeed, it is precisely that question as it is embodied in these identities that becomes one source of their erotic significance. (Butler 1990a: 123)

Similarly, in the context of transsexualism, transgendering, and transvestism, which often involve the imaginary possession or artificial deployment of other body parts, sexual desire destabilises the conventional sex-gender-desire alliance. However, this is dependent on a non-heterosexual contextualisation and reading. Indeed, Butler's "queering" of postmodernism forms the departure point for the queer theorisation of the dependency of parodic subversion/resignification on both its context and its reader.

In comparison to the homosexual community's traditionally modernist self-presentation – firstly, as butch/femme types based on Kraft Ebing's female inversion and, secondly, 1970s lesbian feminism's narcissistic doubles – (post)Butlerian Queer Theory, informed primarily by postmodernism's anti-essentialism, eschews

lesbian/gay self-definition, integral sexuality, metanarratives and stable identity in favour of multiple, optional sexual identities and desires (Griggers 1994; Grosz 1994; Halberstam 1994; Lamos 1994; Roof 1994; Wiegman 1994). Whereas modernist approaches define the lesbian as a minority identity existing in opposition to the heterosexual majority, Queer Theory's eclectic analysis repositions the lesbian in a rhizomatic relationship to the majority: the integrity of sexual categories is destabilised, on the one hand, through (anti)philosophy's demonstration of the performativity of sexual identity and the construction of *all* sexualities within the phallogocentric, heterosexual matrix and, on the other, through postmodern sociology's examination of the proliferation of sexual identities and desires in a high-tech postmodern culture of advanced science, technology, and capitalism. Thus, while the former draws on the Butlerian analysis outlined above, the latter charts the homosexual's increased participation in the majority signifying economy in the social condition of postmodernity – as parents, fashion/sex industry, commodities and consumers, and cyborg bodies. Hence, Griggers' comment: "Each lesbian has a facility touching on some aspect of a majority signifying regime of postmodernity, whether that be masculinity/femininity, motherhood, race, or the nation-state, the sex industry, technologies of simulation, surgical techno-plastics, the commodification of selves and knowledges, reproductive technologies, or the military under global capitalism" (1994: 129). Notwithstanding a warning concerning the political stakes involved, Griggers' analysis represents Queer Theory's theorisation of the positive proliferation of sexual identities occasioned by postmodernity, including the call for a new politics of hybridity and resistance. Wiegman's analysis, however, warns of an inverse trend concerning the essentialist lesbian identity behind a growing popular lesbian culture: firstly, the production and consumption of lesbian clothing, travel, music, art, and publishing are based on lesbian identity; secondly, "the very mechanism that makes possible the lesbian's emergence in public space" is not only misperceived as political progress but ends up "negating difference at a variety of psychological and sociological levels" and hence "works to contain her most radical possibilities" (1994: 4).

Lamos' examination of the lesbian porn magazine *On Our Backs* is paradigmatic of this eclectic approach; while the magazine itself testifies to the lesbian's accession to mainstream culture – the commodification of the lesbian body and targeted lesbian



consumerism – Lamos’ approach incorporates a Butlerian analysis of parodic repetition, proliferation and ambiguity. Disrupting pornography’s conventional generic codes, based on sexology’s reductive identity categories and correlative desires, the magazine both features a variety of sexualities (styles and practices) and enjoys a wide (non)hetero readership which contravenes the homo/hetero and masculine/feminine binaries as well as the normative relation between sex-gender-desire. Thus, rather than “the lesbian version [...] to straight male pornography, acceptable to liberal sensibilities as, perhaps, ‘different strokes for different folks’ [...] the magazine makes it all the more difficult to distinguish between ‘different strokes’ and ‘different folks’ or between heterosexuality and homosexuality” (Lamos 1994: 90). Furthermore, as both Lamos and Halberstam argue, such lesbian magazines and zines testify to a proliferation of sexualities, which contravene queer culture’s own reductive stereotypes, in particular the butch/femme model, revealing that “what we have known as ‘lesbian sex’ (sex between two genetic females acting as women) may be a marginal practice among many other sexual practices in the lesbian community” (Halberstam 1994: 225).

As these letters testify, the butch/femme dichotomy has become complex and internally differentiated among, for instance, femme tops, butch bottoms, femmes butched-out (or cross-dressing) in (male) drag, butches femmed-out in drag, and even the butch fag in drag (the butch who, when she dresses in femme clothing, feels like a gay man dressing as a woman). (Lamos 1994: 96)

[S]ome queer identities have appeared recently in lesbian zines and elsewhere: guys with pussies, dykes with dicks, queer butches, aggressive femmes, F2Ms, lesbians who like men, daddy boys, gender queens, drag kings, pomo afro homos, bulldaggers, women who fuck boys, women who fuck like boys, dyke mommies, transsexual lesbians, male lesbians. As the list suggests, gay/lesbian/straight simply cannot account for the range of sexual experience available. (Halberstam 1994: 212)

However, it is the magazine’s parodic exploitation of strap-on dildos and butch/femme roles, adopted from the conventions of *Penthouse* and *Playboy*, which

are paradigmatic of a Butlerian redeployment of power occasioning a contestation of the integrity of lesbian sexuality, a realignment of female desire with conventional masculine activity and visibility, and a disruption of the binaries hetero/homo and male/female. Contextualised within Butler's theory of parodic repetition, "the dildo, as the imitation of the penis, exposes the penis as itself 'only' a representation, or a failed imitation of the phantasmatic phallus" (Lamos 1994: 95). Similarly, like Butler, Lamos argues that "the eroticism of butch/femme [...] lies not in the so-called attraction of opposites, as through butch/femme were an ersatz version of heterosexual romance, but in its *deauthorization* of gender [...] [which] reverses the supposedly obligatory derivation of sex from gender and breaks the chain that links masculine/feminine with its associated binaries: top/bottom, penetrator/penetrated, active/passive, male/female, and subject/object of desire" (1994: 97-8). Nevertheless, like Halberstam, Lamos develops Butler's cursory reference to the contingency of parodic repetition on both its context and its reader: firstly, albeit performed ironically, both the dildo and the butch/femme model – including "new" butch and femme camp – may be interpreted reductively by other viewers, particularly heterosexuals; secondly, it operates most effectively not within a nonheterosexual context, as Butler claimed, but on the margin between gay and straight culture, although even here it "always works in at least two ways, to confirm and to unsettle the naturalness of gender and the heterosexual norms it subtends, because the simulacrum of gender can always be naturalized as the real" (Lamos 1994: 99). In Chapter Five, Winterson's *The Passion* (1988 [1987]) provides a paradigmatic literary example of the mobilisation of butch/femme, transvestitism, and strap-on body parts in the subversion of substantive, binary sexed, gendered, and sexual identities.

The relationship between parodic repetition and its context/reader, however, is most fully theorised by Halberstam's examination of transvestitism, transgender, and transsexuality as paradigms for non-essentialist sexual identity in the postmodern era. Halberstam's postmodern lesbian characteristically emanates from both advanced (bio)technology and Butlerian performativity, which recast "sexualities and genders as styles rather than life-styles, as fictions rather than facts of life" (1994: 210) – these fictions, however, require "readers" who are alert to the multiple manifestations of desire. Indeed, like Lamos, Halberstam examines the multiplicity of lesbian sexualities beyond gay/straight and male/female binaries whose pleasure emanates

from multiple gendered and sexual codes and scenarios: hence, “Pleasure might be sex with a woman who looks like a boy; pleasure might be a woman going in disguise as a man to a gay bar in order to pick up a gay man” (1994: 212). This explosion of variegated albeit specific lesbian sexualities, as manifest in sex magazines and zines such as *On Our Backs*, not only contravene traditional, reductive categorisation – both in/outside queer culture – but represent “precise and readable desires” (1994: 213); it is this “terrifying precision” (212) of desire which further necessitates a “gender reader.” For Halberstam, transvestism, transgendering, and above all transsexuality – particularly female/lesbian masculinities and F2Ms – are paradigmatic of, firstly, the postmodern performativity and fictionality of sexuality, secondly, its disjunction from the sex-gender equation, and, thirdly, its contingency on a gender-reader. Rather than focusing entirely on the construction of female masculinity and its subject (the transvestite, transsexual, or transgendered person him/herself), Halberstam is interested in its *reading*, or interpretation – indeed, the “titillation and pleasure” (219) derived from that performance by the *reader* as lover. Thus, as opposed to the conventional theorisation of transsexualism, which undertheorises the desire experienced toward the transsexual, Halberstam maintains that “Her [the reader’s] fantasy, her sexuality, is a part of the enactment of ‘trans-sex’ rather than its object or incidental partner” (1994: 220). The importance of the precision of sexed, gendered, and sexual codes and their interpretation by an adequate gender-reader find their paradigmatic literary embodiment and exploration in the subsequent chapters on Winterson and Carter.

However, according to Halberstam, within the general destabilisation of sexual identity occasioned by high-tech postmodernity and poststructuralist philosophy the “specificity” of the transsexual dissolves – “therefore we are all transsexuals. There are no transsexuals” (1994: 226). From this perspective, the individual’s investment at some level in science and technology, on the one hand, and the performance of sexed, gendered, and sexual identity, on the other, renders all genders and sexualities trans: firstly, “we all wear our drag, and we all derive a different degree of pleasure – sexual or otherwise – from our costumes. It is just that for some of us our costumes are made of fabric or material, while for others they are made of skin” (1994: 212); secondly, “we will begin to acknowledge the way in which we have already surgically, technologically, and ideologically altered our bodies, our identities,

ourselves" (215). In this sense, Halberstam's "transsexual," comprising both the actual subjects of transsexual surgery and the general transitivity of sexuality in postmodernity, recalls Haraway's cyborg discussed above. Furthermore, as opposed to the conventional interpretation of "trans" as the (surgical) passage from one ontological category to another, which results in the reification of sexed, gendered and sexual categories, Halberstam's "transsexuals" – both surgical and mythical – experience desire as ambiguity and continual flow – "All gender should be transgender, all desire is transgendered, movement is all" (226). Thus, Halberstam's concept of the "transsexual" sets the stage for Carter's subversion of gender categories through Eve/Evelyn's transsexual surgery in *The Passion of New Eve* (1993a [1977]).

Halberstam's emphasis on the specificity ("precision") of sexual desire and its continuous flow ("movement") also figures in Grosz's Deleuzian critique of Western philosophy's legacy of masculine, heterocentric desire and her adoption of the latter's productive model of desire (discussed above) for postmodern lesbianism. Grosz aims to "flatten depth, reducing it to surface effects" (1994: 78) – movement, energies, inscriptions, patterns of flow; sites of conjunction between machinic parts, relative quantities and quality of intensities; types of production and metamorphoses whose provisional investment of libidinal force displaces psychoanalytic attempts to predesignate erogenous zones. Echoing Halberstam, Grosz argues that the very multiple possibilities of desire lend each encounter a precise specificity, "a relation to a singularity or particularity, always specific, never generalizable" (1994: 78). For Grosz, this model of lesbianism eliminates reductive binaries (human/animal, organic/inorganic, male/female, gay/straight) and substitutes an examination of "lesbian connections" and "lesbian-machines" for the modernist pursuit of lesbian selfhood. This provides a context for a reading of the shifting, mobile, metamorphosing sexualities of Cixous' *Le Livre de Promethea* (1983) and Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien* (1976 [1973]) as well as the lesbian relationship in Winterson's *The Passion* (1988 [1987]). Notwithstanding its relation to Halberstam's "transsexual", Haraway's cyborg, whose sexuality manifests itself at the interface between human/machine and human/animal, closely corresponds to Grosz's Deleuzian theorisation of postmodern lesbian desire in terms of machinic parts. In this sense, the breakdown of human/animal in both cyber writing and (bio)technology represents the cyborg's fusionalty with other living things resulting in a "disturbingly and

pleasurably tight coupling” (Haraway 1990 [1985]: 193). Not only does “Bestiality [have] a new status in this cycle of marriage exchange” (193), “Cyborg ‘sex’ restores some of the lovely replicative baroque of ferns and invertebrates (such nice organic prophylactics against heterosexism)” (191). The appearance of a variety of female cyborgs in all four writers is discussed in the subsequent chapters.

Notwithstanding its obvious support of feminist postmodernism, this chapter has sought to demonstrate the variety of positions within feminist postmodern philosophy, in particular their diverse relationship to modernism. While many reject modernism in its entirety, others seek to re-articulate its terminology for a postmodern age. This will provide a context for a reading of the four subsequent authors, who in different ways attempt to intervene in the modernism/postmodernism debate. The chapter has also examined a number of theoretical strategies for the pursuit of feminist postmodernism's fundamental project: the elimination of binary, substantive identity and the re-theorisation of agency. In the subsequent chapter, “The Postmodern Fantastic”, the thesis indicates how textual and topographical re-performance – e.g. the grotesque and the cyborg – comprise the narratological counterparts of feminist postmodern agency and anti-essentialism. The study of the four authors will demonstrate how these strategies are mobilised, in a variety of ways and with varying success, in the realm of the literary text.

## Chapter 2. The Postmodern Fantastic

### i. Realism(s) and non-realism(s)

Historical and contemporary fantastic, Gothic, science fiction, utopia, fairy tale and the grotesque, conventionally grouped since the 1970s – according to individual schema and theoretical approach – under the umbrella of the literary fantastic, are generally defined by their opposition to aesthetically stable and philosophically rationalist genres: (neo)classicism(s) and conventional realism(s). Notwithstanding their differences, classicism and realism coalesce in the following qualities: observance of the unities, regularity and restraint, on the one hand, and coherent, quintessential, mimetic representation of reality on the other. Nevertheless, the growth of the realist novel after the eighteenth century and the ascendancy of the fantastic in the twentieth century – including current manifestations of historical non-realist modes (e.g. Gothicism) as well as postmodernisms – have led to the prevailing theorisation of such genres vis-à-vis realism. Hence, the recent, albeit deceptive, categorisations “non-realism,” “anti-realism,” “unrealism,” “pararealism”. This opposition derives not from realism’s politics, which have tended towards both reactionism and radicalism (e.g. Leavisian realism, socialist realism, Lukácsian (Marxist) realism, and feminist realism), but from its investment in Enlightenment humanism and concomitant rationality at the level of representation. Thus, drawing on notions of communal reality and the innocent transparency of language, realism predicates “real(ity)” and “truth” on the direct relation between experiential reality and objective representation. In contradistinction, the self-reflexivity of “non-realist” genres problematises language and representation revealing the ways in which narratives construct reality, truth, and identity. Hence the inadequacy of current binary theorisations – realism versus anti-realism – and their seminal displacement by “performative,” “actualist” paradigms; indeed, rather than a retreat from reality, anti-realism’s self-conscious techniques constitute an engagement with and commentary on the nature of the external, “real” world.

The numerous formal, thematic and philosophical similarities between postmodern fiction and other non-realist modes reveal the latter as sister genres and precursors – or, postmodern fiction their most recent avatar; nevertheless, debates concerning their shared terrain have only recently been absorbed into contemporary criticism generated

largely by postmodernism's own generic eclecticism. While this incorporation reflects, on one level, the widespread breakdown of media and genres in the age of postmodernity, specific postmodernisms consciously exploit the correlation between these genres (e.g. "fantastic/Gothic postmodernism" and "postmodern science fiction") necessitating an examination of historical non-realisms both prior to and following their assimilation. Furthermore, the evolution of non-realisms (the fantastic, Gothicism, SF) in the late twentieth century, including their long-standing practice of genre-mixing, suggests, on another level, that it is in fact these genres which incorporate the postmodern. The discussion of these issues in this chapter is necessarily limited to the topics "Reality and realism," "Indeterminacy," and "Identity", which are intended to identify both the major sites of conjunction between anti-realisms as well as those most pertinent to the following section on feminist postmodernism's revision of non-realist modes.

Thus, the first section, "Reality and realism", demonstrates that non-realism's dependency on traditional realism for its generic definition and methods of estrangement occasions its characteristic scrutiny of both cultural limitations and conceptions of the real. Other interpretations of non-realism as an aesthetic response to cultural heteroglossia and social change and the plural or simulated nature of postmodern reality consolidate the emerging status of non-realism as a "new" realism. The following section investigates reader participation produced by Gothicism and the fantastic's formal and thematic "indeterminacy", transposed in postmodern fiction into a confrontation between ontological levels and an ambiguous relation to the dominant social order. "Identity" examines non-realism's destabilisation of the boundaries between self and other and its display of depthless, theatrical characters, which challenge Enlightenment sovereignty and reveal the performativity of identity. Finally, these formal, thematic, and philosophical similarities reveal, firstly, that postmodern fiction is heir to a long-standing literary tradition and, secondly, that the conjunction between these modes – manifest, for example, in Gothic/fantastic postmodernism – is more than fortuitous; indeed, their combined critique of reality and sovereign selfhood is subsequently adopted by the feminist postmodern writers below in their pursuit of the destabilisation of sexed, gendered, and sexual identities.

## Reality and realism

As outlined above, non-realisms are most generally defined through their deviation from and initial marginality to the dominant literary practice: (neo)classicisms, conventional realisms, and their correlative rationalist philosophy. Thus, transgressing classicism's unities, symmetry, and design, advocated by Enlightenment values, early Gothic's formal and thematic non-linearity, hybridity, and excess presented a challenge to reason and rationalist morality. Hence, its espousal of popular, mediaeval genres (Romance, ballad, myth, legend), contemporary anti-Augustan literatures (graveyard poetry, the sublime, sensationalism), Shakespearean tragedies, and anti-Enlightenment philosophies intended to "shadow[...] the progress of modernity with counternarratives displaying the underside of Enlightenment values" (Botting 1996: 2) – imagination, sensation, mystery, and terror. This prevailing interpretation of Gothicism as anti-realism also permeates its postmodern transmutations: while, for Punter, "Gothic's general opposition to realist aesthetics [...] most simply define[s] a unitary 'Gothic tradition'" (1996b: 182) from 1800 to the present, D'Haen (1995) predicates Gothic postmodernism's non-realism on its opposition to aesthetic and poststructuralist postmodernisms' new-found status as mainstream literature and dominant social order in the age of postmodernity.

Both the historical and contemporary literary fantastic, whose early roots lie in the Gothic, is similarly defined by its contravention of realism's formal and thematic unities vis-à-vis chronology, character, time-space, and cultural differentiations (self/other, human/animal, animate/inanimate). This arises, on one level, from the fantastic's direct descendance – along with the grotesque and postmodernism – from Menippean satire, which infracted and "carnivalised" the rules of probability and propriety in historical realism. On another level, the "enormous reservoir of the fantastic" and "the fantastic literature of madness and horror" emerged in direct proportion to the Enlightenment's confinement of "abstract unreason" and imposition of neo-classical aesthetics (Foucault 1992a [1961]: 209-10). Deriving variously from the *mennipea*, Gothicism, the fantastic, and the uncanny, various historical and contemporary branches of the grotesque also coalesce in their opposition to classicism, realism and rationalism. Firstly, the historical grotesque opposed and was marginalised by the neoclassicism of the late Renaissance; secondly, Romanticism's uncanny-grotesque represents the repressed irrationality of the human psyche (Kayser



1963; Freud 1955 [1919]); thirdly, the comic-grotesque mobilises the abjected areas of the classical bodily canon (Bakhtin 1984b); and, finally, the “aerial” grotesque (acrobatics, philobatism, stunting) challenges modernity’s models of progress, rationality and liberation (Russo 1994). Similarly, trivialised like the grotesque by mainstream aesthetics, early science fiction evolved from the Gothic/fantastic birth of *Frankenstein* (1992 [1818]), the subsequent dissolution of realism’s time-space continuum in pursuit of alternative realities and, finally, the current – postmodern science-fictional – dystopian representation of Enlightenment progress. Indeed, following its inception during the crisis in modernity in the 1960s, postmodern narrative strategies and correlative thematics are “openly premised on a challenge to the realist notion of representation” (Hutcheon 1989: 34) and its underlying rationalist philosophy. Finally, therefore, in their transgression of realism and correlative Enlightenment discourse non-realisms begin to emerge as “new” realisms.

On another level, however, non-realism’s relationship to realism is more complex than the above suggests, for it is contingent on realism and realist representation for its own generic definition. Indeed, structuralist endeavours to define the fantastic without recourse to realism’s precepts inevitably disclose this intrinsic dependency. Thus, while Todorov (1973 [1970]) predicates the fantastic on the borderline between the “fantastic-uncanny” and the “fantastic-marvellous” – or natural/supernatural and real/unreal – Jackson’s substitution of mimesis/marvellous for the Todorovian formula intends to further clarify the symbiotic, albeit indeterminate, relationship between realism and non-realism. Jackson writes:

Fantastic narratives confound elements of both the marvellous and the mimetic. They assert that what they are telling is real – relying upon all the conventions of realistic fiction to do so – and then they proceed to break that assumption of realism by introducing what – within those terms – is manifestly unreal. (1993 [1981]: 34)

Hence Todorov’s prediction for the demise of the fantastic in the late twentieth century, following the disappearance of representation in writing and the subsequent inability to represent the real. However, not only has the opposite occurred, but, as McHale (1994 [1987]) counters, postmodern (or fantastic postmodern) fiction’s

challenge to realist representation constitutes in itself an incorporation of representation. Postmodern approaches to the literary fantastic equally reveal the fantastic's imbrication with realism and the real. Accordingly, Cornwell's "portmanteau" (1990), Lee and Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction" (1990; 1989; 1995), and McHale's "postmodern fantastic" and "historical fantasy" (1994 [1987]) comprise the same realist-fantastic fusion. Similarly, Hutcheon, Malekin, and Yarrow interpret postmodernism as the interrelation between "fantasy"/fiction and the "real" (1989; 1988; 1988); and Haraway's "cyborg writing" combines social reality with fantasy/fiction (1990 [1985]). Hence, as discussed below, the integration of historical realism and the fantastic in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1994b [1984]) and the thematised warfare between imagination and reality in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1982 [1972]). On a similar basis, the uncanny/uncanny-grotesque represents a gateway between realism and fantasy, carnival "official literature's dialectical antithesis and parodic double" (McHale 1994 [1987]: 172), and science fiction a merger of fantastic/marvellous themes with the realist narrative's closed form and reality orientation – coined by Brooke-Rose (1981) as "the unreal as real" or "marvellous-realism". Nevertheless, as outlined above, it is Gothicism which most closely resembles the fantastic's characteristic indeterminacy between realism and the fantastic (discussed below). Finally, however, this "paraxial" positioning of realism and the fantastic has generated, firstly, debates concerning the general fantasticality *and* realism of all art; secondly, the emerging interpretation of non-realism as a new realism; and, thirdly, the ability of non-realism to scrutinise both reality and notions of the real.

The symbiosis of realism and the fantastic occasions an interrogation of their discrepancy which discloses society's historically shifting mores, epistemological and ontological boundaries, and conceptions of reality and the real. As Jackson summarises: "In this way fantastic literature points to or suggests the basis on which cultural order rests, for it opens up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems. The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made absent" (1993 [1981]: 4). Hence Hutcheon (1984 [1980]) and Jackson's conceptualisation of the fantastic as a transgressive and potentially subversive mode; a "literature of desire" seeking to compensate for

cultural constraints; and the embodiment of unconscious hopes, fears, libidinal drives, repressions, and taboos. Indeed, anticipating postmodern fiction, the fantastic's disjunction of signifier and signified, its problematisation of the "real" and its self-conscious textuality "betray[s] its version of the 'real' as a relative one, which can only deform and transform experience, so the 'real' is exposed as a category, as something articulated by and constructed through the literary or artistic text" (Jackson 1993 [1981]: 84). In this sense, Cornwell (1990), Jackson and McHale's (1994 [1987]) interpretations, which emphasise contesting discourses and the interrogation of unitary truths, approximate Bakhtinian dialogics; for, "The fantastic here serves not for the positive *embodiment* of truth, but as a mode for searching after truth, provoking it, and, most important, *testing* it" (Bakhtin 1984a: 114).

Postmodern fiction inherits this dialogical scrutiny of reality and the real: firstly, its anti-realist narrative techniques (pastiche, framebreaking, metatheatre, text-in-process), bequeathed from the fantastic, reveal the plurality, illusion, construction, and dynamism of reality(ies); secondly, its approximation of "purely fantastic narrative", including alien creatures, time-space settings, and language, comprises an examination of the limits of Western culture (Olsen 1988); thirdly, its self-conscious language – exemplified by the fantastic-poststructuralist, albeit divergent, writings of Hélène Cixous and Monique Wittig – defamiliarises the real (Alexander 1990). The above accounts of the postmodern, therefore, which emphasise the fantastic – and hence interpret postmodern fiction as a *mélange* of fantastic and realism – anticipate fantastic postmodernism. Indeed, embodied in Haraway's cyborg and the novels of Angela Carter, fantastic postmodernism's interrogation of reality derives from its symbiosis of realism and the fantastic, albeit where realism is newly represented by aesthetic and poststructuralist postmodernisms. D'Haen writes:

in postmodernism we witness the reintroduction of the "unreal" as a meaningful category or element. [...] I would argue for the fantastic in postmodern literature as the counter-axial counterpart of present-day forms of (social) realism in opposition to poststructuralist/aesthetic postmodernism. (1995: 289)

Gothicism's symbiosis of realism and fantasy – real/unreal, natural/supernatural, convention/transgression – reveals a similar “anxiety over cultural limits and boundaries” (Botting 1996: 2) and correlative conceptions of reality and the real. Hence, its fundamental excitation of terror and paranoia, approximation of “social fears and taboos” (120), repressed hopes and desires, and “boundaries of the civilised” and the barbaric (183); for “these are the aspects of the terrifying to which Gothic constantly, and hauntedly, returns” (Punter 1996b: 184). Thus, Gothic fears shift in accordance with historical notions of social reality: whereas early Gothic's incorporation of romance and feudal motifs examined contemporary reality through fears relating to an allegedly barbaric past, postmodern Gothic's encounter with science fiction projects fears from the future. Nevertheless, the theme of barbarism/civilisation, or Appollonian versus Dionysian forces, continues to manifest itself in postmodern and Gothic postmodern fiction (e.g. Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains* (1981a [1969]), Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* (1990 [1969]), consolidating historical Gothic's suggestion that both are, in fact, constructed through narrativisation (McHale 1994 [1987]; Punter 1996a; 1996b). Finally, therefore, like the fantastic and postmodernism, Gothicism's continual problematisation of the real and its representation, self-reflexivity, and generic mixing reveal that reality is the effect of representation.

While early science fiction's “other worlds” retain a representational link to the reader's own world, producing an estrangement of reality, SF juxtaposes stable, integral worlds rather than creating the symbiotic relationship characteristic of Gothic and the fantastic. However, with the science-fictionalisation of postmodernism, or the postmodernisation of science fiction, the incorporation of fantastic and postmodern techniques (e.g. metafiction) effects an interrogation of reality through the formal and thematic layering of reality(ies). Nevertheless, for Baudrillard and Jameson, the collapse of the boundary between the real and the imaginary, occasioned by the science-fictional/fantastic nature of postmodernity, has eliminated SF's ability to derealise the real and its concomitant capacity to interrogate social reality. Notwithstanding general agreement concerning the science-fictionality of postmodern reality, this view derives from Baudrillard and Jameson's individual, pessimistic postmodernisms, which, firstly, represent social reality and the dominant cultural order and, secondly, fail to account for the current diversity and opposition between

postmodernisms. Hence, from the perspective of McHale's ontological postmodern poetics, SF's "close encounters between different worlds" (60) stages as much an ontological confrontation – questioning of reality and being – as the postmodern fantastic's framebreaking techniques. Similarly, both fantastic/Gothic/SF postmodernism(s) and ethical/political postmodernism(s) (e.g. postmodern feminism) exist in critical opposition to aesthetic and poststructuralist postmodernism's status as mainstream literature and dominant social reality (Armitt 1999; 1996; D'Haen 1995). Ultimately, therefore, non-realism's interrogation of cultural limitations and conceptions of the real further consolidates its emerging position as a new realism.

On another level, however, the historical fantastic and Gothic constitute responses to the transformation of late-eighteenth-century Western society by post-Enlightenment secularisation and early capitalist industrialism. In this sense, their anti-realist formal strategies not only anticipate those of postmodern fiction, but project an uncertain, superficial, duplicitous reality which is quintessentially postmodern. Firstly, in a religious era fantasies projected otherness into "supernatural" realms (heaven/hell) accessible through transcendental leaps of faith; in modernity, however, the fantastic and Gothic's characteristic inversion of this world into something strange – unreal within the real – provides a secular substitution for religion which corresponds to the role of postmodern writing (Alexander 1990; Botting 1996; Foucault 1992a [1961]). Secondly, the early fantastic's manifestation of "the debilitating psychological effects of inhabiting a materialistic culture" (Jackson 1993 [1981]: 4), and early Gothicism's reaction to "changes [...] pris[ing] apart the bonds linking individuals to an ordered social world – urbanisation, industrialism, revolution" (Botting 1996: 23), find their counterpart in postmodernism's presentation of "the pluralistic and anarchistic ontological landscape of advanced industrial cultures" (McHale 1994 [1987]). Indeed, as Docherty maintains, "many of the debates around the issue of the postmodern not only have their sources in eighteenth-century controversies, but also recapitulate those earlier debates and reconsider them: the late twentieth century is contaminated by the late eighteenth" (1993: 15).

Hence, firstly, Bakhtin's "polyphonic novel" produced by capitalism's cultural heteroglossia and, secondly, recent comparisons between eighteenth-century (early Gothic) and late-twentieth-century social reality (Botting 1996; Howells 1995 [1978];

Punter 1996b; Smith 1996). Thus, for Botting, postmodern Gothic's depiction of the oppressive effects of late-capitalist science, loss of reality and identity, and disaffection with modernity's metanarratives find their inception in eighteenth-century Gothic: "In the questioning of narratives of authority and the legitimacy of social forms, what can be called postmodern Gothic is akin, in its playfulness and duplicity, to the artificialities and ambivalences that surrounded eighteenth-century Gothic writing and were produced in relation to the conflicts of emerging modernity" (157). Similarly, Punter's Marxist approach targets the disruption of rural life by industry, urbanisation, and clock-time; dissolution of social structures by new types of work and social roles; growth of cities and communications; and the demise of the mercantilist economy in favour of a newly emergent capitalism. Thus, previously perceived, in part, as a set of conventions, the historical Gothic's uncanny "assemblage of different stories," "labyrinthine complexity" (1994b: 170), ambiguity and persecution mania, are consolidated in postmodernity by a fear of textuality, dissolution of modernist metanarratives, bureaucratisation and technologisation, and paranoia vis-à-vis an incomprehensible universe governed by unknown powers/groups. Although Smith's examination differs in its relation between the historical Gothic and postmodernism (rather than Gothic postmodernism), it equally links early Gothic's confusion vis-à-vis villainous plots to the disarray occasioned by postmodernity's information revolution, capitalism, and subsequent paranoia:

If it is true that the shift from the technology of production to the technology of information [...] offers some similarities to the shift that occurred at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, then there is reason to think that the parallels may be more than fortuitous. (1996: 15)

However, despite the above similarities – the postmodern nature of Gothic/fantastic, or the Gothic/fantastic nature of postmodernity – the Gothic/fantastic is not synonymous with postmodernism/postmodernity. Indeed, while the above critics tend to evince a pessimism vis-à-vis social change that is reflected in their discussion of the fantastic/Gothic and postmodernism as empty pastiche and fear of technologisation, D'Haen's postmodern fantastic and feminist postmodern fantastic (discussed below) espouse a positive attitude towards societal changes coupled with the critical deployment of anti-realist strategies against aesthetic and poststructuralist

postmodernism's representation of social reality. Finally, as D'Haen writes, "Instead of being reduced in the final analysis to the world of the dominant cultural order's 'reality', therefore, Gothic in fantastic postmodernism creates one or more alternative 'realities' on a par with that of the dominant cultural order's. The thrust [...] is truly ontological in McHale's sense: to create a clutch of worlds" (1995: 293).

### Indeterminacy

Notwithstanding their coalescence as anti-realisms, the various modes described above are conventionally subdivided according to their (in)determinacy. Firstly, Gothicism, the fantastic, and postmodernism espouse a fundamentally indeterminate structure and correlative double-codedness vis-à-vis the ruling ideology, generating hesitation on the part of the reader. This is consolidated, on a thematic level, by a host of enigmatic topoi – mirrors, fairs, fantastic enclosures, temporal fluidity, and metamorphosis. Whereas the above are "fantastic" in the sense of "open" and indeterminate – and, hence, arguably subversive (an issue discussed below) – prior to their incorporation by postmodernism and vice versa, early SF, utopia/dystopia, myth, and fairy tale comprise "marvellous" or structurally "closed," determinate forms. Unlike the dialogics of the fantastic, therefore, the latter "ha[ve] complete knowledge of *completed* events," "reproduc[e] established 'true' versions," "deny the process of [their] own telling" (Jackson 1993: 33); and "channel readings into a singular, complicit narrative stance" which offers "little in the way of narrative pleasure" (Armitt 1996: 29). In contradistinction, the historical fantastic emerges from a formal indeterminacy, or structural space, between realism and non-realism – fantastic-uncanny/fantastic-marvellous (Todorov 1973 [1970]) or mimesis/fantastic (Jackson 1993). Hence, Todorov's renowned structuralist formula for the "pure fantastic," which inhabits the duration of the reader's uncertainty over the supernaturalism in the text:

The fantastic requires the fulfillment of three conditions. First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus [...] the hesitation is represented, it

becomes one of the themes of the work. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as “poetic” interpretations. The first and third actually constitute the genre; the second may not be fulfilled. (1973 [1970]: 33)

While Todorov's analysis “open[s] up the textual borders to intervention from the reader,” indeed, casts “the reader [as] the main protagonist through interaction with the fantastic itself” (Armitt 1996: 31-2), it is limited by its characteristically 1970s structuralist precepts. Hence, the foregoing prognosis of the decline of the fantastic following the disappearance of representation in (post)modern writing and correlative epistemological hesitation between the real and the unreal.

In comparison, McHale's substitution of ontological for epistemological uncertainty identifies an affinity between the fantastic and postmodernism, which provides the basis for the former's continued evolution and incorporation within postmodernism and vice versa. From this perspective, the fantastic's fundamental ontology, previously “naturalised” by the superimposition of epistemological hesitation, reemerges within postmodernism and fantastic postmodernism as “one of a number of strategies of an ontological poetics that pluralizes the real and problematizes representation” (1994: 75). Thus, like its assimilation of Gothic, carnival and the grotesque, the fantastic usually emerges in postmodernism in residual form, displacing the locus of hesitation from the text's structure to its themes, topoi, language, reader, and ontological layers (e.g. metafiction) (Cornwell 1990; D'Haen 1995; McHale 1994 [1987]); hence, the general permeation of postmodernism with a fantastic “charge”, including texts which are not formally fantastic. McHale's replacement of Todorovian “hesitation” with “confrontation,” “zone of hesitation”, and “frontier” intends to emphasise, therefore, the historical and postmodern fantastic's uncertainty not only in relation to the normal and paranormal but, most importantly, vis-à-vis different worlds, forms of representation, and realities. Comprising alternative approaches to the same phenomenon, Cornwell's “portmanteau” and Hutcheon's “historiographic metafiction” (1989; 1995) similarly testify to the existence of the Todorovian “pure fantastic” as a quality “in its broader and narrower literary senses” within “the twentieth-century trend towards genre mixing and breakdown” (Cornwell 1990: 143, 212). Similarly, Lee's examination of



postmodernism's textual performativity – or, tendency to “textualize [its] own indeterminacy” (1990: 81) – confirms the fantastic's development within postmodernism as ontological confrontation. Nevertheless, rare postmodern manifestations of the “pure fantastic's” epistemological indeterminacy appear, for example, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1988 [1987]) which remains ambiguous vis-à-vis the supernaturalism in the text. Hence, finally, Olsen's conclusion that it is postmodern fiction which most closely approximates a truly “pure”, wholly indeterminate fantastic (1988).

Like the fantastic, historical Gothicism's dependency on structural indeterminacy and epistemological hesitation generates an uncertainty, terror, and paranoia in the reader which founds its definition as a “literature of terror” and a “paranoiac fiction”. As Punter argues, “Gothic fiction [...] finds itself operating between two structural poles” (1996b: 188): firstly, a supernatural, non-realist account of the world rooted in its collage of legend, myth, and tragedy; secondly, a natural, realist representation of the world established through its use of verification techniques. On one level, therefore, Gothic indeterminacy incorporates Romanticism's repudiation of Enlightenment rationality – clear-cut boundaries, and single truths – and neo-classical aesthetics; on another level, it constitutes a narratological requisite for the creation of mystery and suspense. Thus, Smith (1996) compares Gothicism with postmodernism, whose rejection of modernist aesthetics and metanarratives creates a similar indeterminacy through its contradictory narratives and discourses. Hence, his conclusion that in spite of its traditional interpretation as “epistemological crisis,” Gothicism's suspense, anti-realist narrative techniques, and depthlessness also foreground an ontological indeterminacy akin to McHale's fantastic and postmodernism. As outlined above, therefore, notwithstanding rare examples such as Morrison's *Beloved*, Gothic postmodernism generally displaces its epistemological hesitation from the text's structure to its themes, topoi, reader, and ontological layers.

On another level, non-realism's structural indeterminacy manifests a correlative ambiguity vis-à-vis the ruling ideology, encompassing its relation to conventional morality, past and present, audience and readership. Thus, the historical fantastic's “expression” of desire, which both “tells of” and “expels” libidinous drives “frequently serve[s] (as does Gothic fiction) to reconfirm institutional order by

supplying a vicarious fulfillment of desire and neutralising an urge towards transgression” (Jackson 1993: 72). Nevertheless, as Armit (1996) counters, Jackson’s argument is problematised by her conflation of fantasy with the fantastic: whereas the former colludes with early SF, utopia, and fairy tale in its fulfillment of generic expectations and narrative closure, albeit double-coded, the fantastic’s open form transgresses expectations, monological forms, and established limits. Similarly, early Gothicism’s retreat from literary and social transgression to moral closure and the natural world comprises “a dynamic of limit and transgression that both restores and contests boundaries,” “a delineation neither of reason and morality nor of superstition and corruption [...] but both at the same time” (Botting 1996: 8, 9). Gothic ambivalence is partly rooted in the writers’ own ambiguous positions: imagination, dissatisfaction, and rebelliousness, on the one hand, inherited from the French Revolution, de Sade, and the Romantics; adherence to eighteenth-century morality, on the other, ingrained by their middle-class, aristocratic, church-going, and feminine status. Indeed, while their espousal of medieval romance genres, which were distanced from the Renaissance, provided the freedom to portray their hopes and fears, the relegation of these literary forms and correlative feudal motifs by Enlightenment morality and aesthetics forged Gothic’s ambivalent fascination and repulsion vis-à-vis the past. Thus, “In Gothic the middle class historically displaces the hidden violence of present social structures, conjures them up again as past, and falls promptly under their spell” (Punter 1996b: 198). Hence, the prevalent ambivalence between civilisation/barbarism, reason/desire, attraction/repulsion, past/present/(and future); and, from Punter’s Marxist perspective, Gothic’s “central contradiction [...] from which all the others flow [...] that Gothic can at one and the same time be categorised as a middle class and an anti-middle-class literature” (203). Indeed, Botting and Punter reveal that despite Gothic’s alleged low-class “popularity” and repulsion by middle-class morality, it both shared realism/classicism’s educated readership and “first began to emerge, in a hesitant way, within the mainstream of the realist novel itself” (Punter 1996a: 40). Firstly, Gothic’s romance forms, once the mouthpiece of the popular masses, were revived by middle-class writers; secondly, Gothic included works currently perceived as mainstream eighteenth-century realism; thirdly, in spite of increased printing presses and circulating houses the working classes could neither afford the novels nor understand their elaborate style. Thus, Punter colludes with Jackson that, notwithstanding its transgressive impulse, Gothic’s

contradictory “vindication and substantiation of a middle-class world view” (1996b: 202) renders it double-coded rather than directly subversive:

It is this structure which renders most of the directly political arguments about the “subversiveness” of Gothic irrelevant. Gothic *enacts* psychological and social dilemmas: in doing so, it both confronts the bourgeoisie with its limitations and offers it modes of imaginary transcendence, which is after all the dialectical role of most art. Gothic fiction demonstrates the *potential* of revolution by daring to speak the socially unspeakable; but the very act of speaking it is an ambiguous gesture. (1996b: 196-7)

In contradistinction, Smith’s postulation of the relation between Gothic’s indiscriminate, playful display of the past as “touristic exoticism” and postmodernism’s “same, if more extensive, imaginary museum of pastness [...] [and] cannibalisation of images from the detritus of global history,” divests Gothicism of the above ambivalence (1996: 11). Indeed, like the discussion of Gothic and postmodern pastiche, Smith’s analysis is problematised by its exclusive reference to aesthetic/neo-Marxist postmodernism, whose pessimism fails to account for the critical revisitation of the past and ambivalence witnessed, for example, in historiographic metafiction and social/political postmodernisms and (postmodern) Gothicisms. Hence, Smith’s conclusion that the evil portrayed in early Gothic had a meaning, whereas postmodern Gothic constitutes “transgression [...] relieved of its Gothic portentousness” (15). A similar generalisation is expounded by Botting (1996) who predicts the demise of Gothic excess, transgression, horror, and duplicity amidst the relativism and political quietism of postmodernity. These are countered by Hutcheon’s contention that “Postmodern parody is a kind of contesting revision or rereading of the past that both confirms and subverts the power of the representations of history” (1989: 95). Similarly, according to D’Haen, rather than empty transgression, Gothic postmodernism’s complicitous critique of cultural order “serves to counter-write the dominant other’s discourse” (1995: 292). Indeed, Robinson (1991) reconfirms what the latter theorists suggest: that the political stake of certain (feminist) postmodernisms – and by extension the fantastic, Gothic, and

fantastic/Gothic postmodernism – renders this double-codedness nonetheless subversive.

While non-realism's structural uncertainty is mirrored on another level by a host of indeterminate themes and *topoi*, the present discussion is necessarily limited to key thematic and structural aspects elaborated below. As outlined above, in historical fantastic/Gothicism these correspond to the uncertain structure's dialogical scrutiny of the real; in fantastic/Gothic postmodernism they often comprise "generic debris" (D'Haen 1995), displaced elements of the fantastic/Gothicism's early epistemological indeterminacy redeployed as ontological confrontation. Thus, indeterminacy manifests itself paradigmatically through notions of vision/"seeing," which, as Jackson argues, comprises the West's fundamental means of comprehension and belief. Hence, the fantastic, Gothic, and postmodernism's spectral images – mirrors, glasses, lenses, reflections, portraits, eyes, invisibility – whose inverted, distorted, or myopic vision defamiliarises the familiar, introduces indeterminate realms and identities, and reveals the construction and instability of reality and subjectivity (Armitt 1996; Freud 1955 [1919]; Jackson 1993). Indeed, whereas in the fantastic "parameters of the field of vision tend towards indeterminacy" (Jackson 1993: 46), postmodernism's approximation of Derridean linguistics, quantum theory, and Foucauldian genealogy rejects discrete entities in favour of field concepts – "the field being in its ultimate nature unmanifest, nonspecific, nonspatio-temporal, an all-important absence" (Malekin 1988: 10-11). This "paraxial realm"/"field" often comprises an enclosed space in which unreality prevails: the fantastic and Gothicism's terrifying edifices and locales suspended in an eternal present; and postmodern and Gothic/fantastic postmodern fiction's (poly)chronotopic "closed systems which are subject to no principle of change but their own" (Olsen 1988: 107). On another level, these fantastic spaces, or chronotopes, are represented by fairs, circuses, theatre, unknown countries and travelling shows and their inhabitants - acrobats, philobats, clowns, fools, performers (Bakhtin 1984b; Neumeier 1996; Russo 1994). Hence, the circus- and theatre-based settings, travelling fair/circuses, unknown islands/countries/states, and Gothic edifices throughout Angela Carter's novels. Ultimately, however, thematic indeterminacy reveals an entropic "drive towards a realisation of contradictory elements merging together in the desire for undifferentiation" (Jackson 1993: 80), manifest in metamorphoses' paradigmatic

disjunction of signifier and signified (Armitt 1996; Malekin 1988; Massey 1976). Hence, Armitt's theorisation of thematic *and* structural metamorphosis as the basis of a new (postmodern) anti-structuralist approach to non-realism embracing both its historical and current (postmodern) manifestations.

### Identity

Non-realisms are distinguished, in ways which draw on their indeterminacy, by their interrogation of the unity of character - the rationalist definition of selfhood as a unified, continuous whole espoused by classicism and realism. Thus, whereas the former's physically and psychologically realist, coherent subjects reflect rationalism's sovereign selfhood, non-realist characters' corporeal and psychic fragmentation, metamorphosis, depthlessness, and performativity present subjectivity as process, plurality, and construction. For Jackson, therefore, "It is important to understand the radical consequences of an attack upon unified 'character'," for rather than a merely thematic device it "constitutes the most radical transgressive function of the fantastic" (1993 [1981]: 83). This agrees with postmodern notions of "character" as an ideological device, whose sovereignty endorses a realist representation of external reality in support of the dominant social order. Indeed, postmodernism's shifting, depthless characters foreclose identification - and, hence, a unified moral viewpoint - revealing instead that "[the] sense of the 'coherent, continuous, autonomous, and free subject [...]' is a historically conditioned and historically determined construct with its analogue in the representation of the individual in fiction" (Hutcheon 1991 [1989]: 38). The discussion, however, is necessarily limited to an examination of non-realist identity in relation to fragmentation, self and other, and performativity, which are pertinent to feminist postmodernism's adoption of the postmodern fantastic.

On one level, the notion of decentred identity manifests itself in non-realism's fragmentation of identity and destabilisation of the self/other dichotomy. In contradistinction to the realist/classical subject, therefore, whose selfhood is defined in direct opposition to a separate "other," the fantastic transforms the boundaries between self/other - animate/inanimate, human/animal, and human/machine. Hence, Todorov's division of fantastic themes into two groups, the "I" and the "Not-I": as "themes of perception" the former emphasise the I/eye whose subjective perception blurs the borderline between self and world generating metamorphoses, doubles, and

multiple selves; comprising "themes of discourse" the latter focus on the (re)construction of the self/other relationship by the unconscious, desire, and language. Similarly, Jackson classifies fantastic texts according to the fundamental "myths" of "self" and "other": fear and otherness emanate, on the one hand, from within the subject itself, generated, for example, by the overreaching search for knowledge and rationality (e.g. *Frankenstein* (1992 [1818])) and, on the other, from an external source which appropriates the subject as part of the other (e.g. *Dracula* (1897)). Thus, "In its broadest sense, fantastic literature has always been concerned with revealing and exploring the interrelations of the 'I' and the 'not-I', or self and other" (Jackson 1993 [1981]: 53). Nevertheless, conceptions of "undifferentiation, [the] unity of self and not self" (52) shift historically, producing the demise of the marvellous and the rise of the uncanny. In a religious era, therefore, otherness manifests itself as supernaturalism, or the metaphysical, teleological struggle between good and evil. Late-nineteenth-century secularisation and capitalism, however, internalised otherness as those fears emanating from the subject's newly problematic perception of a changed world; the subsequent depolarisation of good and evil renders metamorphoses and dual/multiple selves increasingly uncanny (Eigner 1966; Herdman 1990; Jackson 1993 [1981]). Indeed, both pre-Freudian (di)(poly)psychism and (post)Freudian psychoanalysis interpret the fantastic's metamorphosing, fragmented selves as representative of intrinsic human duality, opposition to cultural order, and open-endedness of being – hence, a reversal of the formation of body and ego according to both Enlightenment rationalism and psychoanalysis (Eigner 1966; Hendersnot 1993; Herdman 1990; Miyoshi 1969; Otto Rank 1971). From this perspective, the prevalent mirror motifs act as metaphors for the introduction of other selves (Armitt 1996; Jackson 1993 [1981]) and "fantasize a return to a state of undifferentiation to a condition preceding the mirror stage" (Jackson 1993 [1981]: 89) - multiplicity, motion, interconnection, détente - which corresponds also to Freud's theory of animistic thought and the entropic drive.

As a constitutive element of the fantastic, Gothicism's destabilisation of identity and the self/other dualism charts a similar trajectory from the marvellous to the uncanny. Indeed, in comparison to the eighteenth century's expulsion of otherness as supernatural evil, nineteenth-century Gothic internalised the other as subjective perception and psychic dis-ease, "the irruption of fantasies, suppressed wishes and

emotional and sexual conflicts" (Botting 1996: 11); hence this mode's ambivalence between natural and supernatural explanations. Drawing on Darwinian, scientific, technological, and physiological theory, which located the bestial/other within the human, otherness appeared in Gothic in the guise of madmen, scientists, psychopaths, criminals, and degenerates. This gives rise to the demise of the eighteenth-century sublime and the prevalence of Romantic motifs – mirrors, doubles, alter egos, fragmented selves – which destabilised the boundaries between psyche and reality, and depolarisation of good and evil (see Wilde's *Dorian Gray* (1891) and Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886)):

It is no longer a question simply of good and evil, of human nature divided between a higher or better self and a lower or instinctual self, but of an ambivalence that is more disturbing to the constitution and classification of human nature. The doubling [...] does not establish or fix the boundaries of good and evil, self and other, but discloses the ambivalence of identity and the instability of the social, moral and scientific codes that manufacture distinctions. (Botting 1996: 140-1)

As Delamotte argues, however, like the fantastic, such "Anxiet[ies] about boundaries [...] resolve themselves most fundamentally into a concern about the boundaries of the self" (1990: 14) manifest in Gothicism's prevalent vampirism, bondage, and transformations. Indeed, Delamotte's identification of four issues pertaining to Gothic's theme of the "me" and the "not me" – self-defence, knowledge, repetition, and transcendence – reconfigure Jackson and Todorov's analyses of the boundaries between self and other. Furthermore, her category of "transcendence", depicting the Romantic Gothic's portrayal of human vastness through omniscient, immortal heroes, finds its correlative, firstly, in Botting's examination of the eighteenth-century sublime's pursuit of transcendental selfhood and, secondly, Jackson's conclusion that "The [nineteenth-century] double signifies a desire to be reunited with a lost centre of personality and occurs as an obsessive motif throughout Romantic and Post-Romantic art" (1993 [1981]: 108). As this account reveals, historical Gothicism and the fantastic's depiction of the fragmentation of identity and the self/other dichotomy is marked by their indeterminacy and double-codedness (outlined above); excepting de Sade, most comprise an ambivalent celebration and terror of decentred subjectivity.

While this nostalgia for a lost unified selfhood equally pervades (Gothic/fantastic) postmodernism, as outlined below, an inverse tradition espoused by political/social (e.g. feminist) postmodernists celebrates decentred identity as a model for social change.

Postmodern and Gothic/fantastic postmodern fiction incorporates a similar dissolution of unified identity and boundaries between self and other: firstly, through performativity – textual and topological – whose “‘subject’ and ‘object’ do not occupy separate compartments but are part of a process of interchange” (Yarrow 1988: 22). Secondly, unified identity is challenged through corporeal dislocation, fragmentation, and absence - intermittent blank pages and semantic, character-less prose (Hélène Cixous *Neutre* (1998 [1972]; Olsen 1988; Hutcheon 1995; Lee 1990). Thirdly, the self/other dichotomy is eroded through metamorphosis and hybridity as theorised, in particular, by Bakhtin (1984a; 1984b) Haraway (1990 [1985]) and Russo (1994). Indeed, the fusional, ambivalent characters of the Bakhtinian carnival-grotesque comprise identities-in-the-making whose shifting corporeal boundaries are inseparable from the other. Thus, in contradistinction to the classical body's completion, closed contours, and individuality - its correlative sovereignty and mind/body dualism - the carnival-grotesque constitutes a heterogeneous collection of the former's abjected identities whose "bodily element is deeply positive [...] [and] presented not in private, egotistic form, severed from other spheres of life, but as something universal" (Bakhtin 1984b: 19). Bakhtin's emphasis on the grotesque body's principle of excess and growth, manifest in copulation, pregnancy, revelry, and death, similarly reveals "The unfinished and open body (dying, bringing forth and being born) [...] blended with the world, with animals, with objects. It is cosmic, it represents the entire material bodily world in all its elements" (1984b [1965]: 26-7). Hence, the paradigm of the “double body” whose simultaneous birth and death represent the two poles of becoming. Thus, the Bakhtinian model of identity contravenes not only Enlightenment sovereignty but also Freudian ego formation: "In Freud, self is suppressed in the service of the social; in Bakhtin, self is precisely a function of the social. In Freud, the more of the other, the less of the self; in Bakhtin, the more of the other, the more of the self" (Clark and Holquist in Russo 1994: 34). As a model for social, political change, Bakhtin's carnival-grotesque is mirrored by Haraway's feminist (postmodern) cyberpunk writing whose interstitial locales and



cyborg identities enable “the interpenetration of boundaries between problematic selves and unexpected others” (Haraway in Wolmark 1993: 2). Hence, Armitt’s comparison of grotesque identities with the cyborg’s anti-dichotomous, anti-Oedipal, “illegitimate fusions” (1990 [1985]: 218) of self and other: human/animal, human/machine, man/woman; alien/other. Firstly, the “double-body” finds its correlative in the cyborg’s integration of opposing qualities and its cosmic connections with the cyborg’s science-fictionality; however, most importantly, both comprise a synthesis of subject and object. Nevertheless, Armitt’s contention that such similarities are counteracted by the cyborg’s impenetrable surface, which like the classical body forecloses interaction, constitutes a reductive reading of the latter’s multilayered iconology; for, the cyborg constitutes not only the literal product of late-capitalist militarism, but also a representation of animal-human-machine identity in postmodernity and the mytho-political personae of cyberpunk writing.

Like the fantastic and Gothicism, however, postmodernisms and fantastic/Gothic postmodernisms evince different positions vis-à-vis the fragmentation of identity and the self/other boundary. Hence, on one level, Botting (1996), Punter (1996a; 1996b), and Alexander (1990) examine (Gothic/fantastic) postmodernism’s fear of “The loss of human identity and the alienation of self from both itself and the social bearings in which a sense of reality is secured” (Botting 1996: 157), manifest in the prevalence of psychoanalysts, psycho- and sociopaths, and serial killers. Encapsulated generally by aesthetic/neo-Marxist postmodernisms (e.g. Jameson)<sup>1</sup>, this pessimism derives from a disbelief in the ability of postmodern decentred selfhood to politically challenge current hierarchies and subjectivities. On another level, however, postcolonial and feminist postmodernists (see chapter 1) postulate such pessimism as “an insistent and excessive but familiar enough Romantic desire to rediscover a transcendent truth, an essence of Being” (Waugh 1996a [1989]: 327), which, furthermore, produces woman/ethnic as “other” in order to retain rationality and autonomy as the quintessence of masculine identity. Indeed, as demonstrated by the fictions of Hélène Cixous and Monique Wittig, Bakhtin (1884a; 1984b), Deleuze and Guattari (1995), and Haraway’s (1990 [1985]) postmodern celebration of fluid identity and self-other boundaries - especially that brought about by libidinal desire - endeavours “to

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<sup>1</sup> Exceptions to this generalisation are found in Marxist poststructuralists and postmodernists (e.g. Louis Althusser, Zygmunt Bauman, Steven Seidman, Chantal Mouffe).

consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world" (Bakhtin 1984b: 34).

Drawing on postmodern performativity, including Butlerian identity performance and the text's formal and topological performance, decentred subjectivity manifests itself in non-realisms' depthless, theatrical characters, which in comparison to classicism/realism's psychologically-rounded, essentialist, cognitive self, reveal identity in process and construction. Thus, firstly, the early fantastic and Gothicism's continual problematisation of the real and its representation, self-reflexivity, and generic mixing demonstrates the construction of identity through narrativisation; secondly, characters exist merely as representatives of neuroses, taboos and social values; thirdly, indeterminacy and double-codedness, inciting mystery and terror, eschew psychological depth for two-dimensionality. As Howells comments, "The ambivalent attitude of Gothic writers inevitably affected the way they presented emotion. [...] [T]hey tend to concentrate on external details of emotional display while leaving readers to deduce for themselves complex inner psychological movements" (1995: 15). This reaches its paradigm, however, in Gothic's stock characters - persecuted heroines and treacherous villains - which emphasise the formation of identity through repeat performance and the subject's interpellation by discursive roles. Hence, Gothic's recourse to theatre performance - Shakespearean tragedy, melodrama, and commedia dell'arte - witnessed in the topoi of performance, the burlesque treatment of characters' ignorance, doubling and mistaken identities, and surface affectivity. Thus, mood and emotion are depicted through highly stereotyped appearances, gestures, and facial characteristics, which exceed behaviourism and physiology's postulation of the relation between physical and emotional responses.

The above constitutes the basis of Smith's comparison of historical Gothic and postmodern identities, for "In both we confront the embattled, deconstructed self, without sureties of religion and social place, or any coherent psychology of the kind observable in both the Enlightenment or modernist traditions" (1996: 7). Indeed, (Gothic/fantastic) postmodern fictions self-consciously foreground the performativity of identity through textual play - literary games, metafiction, generic mixing, and the manipulation of historical, "transworld," authorial, fantastic figures; their emphasis on

textuality and text-as-process produces a correlative notion of identity, as in Carter and Wittig. As Yarrow comments: "if text is never stable but always in production, the 'self' that produces it is likewise always being reworked. Plurality of text can arise only on the basis of a model of self that is relativistic and also dynamic" (1988: 22). Hence, the conceptualisation of identity "as flame or energy: being as yet without shape [...] being as performative, not fixed, as continual coming-into-creation" (Yarrow 1988: 23). On another level, (Gothic/fantastic) postmodern fiction's performative identity is manifest in its play on theatrical performance: hence, the self-conscious manipulation of roles and awareness of audience reception (Carter *Circus*), ironic display of doubling, disguises and mistaken identities (Carter *Doctor Hoffman*, *New Eve*, *Wise Children*), and the prevalent topoi of performance - theatrical enactments and theatre-based settings (Carter *Magic Toyshop*, *Doctor Hoffman*, *Wise Children*) - revealing also the construction of the character and, hence, subjectivity, in ideology.

[C]haracters [...] have moments of hesitation wherein they distance themselves from their previous performances in order to evaluate and examine them. These moments also implicate the reader [...] the reader is also asked to evaluate how he or she perceives the idea of character (subject) formation. (Lee 1990: 82) ·

In this sense, subjectivity defines itself "in/as the tensions between [...] the characters' various performances" (Lee 1990: 84) - or, between the characters' performances and the roles cast them by society. Nevertheless, this portrayal of identity is theorised by a diverse range of performative philosophies: Butlerian, poststructuralist approaches (Bacchilega 1997; Russo 1994); (meta)theatrical models based on Beckett, Handke, and Weiss, on the one hand, and Commedia and Carnival on the other (Bacchilega 1997; Lee 1990; Smith 1996; Yarrow 1988); Bakhtinian performance and spectacle (1984a; 1884b); and, Russo's subversive, female-grotesque, "aerial" performances - stunting, flying, and acrobatics (1994). As above, non-realist positions in relation to depthlessness and performativity are divided, on a general level, between neo-Marxist postmodern pessimism and political and/or fantastic/Gothic postmodern optimism (Bakhtin 1984a; 1984b; Russo 1994; Yarrow 1988). The latter accord the self "not merely the curse of or capacity for plurality, but also the power of transformation of

its own contours" (1988: 22). It is this model of identity that is espoused below by feminist postmodern manifestations of the fantastic, Gothic, grotesque, and SF.

## ii. Feminist Postmodern Revisions

The ability of non-realisms to challenge cultural norms has led, firstly, to their historical and current employment by marginalised groups in pursuit of social change and, secondly, to their increasing ethicisation and politicisation at the end of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the recent poststructuralist/postmodern division of non-realisms into "open" and "closed" forms (outlined above) reveals a fundamental difference in both their method of critique and the politics of their feminist adherents. Firstly, the fantastic, Gothic, grotesque, and postmodernism comprise open modes, which challenge literary and cultural conventions not only thematically but also through their heteroglot, writerly, rhizomatic, and transgressive form (see respectively Bakhtin; Barthes; Deleuze and Guattari; Foucault). Hence their espousal by feminist postmodern writers and critics who subscribe to (conventional) postmodernism's plurality of meaning, reality, and identity while rejecting its prevalent patriarchal ideology. Secondly, conventional myth, fairy tale, SF, and utopia constitute "closed" genres, whose concealed artifice and completed alternative worlds produce a monoglot narratological and ideological stance. These are generally espoused, therefore, by liberal and modernist feminist writers interested in exploiting non-realism's subversive alternative realities, as well as challenging their conventional patriarchal ideology, while retaining the "closed" form's single narrative, political voice and concomitant espousal of unified selfhood and feminist identity politics. Nevertheless, the distinction between "open" and "closed" non-realisms is eroded by the current postmodernisation of myth, fairy tale, SF, and utopia, and vice versa, which reframes the latter's topographical motifs within the former's ontological poetics; hence, the open utopias, SFs, fairy tales and myths of feminist postmodern writing and theory - Armitt's "grotesque utopias" (1999), Bacchilega's performative fairy tales (1997), and Haraway's "cyborg writing" (1990 [1985]).

At a thematic level, feminist postmodernism's rewriting of non-realist modes pursues its interest in the destabilisation of sexed, gendered, and sexual identities (see above); hence, its critique of both historical (patriarchal) non-realist writing, modernist

feminist rewritings, and conventional (patriarchal) postmodernisms. Firstly, despite their transgression of sexed and gendered identity, historical non-realisms ultimately reinforce Enlightenment (patriarchal) depictions of sex and gender – female/passive/nature; male/active/culture. Secondly, notwithstanding their subversion of a masculine genre, modernist feminist rewritings are imbricated in the tension between essentialism and deconstruction (see above): the radical deconstruction of gender, on the one hand, and the subscription to binary role reversal, essentialist sex depictions, and sovereign selfhood on the other. Thirdly, the inscription of “other” space as feminine in conventional postmodern writing and criticism perpetuates the Enlightenment opposition between masculine selfhood and feminine other. In contradistinction, feminist postmodern non-realist writing emphasises the cultural construction of both sex and gender and eschews reversal, autonomy, and essentialism in favour of plurality. Finally, the fantastic and Gothic’s inherent imbrication in sexuality – as a metaphorical substitution for sexual acts and an opposition to death – renders it an ideal form for feminisms’ vested interest in sexuality. Indeed despite the historical fantastic/Gothic’s ultimate reinforcement of sexual stereotypes, its characteristic depiction of transgressive or taboo sexual identities, desires, and acts threatens to overthrow sexual norms. Although modernist feminism’s appropriation of Gothicism readdresses conventional sexual roles, its primary examination of feminine sexuality subscribes to biological essentialism and attempts to reverse - and hence perpetuates - Enlightenment dualisms. In comparison, feminist postmodern Gothicism/fantastic’s open-endedness reveals the construction, performativity, and plurality of sexual identity and desire. On another level, while early (male) SF/utopia neglected to experiment with sexuality, following, firstly, the deluge of 1970s feminist rewritings and, secondly, the impact of high-tech postmodernism, SF/utopia has become a contemporary forum for the reconfiguration of sexual roles. Nevertheless, modernist feminist SF/utopia – both in the 1970s and the present – typically portrays a Marcusian, communitarian-anarchist, liberation of sexual repression in favour of non-monogamy and sexual permissiveness, including essentialist feminine sexuality, homosexuality, and an association between women and nature. In comparison, feminist postmodernism’s Foucauldian-Butlerian rejection of an essentialist, repressed sexuality draws, instead, on SF and postmodernism’s advanced bio-medical technology, as well as its alternative ontological realities, in

order to present a plurality of sexual identities and desires freed from the constraints of biological birth.

### Anti-realist subversion

Feminist postmodernism's rewriting of non-realist genres derives, therefore, not from avant-garde, aesthetic, and poststructuralist postmodernisms' politically neutral inscription of generic eclecticism, breakdown of high/low culture, and loss of selfhood in the age of postmodernity, but from ethical/social postmodernisms/poststructuralisms and fantastic/Gothic postmodernisms' adherence to "open" writing as social revolution and celebration of heterogeneity. Thus, for Jackson, the fantastic's dissolution of normative classical/realist literary conventions comprises cultural disintegration: "undoing those unifying structures and significations upon which social order depends, fantasy functions to subvert and undermine cultural stability" (1993 [1981]: 70). Hence, the attraction for feminist writers, for "It is surely no coincidence that so many writers and theorists of fantasy as a countercultural form are women – Julia Kristeva, Irène Bessière, Hélène Cixous, Angela Carter. Non-realist narrative forms are increasingly important in feminist writing" (1993 [1981]: 186). Although Jackson makes no distinction between feminisms or historical periods, this list, which comprises exclusively of poststructuralist/postmodern writers and critics, consolidates this group's particular interest in a feminist (postmodern) fantastic. Furthermore, Jackson emphasises structural as well as thematic subversion: whereas the latter tends to neutralise its transgressive impulse, de Sade's structurally "'open', dissatisfied, endlessly desiring" (1993 [1981]: 9) fantastic works provide a model of unassimilable subversion.

Similarly, Armitt's postmodern approach to the fantastic identifies its cross-generic propensity to "open [...] subversive spaces within the mainstream" (1996: 3), occasioned by its "loose ends [...] narrative difficulties and its wilful paradoxes" (1996: 30), which like the Foucauldian definition of transgression play along both thematic *and* structural limits. As outlined above, however, Armitt criticises Jackson's failure to differentiate between fantasy and the fantastic: while the former comprises monological, neo-conservative genres, whose "formulaic constructs [...] fulfil our expectant desires" (1996: 35), the fantastic is "a disruptive and open-ended form" (1996: 35). Nevertheless, like Jackson, Armitt examines the relation between

feminism and the fantastic, for "This endlessly open and thus non-containable text must [...] pose a dangerous threat to established notions of fixity and conformity, a characteristic that obviously makes the fantastic a particularly appealing form for the exploration of socio-political marginality and ex-centricity" (1996: 33). Indeed, in opposition to previous, reductive structuralist and/or Freudian readings, Armitt theorises a new model for the (feminist) postmodern fantastic based on Haraway and Bakhtin, which "sets up a series of competing discourses or free-playing counter-structures that threaten to disrupt the very narrative they comprise" (1996: 81-2). Like D'Haen's (feminist) fantastic/Gothic postmodernism, Armitt's feminist postmodern fantastic eschews the political neutrality of self-referential or pessimistic postmodernisms.

Indeed, while aesthetic postmodernism criticises postmodernism for failing to raise class issues and poststructuralist postmodernism celebrates postmodernism for decentring "man", as D'Haen argues, they coalesce in a political neutrality which reinscribes Western, patriarchal hegemony. In contradistinction, by reintroducing the unreal - a defamiliarisation of the dominant cultural and literary practice (the above postmodernisms) - as well as the socially marginalised - women, ethnics, deviants - fantastic/Gothic postmodernism constitutes a mode of subversion inclusive of both postmodern feminism and postcolonialism. Hence, (feminist) Gothic/fantastic postmodernism's parodic rewriting of traditional fantastic/Gothic and the relocation of its *topoi* within postmodernism's broader ontological structure.

Whereas the latter postmodernism expresses the reality of contemporary corporate society both as desired by the system and as perceived by those productively involved with it from a Western point of view - roughly speaking that much maligned cliché: Western white heterosexual male - the fantastic postmodernism expresses the fears of this society for, and the pressures exerted upon it by, those it has traditionally excluded from participation or has made subservient to the interest of making its "central" character into its present shape. (1995: 292)

D'Haen's analysis, therefore, equally serves to illustrate the subversive structure of feminist postmodern Gothicism. At first, despite the subversive inception of a female

Gothicism (Delamotte 1990; Fleenor 1983; Marinovich 1994; Moers 1977), its historical tendency to reinscribe narrative closure risked neutralising its transgression (Jackson 1993 [1981]; Punter 1996a). However, as demonstrated by the subsequent chapters on Carter and Winterson, feminist postmodern Gothic/fantastic's ironic redeployment of generic mixing, intertextuality, and burlesquerie comprise open-ended, subversive strategies (Becker 1996; D'Haen 1995; Hutcheon 1989).

On another level, the fantastic's subversiveness is frequently linked to its roots in the carnivalesque. Indeed, for Bakhtin (1984a; 1984b), the comic grotesque is paradigmatic of the heteroglot novel, whose fusion of heteroglossic cultural elements, genres, and competing discourses parody authoritative forms of dominant language and monological literatures. The novel's dialogical form is mirrored thematically by the unfinished, grotesque body, whose collation of culturally abjected identities creates a subversive body politic. Despite the prevalent patriarchal ideology of Bakhtinian theory (discussed below), its subversiveness is appropriated by feminist postmodernism (Armitt 1996; 1999; Michael 1994; Russo 1994). Hence, Russo's feminist postmodern theorisation of "aerialism," based on the connection between the grotesque and the spectacularised, high-flying bodies that symbolised modernity's progress and liberation. Aerialism is simultaneously both historical and imaginary: on one level, it represents late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century modernity's pursuit of technological progress associated with aeronautic spectacle; on another level, it produces freedom from the norm as represented in limitless flight. Furthermore, it is intrinsically imbricated, firstly, in risk whose contravention of the (bodily) norm produces the possibility of subversion and, secondly, in types of "stunting" whose risky, liminal activities comprise "grotesque performances." "Stunting," however, encompasses a dual meaning: firstly, active female stunt pilots, aerial entertainers, and balloonists and, secondly, passive, dwarfed women of circus sideshows. While aerialism is rooted in liberal feminism's metaphorical pursuit of transcendence from (female) bodily entrapment, as subsequent discussion demonstrates, the ambivalence, riskiness, and flight surrounding female performance provides a model for feminist postmodernism, in particular its destabilisation of sex and gender. Finally, at the level of form and structure, the feminist carnival grotesque subscribes to a range of "textual travesty, 'mimetic rivalry,' semiotic delinquency, parody [...] masquerade, seduction, counter-seduction, tightrope walking, and verbal aerialisms of all kinds" (Russo 1994:



65). Hence, the thematic and textual aerialism of Carter, Winterson, and Wittig's novels, including, on one level, a range of female performers - aerial stunts, feminine excess, and polymorphous winged creatures - and, on another level, linguistic and formal "flightiness."

As the above demonstrates, the formal subversiveness of feminist postmodern non-realisms is rooted in their fundamental redeployment of, firstly, fantastic, Gothic, and the carnivalesque's own open-endedness and, secondly, postmodernism's "open," ontological narrative strategies – irony, parody, and metafiction. Hence, Hutcheon's examination of postmodern fiction "from the point of view of its politicized challenges to the conventions of representation" (1991 [1989]: 17). As postmodernism's central technique, parody – "ironic quotation," "pastiche," and "intertextuality" – operates to disclose the politics of representation. Nevertheless, like D'Haen, Hutcheon differentiates between neo-conservative, pessimistic neo-Marxist, and poststructuralist postmodernism's politically neutral parody, on the one hand, and critical (e.g. feminist) postmodernism's political redeployment of parody on the other, similarly exemplified by the writing of Angela Carter:

The prevailing interpretation is that postmodernism offers a value-free, decorative, de-historicized quotation of past forms and that this is a most apt mode for a culture like our own that is oversaturated with images. Instead, I [...] argue that postmodernist parody is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations. [...] Irony makes these intertextual references into something more than simply academic play or some infinite regress into textuality: what is called to our attention is the entire representational process [...] and the impossibility of finding any totalizing model to resolve the resulting postmodern contradictions. (1991 [1989]: 94-5)

Furthermore, rejecting modernist parody's "resolving urge [...] toward closure or at least distance" (Hutcheon 1991 [1989]: 99), postmodern irony's double-codedness, production of contradiction, and division, which contests humanist unities, constitutes not only a fundamentally subversive technique, but a quintessential representation of women's status in society (Hutcheon in Becker 1996). Hutcheon's work provides the

basis for subsequent theorisations of the subversive appropriation of postmodern techniques by feminist postmodernism, which focus on parody and metafiction (Becker 1996; Boehm 1995; Michael 1994; Neumeier 1996). Indeed, as Boehm argues, in comparison to metafiction's conventional employment by politically neutral (male) postmodernism, "[it] is a powerful tool of feminist critique, for to draw attention to the conventionality of the codes that govern human behaviour, is to reveal how such codes have been constructed and how they can therefore be changed" (Greene in Boehm 1995: 35).

On another level, feminist postmodernism's investment in structurally open-ended narrative strategies for their subversive potential is further illustrated by its rewriting of conventionally "closed" modes – fairy tale, myth, SF, and utopia. Indeed, both structuralist (Jackson 1993 [1981]; Todorov 1973 [1970]), postmodern (Armitt 1996; 1999; Bacchilega 1997), and socio-political approaches (Zipes 1986; 1992 [1979]; 1993) agree in their interpretation of fairy tale as a narratologically, structurally, and ideologically stable form, which aims to "conceal its 'work' systematically - to naturalise its artifice, to make everything so clear that it works magic [...]. [To] disguise its artifice and its social project" (Bacchilega 1997: 8-9). However, while Jackson relegates fairy tale to "the marvellous" - or formulaic narrative consolation - Zipes' endeavour to reactivate its subversive impulse by rediscovering its socio-historical roots and "breaking the magic spell" provides the basis for feminist rewritings. From Zipes' Marxist perspective, this subversiveness derives from fairy tales' origin in pre-capitalist, socially-rooted, oral folktales, which, firstly, expressed the common people's utopian hopes and, secondly, espoused an open-ended form on account of their performance, communality, (generational and individual) re-creation, and audience participation. Transposed into written fairy stories, however, the tales became, on one level, closed, fixed, and ideologically stable and, on another level, the instrumentalised vehicles of the ruling ideology - seventeenth- and eighteenth-century aristocracy, nineteenth-century early capitalism, and the twentieth-century capitalist culture industry. Nevertheless, both the Romantics and feminism's anti-authoritarian redeployment of the tales demonstrate that "To the extent that the folk and fairy tales of old as well as the new ones form alternative configurations in a critical and imaginative reflection of the dominant social norms and ideas, they contain an

emancipatory potential which can never be completely controled" (Zipes 1992 [1979]: 18).

From a (feminist) postmodern perspective, however, Zipes' phonocentrism blinds him to the subversive, open-ended *written* form of postmodern fairy tales, which explains his unacknowledged propensity to focus on modernist feminist rewritings. Furthermore, like Barthes' *Mythologies* (1970; 1973a), Zipes fails to acknowledge the inherence of even pre/anti-capitalist communities in ideology, including "established hierarchies, systems of authority, or common assumptions" (Bacchilega 1997: 7). Nevertheless, both provide the basis for feminist postmodern rewritings, whose fundamental demythologisation, multiple versions, performance - as (re)citation of the norm - parody, metafiction, and reinscription of historical folklore seeks to "expose the fairy tale's complicity with 'exhausted' forms and ideologies of traditional Western narrative, rewriting the tale of magic in order to question and re-create the rules of narrative production" (Bacchilega 1997: 23). Indeed, Bacchilega examines postmodern feminism's anti-mythic, revised magic, which, firstly, "reactivate[s] the wonder tale's 'magic' [...] by providing new readings of it, thereby generating unexploited or forgotten possibilities from its repetition" and, secondly, "constitute[s] an ideological test for previous interpretations" (1997: 22). Hence, the feminist postmodern fairy stories of Angela Carter as well as the fairy-tale elements in Winterson and Wittig's works.

Notwithstanding feminist consensus concerning the subversiveness of SF, *sf*,<sup>2</sup> and utopia - and, indeed, the utopianism of feminism itself (Armitt 1999; Bartkowski 1991; Mellon 1982) - these modes are similarly distinguished in current criticism on the basis of their "closed" or "open" form, which, as above, corresponds generally to early and contemporary manifestations - or modernist closure and postmodern fluidity (Armitt 1999; Hollinger 1990; 1992; Roberts 1990). Hence a "doubleness in feminist science fiction [...] not only in individual texts [but] also in the body of texts [...] an opposition between 'ancients' and 'moderns' [...] between approaches to literature - and criticism - that are more or less conventionally humanist and realist, and those that are more or less committed to exploring less orthodox formal and ideological

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<sup>2</sup> Science Fiction; speculative fiction.

positions" (Hollinger 1990: 230). Indeed, modernist feminism - both liberal, 1970s, and contemporary - has a vested interest in the structural stability of "closed" SF, *sf*, and utopia for its projection of a unified political vision and selfhood. In contradistinction, postmodern feminism aligns itself with "open" SF, *sf*, and utopia on account of its inscription of structural open-endedness and multiperspectivity, for "however progressive in ideological terms [closed SFs] always remain at least partially compromised by the generic enclosures which give them their voice" (Armitt 1996: 29). Nevertheless, postmodern feminism's open form is anticipated, in one sense, by modernist feminism's 1970s propensity towards dys/utopian fusion - hence its categorisation as "unstable" (Bartkowski 1991; Bouchard 1992; Levitas 1990), as in the works of Christiane Rochefort (1966; 1972). Furthermore, feminist postmodernism's theorisation of SF, *sf*, and utopia - embodied by Haraway's "cyborg writing" and Armitt's "grotesque utopias" - challenges Bloch's previously prevailing relegation of "abstract," compensatory utopia in favour of "concrete" utopia's foundation in a realistically realisable world (Bloch in Levitas 1990; Bloch in Mellon 1982). Indeed, it also challenges pessimistic and self-referential postmodernism's charge that in the age of postmodernity SF is no longer capable of providing a critical re-vision of society (see Wolmark (1993) on Baudrillard and Jameson).

Thus, firstly, Haraway's cyborg writing invokes the subversiveness of structural fusion, monstrosity, rewriting(s), demythologisation, and imperfect communication (1990 [1985]). Secondly, Armitt's grotesque utopias - utopianism combined with Russo's feminist postmodern carnival-grotesque - reject structural closure for "a 'riskier' dynamic [which] positively invite[s] disruption rather than closing off dissenting voices [...] which likewise eschews squeaky-clean lines and accommodates more thoroughly that which 'revolts'" (1999: 186). Notwithstanding their open-ended postmodern-grotesque form - or Russoesque textual "aerialism" - such texts, exemplified by Winterson and Wittig's utopias, similarly manifest a range of thematic aerialists. As Armitt concludes, "Aerialism, then, proves central to contemporary explorations of women's utopia, centred as they are upon the need to resist being tied down" (1999: 191).

## Sex and Gender

Feminist rewritings employ the defamiliarising strategies of non-realist modes, in particular their production of alternative realities – fantastic realms, Gothic locales, and science-fictional high-technologies – to explore their vested, albeit politically divergent, interest in the reconfiguration of sexed and gendered roles and identities. Indeed, while historical non-realisms reinforce Enlightenment notions of sex and gender, their traditional association with either radical tabooed, highly formulaic, quintessentially feminine, or exclusively male gendered/sexed positions further renders them apt modes for feminist appropriation. Thus, the historical fantastic's principal "thematic uncertainties" – invisibility, transformation, dualism, and good versus evil – manifest in recurrent motifs (ghosts, vampires, doubles, reflections, monsters, enclosures) and transgressive impulses (incest, necrophilia, androgyny, cannibalism, abnormal psychological states), are "concerned with erasing rigid demarcations of gender and genre. Gender differences of male and female are subverted and generic distinctions between animal, vegetable and mineral are blurred in fantasy's attempt to 'turn over' 'normal' perceptions and undermine 'realistic' ways of seeing" (Jackson 1993: 49). On another level, according to psychoanalytic approaches (e.g. Jackson), the (historical) fantastic's fusion of sexed and gendered identities derives from its drive towards undifferentiation located in both the imaginary and entropy; hence, their transgressive dissolution of social, cultural order. De Sade's works are paradigmatic of this subversive, entropic drive, for "by indicating the bisexuality of desire (refusing distinctions between male and female gender), Sade questions the sexed identity of the subject, anticipating explorations of sexual difference through thematic clusters in the fantastic, such as metamorphosis, vampirism, androgyny" (Jackson 1993: 75). Nevertheless, in the historical fantastic this "play upon a *natural* fear of formlessness" aims to "reinforce an *apparently* 'natural' order of life [...] which identifies the 'norm' as a middle-class, monogamous and male-dominated culture" (122).

In comparison, feminism's appropriation of the fantastic aims to "reconceive gender relations in so-called 'other' cultural spaces" (Armitt 1996: 2) and investigate their formation through narrative, and hence ideological, structures. However, while Kristeva's revalorisation of the stranger, or (estranged) m/other, as feminist fantastic paradigm risks reinscribing the gendered/sexed dichotomies of the Freudian uncanny

maternal body, feminist postmodern fantastic's Deleuzian plurality/fusion of sexed and gendered identities explodes binary categorisations. Hence, the multi-sexed, poly-gendered personae in Carter, Winterson, Cixous, and Wittig's novels, which manifest themselves both thematically and linguistically, in particular through the French novelists' fusion of masculine and feminine pronouns, nouns, and verb endings. Indeed, as Landon argues, if the fantastic is defined as the contravention of narrative expectations/perspectives, then it is specifically the "recasting[...] of sex roles" (1986: 62) and subsequent reversal of "essentially patriarchal literary formulas" (73) which gives rise to the fantastic element in (feminist) postmodern fantastic novels.

Generically linked to the literary fantastic, the feminist postmodern carnival-grotesque similarly aims to subvert and redeploy the traditional (patriarchal) grotesque's multivalent constructions of the female grotesque for its destabilisation of sexed/gendered identity. Indeed, as Russo argues, if the semiotic grotesque represents "a deviation from the norm," "the expression 'female grotesque' threatens to become a tautology, since the female is always defined against the male norm" (Russo 1994: 11-2). Thus, following its historical discovery during fifteenth-century excavations, the grotesque's etymological origins in the grotto-esque, or inner space - and hence, the low, earthly, material, visceral - occasioned its association with the "cavernous female body," maternal body, and earth mother. Despite their valorisation of archaic tropes, the grotesque as inner space is inextricably linked with abjected bodily, *feminine*, waste and "loaded with all of the connotations of fear and loathing around the biological processes of reproduction and of aging" (Russo 1994: 63). Indeed, Bakhtin's paradigmatic inscription of conception, pregnancy, birth, and infamously "senile pregnant hags" (1984b: 29) as quintessentially grotesque - particularly in relation to his theorisation of the material body and the double-body - perpetuates the woman/nature dichotomy and renders abject feminine bodily product(ion). Nevertheless, surface models of the grotesque as the superficial and the marginal, which recall poststructuralism's construction of the feminine as surface, detail, and the particular, equally inscribe the feminine as quintessentially grotesque albeit in this case peculiar and monstrous. Similarly, postmodernism's linguistic, psychoanalytical, semiotic, and advanced (bio)technological disaggregation and dispersal of interior space across surface fields and networks, which evokes the grotesque female cyborg

and feminine artificiality – “surface glitter,” “display,” “ephemerality” - often comprise “another opportunity to scapegoat the feminine” and return to “the truths of a more virile and substantial mode of the political” (Russo 1994: 27-8). Furthermore, Freudian psychoanalytical models of the grotesque, featuring apparitions, dismemberments, prostheses, hybrids, and uncanny doubles, posit the ungrounded female hysteric's intrinsic grotesquerie in opposition to masculine reason. Finally, while the above theorise the grotesque as semiotic performance, the historical/cultural grotesque similarly manifests dominant, patriarchal notions of sex and gender: firstly, women were raped during carnival activities; secondly, the carnivalised Lady Skimmington's “wifely aggression” embodies “the despised aspects of ‘strong’ femininity” (Russo 1994: 59).

This prevalent association between the feminine and the grotesque has given rise to its subversive redeployment by feminists seeking to subvert both the traditional grotesque and the dominant order's notions of sex and gender. Hence, for Cixous and Clément, female sexuality and the maternal body, whose grotesquerie derives from their open-endedness, act to disrupt the masculine economy. Similarly, comparing the historical carnivalesque with hysterical crisis, they theorise hysteria - and in particular the grotesque's hysterical woman - as an expression of contestation. From a feminist postmodern perspective, however, their essentialist equation of the feminine with the biological female body fails to acknowledge the construction of both sex, gender, and the body; thus, as Russo argues, both the maternal body - manifest in Russo's subversive theorisation of “twin mothers” - and hysteria are recuperable only on the condition that they represent the feminine as image rather than its physiology. Indeed, Russo's feminist postmodern redeployment of female spectacle - including “stunting” and “aerialism” (introduced above) - associated with the contravention of constructed feminine bodily norms, operates to exaggerate, mimic and, hence, deconstruct the dominant order's feminine bodily production. Hence, feminist postmodern theory and fiction's prevalence of erring, risky female performers “marked by specifications of age, body shape, class, ethnicity, and sexuality” (Russo 1994: 13). Indeed, subverting the conventional Bakhtinian association of the grotesque with the “low” - the grottoesque and, hence, the womb - “The emphasis on aeriality [...] is meant to introduce a principle of turbulence into the configuration of the female grotesque” (1994: 29) which produces a subversive, heterogeneous body politic. Furthermore, constituting

Butlerian "repeat performances" aerialism reveals the production of femininity - and hence the possibility of its subversion. Similarly, its redeployment of Balint's "philobatics" - thrill-seeking, amateur acrobatics linked to genitility and liminality - produces a powerful ambivalence and androgyny, which challenges essentialist definitions of woman. Finally, comprising a "space of risk and abjection" for both men and women, the feminist postmodern grotesque's prevailing emphasis on "the flexibility and force of juxtaposition - the communal repetitions and differences" (Russo 1994: 13) draws on the paradigms of "Siamese twins," "uncanny connections," the "freak body," and "female spectacle" (16) for its provisional, conflictual, heterogeneous, queer body politic/coalition (see Chapter 1), or "radical model of sociality which exceeds the Bakhtinian grotesque, making connections between and within genders" (15-6).

Like the fantastic, traditional male Gothic simultaneously transgresses and reinforces Enlightenment notions of sex and gender. According to Punter, therefore, Gothic's transgression of taboo involves "first and foremost [...] the question of the relations between the sexes" (1994b: 184). Male writers in particular experienced a freedom vis-à-vis sex and gender on account of their aristocratic backgrounds and male gender, "display[ing] in their works and their lives a tangential relation to socialised masculine norms" (Punter 1994b: 191). Furthermore, Gothicism granted heroines a freedom which temporarily removed them, and their readers, from the domestic realm (Botting 1996). Nevertheless, its preoccupation with Oedipal structures - an initially displaced nuclear family resolved by marriage - creates new non-Oedipal kinship relations and returns the heroine to the domestic sphere. Hence, the reinforcement of the domestic ideology produced by the eighteenth-century's displacement of open Gothic architecture with the eighteenth-century bourgeois home's demarcation between inside/female;outside/male, on the one hand, and work space/male;living space/female on the other (Weissberg 1996). Norms are further reinforced through the archetypal heroine, who fails to arrive at any self-awareness from her experiences and "embod[ies] all the fashionable feminine fantasies and neuroses" as well as the "idealised image of beauty" (Howells 1995 [1978]: 11, 9). Finally, despite the prevailing predominance of a female Gothic (Howells 1995; Jackson 1993; Punter 1994a; 1994b), Gothicism has witnessed a "masculinization of the canon - both in terms of a tendency to see the 'high' form of Gothic as written by men and of a



tendency to see Gothic in its fullest development as centering on a male rather than a female protagonist" (Delamotte 1990: 12).

Coined by Moers (1977), the historical and contemporary female Gothic derives from two models: firstly, Radcliffe's traditional *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), revolving around the female perspective of a persecuted, courageous heroine, becomes the prototype of the "popular" Gothic Romance; secondly, Shelley's reconfiguration of Gothic in *Frankenstein* (1818), a "birth myth" rooted in the writer's own female experience, provides a model for "serious" Gothic rewritings. Thus, firstly, like the conventional Gothic above, the traditional female Gothic's contestation of the symbolic order through its female specificity and geographical freedom ultimately reaffirms conventional sexed/gendered roles. Nevertheless, "ambivalence remains, not only in the way that the home seems to conceal horrifying secrets but in the possibility that escape, especially for readers, into imagined worlds and events may be more pleasurable than the return to domesticity" (Botting 1996: 70). For Delamotte, this central concern with boundaries (of the self) reflects women's vulnerability to invasion and separation from their history, selfhood, and the "outside" economic/political sphere. This position is generally espoused by modernist feminist criticism, which focuses primarily on women's perceived lack of autonomy. However, Gothic's enclosed spatial imagery - locked rooms, houses, castles - is suggestive not only of the female experience of isolation and oppression within patriarchal society but also of fearful female physiology and the maternal body (Fleenor 1983; Marinovich 1994; Moers 1977). Whereas both male and female Gothic manifests this fear of female identity, sexuality, and maternity, it is internalised in the latter as a pervasive self-disgust (Fleenor 1983; Marinovich 1994; Moers 1977). Indeed, according to 1970s Chodorovian feminist criticism, the female Gothic's primary impulse is perceived to derive from its exploration of the heroine's relationship with the mother, who is often projected as her double and/or future self (Becker 1996; Fleenor 1983; Marinovich 1994). On another level, whereas in male Gothic the male figure decides over good and evil, female Gothic internalises this dichotomy in the guise of self-division or paired, female characters - chaste heroine/immoral other woman. Nevertheless, like the former, it maintains the opposition between aggressive, intelligent, and derisive males and heroines who "merely stand (passively) for love, goodness, redemption, and innocence" (Russ 1995

[1970]: 106). Finally, 1980s feminist Lacanian poststructuralists see the female Gothic as a manifestation of the feminine unconscious, the semiotic, imaginary, pre-Oedipal m/other, and hence a correlative of the feminine and the transgressive in the guise of the female hysteric.

From a feminist postmodern perspective, however, these various readings dehistoricize the female Gothic and reinstate the conventional binary opposition between men/reason/mind and women/irrationality/body (Ballaster 1996; Becker 1996; Marinovich 1994). In contradistinction, feminist postmodern Gothic criticism and fiction - conventionally associated with Atwood, Carter, Galloway, and Lessing - employ Gothicism in order to "challenge the limits of Gothic form and especially the myths of the feminine shaping that form" (Becker 1996: 72). Hence, their parodic rewriting of traditional Gothic - in particular its happy ending and/or marriage - and metafictional display of its conventional machinery in a process of demythologisation, which seeks to uncover the transformation of women into symbols (Becker 1996; Neumeier 1996). This is also achieved through the prevalence of, firstly, clockwork women representing ideal femaleness and, secondly, Gothic doubles/multiples who embody the disjunction between women's real lives and their cultural transformation into feminine myths. Thus, in its endeavour "to produce an image of woman as blank, impossible of inscription" (Punter 1994b: 192), feminist postmodern Gothic embraces instead "mobile, dynamic, female subjectivit[ies]" (Becker 1996: 78), which reject the modernist construction of new female role models and, in opposition to the original Gothic, succeed precisely through their transgression of conventional feminine innocence and morality (see below on Carter). Finally, therefore, Massé's three prerequisites for the subversion of Gothicism's construction of female masochism correspond to the feminist postmodern characteristics outlined above: "aggression against the dominator that stops domination; self-conscious subversion that mimes cultural expectations of femininity to achieve the protagonist's freedom; and a utopian alterity [...] that refuses to accept the binary options of subordinated/oppressed and laughs heartily at the very idea" (1992: 240). In comparison, conventional female Gothic's narrative dependency on the heroine's internalisation of active drives and subsequent inner suffering constructs and normalises male/female sadomasochistic relations; hence, its generic repetition re-

enacts and comprises a response to the cultural trauma of feminine construction in patriarchal society.

As the above demonstrates, feminist postmodern non-realisms' destabilisation of sex and gender derives, firstly, from non-realism's own subversive potential and, secondly, from the redeployment of postmodern narrative strategies in a parodic, metafictional re-reading of traditional modes (including conventional postmodernisms) and their constructions/representations of the feminine. This is encapsulated by Hutcheon's further comments on postmodern irony: "This art paradoxically inscribes the conventions of feminine representation, provokes our conditioned response and then subverts that response, making us aware of how it was induced in us" (1989: 154). Indeed, feminist postmodern fiction and criticism seeks to deconstruct the continued prevalence of patriarchal grand-narratives - hierarchical binary sexed/gendered identity - in (conventional) postmodern fiction and theory. From this perspective, postmodernism's privileging of the feminine as sacred non-linear space beyond rationalising modernity comprises the latest in a historical line of (patriarchal) philosophies, which have used femininity to signify otherness and to embody the opposite of masculine abstract intellect. Thus, its privileging of the feminine as otherness constitutes an attempt to recontain and control discourses threatening to patriarchal hegemony; hence "a fear specifically of the loss of the legitimacy of Western *patriarchal* grand narratives: a new form of fear of women" (Waugh 1996a: 332) as "all that cannot be rationally controlled and [...] threaten[s] dissolution and non-identity" (338). According to Waugh, "The 'emotionality' thus projected onto the feminine or onto women in order to retain rationality and autonomy as the core of masculine identity produces both images of woman as the 'other' of romantic desire and woman who, thus beyond control, threatens annihilation or incorporation" (1996a: 334). Furthermore, while this affiliation of the feminine grants postmodernism the status of heterogeneity, as Robinson (1991) argues, it recontains the feminine in the masculine as the universal point of view. Carter, Winterson, Cixous, and Wittig's feminist postmodern fiction, as we shall see, displaces hierarchical sexed/gendered binaries through its parodic deconstruction of feminine myths and inscription of plurality and fluidity.

In contradistinction to the conventional fantastic, Gothic, and postmodernism's transgressive, albeit ultimately conservative, depiction of sex and gender, traditional fairy tale, science fiction, and utopia unambiguously reinforce conventional norms. Indeed, in opposition to Bloch's utopian definition, feminist critiques indicate fairy tale's "bias [...] against females who must [...] have their identity defined by males" (Zipes 1992 [1979]: 136). Hence, on the one hand, the naturalisation of hierarchical, sexed/gendered binaries – passive, obedient, beautiful women and authoritarian, active, aggressive men (Rowe 1986; Zipes 1986; 1993) – and, on the other, women's limited roles as mother, witch, princess (Armitt 1996; Warner 1994). Furthermore, the traditional fairy tale's imbrication in, firstly, Oedipal structures, which present the princess as a lack whose absence can only be assuaged through the prince, marriage, and children and, secondly, consolatory romance structures "make female subordination seem [...] romantically desirable" (Rowe 1986: 209) and prophesy that "marriage [as] an *enchantment*" (220). While feminist criticism and fairy-tale rewritings agree in their opposition to the above, their reconfigurations of sexed and gendered identity differ in accordance with their politics. Indeed, as outlined above, although Zipes (1986) neglects to acknowledge this distinction, his emphasis on the predilection of feminist rewritings towards the reclamation of feminine autonomy and self-definition, gender role reversal, a feminist tradition of matriarchal tales, and employment of natural feminine magic against oppression are characteristics of modernist and radical feminist fairy tales. In contradistinction, Bacchilega's feminist postmodern approach illustrates, firstly, the traditional "fairy tale's narrative construction of magic as 'natural,' with an emphasis on the gendered implications for women" (1997: 6) and, secondly, feminist postmodern fairy tales' deconstruction of women's naturalised magic. Hence, Carter, Winterson, and Wittig's feminist postmodern fairy tales' multiple, parodic versions simultaneously aim to demythologise and re-enact – in the Butlerian sense – the original tales' narrative construction of gender, in particular the association of women with nature and concealed artifice.

Early (male) SF similarly reinforces sexed and gendered norms through the absence of female characters, the preoccupation with male adventurers, depiction of crumbling matriarchies, and resolution of sex/gender role reversal narratives through the reinstatement of male power (Lefanu 1988). Feminist criticism and rewritings,

however, draw on its defamiliarisation of reality in order to reconfigure gender in paraspacial realms: "It is a space in which subjectivity and experience, gender and identity, can be re-imagined in opposition to, and in recognition of, the dominant gendered discourses" (Wolmark 1993: 23). Nevertheless, as Hollinger's account of the "doubleness" in contemporary SF demonstrates, this reinscription of sex and gender is contingent on individual feminist politics; hence, on the one hand, "the construction of strong models/representations of women as the subjects of coherent narratives (i.e., humanist feminism)" and, on the other, "deconstruction [...] especially of gendered subjectivity, through its representation as linguistic/cultural/ideological construction, frequently within a framework of non-linear and self-referential narrative (i.e., postmodernist feminism)" (1990: 231). Indeed, while the former reflects a typically (1960s, 1970s, and contemporary) modernist feminist deconstruction of gender and reclamation of female sovereign selfhood, which has recourse to role reversal and privileging of the feminine, postmodern feminist SF displaces essentialist, binary gender with "possibilities for more plural and heterogeneous social relations" (Wolmark 1990: 2). Hence, Carter and Wittig's feminist postmodern SF inscribes aliens and cyborgs, which "Explore [...] possibilities for alternative and non-hierarchical definitions of gender and identity" (Wolmark 1990: 2);<sup>3</sup> secondly, reject conventional postmodernism's association of "paraspaces" with the feminine, which perpetuates Western binaries (Haraway 1990; Waugh 1996a; Wolmark 1990); and, thirdly, "problematize[...] language acquisition and the gendered and hierarchical structures embedded in language" (Roberts 1990: 138).

Utopia follows a similar trajectory commencing with its (ancient and modern) classification as a male tradition prior to the upsurge of 1970s (modernist/radical) feminist rewritings and in spite of the marginalised existence of early liberal feminist utopias and high-profile, albeit socially ostracised, female Owenites and Saint-Simonians. Indeed, as Levitas' (1990) historically wide-ranging study demonstrates, male utopianism – both fictional and political – generally neglected or rejected the inclusion of female characters, women's roles and issues, and the utopian nature of feminism itself. Notwithstanding their reversal of this neglect, feminisms have

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of those (rare) critics who question the critical potential of Haraway's cyborg see Armitt (1996).

employed utopianism's positive, futuristic projections for their divergent reconfigurations of sex and gender. Thus, as above, feminist postmodernist utopia distinguishes itself from modernist (second-wave and radical) feminism's typically 1970s investment in communitarian anarchism (Bouchard 1992; Lefanu 1988): including communal societies, decentralised governing body, lack of demarcation between public/private, ecological concerns, anti-violence, communal child-rearing, rejection of the Oedipal/nuclear family, non-monogamy and sexual polymorphousness following the liberation of sexuality from ownership and reproduction (Clark 1978). From a feminist postmodern perspective, their conventional all-female separatism and depiction of male-society as technological, self-destructive, authoritarian, violent, and ecologically corrupt aims to valorise, and hence perpetuates, woman's traditional essentialist association with nature and nurture (Hekman 1990; Mellon 1982). Similarly, feminist postmodernism's pluralisation of sex and gender has radicalised previous feminist utopian criticism based on Bloch's "concrete" and "abstract" utopia (outlined above): whereas biologically androgynous utopias have been categorised as unfeasible/abstract and two-sex utopias as feasible/concrete (Mellon 1982), in postmodern feminist utopia it is androgyny which is realisable – e.g. the cyborg – and binary sexed/gendered identities which are obsolete. Indeed, Winterson and Wittig's feminist postmodern grotesque utopias manifest a plurality of dynamic sexes and genders whose Russoesque "aerial" characteristics simultaneously deconstruct the normalisation of essentialist femininity and perform its Bulterian subversive repetition.

### Sexuality

Finally, and in a clearly related way, feminist rewritings draw on the defamiliarising techniques of non-realisms for their exploration and politically divergent reconfiguration of sexuality - sexual identities, desires, and practices. Although historical non-realisms reinforce Enlightenment notions of sexuality, their conventional association with transgressive, repressed, or highly formulaic, exclusively male sexuality increases their attraction for feminist appropriation. Indeed, the traditional fantastic's central exploration of the relationship between self and other focuses in particular on sexual relations: hence, Todorov's theorisation of the group of the "Not-I" (outlined above), based on problems generated by unconscious desire (1973), and Jackson's psychoanalytic examination of the fantastic's

- and the nineteenth-century Freudian uncanny's – “expression” (to show and to expel) of transgressive, repressed, tabooed desires/sexuality both focus on sadism, sodomy, incest, necrophilia, and eroticism and their exploration in themes of vampirism, the undead, metamorphosis, and androgyny. As Palumbo summarises, therefore, “Its treatment of sexuality - whether sublimated, overt, or even pornographic - is a distinctive characteristic of fantastic literature” (1986b: 3). For Palumbo, however, this arises from sexuality's symbolic “easing” of humanity's fear of death, which occasions the ancient, nineteenth-century, and modern fantastic's depiction of sex/sexuality as iconic of life, renewal, resurrection, death's antidote, and a preferred choice to immortality. Furthermore, “Often fantasy itself is associated with or symbolically replaces sexuality [...] a circumstance alone that demonstrates the close identification between the erotic and the fantastic” (4). Nevertheless, the traditional fantastic “reinforces [...] sexual prejudices” (Jackson 1993: 121) and includes among its socially marginalised figures the sexually assertive female.

Feminist postmodern writers draw on the fantastic on account of this close association with sexuality and eroticism, which are central features of the novels of Carter, Winterson, Wittig, and Cixous; indeed, Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien* (1976 [1973]) in particular exploits the fantastic's symbolic replacement of sex/sexuality, for the fantastic elements invariably represent sexual acts. Furthermore, in this novel sex/sexuality appears indeed as death's antidote, resurrection, rebirth, and in preference of immortality manifest both in the Isis/Osiris motifs and the lovers' sexual deaths (see Chapter 4). As Winterson comments, therefore, “those morbid medievals and those burning Romantic poets weren't wrong. Sex and death belong together, joined in our imagination as they are in our DNA” (2000: 176). Similarly, the feminist postmodern fantastic exhibits the fantastic's conventional array of transgressive sexualities, which are typically associated with instances of metamorphosis and fantasy; hence, the prevalence of necrophilia (the sideshow *Sleeping Beauty*), incest (*River People*), homosexual rape (*Acrobats of desire*), rape by animals (*Centaurs*), and sadism (“House of Anonymity”) in Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1982 [1972]). Nevertheless, in contradistinction to the traditional fantastic, feminist postmodernism uses the fantastic to demythologise the narrative construction of sexuality and emphasise its multiplicity and dynamism particularly in relation to female desire. Thus, in one sense, the

traditional fantastic's link between metamorphosis and desire/sexuality prefigures Deleuze and Guattari's postmodern theorisation of desire between metamorphic, machinic parts (1994 [1972]) and Haraway's hybrid cyborgs (1990 [1985]) (discussed below). This is consolidated by the fantastic's roots in the *menippea* and the carnival grotesque, which, as Bakhtin illustrates, breaks sexual taboos and depicts copulation as quintessentially grotesque.

Indeed, postmodern feminist fiction's imbrication in sex/sexuality derives, on another level, from conventional postmodernism's own depiction of Deleuzian, free-floating desire. As Alexander comments, "What principally distinguishes [postmodern] fiction which foregrounds the sexual impulse is not its descriptive explicitness, but its willingness to allow the fulfillment of desire to be an end in itself, rather than part of a broader social process" (1990: 64). However, whereas conventional postmodern fiction risks reinscribing nevertheless patriarchal sexual norms, feminist postmodern fiction employs parody and metafiction in order to deconstruct the (male) literary production of female sexual identity and desire. Hence, the juxtaposition between Jeanne Duval's own narrative and the Baudelairean poetry about Duval's black female eroticism in Carter's "Black Venus" (1996 [1985]) and the puppet-maker's construction of the marionette Lady Purple into the quintessential symbol of female eroticism in "The Loves of Lady Purple" (1996 [1974]), whose return to life reveals the performative nature of sexual identity.

Like the fantastic, traditional Gothicism similarly focuses on transgressive - violent, tabooed, ambivalent - sexualities (Botting 1996; Howells 1995 [1978]; Punter 1994a; 1994b), which following the rise of the uncanny in the nineteenth century are seen to (re)emerge from archaic, repressed fantasies within human nature itself. As Punter argues, therefore:

[T]o the Gothic writers [love and sexuality] are the products and visible outcroppings of darker forces, and thus the Gothic writers persist in trying to come to grips with their alternative forms - incest, sexual violence, rape - and in questioning the absolute nature of sexual roles. [...] Gothic fiction is erotic at root: it knows that to channel sexual activity into the narrow



confines of conventionality is repressive and, in the end, highly dangerous, that it is a denial of Eros and that Eros so slighted returns in the form of threat and violence. (1994b: 191)

Gothic's transgressive sexualities, like those of the fantastic, are connected to the central theme self/other and its related thematic clusters of metamorphosis, vampirism, and incest (Delamotte 1990). Hence, the exploration of both homosexuality and independent femininity, or feminine sexuality, embodied for example in the figure of the vampire. While the male vampire encapsulates sexual violence, primitivity, ambivalence, indiscrimination, perversity, and polymorphousness, the female vampire embodies the dangers of independent femininity - primitive regression, cruelty, witchcraft, voluptuousness; hence, their antithesis of conventional norms (Botting 1996). Indeed, like the fantastic, the traditional Gothic ultimately reinforces conventional morality. Thus, its suffusion of topological features with sexuality - the veil motif, physical characteristics of the archetypal characters, unexplained feminine hysteria - vindicates conventional morality "while still exploiting the emotional appeal of what was regarded as immoral" (Howells 1995 [1978]: 13).

Similarly, the traditional female Gothic is fundamentally marked by its conservative albeit prurient attitude towards sexuality, which gives rise to its conventions of terror and anxiety (Howells 1995; Russ 1995). Thus, its archetypal characters or sexual stereotypes - persecuted, virginal heroine, immoral "other woman," and incestuous villain - reinforce conventional sexual mores. Hence, the Gothic heroine constitutes "the image of sublimated sexual fantasy" for the male characters (Howells 1995: 11), whose rejection of sexuality, endless flights from incestuous villains, and "obsessive fear of sex" reveals "the close connection between masochistic fantasy and repressed sexuality" (12). In contradistinction, the heroine's double, or opposite - the glamorous, openly sexual "other woman" - is designated immoral as demonstrated by *Jane Eyre's* Bertha Mason (1847) - the prototype of the Gothic sexual woman. Similarly, the female Gothic's spatial imagery manifests the heroine's locked sexual self and fear and disgust vis-à-vis female sexuality, which despite its female specificity reinforces conventional Enlightenment (patriarchal) views of femininity. As Fleenor summarises, therefore, "The expression of female sexuality is shaped by

the encompassing patriarchal society and is defined in terms of vaginal sexuality, womb-like spaces, and procreation. Thus, the female Gothic is conservative not revolutionary, acting always in reaction, tension and dichotomy" (Fleenor 1983: 24) and, hence, "does not establish any new definitions of female sexuality" (15).

In contradistinction, feminist postmodern Gothicism's parodic, metafictional rewriting of traditional Gothic (above) reveals, and hence subverts, its narrative production of (feminine) sexual identity and desire. Indeed, the juxtaposition of horror and absurdity in Carter's "The Lady of the House of Love" (1996 [1979]) and "The Bloody Chamber" (1996 [1979]) reveals the Gothic machinery which structures sexual fantasies. Furthermore, Carter's novels and short stories, which often focus on awakening female sexuality, are populated by an array of heroines whose sexual assertiveness and mobile sexuality guarantees their survival (e.g. "The Company of Wolves" (1996 [1979]), *Heroes and Villains* (1981a [1969])). Indeed, "this postmodern sexual woman figure [...] poses a challenge to the attractions of the *femme fatale* without replacing them by a new sexual woman ideal" (Becker 1996: 75) and, hence, deconstructs traditional Gothic's fundamental good woman/evil woman dichotomy.

However, while the above modes (traditional postmodernism, fantastic, Gothicism) are conventionally associated with transgressive sexualities, traditional fairy tale, SF, and utopia characteristically enforce socio-historical sexual norms. Thus, for Armitt, fairy tales exhibit Freud's sexist narrative of sexual development based on the dynamic of lack and desire; the conventional wedding ending, therefore, "brings together, in a socially acceptable manner, sexual fulfillment (hence the phallic resolution of lack) with the forging of new non-Oedipal kinship relations" (1996: 24). Hence, critiques of Bettelheim's Freudian *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1991 [1977]), which transforms fairy tales into "symbolic parable[s] of self-realisation and healthy sexuality" (Zipes 1992 [1979]: 171). Indeed, Zipes uses his study of the historical permutations of "Little Red Riding Hood" in order to illustrate "that literary fairy tales were consciously cultivated and employed in seventeenth-century France to reinforce the regulation of sexuality in modern Europe" (1993: xi). Deriving from multifarious oral cognates – "The Story of Grandmother" – in which the girl escapes the wolf on her own wit (Delarue 1989;

Zipes 1993), the two most well-known versions, one implicitly eroticised and the other sanitised - Perrault's "Le Petit Chaperon Rouge" (1697) (Little Red Cap) and the Grimms' "Little Red Cap" (1812) - make the girl guilty of her own "violation" and hence "reinforce[...] the notion that 'women want to be raped'" (Zipes 1993: 11). Indeed, fairy tale's depiction of "the trauma of blossoming (female) sexuality", the dichotomy between chaste heroines and stepmothers/bad fairies, who "personify predatory feminine sexuality" and women's fear of "waning sexual attractiveness" (Rowe 1986: 212), and connection between "sexual awakening and surrender to the prince with social elevation and materialistic gain" (217) similarly reinforce sexual norms. In contradistinction, whereas modernist feminist rewritings challenge the above through their conventional revalorisation of essentialist feminine sexuality, which is linked furthermore to natural magic, feminist postmodern fairy tales both deconstruct the above production of sexual norms - including women/nature; men/culture - and inscribe a mobile, dynamic, fluid sexual identity, desire, and practice which transgresses human/animal boundaries (e.g. Carter's "The Company of Wolves", "The Tiger's Bride", "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" (1996 [1979])).

In comparison, both early SF's characteristic lack of experimentation around sexuality (Lefanu 1988) as well as conventional modern SF's increasing use of sexual "mechanomorphism" - the personification of machines as "sexual extensions of man" (Broege 1986: 104) - reinforce conventional sexual norms; indeed, the tendency of male robots towards rape is seen to offer vicarious fulfillment for young male science fiction readers (Broege 1986). However, despite this recent trend towards sexual experimentation, which draws on science and technology and figures the increasing disjunction between reproductive sex and sex for pleasure, conclusions about the results for humanity are divided, on a general level, between humanistic and postmodernist responses. Hence, on the one hand, Broege's warning that "humans should never come to view themselves as machines or to look to machines to provide the ultimate sexual experience lest they become alienated from their own humanity and come to live in a fantasy world of their own making. Just as it is necessary to be concerned with the Epimethean side of technology in other aspects of life, so too is vigilance necessary where love and sex are concerned, unless human essence is to be lost" (128). Feminist postmodern SF, in direct opposition, has recourse to robots, cyborgs, and aliens for its deconstruction and reconfiguration of sexuality and desire

(Lefanu 1988; Haraway 1990 [1985]; Wolmark 1993). Indeed, as a representation of humanity in high tech postmodernity, the human-cyborg has already erased integral human essence through its fusion of human/animal and human/machine; furthermore, as a mythic icon of cyberpunk writing, the cyborg's anti-Oedipality and post-gender status "subvert[s] the structure of [normative] desire" (Haraway 1990).

As above, the male utopian tradition's general perpetuation of sexual norms is challenged by feminist criticism and rewritings, which are divided between modernist and postmodernist positions. Thus, on the one hand, 1970s and contemporary modernist (separatist) utopias espouse a characteristically communitarian-anarchist approach to sexuality - sexual permissiveness, non-monogamy, non-exploitation, friendship - which seeks to realise women's sexual autonomy through a reversal of patriarchy's "privatisation" of love and sex (Bouchard 1992; Lefanu 1988). Examples would be Rochefort's *Une rose pour Morrison* (1966) and *Archaos, ou le jardin étincelant* (1972). Hence their recourse to Marcusean theory, which argues that the performance principle (the reality principle in advanced industrial societies) comprises the repression of sexuality (Eros) confining libidinal satisfaction to spare time and converting general to genital/reproductive sexuality. Notwithstanding Levitas' critique of Marcuse on the basis of his misunderstanding of women's role in low paid work (1990), for feminist postmodernism sexuality's social/linguistic/performative construction forecloses both its repression and its liberation, including modernist feminism's perpetuation of essentialist sexual identity (see Chapter 1). Indeed, the "desire machines" in Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1982 [1972]), powered by the sexual activities of row upon row of caged lovers, demonstrate that sexual liberation and sexual oppression are merely two sides of the same coin. Finally, in Winterson and Wittig's feminist postmodern grotesque utopias sexuality manifests a performativity, which subversively re-enacts its conventional construction and exceeds binary definitions.

This chapter has aimed to establish the close relation between postmodern narratology and, in particular, the literary fantastic and Gothic modes, focusing on the potential of open-ended, heterogeneous genres to challenge realism and a concomitant rationalist philosophy. Hence the alliance between feminist postmodernism and the postmodern fantastic, whose narrative strategies and motifs, such as the cyborg, the female

grotesque, aerialism, and a range of textual performance, enable feminist postmodernism's subversive practices of resignification. The resulting personae present examples of reconfigured subjectivities and postmodern agency. In addition, the chapter has demonstrated that in addressing issues of sexed, gendered, and sexual identity, the feminist postmodern fantastic redeploys the historical association between the fantastic and eroticism/sexuality and works both to exploit this connection and challenge its otherwise binary conventions. As a combination of postmodern feminism and the postmodern fantastic, the feminist postmodern fantastic constitutes a powerful mode of ideological critique. Indeed, in spite of their diverse positions within the wider field of feminist postmodernism, the subsequent four authors join in staging this critique. It is these writers that the thesis addresses below, focusing now on both their individual reformulation of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism and their various uses of the feminist postmodern fantastic.

### Chapter 3. Hélène Cixous: Feminist Postmodernism and *Écriture Féminine*

Cixous' project to found a woman's discourse is part of the long-standing and continuous tradition of the French avant-garde - both the literary avant-garde, existing since the nineteenth century, and the more contemporary philosophical avant-garde following the May 1968 uprising. Unlike British or U.S. critical approaches, which usually involve a questioning of the canon, the French tradition operates according to a "class"-based scheme that aligns art with the political left. Thus, beginning at the end of the nineteenth century and continuing across twentieth-century France, dadaists, surrealists, existentialists, and new novelists questioned what they referred to as existing "bourgeois" values. Similarly, the new subjects of the post-'68 avant-garde - anthropology, linguistics, (poststructuralist) philosophy and psychoanalysis - popularised a new wide-spread belief in the revolutionary potential of language, art, *écriture*, and love to overthrow the prevailing oppressive "bourgeois" order. The literary manifestations of these French avant-garde strands demonstrate a rejection of realism and representation as politically reactionary. Drawing on both Romanticism and poststructuralism, they advocate a non-realism that is politically and socially revolutionary through the disruption of unified character, linear time, and the inscription of the Imaginary and Bataillan excess. In this sense, as outlined in Chapter Two, the French avant-garde has played a crucial role in the theorisation of postmodern fantastic narratology as a subversive mode. As witnessed in Chapter One, at a philosophical level, the French poststructuralist avant-garde also represents one of the primary sources of postmodernism, providing a model for the deconstruction of binaries and the displacement of meaning and identity. While Cixous' *oeuvre* is a direct descendant of this tradition, she develops its literary and philosophical premises towards a concept of "feminine writing" which is simultaneously modernist and postmodern.

Indeed, as the subsequent discussion indicates, Cixous' critical and fictional work presents a systematic, Derridean challenge to gendered binaries, unified subjectivity, and the construction of the subject through socio-historical discourses. Notwithstanding Kristeva and Irigaray's projects, Cixous' unique position as a feminist counterpart to the *maître penseurs* of poststructuralism has generated a lot of

interest among feminist postmodernism (Jardine 1993; Hekman 1990; Suleiman 1994). However, while “French feminism” in general, and Cixous’ work in particular, has been indispensable for the emergence of postmodern feminism, theorising a mobile (sexual) subjectivity, its association of postmodern fluidity with the essential, primordial female body ultimately reinforces modernist, essentialist binaries. It is the purpose of the following discussion to examine the tension in Cixous’ reformulation of modernist and postmodern concepts and their overall relationship to feminism.

“French feminism”,<sup>1</sup> the group with whom Cixous is conventionally positioned, designates those theorists who align the revolutionary potential of French avant-garde philosophy and literary styles with a specific stream of feminism that emerged in France in the aftermath of the May 1968 uprising. Due to its growth out of the post 1960s intellectual ferment, with its emphasis on philosophy, anthropology, linguistics and psychoanalysis, French feminism – or the “Psychanalyse et Politique” movement – was radically different to both the existing materially-based *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (MLF)* in France as well as its English and American counterparts, which, at that time, were predominantly materialist.<sup>2</sup> As Sellers writes:

Anglo-American feminism, including its academic and critical branches, has, on the whole, evolved from a grass-roots women’s movement set up in the aftermath of the Civil Rights campaign in America, concerned to value women’s experience and to protest against the political, social and economic injustices women endure, whereas the French feminist writing referred to here is in the main a response to a philosophical tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> A distinction must be made here between French feminist thought and the “French feminism” referred to in this chapter: while the former is a general category and may include critics such as Simone de Beauvoir and Monique Plaza, who contest the French avant-garde aims, the latter is conventionally associated with an elitist group of poststructuralist but biologically-essentialist critics revolving around Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous.

<sup>2</sup> It is necessary to emphasise that the labels “French feminism” and “Anglo-American feminism” are based on historical generalisation. Thus, not all French feminists adhere to French feminism or vice versa: French critic Monique Plaza is critical of the French feminist insistence on ahistoricism, biology and psychoanalysis; French critic Christine Delphy criticises the French feminist failure to address the material conditions of women’s lives; 1970s France witnessed an increase in the number of material feminist groups and campaigns in France (Moi 1993, Sellers 1991). For a discussion of the opposition between the “Psychanalyse et Politique” movement and the *MLF* see Adkins and Leonard (1995). Similarly, at present, the US has witnessed an upsurge of interest in poststructuralist literary and theoretical issues, embodied in particular by Judith Butler’s seminal works.

(1991: xiii)

Drawing on French avant-garde philosophers and cultural interpreters, French feminists conclude that Western thought - society, government, history, law, religion, culture, and in particular language - is underpinned and encoded by a male-centred ideology that passes itself off as natural and inevitable. This masculinist ideology is embedded in Enlightenment and humanist dualisms, based on the hierarchical couple man/woman, and disposes power in favour of men. Thus, French feminism distinguishes itself from other feminisms on account of its rejection of Enlightenment dualisms, in particular the man/rational and woman/irrational dichotomy: both socialist/Marxist and liberal feminist (Anglo-American) attempts to admit women into the (rational) symbolic world of men, and radical (French) feminist attempts to privilege the feminine side of the equation, are perceived as erroneous on account of their perpetuation of these existing dichotomies. In this sense, as Hekman argues, "the work of contemporary French feminists, particularly that of Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva, have been important in formulating the postmodern feminist position" (1990: 42). Hence, the main distinction between Anglo-American and French feminism – while the former seek material, social transformation and equality within the existing system, the latter believe that equality can only be achieved through a deconstruction – and hence displacement – of the current masculinist hegemony. These pole-positionings determine approaches to other areas of concern: thus, while Anglo-American feminists aim for the inclusion of female voices and the institution of surface changes to the current language system (Cameron 1995; Spender 1995), French feminists argue that female/non-patriarchal expression, even equality, is impossible to achieve within a system which disposes its users to a patriarchal mode of thought (Sellers 1991). Similarly, these distinctions give rise to the differences between the Anglo-American and French feminist preferred literary style – or, the former's investment in realism and the latter's contribution to the feminist postmodern fantastic.

Anglo-American feminists share a Lukácsian belief in a "critical" bourgeois realism, which through its ability to provide a fuller insight into reality than its non-realist



counterpart, is perceived to be the ultimate weapon against oppression (Eagleton 1995; Moi 1988). In this view, realism provides a single unified political perspective from which to judge, an authentic and truthful account of the world, and positive role models of strong women. The avant-garde (poststructuralist) philosophy on which French feminism rests operates to deconstruct the humanist and inherently male tradition on which this realism is based. French feminism is clearly an attempt to achieve the type of writing advocated by avant-garde philosophers Derrida and Barthes, whose writings inform subsequent postmodern philosophy and narratology. As introduced in Chapter One, these critics begin from the premise that meaning/signification is not produced through the closure of the binary opposition, as early structuralists had believed, but is instead the effect of an endless process of present and absent signifiers that can never be pinpointed or arrested. Thus, Derrida argues for a mode of writing that will not impose (single) meaning but will consciously work to incorporate the possibilities for meanings generated by the signifying operation - puns, paradox, erasure marks, parentheses and silences, in which what is repressed or marginalised by the dominant ideology may be perceived. This is paralleled by Barthes' distinction between two types of writer, the *écrivain* and the *écrivain*: while the former uses language unequivocally and reflects the traditional critic's belief in intrinsic meaning, the latter explores the potential of language to generate multiple meanings. The *écrivain-écrivain* model is mirrored by the *lisible* (readable) and the *scriptible* (writable) text: the former demands that the reader passively consume the words on the page; the latter necessitates active participation on the part of the reader in the production of the text's meaning, largely on account of the gaps, silences and word plays. The *scriptible* texts are seen to offer the potential to free readers from fixed meaning, from a passive consumption of society's ideologies by setting against this the inscription of multiple difference. As Barthes writes:

In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing*), by refusing to assign a "secret", an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning

is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law.  
(Barthes in Rice and Waugh 1996: 122)

Heir to this tradition, French feminist fiction/theory embraces non-realism, and moves towards an examination of gaps and silences, to the deconstruction of the symbolising process itself, and to the inscription of disruption, plurality, and, above all - the “feminine”. While for the poststructuralist thinkers above, the feminine embodies postmodern fluidity, the French feminists redeploy this association as part of a feminist critique; hence, the term *écriture féminine*.

Starting from the premise that language implements men’s desire at women’s expense, theorists and writers alike argue that only by inscribing the feminine can we hope to transform the current order of patriarchal relations. In particular writing, through its capacity to defy established meaning, and because the written text can always be read an other way, is seen to offer the potential to generate alternate meanings. (Sellers 1991: 39)

At one level, feminine writing reveals itself an ally of feminist postmodernism and is illustrative of “the way in which the French feminists and Cixous in particular have developed a feminist critique of the masculine language of rationality that is consistent with the postmodern position” (Hekman 1990: 46). Hence it rejects dualism, essences, the inversion of hierarchies, and replaces masculine singularity with pluralism and fluidity by residing within the gaps and subverting them from within. As outlined in Chapter Two, however, the poststructuralist avant-garde thinkers’ employment of the feminine as a signifier for fluidity and disruption evinces a nostalgia for humanist certainties and perpetuates longstanding binary dualisms, linking woman to the counterpart of masculine rationality (Robinson 1991; Waugh 1996a).<sup>3</sup> By valorising this connection between transgressive fluidity and the feminine as a feminist strategy, which it conflates with the essentialist female body, as we shall see, French feminism reinscribes the very Enlightenment gender dichotomies

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<sup>3</sup> For an extended analysis of (male) poststructuralism’s use of the “feminine” as a signifier for

that it initially sought to displace. Hence the existence of a tension in Cixous' criticism and fiction between a postmodernist deconstructive programme, on the one hand, and a modernist adherence to the essentialist female body, on the other.

Like other French feminists, Cixous' primary impulse is towards the (postmodern) deconstruction of "dual, hierarchical oppositions", in particular the fundamental couple masculine/feminine, which ideologically pervades Western thought, constructs gendered subjectivities and roles, and "subjects the entire conceptual organisation to man" (Cixous 1980a: 91). Cixous holds a Baudrillardian view – albeit with an emphasis on gender – that "men and women are caught up in a network of millennial cultural determinations [...]: we can no more talk about 'woman' than about 'man' without getting caught up in an ideological theater where the multiplication of representations, images, reflections, myths, identifications constantly transforms, deforms [...] and in advance, renders all conceptualization null and void" (1980a: 96). Cixous maintains that the ideological shift and freeing of the Imaginary generated by the destabilisation of these poles will transform mentalities and initiate a greater equality than Anglo-American feminism's materialist protest against the existing system. For Cixous, the latter are imbricated in a perpetuation – rather than a displacement – of existing gender binaries, which seeks to "modify power relations or toss the ball over to the other camp" (1980b: 252-3). In comparison, poststructuralist deconstruction avoids a reversal of binary equations, effecting positive outcomes for women and men (Cixous 1980a). Cixous adheres here to an anti-essentialist stance, expounded in such comments as: "there is no such thing as 'destiny,' 'nature,' or essence, but living structures, caught up, sometimes frozen within historiocultural limits which intermingle with the historical scene to such a degree that it has long been impossible and it is still difficult to think or even to imagine something else" (1980a: 96; 1980b: 245). Thus, the terms "masculine" and "feminine" become labels, suggestive merely of the ways in which gender positions divide under patriarchy:

I am careful here to use the *qualifiers* of sexual difference, in order to avoid the confusion man/masculine, woman/feminine: for there are men who do

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disruption and fluidity see Jardine (1993).

not repress their femininity, women who more or less forcefully inscribe their masculinity. The difference is not, of course, distributed according to socially determined “sexes.” [...] We must guard against falling complacently or blindly into the essentialist ideological interpretation, as, for example, Freud and Jones, in different ways, ventured to do; in their quarrel over the subject of feminine sexuality, both of them, starting from opposite points of view, came to support the awesome thesis of a “natural,” anatomical determination of sexual difference-opposition. And from there on, both implicitly support phallocentrism’s position of power. (1980a: 93)

Thus, like postmodern feminism, this recognition that gender and subjectivity are socially and historically constructed involves a rejection of the androcentric autonomous subject common to Enlightenment and humanist thinking - and its attendant dichotomies man/woman; subject/object. French feminists agree with postmodern feminism’s opposition to materialist feminism’s endeavour to admit women to the realm of the subject, which, they argue, leaves the dichotomy intact. Drawing on poststructuralist philosophy and the *scriptible* text, Cixous’ *écriture féminine* constitutes one of the most radical reassessments and displacements of the subject.

Indeed, Cixous’ argument thus far consolidates the core concerns of feminist postmodernism. However, her belief that women are closer to the “feminine” than men, and that women’s writing is more disposed towards *écriture féminine*, is based partly on the above recognition of social construction and partly on an emerging biological essentialism. Firstly, in terms of social construction, Cixous argues that women are currently closer to a “feminine” than men due to the marginalisation of their history and sexuality by the present patriarchal scheme. Thus, mirroring Barthes, Foucault, and Irigaray’s interest in the power of marginalised voices, Cixous maintains that women’s writing in particular, especially the inscription of their sexuality, holds the potential to explode masculine thought and initiate change. Secondly, in terms of biology, women’s sex-specific experience of pregnancy and childbirth, which entails the acceptance of a split between self and other, provides the

model for a new approach to love and subjectivity. Whereas the masculine appropriates and erodes the difference of the other in its (Hegelian) attempt to position itself as master, the feminine creates a relation to the other in which self and other co-exist as different: “There is hidden and always ready in woman the source; the locus for the other” (1980b: 252). It is Cixous’ hope that this new way of relating to the other - a “feminine libidinal economy” as opposed to a “masculine libidinal economy” - will be adopted on a societal level. Cixous believes that masculine singularity can be broken apart by freeing the body drives that are part of the process of all speech and writing: the transformation of thoughts through nerves, chemicals, muscles, breathing, and pulse movements. In one sense, these body-drives that propel *écriture féminine* parallel Barthes’ description of *jouissance*: the body’s participation in the pleasure of writing combines with the pleasure the reader experiences in embracing the infinite possibilities of the signifying process to produce other meanings. However, again, it is the biological specificity of the female body that lends itself more readily to such rhythms and *jouissance*: “Listen to a woman speak at a public gathering [...]. She doesn’t ‘speak,’ she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it’s with her body that she supports the ‘logic’ of her speech. Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she’s thinking; she signifies it with her body” (1980b: 251). These arguments radically break with a feminist postmodern stance: the approach to the female body as a font of self-knowledge involves an appeal to an essentialist femininity; the discussion of *jouissance*, based on the sex-specific rhythms, cycles and experiences of the female body, almost aligns itself with Freud’s concept of a distinctly feminine ego.

The female body/sexuality is further privileged on account of its plurality (“her libido is cosmic” (1980b: 259)); its link to the pre-linguistic, pre-symbolic “forelanguage [...] of 1,000 tongues” (1980b: 260); and its incorporation of the continuing impact of the mother’s voice. It is here that Cixous’ biological essentialism finds its full expression and borders on the metaphysical. Woman’s voice is both her own and an emanation from the depths of her psyche, an echo of the primeval “song” and an incarnation of the voice and body of the mother of the pre-Oedipal baby located

within the closure of the Lacanian Imaginary. Woman's sex-specific tendency to experience the continuing impact of the mother's voice, including the latter's link to the pre-symbolic and pre-linguistic, grants her access to the Imaginary; men, on the other hand, tend to repress the link with the mother. Cixous privileges the Imaginary over the Symbolic because, in opposition to feminist postmodernism, she subscribes to its conceptualisation as a locus of identification and doubling, a state of fluidity prior to the Law. Thus, for Cixous, if the socialisation of the subject and its insertion into society takes place at the expense of controlling the Imaginary and the unconscious, then the Imaginary contains the infinite multiplicity of identifications that preclude a stable subject. While the socialised subject represses those aspects that society rejects, these continue to exist in the unconscious and continue to threaten the construction of the ego. Thus, for Cixous, the unconscious, and the relation that she conceives between the body and the unconscious, enables women to prevent their writing from reproducing the (patriarchal) ways in which they have been constructed to perceive/experience the world; it is the possible site of an inherent, pre-patriarchal femininity. To access and express the Imaginary, via the incarnation of the pre-Oedipal mother's voice, will explode social orders, undo censorships and repression, disrupt the institution of single truth, and avoid the (Hegelian) will to mastery. This writing of the Imaginary parallels the type of fragmented, fluid and multiple writing advocated by Derrida and Barthes and completes Cixous' own delineation of *écriture féminine*. This consists of a writing of the unconscious which presents a space freed from the Law; a writing that expresses the repressed of history and culture; a writing of the body, of new relations between self and other, and of multiple selfhood; and, finally, a writing whose language disrupts and extends the signifying process.

Commenting ironically on the uneasy alliance between Cixous' modernist and postmodernist leanings, Jardine writes, "For Cixous, women today would in fact seem to be, almost intrinsically, proto-postmodernists" (1993: 262). However, these tensions raise a number of serious problems and while most critics acknowledge a successful attempt on Cixous' behalf to inscribe a revolutionary writing based on (postmodern) deconstruction, they remain divided on the question of her underlying essentialism. Firstly, the biological essentialism risks reinscribing the

woman/irrational equation challenged by feminist postmodernism. Secondly, the link between women and the pre-linguistic appeals to the metaphysical. Thirdly, the privileging of the feminine, all too readily equated with women, runs the risk of merely inverting the very binaries that Cixous initially aimed to deconstruct (Conley 1991; Moi 1988). As outlined in Chapter One, Butler's Foucauldian feminist postmodernism challenges liberationist feminisms based on "the repressive hypothesis", including Cixous' search for a pre-patriarchal femininity: "'the before' of the law and 'the after' are discursively and performatively instituted modes of temporality that are invoked within the terms of a normative framework which asserts that subversion, destabilization, or displacement requires a sexuality that somehow escapes the hegemonic prohibitions on sex" (1990a: 29). In another sense, for Hekman (1990), the contradiction in Cixous' criticism and literary texts between essentialism and anti-essentialism, or modernism and postmodernism, embodies itself a displacement of an Enlightenment nature/nurture dichotomy. Nevertheless, while the above tensions remain unresolved, as witnessed below, Cixous' legacy to feminist postmodernism comprises one of the most thoroughgoing critiques of gender dichotomy and unified subjectivity. As Hekman summarises:

Their [Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva] attempt to formulate a new discourse about women, sexuality and the body is a crucial step towards the articulation of a sexual difference that is non-oppositional and non-hierarchical. Their attack on the dichotomous discourse of sexual difference is an effort to break the hold that this discourse has exerted over the lives and status of women. [...] The articulation of this new discourse has been strongly influenced by postmodern philosophy and exhibits many similarities to that approach. [...] Although these writers may appear at times to be appealing to biology, [...] they have more in common with Foucault than the position that biology is destiny. (1990: 150)

The above has demonstrated how avant-garde philosophy and writing – including Cixous' own contributions – have supported both feminist postmodernism and the

theorisation of a subversive anti-realist literature. At the same time, it has revealed the uneasiness of Cixous' attempt to reformulate aspects of modernism within a postmodern frame. The subsequent discussion pursues the above in a reading of Cixous' literary texts.

*Neutre* (1998 [1972]), a text rarely commented on by critics, perhaps on account of its conscious resistance to analysis, aims to inscribe, as its title suggests, a neutral or neuter economy in which rigid binary oppositions - masculine and feminine - are deconstructed. The novel is exemplary of Cixous' early phase of writing which focuses on the limitless, beginnings, the "feminine", irony, the experimental and a preoccupation with the self (Conley 1991; Sellers 1996; Suleiman 1994). The text is radically experimental in its lack of character and plot; instead, the narrative is determined by the signifying function itself and, at times, by the personification of the narrative and the philosophical/linguistic subject by the novel's characters. In this sense the text may be regarded as a meditation on or demonstration of the workings of both poststructuralist narrative and poststructuralist selfhood; indeed, the text is neither fiction nor criticism. Although *Neutre* may not appear at first glance to be overtly feminist, a postmodern feminist stance reveals itself in a number of ways: firstly, via the transposition of poststructuralist narrative into *écriture féminine*: a revolutionary language of surface play, intertextuality, flight and multiplicity that breaks the singularity of the masculine Symbolic; secondly, through the deconstruction and co-existence of a redefined masculine and feminine within a new neutral, a bisexual and fluid space linked to the Phoenix; and, thirdly, via corresponding notions of fluid, multiple and bisexual selfhood, including a multiple and bisexual narrating "I." At the same time, however, the emphasis on the "feminine" as a signifier for fluidity and disruption and its link to the essential female body returns the novel to Cixous' underlying essentialism. Similarly, while sexual fluidity or bisexuality is indicative of postmodern feminism, Cixous' depiction of bisexuality as the coalescence within one psyche of the masculine and the feminine recalls the Freudian and Lacanian heterosexualisation of sexuality through the postulation of masculine and feminine primary libidinal dispositions, as discussed in Chapter One.



*Le Livre de Promethea* (1983), by comparison, bears witness to a less experimental phase of writing, which nevertheless fulfills Cixous' pursuit of *écriture féminine*, and realises a postmodern feminism, in other ways, principally through reflections on the purpose and process of writing and via the character of Promethea. Firstly, the fragmentation of the writing subject (into I and H) creates a way of relating to and writing the other which allows for difference; also, the emphasis on the female status of this writing subject, or scriptor, creates a female critical subject within the textual model, which mirrors the feminist postmodern rejection of "conventional" postmodernism's politically neutral textuality. Secondly, the figure of Promethea exhibits the innocence, self-dispossession and generosity that constitutes Cixous' "other love," a new relation between self and other, deemed capable of producing societal revolution. In addition, Promethea's metamorphosing and mythical transformations inscribe fluidity, decode stereotypical representations of women, and produce a textual performance of liminal lesbian acts as well as an ambiguous relation between metaphor and reality, that parallels Sedgwick and Butler's postmodern queer theory. However, again, the novel's emphasis on the feminine as the quintessence of fluidity and disruption and its association with the persona and, above all, the physical *female* body of Promethea, underlines Cixous' essentialism.

Plutôt que de création, Il s'agit ensuite de page en aiguille d'un récit secret, creusant en profondeur, d'autant plus difficile à chasser que semé d'un grand nombre de métaphores mal jointes l'une à l'autre, et dès l'affichage ici-même, en ce . , livré au hasard de la Sémantique, et à ce hasard bâtard de la Lettre pour la Lettre, dans la mesure où la Lettre s'aime (sème), comme on l'a vue et entendue se plaire dès les premiers mots à certains effets narcissiques (ainsi ce n'est pas par hasard que *hasard* s'accompagne de *bâtard* et *tronc* de *donc*). Le but de ce récit – en tant que Récit du récit – est justement de rebrancher au hasard le plus grand nombre de parts possibles, ou d'en racheter, d'en faire des parties de son corps propre, de leur donner parfois figure humaine, rarement figure tropique, de tirer des richesses nouvelles et encore incalculée de ce mariage vertueux, - de faire de l'absurdité la preuve de sa vitalité, à la façon du travail du rêve,

étant posé que ce Récit est un sujet normal, même s'il est secret, qu'il garde  
la tête sur les épaules. (1998: 21)<sup>4</sup>

Taken from the opening of Cixous' *Neutre*, this extract works almost as a conscious introduction to the novel's style as well as itself illustrating some of the text's main characteristic features. Firstly, the Author or Creator, with its implications of mastery and control, has been superseded by "the modern scriptor", who, as Barthes comments, "is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now*" (1996: 144). Secondly, the text is fluid, connected irregularly by ill-fitting metaphors, its direction determined by semantic chance, linguistic pleasure, and the

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<sup>4</sup> One cannot overestimate problems of language translation as far as Cixous' novels are concerned, in particular the earlier works. Early novels, such as *Neutre*, operate according to semantic chance, alliteration, assonance, chance association between words, which are meaningless and lost in English translation. Later texts may be more conventionally structured, but still retain some innovative stylistic features. *Le Livre de Promethea*, for example, feminises all masculine nouns into feminine nouns which is also untranslatable into English. In addition, Cixous' concerns over the French subject pronoun "il" are not adequately translated by the English counterpart "he". For a detailed discussion of these problems see Sellers (1991; 1994).

There is currently no published translation of *Neutre*, probably due to the problems outlined above; a possible English version, therefore, will be provided by myself but will be unable to incorporate all the layered meanings of the French text. On account of its easy availability to English readers, B. Wing's (1991) translation of *Le Livre de Promethea* will be used for footnoted translations; however, this English version will be provided with commentaries or modified if thought necessary. As quotations from the French have been specially combined syntactically and grammatically with the main body of the chapter, in a way that the English translation has not, the footnote may provide full sentences from the English translation even where only half sentences are used in the chapter in French.

"Rather than creating, It is then the threading page by page of a secret narrative, burrowing deep, all the more difficult to catch that it is sown with a great number of metaphors poorly joined one with the other, and as soon as presented here, in this ., surrendered to the haphazard of the Semantic, and to the bastard haphazard of the Letter/literature for the Letter/literature, insofar as the Letter/literature loves itself (sememe), as we saw and heard, taking pleasure in itself from the first words onwards, and which has narcissistic effects (thus it is not haphazard if *haphazard* is accompanied by *bastard* and *fence* by *hence*). The aim of the narrative – being the narrative of the narrative – is precisely to rebranch haphazard to the greatest possible number of parts, or to buy them back, to make them parts of one's own body, to give them at times a human profile, seldom a tropical profile, to draw new riches from this as yet unquantified virtual/ous marriage, - to make of the absurd the proof of its own vitality, in the way that dreams are sown together, given that the Narrative is a normal subject, even if it is secret and that it may remain straight."

[In French it is the sound of "s'aime" and "sème," "hasard" and "bâtard," and "tronc" and "donc," that connects these words. This is lost in the English translation. The English translation "virtuous" also loses the full meaning of the French "virtueux" which is a combination of "vertueux" (virtuous) and "Vir" (Latin pre-fix for "man"). Whereas the French "il" could mean either "he" or "it," it is impossible to know which of these to use when translating the final sentences which involve the personification of the Narrative (it) into a character in its own text (he). The personification is

unconscious. Cixous plays on the suggestions produced by language itself aiming to reflect the way in which a poststructuralist narrative writes itself simultaneously with the birth of the scriptor. The connections made by these language suggestions are not based on logic but on aural resemblance, alliteration, assonance, neologism, word combination, dream, gaps and marks of erasure. Hence, the play above on the aural resemblance of *s'aime* (loves oneself) and *sème* (sows), *hasard* (chance/fate) which begets *bâtard* (bastard), and the combination of *vertueux* (virtuous) and the Latin prefix *Vir* (man) to produce *virtueux*. At times, the reader follows the narrative flow as dictated by the semantic language changes themselves, at other times the narrative is arrested and language and textual elements, inclusions and changes, are discussed metafictionally by a "Je" that clearly declares itself as scriptor as opposed to Author or narrator: "Si je suis un effet du texte..." (159).<sup>5</sup> "Je" reveals to the reader that his/her writing of the text is directed by the impulses of language itself and the unconscious (80-1); that the mother, for example, was included in order to "give the narrative time to flee" (99); and that Mozart appears due to the rhyme of this word with *Hasart* (Mozart and *hasard*, chance) and because of the "o" and the "a" in the name.

However, Cixous' paradigmatic metafictional feat, exemplified also in the above extract, is the personification of the narrative into a character in its own text: "Cependant le Récit [...] fuit encore, il ne se pose pas ou guère [...] primitif, brutal même dans son comportement, alors que son travail le montre très subtil, capable de détours et avancées les plus neufs et délicats, génial insaisissable mais saisissant" (22).<sup>6</sup> The personification is strengthened throughout the text by a continual recourse to bodily imagery linking the body of the text with the (female) body as well as the

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strengthened by a continual use in the French original of bodily imagery linking the body of the text with the (female) body as well as the body of the reader in an example of *scriptible jouissance*.]

<sup>5</sup> "If I am an effect of the text..."

<sup>6</sup> "However, the Narrative [...] is still on the run, it/he does not rest, or hardly [...] primitive, even brutal in its/his behaviour, whereas its/his work reveals it/him to be very subtle, capable of the most original, delicate – ingenious unfathomable/ungraspable gripping - detours and advances." [The English translation "ungraspable" and "gripping" intends to capture the play between "insaisissable" and "saisissant" which not only sound alike but stem from the same verb "saisir" (to seize/grasp).]

body of the reader in a move towards writerly *jouissance*. Furthermore, emphasising the contribution of the *scriptible* text towards the theorisation of transgressive non-realist literatures, “à ce moment-là le Récit vêtu à la mode fantastique, ressemble comme un frère à un conte d’Hoffmann, une de ces histoires de double, dans lesquelles les Sujets trop aventureux risquent de laisser leurs yeux” (163-4).<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the personification provides an analogy for the workings of poststructuralist narrative based on the movement/behaviour of this new “hero” and Hoffmannesque character. This latter example, with its intertextual reference to Hoffmann, highlights another means of inscribing multiplicity and *différance* in poststructuralist/postmodern texts.

The novel is, indeed, densely intertextual and provides, in the majority of cases, a referenced footnote of the source text; this has the effect of aligning fiction, scholarship, and theory, metafictionally draws attention to the novel’s own status as an artifact, and obliges the reader to make connections between source and target text – again, the reader becomes a co-producer in the text’s meaning. Following the “death of the Author” - the recognition of the author as an ideological construct belonging to a period believing in the sovereignty of the individual and the genius of the poet - the *writerly* text has become a weave of cultural quotations, a multiplicity of voices which defy (masculine) singularity and closure. Although the intertexts are wide-ranging, it is clear that the majority are drawn from those early avant-garde writers (Kleist, Hölderlin, Hoffmann) that Cixous admired as having contributed to non-realism’s anti-rational, transgressive impulse (Cixous and Clément 1996). Similarly, they reflect those authors, who share her interest in multiple subjectivity (Hogg, Hoffmann, Poe, Freud), or who provide analogues for the workings of poststructuralist narrative and selfhood (Freud, Dante, Shakespeare, Poe, Herodotus). At the same time, however, these consciously incorporated intertexts serve to indicate that the *scriptible* text does not completely “write itself”, introducing the possibility

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<sup>7</sup> “At this moment, dressed according to the Fantastic, the Narrative looks like a brother from one of Hoffmann’s tales, one of those stories about the double in which over-adventurous subjects risk losing their eyes.”

[The English translation has capitalised “Fantastic” to distinguish between the colloquial use of the word and the Fantastic as an art form, which is what the French text is referring to. ]

that its complexity ultimately activates in the reader “the desire for control” (Sellers 1996: 38). Principal intertextual themes are established by the four epigraphs, which precede the novel. Poe’s *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, commenting on the “âme double” and the possibility of “un Dupin créateur et un Dupin analyste”, is suggestive of Cixous’ interest in both the fragmented subject and the relation between creation and analysis. Saussure advances (post)structuralist notions of language; Herodotus introduces the Phoenix which comes to symbolise the co-existence of masculine and feminine within a new bisexual neutral; and Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* introduces the role of dreams and the unconscious in poststructuralist narratology. Due to the frequency of their appearance some texts are elevated to the status of quasi-motifs: thus, the ghost of Hamlet’s father, bearing its secret tale, becomes a metaphor for the eruption of the unconscious and acts as an invitation to the reader to listen to phantom sounds of the poststructuralist narrative:

parce que ceci est une histoire de «fantômes», par points de jonction entre cette histoire, l’ombre (ou l’âme, ou le double) de cette histoire, les histoires-fantômes que le texte projette, lorsqu’il hésite entre deux maîtres égaux, et les sons-fantômes que le lecteur à l’oreille tendue détectera sous le texte: écoute o.écoute! «le camarade dans la cave» s’il est maintenant à l’autre bout du monde il mène son affaire avec méthode et raison dans sa folie, il est où il est entendu... (36)<sup>8</sup>

In a similar manner, grasping the irreconcilable metaphors in the novel is likened to the quest in Poe’s *The Gold Bug* (21), while the non-realist aspect of poststructuralist narrative approximates Hoffmann’s *Der Sandman* (163).

The novel’s intertextual and fluid narrative is paralleled by a similar presentation of selfhood as multiple, fluid, and searching. Notions of selfhood in *Neutre* are

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<sup>8</sup> “this is a ‘phantom’ story on account of the links between this story, the shadow (or the soul, or the double) of this story, the phantom-stories that the text projects, when it wavers between two equal masters, and the phantom-sounds that the reader with pricked-ears will detect beneath the text: list o list! ‘the companion in the cellar’ if he is now at the other side of the world he carries out his affairs with method in his madness, he is where he is heard/understood...”

examined via the “je” and the personification of the philosophical/linguistic subject into a character in the novel. While the Subject “sent qu’il est le siège de plusieurs et [...] se craint” (48),<sup>9</sup> “ne sait plus qui être” (110),<sup>10</sup> and is subjected to chance and the whim of the narrator (118), the “je” haunts the novel with the question “Qui suis je?” (19, 20).<sup>11</sup> However, the multiplicity and fluidity of the “je” and the Subject contributes to one of the text’s principal themes, indeed, to the text’s self-expressed main aim (25, 31, 62): the creation of a new neutral or neuter – the text’s title – through a simultaneous displacement and yet co-existence of binary oppositions, in particular masculinity and femininity. As the subsequent discussion indicates, despite Cixous’ primarily deconstructionist programme and rejection of Freudian bisexuality, the text’s self-conscious endeavour to reunite opposites and represent them in a single object recalls the Freudian/Lacanian heterosexualisation of the subject through the theorisation of a primary homosexuality or “heterosexual” bisexuality, manifest in masculine and feminine libidinal dispositions (see Chapter One).

*Dieses Buch*, ce livre,  
et son ordonnance, par son système de consommation et reproduction, sa  
gloire, son hésitation sur le sexe, pas plus masculin que *die Sonne* ni  
féminin [...] est ne-uter [...].  
[...] Dieses Buch, se livre, excelle à réunir les contraires à les représenter  
en un seul objet,  
soit par magie, soit par science, soit par rêve ou Fiction... (31)<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, like other French avant-garde texts (Jardine 1993), Cixous renders subjectivity both fractured and mobile through linguistic innovation. Thus, the “je”

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<sup>9</sup> “senses that he/it is the locus of several [people] and [...] feels afraid.”

<sup>10</sup> “no longer knows who to be.”

<sup>11</sup> “Who am I?”; “who am I following?” [The French “suis” incorporates both “être” (to be) and “suivre” (to follow).]

<sup>12</sup> “Through its method of consumption and reproduction, its distinction, its hesitation over (the) sex, no more masculine than *the Sun*, nor feminine, *this book*, this book [...] is ne-uter. [...] This book, surrenders itself [to the reader/semantic chance], excels at gathering/reuniting opposites and portraying them in a single object, either by magic, through science, or through dream or Fiction.”

linguistically adopts all subject positions leaving the reader unable to discern whether the “je” is masculine, feminine, or plural. Hence “je serai saisie saisi saisis” (130),<sup>13</sup> and, “Je, mêlé(e) à mes larmes, menaçante(e), pourtant presque effacé(e)” (45).<sup>14</sup>

Cixous’ deployment of the “feminine” as a signifier for poststructuralist sexual/textual transgression also manifests itself again as it is via the “feminine” that this new neutral, and subsequent deconstruction of masculine and feminine poles, is created (62, 99, 171/2). However, in spite of the emphasis that the feminine is “neutral”, the novel’s recourse to “feminine” bodily imagery recalls Cixous’ essentialism outlined above. Thus, “Le féminin l’égare: sans doute est-il blessé, coupé, entaillé, mordu, piqué, égratigné, ou féminin; il perd du sang. On voit le sang monter aux lèvres et s’écouler. Cependant rien ne prouve que le texte est femme. Le Sang est neutre” (62).<sup>15</sup> The Subject is similarly described as manifesting this new neutral/neuter, firstly through descriptions of the Subject as homosexual and secondly via the combined identities of the Subject and the Phoenix (26, 34, 80, 172/3). While “lesbianism” is viewed by Cixous as an attempt to “counterfeit” men and adopt patriarchal power relations, “homosexuality” is praised as the co-existence within the self of both sexes, capable of erasing patriarchal singularity. The Phoenix, which appears throughout the novel and is expanded on in Cixous’ critical writings, is also capable of deconstructing patriarchy’s binaries although in this case via its bisexual

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[The French original plays on the visual, aural resemblance of “ce livre” (this book) and “se livrer”, which has the double meaning of “to give oneself up/over to” and “to indulge in”/“abandon oneself to”.]

<sup>13</sup> “I will be seized seized seized”/“I will be grasped grasped grasped”.

[This is a good example of the way in which the English translation loses elements that are crucial contributions to one of the text’s major themes. The endings “saisie”, “saisi”, “saisis” linguistically demonstrate a selfhood which is feminine, masculine and plural.]

<sup>14</sup> “I, mingled with my tears, threatening, nevertheless almost erased.”

[See footnote 13. The letter “e” in brackets in the French original indicates that the “I” is both masculine and feminine. Indeed, by adding “e(e)” to the neutral/masculine “menaçant”, this particular word is rendered doubly feminine.]

<sup>15</sup> “The feminine leads it astray: undoubtedly it is wounded, cut, gashed, bitten, stung, grazed, or feminine; it is losing blood. Blood rushes to the lips and seeps out. However, nothing proves that the text is woman. The Blood is neutral/neuter.”

[The French word “neutre” means both “neutral” and “neuter”; here neuter refers to a gender of nouns which do not specify the sex of their referents. As Cixous’ primary interest was the deconstruction of masculinity and femininity, it is possible that she had both of these meanings in mind, especially considering the play on multiple meanings in this text.]

flight (Cixous and Clément 1996). Thus, the Phoenix and homosexuality are similar in their accommodation of both sexes; both encapsulate Cixous' notion of the new neutral or neuter - a space which is not neuter(ed) or unsexed, or even really neutral, but in which both masculine and feminine co-exist, in sum, a bisexuality. Despite her protestation to the contrary, Cixous' conceptualisation and literary portrayal of lesbianism, homosexuality, and bisexuality are inextricably rooted in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. An examination of feminist postmodernism's thoroughgoing critique of the latter positions (Butler 1990a) is outlined in Chapter One.

In Cixous' own formulation, however, this "new" bisexuality is not composed of two halves or fear of castration, as Freud had argued, but is rather a space in which the other sexual component is not repressed (1980a; 19980b). Thus, bisexuality becomes a label given to a type of subjectivity which is not embroiled in phallogocentric representation, which incorporates subject positions of both sexes, and is open to multiplicity. As Cixous states: "Bisexuality: that is, each one's location in self (*répérage en soi*) of the presence - variously manifest and insistent according to each person, male or female - of both sexes, non-exclusion either of the difference or of one sex, and, from this 'self-permission,' multiplication of the effects of the inscription of desire, over all parts of my body and the other body" (1980b: 254). However, on account of their cultural position, it is women again who are more inclined, in Cixous' view, to bisexuality, while men are preoccupied with "phallic monosexuality" (1980b). The simultaneous presentation and theorisation of "neuter"/"neutral", the feminine, and bisexuality/homosexuality as *différance* and fluidity and the reconciliation of opposites within a new unity/whole reveals a tension in *Neutre* that is never entirely reconciled. On one level, the emphasis on textual/sexual mobility is compatible with the feminist postmodern endeavour to proliferate substantive sex, gender and sexual identity categories beyond the binary frame. On another level, however, her equation of such mobility with the feminine, in particular the female body, perpetuates gender dichotomies and essentialist notions of woman in a manner untenable within postmodern feminism. Furthermore, her recourse to Freudian and Lacanian concepts of lesbianism, homosexuality, and bisexuality inevitably mirrors



the latter's discursive production of the lesbian as unsuccessful psycho-sexual maturation, resulting from an inability to displace a primary, albeit heterosexual, bisexuality composed of masculine and feminine parts.

The above tension is reflected also in Cixous' theoretical writings and, above all, her theorisation of the *scriptible text* and "feminine writing". For Cixous, bisexuality is a prerequisite for *écriture féminine* as it predisposes the writer to the multiplicity and inscription of difference on which revolutionary poststructuralist writing is based:

There always have been those uncertain, poetic beings, who have not let themselves be reduced to the state of coded mannequins by the relentless repression of the homosexual component. Men or women, complex, mobile, open beings. Admitting the component of the other sex makes them at once much richer, plural, strong, and to the extent of this mobility, very fragile. We invent only on this condition: thinkers, artists, creators of new values, "philosophers" of the mad Nietzschean sort, inventors and destroyers of concepts, of forms, the changers of life cannot but be agitated by singularities - complementary or contradictory. This does not mean that in order to create you must be homosexual. But there is no invention possible, whether it be philosophical or poetic, without the presence in the inventing subject of an abundance of the other, of the diverse.[...] But there is no invention without a certain homosexuality (interplay therefore of bisexuality) making in me a crystallized work of my ultrasubjectivities. I is this matter, personal, exuberant, lively masculine, feminine, or other in which I delights me and distresses me. And in the concert of personalizations called I, at the same time that you repress a certain homosexuality, symbolically, substitutively, it comes out through various signs - traits, comportments, manners, gestures - and it is seen still more clearly in writing. (1980a: 97-8)

Another transgressive gesture, also linked to the Phoenix, can be found in references to wings and flight, metaphors for the way in which poststructuralist narrative, and

hence *écriture féminine*, “flies”, transgresses limits, and replenishes itself (22, 160-1, 169). This parallels Barthes’ description of the “flight” of the poststructuralist narrative in *Le Plaisir du texte* (1973b), flight and height metaphors in Nietzsche and Bataille, Russo’s “aerialism”, and Cixous’ own critical description of *écriture féminine* as “vol”. Inevitably, however, in her critical writing this transgressive function is associated with the feminine and the female body as indicated by her alignment of women with flight, birds and wings. Cixous writes, “Flying is a woman’s gesture - flying in language and making it fly [...] It’s no accident: women take after birds and robbers just as robbers take after woman and birds” (1980b: 258). Hence mirroring the novel’s opening description of the Phoenix-like birth of the text amongst ashes, one of the novel’s endings portrays an orgasmic Phoenix-like death/birth of the text through fire: “Le Texte allongé frémit, et dans un transport d’une violence sans pareille, il fait monter autour de lui-même un bûcher. Neutre met le feu au cercueil d’aromates, en frottant ses ailes clairielles: d’un éventail rapide il avive et tamise l’air taillé qui se prête jusqu’à s’élever aussi haut qu’où l’essor des Aigles royaux met feu aux vents; à tous les volatiles il semble être Phoenix” (169).<sup>16</sup> Hence the novel culminates with a paradigmatic example of *jouissance*, a display of the text’s sexual/intellectual intercourse with the reader, manifest in the French original’s underlying sexual imagery, poeticism, linguistically layered meanings, interplay of opposites (life/death; hot/cold), and allusions to flight and height. Not surprisingly, however, Cixous’ neologism “clairielles” (“clair”/“air”/“elles”, light/air/(feminine) plural or women) for the description of the wings that light the fire links flight and *jouissance* to the feminine. The parallelism between the novel’s beginning and end is strengthened by a footnote drawing the reader’s attention to the fact that this particular section of the text is quoting the beginning section. A poststructuralist sense of circularity - as opposed to realist linearity - is inscribed

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<sup>16</sup> “The text, which is laying down, trembles and seized by an unparalleled crisis of violent passion erects a pyre around itself. Neutral/Neuter sets fire to the coffin of herbs by rubbing together its light-airy-feminine wings: with rapid fan movements he/it arouses and sifts the hewn air which is moved to the point of rising up/flying/becoming erect as high as where the flight/rapid development of the golden Eagles sets fire to the winds. To all the winged creatures/multiple selves he/it appears to be Phoenix.”

[The French “volatiles” has the meaning of both “birds” and “volatile/mobile/changeable individuals”. Hence like the imagery in Cixous’ critical writings, she draws on the linguistic and metaphorical relation between flight and fluid selfhood/sexuality.]

which leaves the reader with the message that the text, rather than having ended at all, will renew itself via the Phoenix's fire.

While *Le Livre de Promethea* belongs to a less experimental phase of Cixous' writing, which demonstrates a return to mainly conventionally structured sentences and the presentation of short "scenes," the novel nevertheless displays a number of innovative stylistic features. The most striking of these is the fragmentation of the writing subject, conveyed most clearly in the split between "Je" and H. At the opening of the novel, the author expresses the desire to "poser la question de ma division entre Je et H. Je demande à Promethea la permission d'être un peu deux, ou un peu plus, un peu incertaine" (18).<sup>17</sup> In a manner typical of the highly metafictional style of the novel, the author discusses the nature and necessity of this split: being a fearless book "H n'aurait pas pu l'écrire seule. Et moi non plus" (21);<sup>18</sup> at times I and H merge, for "Il y a des moments où je suis H"<sup>19</sup> and, we assume, moments when she is not (21). Also, H is necessary because she is I's "personne de nuit,"<sup>20</sup> more daring to lose and submerge herself than I (24). Hence H represents that part of the narrator that is linked to and able to voice the pre-symbolic: "Du point de vue de mon archéologie subjective, elle se situe dans le pré-savoir, dans un état de réceptivité un peu enfantin" (25).<sup>21</sup> Such statements incorporate a (postmodern) declaration of the distrust of autobiography: "Je n'ai pas encore le courage mental d'être que Je. [...] Quand je dis «Je», ce n'est jamais le sujet d'une autobiographie, mon je est libre" (27-8).<sup>22</sup>

Thus, like *Neutre*, *Le Livre de Promethea* manifests an unresolved tension rooted in Cixous' endeavour to align poststructuralist subjectivity and narratology with

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<sup>17</sup> "Here, I think, I ought to try raising the question of my division between I and H. I ask Promethea's permission to be slightly two, or slightly more, slightly unsettled..." (Cixous 1991: 11)

<sup>18</sup> "Because it is a fearless book. Besides, that is what makes it impossible for H to have written it alone." (Cixous 1991: 13)

<sup>19</sup> "There are moments when I am H." (Cixous 1991: 14)

<sup>20</sup> "night person." (Cixous 1991: 16)

<sup>21</sup> "From the point of view of my subjective archaeology, she is situated in the preconscious, in a rather childish state of receptivity." (Cixous 1991: 17)

<sup>22</sup> "I do not yet have the mental courage to be only I. [...] When I say 'I,' this I is never the subject of autobiography, my I is free." (Cixous 1991: 19)

essentialist notions of the body and the pre-symbolic. At one level, in order to write, “I” searches for a primary multiplicity and femininity unrepressed by the masculinist symbolic order. Nevertheless, the fragmented writing subject clearly has a number of functions, which are part of Cixous’ engagement with postmodern notions of authority, authorship and subjectivity. Notwithstanding its inscription of decentred, mobile subjectivity, it informs I’s constant questioning of her role and ability to accomplish the writing of the novel, comprising a means of “conceal[ing] or protect[ing] ‘Je’ from her vulnerable position of lone responsibility for her own desires” (Wilson 1996: 126). The fragmented writing subject also entails a (postmodern) denial of a singular narrative position, represents the difficulties involved in the pursuit of writing about and relating to an other (Promethea), avoids the will to mastery that is part of masculine writing, and achieves a multiple perspective capable of rendering the complex and metamorphic reality of Promethea. Finally, the split between I and H enables the author to write about herself, thus creating a separation between the I who lives with Promethea and the I who writes. This latter aspect gives rise to the occasions where I imagines herself able to devote energy to living with Promethea while H is delegated the job of dealing with reporters. Moments when the split writing subject (I and H) merges together and with Promethea (112-3, 167) are paradigmatic of the key issues outlined above: closeness between these figures, but, nevertheless, a desire to maintain Promethea’s difference; I’s desire to acknowledge the contribution of all three to the writing of the novel; a privileging of the ternary over the binary; and, an evasion of mastery as I, normally in the position of subject, grammatically positions herself as object:

je me sens si proche et je me sais si différente de H et de Promethea, je tremble de la crainte du chirurgien: il faut que le geste soit d’une délicatesse égale à celle du Créateur pour ne pas léser l’admirable organisation interne du corps. Et je ne suis pas du tout de l’espèce du Créateur. Je ne suis qu’un auteur. C’est un mince personnage. Cependant je suis au moins une femme. Mon but est de me glisser au plus près de l’être des deux vraies faiseuses, jusqu’à pouvoir épouser le contour de leurs âmes avec la mienne, sans cependant causer de

confusion. Mais dans l'extrême proximité parfois nécessaire il peut toujours arriver que deux je se touchent. Chaque phrase non de moi, et qui pourrait passer pour mienne, je ferai tout mon possible pour la rendre à qui de droit. (11-2)<sup>23</sup>

Thus, while the fragmented writing subject of *Neutre* was mainly the expression of this novel's concern with multiplicity, fluidity and bisexuality, the fragmented writing subject of *Le Livre de Promethea* similarly reflects one of the novel's main themes - the attempt to create a way of relating to and writing the other which allows for difference and fluidity. The above passage, taken from the opening page, acts also to illustrate other key approaches to writing in this novel. The writing subject clearly reveals *herself* to be a "scriptor" or Foucauldian author, as opposed to Author or Creator; hence a range of metafictional discussions addressing the difficulties involved in writing and the attempt to inscribe the present. However, as above, emphasis placed on the writing subject's status as a woman returns the novel to Cixous' conflation of postmodernism's fluid identity and narratology with the feminine and the essentialist female body.

The writing subject's status as scriptor reveals itself in a number of ways: firstly, as above, through self-declaration: "Je me sens mal à l'aise, presque au chômage, [...] l'idée d'être à peine l'auteur du livre qui me précède, me ravit et m'effraie" (20);<sup>24</sup> secondly, through constant emphasis on the "present" or "immediacy" of the narration, described in her critical writing *Rootprints* as "writ[ing] inside-outside" (1997 [1994]: 78): the novel "ne s'écrit pas comme un livre, parce qu'un livre prévoit

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<sup>23</sup> "I feel so close and yet know I am so different from H and from Promethea, I shake with a surgeon's terror. If I am not to damage the body's wonderful internal organization, the move must be as delicate as the Creator's. And I am not at all the Creator type. I am merely an author. A minor character. But I am, at least, a woman. My aim is to slip as close as possible to the two real makers' being until I can marry the contour of these women's souls with mine, without, however, causing any confusion. But in the extreme closeness sometimes necessary, it is always possible that two I's will verge on each other. I shall do whatever I can to give any sentence not from me, that might be taken for mine, back to its rightful owner." (Cixous 1991: 5)

<sup>24</sup> "I feel uncomfortable, almost redundant [...] the idea of being marginally the author of a book that is ahead of me, delights and frightens me." (Cixous 1991: 13)  
[The French word "à peine" (scarcely, barely) suggests more forcefully than the English translation "marginally" the notion that the I does not really feel herself to be the author of the book]

toujours un peu sa lecture" (14),<sup>25</sup> instead, it is "un ensemble de premières pages" (22),<sup>26</sup> "un livre entièrement au présent" (23),<sup>27</sup> "un livre de maintenant...à lire sans calcul. Sans demander: «et après? Et à la fin?» Car il n'y en a pas" (21).<sup>28</sup> Narratorial attempts to produce a scriptor whose existence is the here and now of enunciation, and a book whose time is the moment of reading and writing, can also be witnessed at moments when the I has just "entered" or "exited" the text, metafictionally collapsing the two ontological realities - reality inside the novel (traditionally perceived as fictional) and reality exterior to the novel (perceived traditionally as the author's own "reality"): "le texte, dont je viens de sortir il y a une demi-heure (j'en ai encore les cheveux collants d'Atlantique et des taches de cristaux sur tout le corps. Qui veut connaître le goût de cette oeuvre presque achevée n'aurait qu'à me lécher l'épaule). [...] Ceci n'est pas une préface. C'est une toute petite chance de dire la vérité sur l'origine du texte dont j'arrive à l'instant rafraîchie, bousculée, et aussi submergée" (11).<sup>29</sup> This is linked to the narrator's principal aim to convey and capture the immediacy of Promethea and the passion of their relationship: "Ce que je voudrais faire: recueillir l'aussitôt de Promethea, son mystère, le violent de sa violence pure. / Ecrire en suivant le présent? J'accompagne. Je serre de près. [...] Ecrire avant le refroidissement? Avant que la mémoire soit arrivée, avant qu'elle ait commencé à embaumer et oublier et raconter des histoires" (110).<sup>30</sup> For the narrator,

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<sup>25</sup> "not written as a book because a book always anticipates somewhat its reading." (Cixous 1991: 8)

<sup>26</sup> "This whole book is composed of first pages." (Cixous 1991: 15)

<sup>27</sup> "a book completely in the present." (Cixous 1991: 15)

<sup>28</sup> "A book about now...to read for no reason. Without asking: 'then what? What happens at the end?' Because there is no ending." (Cixous 1991: 13)

[In the French version the words "Car il n'y en a pas" (because there aren't any) refers to both questions about the ending *and* about what will come next, while the English translation refers only to the fact that there is no ending. The French original, therefore, emphasises more clearly than the English translation the immediacy of the narration.]

<sup>29</sup> "the text from which I emerged just half an hour ago (my hair still clinging from the Atlantic and crystal flecks all over my body. Anyone who wants to know how this almost finished work tastes would only have to lick my shoulder). [...] This is not a preface. It is just a chance to tell the truth about the origin of the text that I am in the process of leaving this very instant - refreshed, tossed about, inundated." (Cixous 1991: 5)

<sup>30</sup> "The thing I would like to do: record Promethea's right-now, its mystery, the drastic nature of its pure violence.

Write along with the present? I am right there with it. In hot pursuit.

writing is a means of relating to and approaching the other (21-2), which parallels Cixous' own delineation of *écriture féminine*. Nevertheless, while this latter attempt at non-Hegelian mastery erodes the Enlightenment subject/object dichotomy, it is theorised in Cixous' critical writings as an essentially feminine trait.

In her position of postmodern "scriptor", the narrator discusses the ways in which writing is the adversary of her task to capture the present: the closer she tries to come to Promethea through writing the more she "loses the surface" (21-2); writing has the ability to obscure the truth, to create an image rather than a reality (22-3), in particular a plural and metamorphic reality such as Promethea's that is linked to the pre-symbolic/pre-linguistic and escapes masculine language (29-30; 32). Furthermore, language is nothing but a "translation" (38), incapable of conveying "Les choses les plus belles" (67).<sup>31</sup> The narrator's attempts are also thwarted by the genre of "portrait writing" which leaves her with "une Promethea rédigée, ou raisonnée [...] une Promethea digérée, ou philosophée" (188);<sup>32</sup> an image of Promethea and their relationship that Promethea herself recognises as merely "literature" (34); and a textual subjectivity that is constructed and influenced, in Baudrillardian fashion, by roles and experiences acquired from literature and obscured by memories (62-3). Experiencing these inadequacies of language - which are themselves postmodern concerns - obliges the narrator to continually question, reread, reshape and metafictionally discuss what she has written, acknowledging not only a distinction between *récit* (narrative) and *histoire* (story) but also the existence of a "composition time" (Plate 1996) (26, 113):

Et alors je me rends compte qu'il était de toute façon absolument impossible d'écrire dans l'apocalypse. Parce qu'à l'intérieur, il n'y a que

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Write before it cools off? Before memory gets there, before it has begun its embalming and forgetting and storytelling." (Cixous 1991: 91)

[The French word "l'aussitôt", translated by Wing as "right-now", has the sense of "immediacy" or "present."]

<sup>31</sup> "The most beautiful things." (Cixous 1991: 53)

<sup>32</sup> "a written-down Promethea or a well-thought-out one [...] a Promethea digest, philosophicpromethea." (Cixous 1991: 158)

du présent immédiat, foudroyant, passant, il n'y a que du présent [...] qui passe comme la foudre, trait à trait, se passe en frappant à coups de lance et de feu, chaque seconde perce, et il n'y a pas le moindre petit instant de passé ou de futur où poser une plume ou une pensée légèrement de côté. Pendant l'apocalypse, il n'y a qu'un énorme puits de présent bouillant dans lequel on tombe. (113)<sup>33</sup>

While the above clearly evinces a postmodern stance, this is undercut by the author's conflation of the *scriptible* text's transgressive fluidity with the feminine and the essentialist female body embodied by Promethea as well as the emphasis on the unequivocally female status of the writing subject. Thus, I declares that it is Promethea's essential femininity or position as a woman that allows the author to write as herself. Furthermore, in spite of Cixous' own eschewal of the term "feminist", I's discussion about the continuing existence of inequality and the subsequent necessity of combating woman's oppression appeals, here at least, to a modernist universal category of women that is directly challenged by feminist postmodernism (see Chapter One). She writes, "Et ce devoir, que je crois devoir accomplir, c'est: «en tant que femme» de ce temps je dois dire et répéter «je suis une femme», parce que nous vivons à une époque encore si ancienne et ignorante et pesante qu'il y a toujours encore danger de gynocide...[...] Je crois et me dois de croire, et dois, à toutes les Voilées de la terre, de croire que je dois encore m'obstiner à prononcer la phrase magique dévoilante et crédentielle, «Je suis une femme». Quand? Aussi souvent que possible et nécessaire" (15-16).<sup>34</sup> It is at this point, as Plate (1996) indicates, that Cixous' project differs from that of her male counterparts: faced with the implications of the subjective identities opened up by theories of the

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<sup>33</sup> "And then I realize that it was absolutely impossible to write in the apocalypse anyway. Because on the inside there is only the immediate present thundering past, there is only the present and a present that goes by like lightening, flash by flash, goes by spearing and striking fire, every instant cuts through and there is not even the tiniest instant of past or future in which to set one's pen or slightly sidelong thought. During the apocalypse there is only a vast pit of boiling present in which to fall." (Cixous 1991: 94)

<sup>34</sup> "And this duty, which I believe I must fulfill, is: 'as a woman' living now I must repeat again and again 'I am a woman,' because we exist in an epoch still so ancient and ignorant and slow that there is still always the danger of gynocide. [...] I believe and it is my duty to believe that I must still stubbornly utter the magical, unveiling credential words 'I am a woman.' When? As often as necessary and possible." (Cixous 1991: 9)



textuality and/or death of the author, Cixous maintains that for the woman writer questions of identity are still of consequence. In this sense, Cixous is paradigmatic of Miller's "arachnology", a "feminist *sub-version*" of male poststructuralism, which reintroduces gendered subjectivity, a "female critical subject", and "political intertextuality" (Plate 1996: 163). Indeed, Cixous' *écriture féminine* combines the postmodern *scriptible* text with a (modernist) feminist politics, creating such a "female critical subject" within the textual model. While, in one sense, this reflects feminist postmodernism's own rejection of traditional postmodernism's political quietism and regression into textuality, its investment in foundationalist identity politics is replaced in feminist postmodernism by "open" coalition (see Chapter One).

Despite the difficulties of inscribing immediacy and creating a textual model that incorporates a female critical position, writing is nevertheless presented as a possible ally in the author's task. Ultimately, the novel foregrounds the type of revolutionary "feminine" writing that parallels Cixous' own delineation and inscription of *écriture féminine*. H's search for a new type of writing will be achieved via the ability of *jouissance* to open gaps in the existing discourse/language (12, 14). This will involve the rejection and "burning" of past forms, set theories, styles and knowledges, hierarchies and distinctions between genres in a manner reminiscent of the emergence of *écriture féminine* from the ashes of the Phoenix's fire in *Neutre*. Conventional representation and autobiography are similarly rejected (19, 28) as untenable for a (postmodern) writing of textuality and fluid subjectivity, while H herself represents that part of the narrator that is linked, via the incarnation of the mother's voice, to the pre-symbolic (25). It is via these methods that the narrator will create a space of enunciation without the bounds of patriarchal ideology and achieve her task of conveying the reality of Promethea and their romantic relationship. At the same time, from a feminist postmodern perspective, references linking the transgressive fluidity of the *scriptible* text to a feminine subjectivity prior to the Symbolic law fail to acknowledge that this "prior" is itself a discursive construction rooted in a false "repressive hypothesis" (see Chapter One). In addition, recalling Cixous' critical writing, its further association with the essentialist female body introduces the novel's underlying biological essentialism.

Indeed, numerous references in *Le Livre de Promethea* link the text and the (female) body in a way that reflects Cixous' delineation of *écriture féminine* as "writing the (female) body". As outlined above, this transcription of the body into writing is based on the ability of women's bodies to explode masculine thinking; the status of all writing as a bodily function, involving thought impulses passing via nerves; and the continuing impact of the mother's body in writing (1980b). As the novel's co-writers, both the author and Promethea are described as writing from the body and presented as capable of inscribing the body of the beloved. This is reminiscent of Barthes' description of *jouissance* as the *scriptible* text's offering up to the reader-as-lover the intimate body of the writer and the text. In *Le Livre de Promethea*, it is Promethea who constitutes the textual body, which is "fait d'elle [...] physiquement" (11).<sup>35</sup> Thus, "tout ce qui vient ci-dessous m'est passé par la main et jusqu'au papier, au contact réel de Promethea. Souvent j'ai mis ma main gauche entre ses seins et par mouvements rapides de ma droite docile, ça s'écrivait. Je ne suis que cette cardiographe" (67).<sup>36</sup> Throughout the novel Promethea is presented as the figure who is linked to the primordial, the pre-symbolic and is capable of speaking from the body, which provides her with a being and a mentality so alien to masculine singularity that she is "untranslatable" in the author's more conventional language (32). Promethea's language, by comparison, is "haletante", "brûlant", "brusque", "nu",<sup>37</sup> her vocabulary emanates – in what is a paradigmatic example of feminine bodily writing and *jouissance* – from her gut and the bowels of the earth (32):

Mais Promethea tient charnellement à ce qu'elle dit. Attention aux mots, avec elle! Parce que Promethea est la personne qui n'a pas coupé le cordon qui relie la parole à son corps. Tout ce qu'elle dit est absolument frais. Vient droit de la chair de ses poumons, des fibres de son coeur. [...] Et toutes ses phrases sont puissantes et jeunes et incandescentes, parce

<sup>35</sup> "made, physically [...] of her." (Cixous 1991: 5)

<sup>36</sup> "everything that follows has moved through my hand and onto the paper when there was real contact with Promethea. I have often put my left hand between her breasts and with the rapid motions of my docile right hand it was written. I am only that cardiograph." (Cixous 1991: 53)

<sup>37</sup> "out-of-breath," "impassioned," "naked." (Cixous 1991: 23)

qu'elles sont causées par une convulsion de toute son âme terrestre. La pensée de Promethea est de lave rouge et frémissante. Et toutes ses remarques datent des commencements de la vie. Même pour les détails elle est cosmogonique. Elle se passe naturellement aux extrémités du monde, là où la vie prend ou perd forme. (184)<sup>38</sup>

This quotation raises a number of issues outlined above: firstly, its relocation of postmodern fluidity in the pre-symbolic is both metaphysical and as constituted by discourse as the Symbolic itself. Secondly, its maternal imagery, manifest in woman-as-earth and woman-as-mother, firstly, reinforces the conventional relegation of woman to the second half on the Enlightenment's culture/nature dichotomy and, secondly, recalls Cixous' simultaneously metaphysical and essentialist conceptualisation of the woman's voice as a reincarnation of the primeval "song" and body of the mother of the pre-Oedipal baby:

Text: my body - shot through with streams of song; I don't mean the overbearing, clutchy "mother" but, rather, what touches you, the equivoice that affects you, fills your breast with an urge to come to language and launches your force; the rhythm that laughs you; the intimate recipient who makes all metaphors possible and desirable; body (body? bodies?), no more describable than god, the soul, or the Other; that part of you that leaves a space between yourself and urges you to inscribe in language your woman's style. (1980b: 252)

In this respect - and many others - Promethea embodies a role model for Cixous' "feminine libidinal economy." Indeed, she is constantly presented by the author as an embodiment of an ideal feminine plurality in comparison to her own perceived

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<sup>38</sup> "But Promethea cares carnally about what she says. Watch out for words with her! Because Promethea is the person who has not cut the cord binding words to her body. Everything she says is absolutely fresh. Comes straight from the flesh of her lungs, the fibers of her heart. [...] And all her sentences are strong and young and incandescent, because they are caused by a convulsion of her whole earthly body. Promethea's thought is of quivering red lava. And all her remarks date from the beginnings of life. Even concerning details she is cosmogonic. She moves easily to the ends of the earth, the places where life takes on form or loses it." (Cixous 1991: 83)

shortcomings. Thus, while the author exhibits multiple and fluid subjectivity, “Promethea est un peuple” (24),<sup>39</sup> and in comparison to the author’s limitations and distrust, “Promethea s’endort et se réveille désarmée”<sup>40</sup> which causes the author embarrassment (17). Also, while the author wishes to incarnate proof of the existence of women, Promethea, she feels, is not only the latter but an example of the human ideal – “femininity”; hence, once again a conflation of postmodern fluidity with the feminine. She writes, “Pourtant elle est pour moi non seulement une preuve des femmes, mais une preuve de - de la divinité du genre humaine. - Non - je voulais dire de «la féminité» du genre humain” (43).<sup>41</sup> Unlike the author, Promethea’s innocence and metamorphic, cyborg selfhood, manifest in her animal metamorphoses, positions her beyond the Law (192): “comment l’arrêteraient-ils, elle, la biche qui vient tout juste d’être métamorphosée en femme, il y a cinq cents mètres au sortir de la Route de la Reine” (192).<sup>42</sup> Finally, she is linked to the primordial and pre-symbolic, of which the author can only dream, and to the type of uncivilised peoples untainted by the traits of Western capitalism and rationality – “la prudence, la dérision de la générosité, les lois de la dévaluation du courage personnel” (245).<sup>43</sup>

Promethea’s embodiment of Cixous’ conceptualisation of a “feminine libidinal economy” draws on her reading of Marcel Mauss’ *Essai sur le don*, anthropological research on the “savage” tribal ritual of potlatch, the spectacular and gratuitous destruction of fortunes (wealth or men) carried out by competing chiefs. Lévi-Strauss, Beauvoir and Bataille’s rereading of potlatch creates a notion of *dépense* (spending) - laughter, abundance, giving - capable of exploding western rationality, capitalist accumulation, and domination. Cixous, like other theorists, regards the “Gift” or

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<sup>39</sup> “Promethea is a people.” (Cixous 1991: 16)

<sup>40</sup> “Promethea goes to sleep and wakes up unguarded.” (Cixous 1991: 10)

<sup>41</sup> “Yet she is for me not only a proof of women, but a proof of - of the divinity of the human race. No - I mean of ‘the femininity’ of the human race.” (Cixous 1991: 33)

<sup>42</sup> “how would they arrest her, her, the doe who has just been transformed into a woman, a quarter of a mile from the Route de la Reine” (Cixous 1991: 162)

<sup>43</sup> “the ones who refused to be careful, or to ridicule generosity, or the laws devaluing personal courage.” (Cixous 1991: 208)

“spending” to be a specifically female attribute; hence a return to Cixous’ underlying essentialism. Due to her cultural repression and her metaphysical proximity to the mother, woman is more receptive to abundance, multiplicity and generosity than man. Cixous writes, “She doesn’t ‘know’ what she’s giving, she doesn’t measure it; she gives, though, neither a counterfeit impression nor something she hasn’t got. She gives more, with no assurance that she’ll get back even some unexpected profit from what she puts out. She gives that there may be life, thought, transformation” (1980b: 264). Hence Cixous theorises the realms of the “Proper” and the “Gift”: the former is associated with “masculine” tendencies towards propriety, property, appropriation, hierarchisation, self-identity; the latter with “feminine” tendencies towards non-appropriation, acceptance of difference, and what is one of the most positive words in Cixous’ vocabulary - generosity, giving without expectation of return (Moi 1988). As elsewhere, the above theory evinces an unresolved tension between Cixous’ self-conscious deployment of the terms masculine and feminine as qualifiers, on the one hand, and both biological essentialism and metaphysics, on the other, represented by the formulation of the Proper as male castration fear and the Gift as an embodiment of the pre-symbolic.

These attributes associated with the Gift and visible in the character of Promethea - unpredictability, self-dispossession, generosity - are also foregrounded in the novel via authorial discussions, firstly, about the nature of I and Promethea’s love, and, on a broader level, about love generally and the relation between self and other. However, notwithstanding the association of “giving” and self-dispossession (183, 189-90) with the Gift, the author emphasises also its role in the (romantic) relationship between self and other. Hence, “le courage de recevoir [...] pour recevoir de l’amour, quelle force, quelle patience, quelle générosité il faut étendre” (126),<sup>44</sup> and “Etre aimée, se laisser aimer [...] recevoir les dons, trouver les mercis les plus justes, voilà le vrai travail d’amour.” (29).<sup>45</sup> This parallels Cixous’ notion of two types of Gift: the Gift in a

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<sup>44</sup> “to receive love so much strength, so much patience, and so much generosity must be extended.” (Cixous 1991: 105)

<sup>45</sup> “Being loved, letting oneself be loved [...] receiving gifts, finding the right thank-you’s, that is love’s real work.” (Cixous 1991: 20)

masculine libidinal economy - dangerously capable of creating inequality, difference and indebtedness - creates an unreceptivity to love and the other that is not paralleled in the feminine libidinal economy. This is reflected in the love-relation between “Je” and H, which is depicted as involving a learning process for I, who acquires self-dispossession and the ability to “receive”. For Cixous, “other love” represents a “gateway”, a new way of relating to the other that is capable of initiating societal transformation (44-6, 123). Hence the novel’s author writes, “Je vois le monde tout autrement, ma sensualité savoure une révolution. [...] [S]i on a touché une fois à cette douceur suprême, on éprouve ensuite un assouplissement et une extension de l’amour, et on sent l’amour se propager sur toute la terre, et à travers les espèces, et il devient plus ouvert, et plus qu’humain et donc plus humain aussi” (123).<sup>46</sup> This parallels similar comments about the revolutionary potential of “other love” in her critical writings (1980b).

The nature of love as depicted in the novel, however, has another face: the author emphasises difficulty, risk and effort as prerequisites for maintaining an enduring happiness (104-6). More problematic aspects of love involve anger, jealousy, pain, cruelty, the torture of desire, separation, and imagined infidelity (53, 54, 60, 81). A further range of unconventional desires to torture, consume, eat, penetrate and physically absorb the beloved recall the transgressive sexualities of the literary fantastic. *Le Livre de Promethea* abounds with these poetic descriptions of mutual bodily interpenetration, invasion, conflation, and animalistic metamorphosis (horse, doe, lioness and eagle):

Tu est si ouverte, je ne peux pas rester devant tes yeux, déjà je suis  
debout dans tes poumons, je veux caresser tes seins, déjà je sens  
l’humide de tes entrailles si lisse sous mes doigts.

Je veux le temps d’entrer. Comment faire pour entrer dans le grand

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<sup>46</sup> “I see the world in a whole new way, my sensuality is savoring a revolution. [...] [I]f you have ever touched this ultimate softness, afterward you feel your love relaxing and extending, and you feel love spreading all over the earth, through every species, and it becomes more open and more than human and therefore more human as well.” (Cixous 1991: 102)

<sup>47</sup> “You are so open, I am unable to remain before your eyes, already I stand inside your lungs, I want

ouvert? Tu es impénétrable à force de nudité. Déjà je suis dans ton ventre, je patauge dans ton sang, je me roule sous tes côtes entre tes poumons. (136)<sup>47</sup>

Although these expressions of desire recall Monique Wittig's writing, the latter's (poetic) literalisation of penetration, cannibalism and animal metamorphoses contrast with the self-consciously textual nature of those in *Le Livre de Promethea*. Indeed, the author's use of "comme si", "je prétends que" (68),<sup>48</sup> "je veux pas [...] en réalité", "il reste sans accomplissement réel" (73-4),<sup>49</sup> "je me sens" (125),<sup>50</sup> changes of mode between metaphor and "reality", and metafictional discussion of metaphors employed (14, 26), suggests that these are inscriptions of sexual/textual fluidity. Hence, drawing on the textuality of the *scriptible* text, Cixous' metamorphoses and sexual penetrations textually realise her adherence to a closeness which allows for difference, a deconstruction of binaries, and an ambiguous play on the relations between inside and out found in the postmodern image of the closet. As Wilson comments, therefore:

Cixous allows no easy fusing between self and other; she seeks instead to undo divisions between exterior and interior, to locate her texts in a position of liminality, and to explore a tantalising eroticism which desires yet dissolves the possibility of entering or possessing the metamorphosing body of the female lover. (1996: 132-4)

For Wilson, this play of inside and out, manifest in uneasy bodily invasion and the conflation of metaphor and reality is a deliberate ploy that parallels Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of postmodern lesbianism in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1991). Thus, Cixous' poetic and metaphoric conflation of the Imaginary and reality is a

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to caress your breasts, already I feel the moisture of your womb slippery on my fingers.

I want to have time to go in. How does one go about entering something wide open? You are impenetrable because of your nakedness. Already I am in your belly, I am splashing in your blood, I roll around under your ribs between your lungs." (Cixous 1991: 113-4)

<sup>48</sup> "as if;" "I claim." (Cixous 1991: 54)

<sup>49</sup> "I do not really want to;" "it remains unfulfilled in reality." (Cixous 1991: 59)

<sup>50</sup> "I feel." (Cixous 1991: 103)

means of expressing desire, eroticism, sensuality, and immediacy. Furthermore, it rearticulates Cixous' previously Freudian and Lacanian notions of female homosexuality or bisexuality as multiplicity and fluidity within a feminist postmodern frame. Indeed, in the above respects, at least, *Le Livre de Promethea* closely parallels the anti-essentialist postmodern queer theory of both Sedgwick and Judith Butler. Sedgwick's "universalising" or "continuum" interpretation of lesbianism based on integration, bisexual potential, liminality, and transitivity, and the imagery of the closet is reflected in the ambiguous and uneasy bodily invasion of the lovers and the ambiguous relation between metaphor and reality. Butler's performative, fluid lesbianism is represented by the textual performance of liminal and metamorphic lesbian acts existing in a "troubling" space between metaphor and reality; an I whose identity is dependent on the repetition of sex acts and speech acts; and the presentation of a fluid homosexual selfhood. As Wilson concludes, therefore, "Cixous works effectively to disrupt discrete identity categories. For her, the act of coming out would merely serve to enclose her work, the text and its inhabitants, within new boundaries. Her novel seeks to cross borders, to deny the fixity of inside and out, whilst simultaneously exploring the erotics of liminality" (139-40). Indeed, the textual, metaphoric nature of female sexuality and the body supports the possibility that, in this instance, Cixous' "masculine" and "feminine" are indeed textual constructs as opposed to essentialist concepts. Thus, while Cixous has been accused by a range of feminists of "essentialising the female body", "since her text is itself a poetic and fissured medium, it is impossible to say just where this body is" (Scott 1995: 33). As opposed to Kristeva, therefore, who perceives lesbian relations as based on narcissism and doubling, here, Cixous creates a female/female relationship based on her vision of multiplicity and difference within closeness and proximity. Nevertheless, recalling similar criticisms of feminist postmodernism and the feminist postmodern fantastic, Cixous' emphasis on textual, sexual relations – as opposed to a direct engagement with social reality – has occasioned criticism from some feminist quarters about the limitation of the novel's political critique.

Many of the above elements - Promethea's metamorphoses, conflation of the Imaginary and reality, and the use of metaphor - are also linked in *Le Livre de*



*Promethea* to Cixous' rewriting of myth. Hence, like postmodern feminism, the novel draws on poststructuralist notions of mythology in order to effect a demythologisation of the production of woman by Western aesthetic representation. The binary oppositions encoded in myths, literature and legends, which align woman with the non-political, a-cultural, non-social, absent, and passive, are replaced in *Le Livre de Promethea* by images of woman as presence, political, and untheorisable. Apart from her animal metamorphoses, *Promethea* is also aligned with a number of multi-cultural mythical characters (Gilgamesh, Enkidou, Moses, Bradamante, Tanaïs, Bedreddin Hassan), which further contribute towards her fluid subjectivity and the notion of a feminine plural (Wilson 1996).<sup>51</sup> The paradigmatic example is the feminisation of the Greek myth of Prometheus, including Shelley's famous rewriting *Prometheus Unbound*. Prometheus stole fire from the gods for humanity thereby incurring the wrath of Zeus who has him bound to a rock where an eagle descends each day to devour his liver. Like the Phoenix myth in *Neutre*, the Prometheus myth in *Le Livre de Promethea* mythologises a fire capable of giving birth to *écriture féminine*. *Promethea* continually manifests the ability to produce fire, both of an erotic and a creative nature. Hence the book is "un buisson de feu," created by the fire lit in the author's soul by "le premier feu", "l'étincelle primitive"<sup>52</sup> that *Promethea*, like Prometheus, carried forth from another realm, in this particular case the realm of the primordial and the pre-symbolic – a return, therefore, to Cixous' "repressive hypothesis":

Promethea a réveillé en moi des rêves éteints depuis des millénaires,  
parfois on prend feu à travers tant de glaces, Promethea a rallumé en moi  
des rêves de feu [...]

Mais, maintenant, depuis que je sais comment Promethea porte le feu  
de tous les rêves jusque dans la réalité, remonte du Puits des Vaches  
Rouges, en portant le premier feu, traverse la Salle des Juments, passe le

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<sup>51</sup> For a discussion of the possible meanings of the signifier H, ranging from Hélène, Hecate and "Haleine" (breathe) to Rimbaud's and Barthes' H see Conley (1991).

<sup>52</sup> "Burning bush," "first fire," "primitive spark."

long de toutes les époques de la vie, en raminant, sur les parois, les mémoires des temps si fragiles si inflammables, et sort en 1982 portant toujours dans ses mains l'étincelle primitive, je me sens vaciller entre l'exultation et la terreur. [...]

Seulement j'étais sûre que je pourrais vivre avec la langue éteinte jusqu'à la fin de mes jours. Je n'étais même pas tentée. J'étais calme. J'avais de solides définitions. J'appelais bonheur l'absence de malheur.  
(33)<sup>53</sup>

However, like her reliance upon metaphor and the Imaginary, Cixous' use of myth has been regarded as another manifestation of her reluctance to engage with the material world. Thus, for Moi, "This constant return to biblical and mythological imagery signals her investment in the world of myth: a world that, like the distant country of fairy tales is perceived as pervasively meaningful, as closure and unity. The mythical or religious discourse presents a universe where all difference, struggle and discord can in the end be satisfactorily resolved" (1988: 116). Nevertheless, Moi fails to consider an interpretation of this aspect of the novel as a manifestation of feminist poststructuralist/postmodern demythologisation and protean, cyborg identities, which the foregoing discussion of its textual, metaphorical lesbian identities definitely supports.

This chapter has sought to examine Cixous' critical and literary works – in particular the *scriptible* text, *écriture féminine*, and *jouissance* – in relation to their renegotiation of both modernist and postmodern concepts. Cixous embodies the ambiguities of the French feminist tradition, whose simultaneous espousal of poststructuralist anti-essentialism and woman-centred essentialism reveals a pervasive tension in her *oeuvre* that remains largely unresolved. Cixous derives directly from the French

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<sup>53</sup> "Promethea has awakened in me dreams extinguished for thousands of years; sometimes one catches on fire even through so many icy layers. Promethea has rekindled dreams of fire in me [...] But now, ever since I learned how Promethea brings the fire of all dreams up into reality, how she climbs back up through the shaft of the Red Cows, bearing the first fire, how she crosses the Chamber of the Mares, how she goes through every epoch of existence reawakening along the walls memories of times so fragile and so inflammable, and comes out in 1982 still carrying in her hands the primitive spark, I feel myself wavering between exultation and terror. [...] I just was sure that I could live with my tongue extinguished until the end of my days. I was not even tempted. I was calm. I had firm definitions. I

poststructuralist avant-garde tradition, adopting the latter's project for the displacement of identity and deconstruction of (gendered) binaries and their literary embodiment in the *writerly* text. Informing the postmodern fantastic's theorisation of the subversive nature of open-ended writing, the *scriptible* text's pursuit of semantic chance occasions the radical erasure of character, narrator, author and plot. Indeed, despite its paradigmatic embodiment of postmodern decentred subjectivity, the radical nature of its extreme manifestations – such as *Neutre* – paradoxically textualise agency out of existence. However, while, on the one hand, Cixous' poststructuralist background leads to the retention of "masculine" and "feminine" as signifiers, which suggests that her equation of femininity with postmodern fluidity is a similarly "textual" position, this is undermined by an underlying biological essentialism and recourse to certain modernist tenets. This is represented by a metaphysical link between the female writer and the voice/body of the mother, the association between transgressive postmodern/poststructuralist fluidity and the essentialist female body, the search for a pre-patriarchal femininity and the, at times, Freudian/Lacanian conceptualisation of lesbianism, homosexuality, and bisexuality. However, the ambiguity of Cixous' position resists even this neat (binary) dissection of her work into two distinct categories – deconstruction and essentialism. While *Le Livre de Promethea* inscribes, indeed, the aforementioned biological essentialism, it represents also an exemplary embodiment of cyborg subjectivity and the textual performativity of lesbian sexual identities.

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called happiness the absence of unhappiness." (Cixous 1991: 24)

#### Chapter 4. Monique Wittig: Feminist Postmodernism and the *Nouveau Roman*

*Les Guérillères* clearly reveals itself from the outset as a close ally of what has been termed “the postmodern book,” the “palimtext,” the “material text,” and “worlds on paper” (Davidson 1995; Hubert 1995; McHale 1994); such labels intend to denote the materiality of postmodern writing, its graphic diversity and superimposition of writing styles and genres. Wittig’s novel is part-framed by a capitalised, emboldened prose poem beginning on the opening page and recommencing three pages prior to the novel’s ending. The subsequent page is punctuated by the first of three full page-sized Os, which hold symbolic meaning for the text’s structure and themes and divide the work into three distinct sections: “the labyrinth of a dead culture”; methods of rejecting patriarchy; textual and sexual overthrow (Wittig 1994). The larger body of the novel is composed of short, non-chronological prose poetry fragments separated by wide bands of spacing. Individual fragments are interrupted every six pages (excepting the final list) by the appearance of capitalised, emboldened lists of women’s names set centre page; thus, it is in fact impossible to discern whether the list interrupts the prose fragments or vice versa. On one level, this play with genre, materiality, typography, gaps, and rhythms contributes significantly to the novel’s themes, and reflects Wittig’s belief in the alliance of form and content (1992g). In this sense, the non-linearity of the text, large Os, gaps, and spaces are formal manifestations of the vulvic ring, overthrow, the beginnings of a new language, and the insertion of women’s language and culture; the list of women’s names and the poem pursue similar key themes surrounding feminism, subversion and the writing process. However, these formal elements are also characteristics of the postmodern “palimtext” and engage with the latter’s underlying critical concerns – the reader as co-producer, the fictional versus “real” world, defamiliarisation, and, paramount in Wittig’s view, the subversive potential of stylistically innovative literature. Like Cixous though, Wittig rejects “conventional” postmodernism’s apolitical and pessimistic textuality and aligns the postmodern “palimtext” – and, in particular, its emphasis on materiality - with feminist critique.

LACUNES LACUNES

CONTRE TEXTE

CONTRE SENS

CE QUI EST A ÉCRIRE VIOLENCE

HORS TEXTE

DANS UNE AUTRE ÉCRITURE

PRESSANT MENAÇANT

MARGES ESPACES INTERVALLES

SANS RELACHE

GESTE RENVERSEMENT

(Wittig 1990 [1969]: 205)<sup>1</sup>

The introduction of graphic diversity – spacing, typeface, typography, titles – into the postmodern book, thereby foregrounding the presence and materiality of the novel, has the effect of conveying some of postmodernism’s primary concerns: firstly, the problematised distinction between the “real world” and the projected reality of the fictional world, or, in McHale’s terms “an ontological hesitation or oscillation between the fictional world and the real-world object – the material book” (1994: 184); secondly, an emphasis on the reader as co-producer in the text’s meaning. While such strategies form part of “conventional” postmodernism’s self-referentiality, they may be harnessed by the feminist postmodernist to political critique. Examining a number of “palimpsests” or “worlds on paper”, McHale cites the above poem to illustrate the way in which the formal qualities of *Les Guérillères* recuperate postmodernism from political quietism:

A trivial, superficial convention, one might think, of no real significance;  
but, depending on the context in which it appears, spacing can be motivated

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<sup>1</sup> “LACUNAE LACUNAE  
AGAINST TEXTS  
AGAINST MEANING  
WHICH IS TO WRITE VIOLENCE  
OUTSIDE THE TEXT  
IN ANOTHER WRITING  
THREATENING MENACING  
MARGINS SPACES INTERVALS  
WITHOUT PAUSE  
ACTION OVERTHROW”  
(Wittig [trans. Le Vay] 1985a: 143)

as an act of subversion – and not just subversion of literary norms, either. Or so, at least, Monique Wittig claims at the end of her spaced-out text, *Les Guérillères* (1979). [...] Here spacing is the objective correlative not just of a destabilised fictional ontology, but also of carnivalesque revolution. (1994: 182)

Employing words “as elements of the material world that can be tampered with, turned around, and played with” (1986: 166) is also a main characteristic of Roudiez’s “gynetexts,” the latest trend adopted by the *Nouvelle Génération* (postmodern) writers in France. Indeed, Wittig’s use of formal elements also reveals her position vis-à-vis a specifically French background, notably her unlikely combination of French feminism with materialist feminism and *Nouveau Roman* with committed literature. Although Wittig distanced herself from Cixousian French Feminism and *écriture féminine* on account of its reliance upon psychoanalysis and the presence of the female body in the text, a position she perceives as biologically essentialist, she remains nevertheless indebted to the latter’s avant-garde tradition. Wittig may not lend herself totally to a Barthesian text of semantic chance, unlike Cixous, but she adheres to this tradition’s belief in the challenging potential of innovative, non-realist styles, its positioning of the reader as co-producer in the text’s meaning, and incorporates the wider lessons of contemporary poststructuralism. Similarly, while she remains indebted to the formal experimentation of the (*Nouveau*) *Nouveau Romanciers*, Wittig rejects their apolitical stance, including their distaste for the committed novel, which links art to a social cause. This parallels, of course, Wittig’s rejection of the political neutrality and ahistoricism of “conventional” postmodernism whose literary strategies she repositions for feminist critique.

That such attitudes to writing coincide with Wittig’s own clearly established critical position confirms the need for a close examination of her novel’s formal and stylistic features. Wittig’s critical writings repeatedly emphasise her central belief: a work of art challenges the ruling ideology first and foremost through its form as opposed to its themes. If the theme dominates the reader’s interpretation the text ceases to operate on a literary level, it becomes “univocal”; hence, Wittig’s declaration that “Minority

writers are menaced by the meaning even while they are engaged in formal experimentation: what for them is only a theme in their work, a formal element, imposes itself as meaning *only*, for straight readers” (1992f: 66). Similar ideas are expressed in “The Trojan Horse” (1992g), which espouses a Russian Formalist reverence for avant-garde literature. The avant-garde text must constantly break with its own conventions in order to remain innovatory and works with the materiality of the text in order to “shock” the reader into perceiving reality – and, in Wittig’s case, also the ruling ideologies – in new ways. As a “Trojan Horse” the new artwork “operates as a war machine” whose goal is “to pulverize the old forms and conventions” (1992g: 68-9). Again, Wittig rejects the notion of literature as subservient to either its own themes and ideologies or to politics and history; while the latter are accepted for their content only, it is the formal elements of literature – in particular, the material form of words – which create a work of art. Such a process involves momentarily divorcing the meaning of words from their materiality and indicates, as Ostrovsky comments, that “Wittig’s view of language is primarily that of a poet [...] her fictions are – essentially – poetic constructs and should be viewed as such” (1991: 9). Wittig writes:

With writing, words are everything. [...] Words lie there to be used as raw material by a writer, just as clay is at the disposal of any sculptor. [...] In literature words are given to be read in their materiality. But one must understand that to attain this result a writer must first reduce language to be as meaningless as possible in order to turn it into a neutral material – that is, a raw material. Only then is one able to work the words into a form. [...] A writer must take every word and despoil it of its everyday meaning in order to be able to work with words, on words. Shklovsky, a Russian Formalist, used to say that people stop seeing the different objects that surround them... [...] What I am saying is that the shock of words in literature does not come out of the ideas they are supposed to promote, since what a writer deals with first is a solid body that must be manipulated in one way or another. [...] [I]f one wants to build a perfect war machine, one must spare oneself the delusion that facts, actions, ideas can dictate

directly to words their form. There is a detour, and the shock of words is produced by their association, their arrangement, and also by each one of them as used separately. (1992g: 71-2)

Thus, while highly innovative and disruptive stylistically on account of its avant-garde, *Nouveau Roman*, and postmodern inheritance, the novel's feminist politics and investment in theories of defamiliarisation create a text which is also "lucid, controlled" (Crowder 1983: 127), "cerebral and highly stylised" (Duffy 1990: 110-1). Hence, critical acclaim that the success of *Les Guérillères* lies in its combination of "militant feminist commitment with the experimental artist's awareness of open structure" (Porter 1989: 98; also 1992; Rosenfeld 1984). The element of "control" or "distancing," noted by several critics, is a crucial tool in Wittig's political critique: "Through depersonalization, Wittig achieves a distancing equivalent to the *Verfremdungs*- or 'alienation-effect' of the Brechtian epic theater. Critical contemplation of vital issues replaces emotional catharsis in the mind of the reader, making a subsequent feminist commitment more likely" (Porter 1992: 262; also Heathcote 1993). This primarily modernist approach to writing is reformulated within a postmodern narratological framework in Wittig's fiction, the latter similarly espousing simultaneously modernist *and* postmodernist themes.

As Wittig's criticism demonstrates, her (post)modern approach to writing – incorporating notions of alienation, defamiliarisation, and reader participation – equally informs the narratological and linguistic aspects of the novel. Varied in theme, style and point of view, *Les Guérillères*' prose poems comprise "oracular pronouncements," accounts of "real" events, mythical events, or fragments from books related second or even third-hand. This lack of any discernible narrator is paralleled by a similar lack of palpable characters. This world is inhabited by an indistinguishable "elles" (feminine plural "they"); the fleeting appearance of isolated names acts only to indicate the two-dimensional female figures who relate stories or about whom stories are told. Like the French feminists, Wittig's adherence to postmodern depthlessness rejects the identifiable heroine of realist fiction for political reasons: "she intends to prevent us from identifying with any one heroine, who could



thus become the vehicle for our projected fantasies of personal power and glory, offering vicarious gratification at the cost of political reflection” (Porter 1992: 262). This “elles” is paradigmatic of the novel’s recuperation of alienating, defamiliarising linguistic devices for feminist critique.

On one level, the unrelenting repetition and accumulation of “elles,” and often of “elles disent,” reinforces linguistic and feminist thematic issues manifest in both the novel and Wittig’s critical writings. These include a call to women to recognise themselves as an oppressed class and form an oppositional collective; an assertive possession of speech which has been denied women in the past, reinforced by the ubiquitous active voice indicating progression from object of (male) discourse to subject of their own discourse; and, finally, a rejection of the categories of sex in language. On another level, it is typical of the novel’s aim to both shock and distance the reader via its linguistic poetic devices – among others, the unexpected use of “elles” as opposed to the so-called generic “ils” or the neutral “on,” repetition of grammatical structures, propulsive and staccato rhythm and unpunctuated enumeration (Wittig 1994). Examining the contribution of linguistic elements towards Wittig’s feminist version of post-Brechtian alienation, Porter comments:

Wittig simultaneously raises her reader’s feminist consciousness, enhances the alienation effect, and enriches the quality of fantasy in her work by exploiting the possibilities for markedness in her gender-biased language. [...] [S]he must employ the dominant language. [...] Such a language is an alien “discourse” in the ideological sense. It resists any liberating change. In compensation, any departure from entrenched linguistic traditions immediately stands out and emphasizes the revolutionary message. (1992: 263)

Wittig’s use of “elles” also plays a role - albeit not an unproblematic one - in this novel’s relation to feminist postmodernism. Like Judith Butler, Wittig starts with the feminist postmodern tenet that the binary categories of sex – man, woman; masculine, feminine – are discursively produced (by language and the sciences) in the service of

the ruling ideology (1992h). Echoing Beauvoir's statement "on ne naît pas femme" (1989 [1949]),<sup>2</sup> Wittig explores the way in which one *becomes* a woman through the prevalence of heterosexist ideology. Although Wittig criticises the binary sex system of both ancient philosophy and early Marxism, her main targets are the *maître-penseurs* of contemporary poststructuralism: despite their sophisticated analyses of cultural and symbolic codes, including the constructed nature of identity, these thinkers are underpinned by the ideology of "the straight mind" and consequently perpetuate the notion that binary sex and gender are natural and prior to social order (1992a; 1992c; 1992d; 1992e; 1992h): "And although it has been accepted in recent years that there is no such thing as nature, that everything is culture, there remains within that culture a core of nature which resists examination, a relationship excluded from the social in the analysis [...] I will call it the obligatory social relationship between 'man' and 'woman'" (1992c: 27).

In alliance with feminist postmodernism, Wittig's main project is to destroy the binary categories of sex; the terms "man" and "woman" must be eradicated from language, the text, and politics: "The concept of difference has nothing ontological about it. It is only the way that the masters interpret a historical situation of domination. The function of difference is to mask at every level the conflicts of interest, including ideological ones. In other words, for us, this means there cannot any longer be women and men, and that as classes and categories of thought or language they have to disappear, politically, economically, ideologically" (1992c: 29; also 1992a). Using "elles" is one of the ways in which Wittig eliminates both the word and the category of "woman" from the text, which she believes designates a cultural, mythical construct. However, the use of "elles" is also pertinent to Wittig's specific interpretation of the linguistic construction of binary sex. Drawing directly on Beauvoir, as opposed to contemporary French feminists Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous, Wittig argues that whereas women are "marked" in the French language via personal pronouns, adjectives and nouns, men's appropriation of the universal position is "a criminal act, perpetrated by one class against another" (1992h: 80). For Wittig, personal pronouns are paradigmatic of the way in which a binary sex and

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<sup>2</sup> "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman".

gender system is embedded in language: “I said that personal pronouns engineer gender through language, and personal pronouns are, if I may say so, the subject matter of each one of my books” (1992h: 82). However, as opposed to feminising the world, or inverting the binary hierarchy, Wittig describes her use of “elles” as an attempt to challenge the reader with the notion of “elles” as the new universal:

*elles* never stands for the general and is never the bearer of the universal point of view. An *elles* therefore that would be able to support a universal point of view would be a novelty in literature or elsewhere. In *Les Guérillères*, I try to universalize the point of view of *elles*. The goal of this approach is not to feminize the world but to make the categories of sex obsolete in language. I, therefore, set up *elles* in the text as the absolute subject of the world. To succeed textually, I needed to adopt some very draconian measures, such as to eliminate, at least in the first two parts, *he*, or *they-he*. I wanted to produce a shock for the reader entering a text in which *elles* by its unique presence constitutes an assault, yes, even for female readers. Here again the adoption of a pronoun as my subject matter dictated the form of the book. Although the theme of the text was total war, led by *elles* on *ils*, in order for this new person to take effect, two-thirds of the text had to be totally inhabited, haunted, by *elles*. Word by word, *elles* establishes itself as a sovereign subject. Only then could *il(s)*, *they-he*, appear, reduced and truncated out of language. (1992h: 85; also 1994)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Wittig’s comments on the translation of “elles” also reveal this pursuit of universalisation and are indispensable to the English reader:

In English the translator, lacking the lexical equivalent for *elles*, found himself compelled to make a change, which for me destroys the effect of the attempt. When *elles* is turned into *the women* the process of universalization is destroyed. All of a sudden, *elles* stopped being *mankind*. When one says “the women,” one connotes a number of individual women, thus transforming the point of view entirely, by particularizing what I intended as a universal. Not only was my undertaking with the collective pronoun *elles* lost, but another word was introduced, the word *women* appearing obsessively throughout the text, and it is one of those gender-marked words mentioned earlier which I never use in French. [...] The solution for the English translation then is to reappropriate the collective pronoun *they*, which rightfully belongs to the feminine as well as to the masculine gender. *They* is not only a collective pronoun but it also immediately develops a degree of universality which is not immediate with *elles*. Indeed, to obtain it with *elles*, one must produce a work of transformation that involves a whole pageant of other words and that touches the

As Wittig intended, the re-introduction of conventional generic/universal (masculine) pronouns and nouns into a novel occupied for the first two thirds wholly with the personal pronoun “elles,” feminised nouns (“chasseuses,” “capitaines,” “combattantes”), and indefinite pronouns (“quelqu’une,” “certaines”), works by defamiliarisation to shock the reader into recognising the absence of the feminine from this so-called neutral masculine.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the depiction of the sex-war in the final section of the novel benefits from the maintenance of this linguistic opposition between feminine and masculine nouns and pronouns: initially, this opposition clearly demarcates the opposing factions; eventually, it reinforces the notion of difference within coalition. As peace between *elles* and *ils* is finally achieved towards the close of the novel, the final fragment depicts the masculine and feminine linguistic markers giving way to a neutral “nous” (“we”) (Wittig 1990 [1969]: 207). This strategy of universalising the feminine point of view, however, problematises what was thus far a feminist postmodern *point de départ*. As Butler illustrates, while on the one hand, Wittig achieves the feminist postmodern project of abolishing the categories of sex in her fiction, the way in which she describes this process in her critical writing ascribes to all individuals the right of the position of universal *subject* and appeals to a “pre-social ontology of unified and equal persons” (Butler 1990a: 119) – this, of course, signals an investment in the tenets of humanism. Thus, this strategy of universalisation brings to light a crucial aspect of Wittig’s *oeuvre*; while her fiction is for the greater part undeniably postmodernist, her critical theory espouses both a postmodernist and, at times, decidedly modernist position. Hence aligning herself with the philosophical and political project of modernity,

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imagination. *They* does not partake of the naturalistic, hysterical bent that accompanies the feminine gender. *They* helps to go beyond the categories of sex. But *they* can be effective in my design only when it stands by itself, like its French counterpart. Only with the use of *they* will the text regain its strength and strangeness. [...] It seems to me that the English solution will take us even a step further in making the categories of sex obsolete in language. (1992h: 86-7)

<sup>4</sup> “huntresses,” “captains,” “combatants” (Wittig 1985a: 12). Due to the different ways in which the French and English languages bear the mark of gender, the English translation has inevitably failed, in places, to retain the effects that Wittig aims for in her feminisation of nouns (e.g. “huntresses” is successful whereas “captains” and “combatants” are not). Wittig’s feminisation of common nouns which habitually appear in the masculine is intended to demonstrate how this convention perpetuates the notion of women as passive and silent. Through this strategy the women in the text occupy domains from which they are usually excluded (hunting, fighting, speaking etc.). The solidarity of the women is also demonstrated. Like “elles,” these words operate by defamiliarisation. This technique is

Wittig writes:

I believe we have not reached the end of what Reason can do for us. And I do not want to deny my Cartesian cast of mind, for I look back to the Enlightenment for the first glimmer of light that history has given us. By now, however, Reason has been turned into a representative of Order, Domination, Logocentrism. According to many of our contemporaries the only salvation is in a tremendous exaltation of what they call alterity under all its forms: Jewish, Black, Red, Yellow, Female, Homosexual, Crazy. Far away from Reason (do they mean within Folly?), “Different”, and proud of being so.

Both the figureheads of the dominators and of the dominated have adopted this point of view. Good is no more to be found in the parameter of the One, of Male, of Light, but in the parameter of the Other, of Female, Darkness. So long live Unreason, and let them be embarked anew in *la nef des fous*, the carnival, and so on. Never has the Other been magnified and celebrated to this extent. Other cultures, the mind of the Other, the Feminine brain, Feminine writing, and so on – we have during these last decades known everything as far as the Other is concerned.

I do not know who is going to profit from this abandonment of the oppressed to a trend that will make them more and more powerless, having lost the faculty of being subjects even before having gained it. (1992e: 56-7)

The above quotation – one of Wittig’s staunchest modernist declarations – appears misplaced, at first glance, in a discussion of postmodern feminism. Contextualised within the whole of Wittig’s critical writings, however, the extract’s modernist message is clarified. Although Wittig argues for the presocial status of human freedom and the right of all individuals to the position of universal subject, elsewhere she carefully elaborates the ways in which this subject - identity, sexuality, and gender

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further developed in the following novel *Le Corps lesbien*.

- is constructed by the ruling ideology. Furthermore, while the above statement rejects the subversive potential of the carnivalesque, Wittig employs this strategy nevertheless throughout both *Les Guérillères* and *Le Corps lesbien*. Hence, the quotation reveals Wittig's unique critical position: while the novels largely stage the postmodern, Wittig's practice as a whole eschews traditional Marxist materialism in favour of 1970s "materialist radical feminism" and "materialist deconstructionism" (Landry and MacLean 1993; Adkins and Leonard 1995), whose examination of the construction of sex, gender and sexuality constitutes a rearticulation of modernism within the postmodern. Indeed, Wittig's critical position approximates the reformulated modernist project outlined by the critics Benhabib (1995 [1990]), Lovibond (1994 [1991]), and Prokhovnik (1999), albeit retaining a stronger commitment than the latter to sovereign subjectivity. While some quarters of feminist postmodernism would criticise such a *mélange*, any anti-essentialism rests on and incorporates essentialism as evidenced in feminist postmodernism's own use of the terms "sex" and "gender". The lengthy discussion allotted to Wittig in Butler's feminist postmodern theory would seem to consolidate this view; Butler is clearly unable to discard Wittig's theoretical contribution to feminist postmodern politics despite her disappointment in its simultaneous espousal of a revised humanism (1990a; 1996). This would also account for the radically conflicting assessments of her work and its appearance in both postmodernist and modernist feminist camps. Albeit generalised, those who classify Wittig as a postmodern writer are, on the whole, literary theorists examining the feminist postmodern strategies of the fiction (Chisholm 1993; Crowder 1983; Shaktini 1982; 1990a; 1990b), whereas those who assess her as a modernist are generally feminist postmodern philosophers principally concerned with the modernist element of her critical writings (Griggers 1994; Roof 1994; Wiegman 1994). As Butler comments:

Wittig's radical feminist theory occupies an ambiguous position within the continuum of theories on the question of the subject. On the one hand, Wittig appears to dispute the metaphysics of substance, but on the other hand, she retains the human subject, the individual, as the metaphysical locus of agency. While Wittig's humanism clearly presupposes that there is

a doer behind the deed, her theory nevertheless delineates the performative construction of gender within the material practices of culture, disputing the temporality of those explanations that would confuse “cause” with “result.”

Wittig calls for a position beyond sex that returns her theory to a problematic humanism based in a problematic metaphysics of presence. And yet, her literary works appear to enact a different kind of political strategy than the one for which she explicitly calls in her theoretical essays. In *The Lesbian Body* and in *Les Guérillères*, the narrative strategy through which political transformation is articulated makes use of redeployment and transvaluation time and again both to make use of originally oppressive terms and to deprive them of their legitimating functions. (1990a: 25-6, 124)

The feminist postmodern *point de départ* of the critical writings is projected as one of the principal themes of *Les Guérillères*. Making use of defamiliarising poetic devices – repetition, unpunctuated lists of verbs and nouns, and an incantatory active voice – the prose poetry fragments in parts two and three of the novel expound invocations to action. Among these is a call for the destruction of binary hierarchies, the rejection of biological essentialism, and accounts of the construction of gender. The women repeatedly reject their equation with the negative side of the binary hierarchy, with “la terre la mer les larmes ce qui est humide ce qui est noir [...] ce qui est négatif celles qui se rendent sans combattre” (111),<sup>5</sup> which have been passed off as the natural consequence of women’s biological essentialism: “Elles disent que, chose étrange, ce qu’ils ont dans leurs discours érigé comme une différence essentielle, ce sont des variantes biologiques” (146).<sup>6</sup> As in Wittig’s theory, the women also repudiate the binary hierarchy manifest in the social sciences: they reject their exclusion from the realm of the Symbolic, their relegation to the status of signs by Lévi-Strauss and to the signifier of absence by psychoanalysis: “ils t’ont chassée du monde des signes”

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<sup>5</sup> “the earth the sea tears that which is humid that which is black that which does not burn that which is negative those who surrender without a struggle.” (Wittig 1985a: 78)

<sup>6</sup> “They say, oddly enough what they have exalted in their words as an essential difference is a

(162);<sup>7</sup> “Elles disent, je refuse désormais de parler ce langage, je refuse de marmotter après eux les mots de manque manque de pénis manque d’argent manque de signe manque de nom” (153).<sup>8</sup> Although the women clearly avail themselves here of a feminist postmodern stance, other invocations to action, or themes, in parts two and three of the novel are less uniform in their politics, in particular the call to women to form a collectivity. Although this theme may be interpreted as postmodernist if read in conjunction with Spivak, Fuss and Butler, it derives from a revised modernism in Wittig’s own critical writings and recalls the radical feminism of the WLM or *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* in France.

The notion of solidarity, glimpsed in the use of “elles” and the capitalised list of women’s names, re-emerges in the invocations to the women to “Redoutez la dispersion. Restez jointes” (82), because “elles savent ce qu’ensemble elles signifient” (120).<sup>9</sup> Repeated reference to the women as “esclaves” (126, 162, 186), to the preference of death over “servitude” (132, 166), comparisons with oppressed races (146, 162), and descriptions of men as “maîtres,” or “opresseurs dominateurs” (153, 162, 146-7) introduce the binary hierarchy in new terms: women are an oppressed class, men the ruling class.<sup>10</sup> Although Wittig rejects what she perceives as Cixous’ biological essentialism, this theme borders on Cixous’ “realm of the Proper.” While the ruling class of men are depicted as obsessed with possession and possessions, those who join the women are significantly described as “dispossessing themselves” of their epithets, which they grant the women as tribute (204): “Elles disent, vile, vile créateur dont la possession équivaut au bonheur, bétail sacré qui va de pair avec les richesses, le pouvoir, le loisir. En effet n’a-t-il pas écrit, le pouvoir et la possession des femmes, le loisir et la jouissance des femmes? Il écrit que tu es monnaie

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biological variation.” (Wittig 1985a: 102)

<sup>7</sup> “men have expelled you from the world of symbols.” (Wittig 1985a: 112)

<sup>8</sup> “The women say I refuse henceforth to speak this language, I refuse to mumble after them the words lack of penis lack of money lack of insignia lack of name.” (Wittig 1985a: 107)

<sup>9</sup> “Beware of dispersal. Remain united...” (Wittig 1985a: 85); “they are aware of the force of their unity.” (58)

<sup>10</sup> “slaves;” “masters;” “domineering oppressors.” (Wittig 1985a)



d'échange, que tu es signe d'échange. Il écrit, troc, troc, possession acquisition des femmes et des marchandises" (166).<sup>11</sup> Fragments towards the end of the novel, however, chart the disintegration of this class dichotomy via the increasing enrolment of men into the women's collectivity and the eventual instatement of peace and equality.

Drawing on radical feminist anti-slave rhetoric, the above recalls Wittig's modernist description of equality in her critical writing as the accession of all individuals to universality and as a dialectical fusion of class and gender oppositions. However, read in conjunction with postmodern feminism, this theme yields other possibilities. The increasing inclusion of men into the women's group, described by critics as an anti-isolationist and polysemic strategy (Duffy 1990; Heathcote 1993; Porter 1989), as well as an emphasis throughout this section on the way in which various groups of women form a coalition, is reminiscent of feminist postmodernism - Spivak's "strategic essentialism" (Butler 1990a; Fuss 1994), Fuss' "nominal essence" and "political coalition" (1994), Haraway's coalition of affinity and choice (1990), and Butler's revised "open coalition" politics (1990a; 1990b). Of particular interest are Fuss and Spivak who highlight anti-essentialist feminism's inevitable recourse to modernist terminology. Fuss resurrects Lockian categories: whereas Locke's "real" essence connotes the Aristotelian notion of unchanging essence, the "nominal" essence is a linguistic and classificatory construction, which serves the purpose of categorisation. Thus, for political purposes, anti-essential feminists are able to hold on to the notion of "women" as a linguistic group rather than yielding to the idea that it is nature that categorises them. Similarly, according to Spivak, when employed singularly by oppressed groups and as a temporary measure, deconstructive humanism provides a useful way in which anti-essentialist feminists may retain the class of women as a political category for feminism. These arguments provide a feminist postmodern reading of *Les Guérillères* as an anti-essentialist novel interested in retaining the notion of class solidarity, or coalition, for political reasons.

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<sup>11</sup> "They say, Vile, vile creature for whom possession is equated with happiness, a sacred cow on the same footing as riches, power, leisure. Has he not indeed written, power and the possession of women, leisure and the enjoyment of women? He writes that you are currency, an item of exchange. He writes, barter, barter, possession and acquisition of women and merchandise." (Wittig 1985a: 115-6)

Wittig's critical commentary on men and women as class antagonists or potential collective, which draws simultaneously on postmodernist and modernist approaches, is maintained by her distinction between "woman" and "women": in alliance with feminist postmodernism, Wittig rejects "woman" as a cultural and mythical construction, and her repeated declaration that there is "no natural group 'women,'" corresponds to Butler's questioning of "women" as the subject of feminism (Butler 1990a; Wittig 1992b). On the other hand, however, her retention of the word "women" to denote the class within which women fight *as subjects* returns the argument once again to Wittig's revised humanism: "Once the class 'men' disappears, 'women' as a class will disappear as well, for there are no slaves without masters. Our first task, it seems, is to always thoroughly dissociate 'women' (the class within which we fight) and 'woman,' the myth. For 'woman' does not exist for us: it is only an imaginary formation, while 'women' is the product of a social relationship" (1992b: 15-6). Employing the same comparisons between women and slaves as those found in *Les Guérillères* (1979; 1992a; 1992b; 1992c; 1992d; 1992e), Wittig's material feminism aims to abolish the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy via a revised (Marxist) dialectics. Development of class awareness, followed by the mutual destruction of both classes (oppressor/men, oppressed/women), is intended to birth a new equality in which "all categories of others will be transferred onto the side of the One, of Being, of the Subject" (1992e: 53): "To understand social reality in dialectical materialist terms is to apprehend the oppositions between classes, term to term, and make them meet under the same copula (a conflict in the social order), which is also a resolution (an abolition in the social order) of the apparent contradictions" (1992a: 2). As Butler argues, however, this Marcusean dream for a sexuality without power or relations of domination, a position rejected by Angela Carter's *Doctor Hoffmann* (1972), is untenable;<sup>12</sup> instead, relations of power must be redeployed, preferably through their multiplication to a point where the oppressor/oppressed model is no longer hegemonic (Butler 1990a, 1996; Marcuse in Tallack 1995 [1966]). Indeed, this is a strategy that is enacted, as Butler argues, in both *Les Guérillères* and *Le Corps lesbien*.

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<sup>12</sup> See Birkett (1996) for a discussion of the influence of Marcuse on Wittig. This reflects a specific trend in 1970s France as witnessed in the works of Christiane Rochefort.

Wittig's project to create a revised humanism for a postmodern age is also revealed in issues surrounding language, writing and story-telling, deemed by most critics as the main theme of *Les Guérillères* (Duffy 1990). In parts two and three of the novel the women perform a (feminist) postmodern deconstruction of the way in which (women's) reality is constructed by language. Armed with the knowledge that "il n'y a pas de réalité avant que les mots les règles les règlements lui aient donné forme" (192),<sup>13</sup> the women are incited to reject the patriarchal language and narratives which have oppressed them, named and therefore possessed them, construed them as biologically determined, and created of them "celle qui ne parle pas [...] celle qui n'écrit pas" (159).<sup>14</sup> The women reject the current linguistic code for conspiring to repress evidence that women may have experienced a status other than slave and for precluding the recognition of possibilities not articulated by that code (162, 164). Although these sections are largely concerned with bringing such issues to light, and conveying demands for a new language (94, 120, 154, 189, 192), they nevertheless propose two possible starting points: firstly, a *tabula rasa*, a phase of destruction and regeneration effected by the war and expressed in the repeated symbolic phrases "Elles disent qu'elles partent de zéro" (88, 121), "Un grand vent balaie la terre. Le soleil va se lever" (94, 189);<sup>15</sup> secondly, in alliance with Alice Jardine's feminist postmodern *gyneesis* (1993 [1985]), the possibility of employing the lacunae in the prevailing male discourse:

Ce sur quoi ils n'ont pas mis la main, ce sur quoi ils n'ont pas fondu comme des rapaces aux yeux multiples, cela n'apparaît pas dans le langage que tu parles. Cela se manifeste juste dans l'intervalle que les maîtres n'ont pas pu combler avec leurs mots de propriétaires et de possesseurs, cela peut se chercher dans la lacune, dans tout ce qui n'est pas la continuité de leurs discours, dans le zéro, le O, le cercle parfait que tu inventes pour les

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<sup>13</sup> "there is no reality before it has been given shape by words rules regulations." (Wittig 1985a: 134)

<sup>14</sup> "that...which does not speak [...] which does not write." (Wittig 1985a: 110-1)

<sup>15</sup> "They say that they are starting from zero" (Wittig: 1985a: 66); "They say that a great wind is sweeping the earth. They say that the sun is about to rise." (85)

emprisonner et pour les vaincre. (Wittig 1990 [1969]: 162, 164)<sup>16</sup>

While the latter solutions are presented thematically, in part one of *Les Guérillères* the women enact the invocations expounded above in parts two and three. A *tabula rasa* is effected through the public burning of the “feminaries”, formerly celebrated for their accurate descriptions of the female genitalia and henceforth renounced as bearers of received knowledge, outmoded patriarchal language and codifications of the female body (67). The ensuing period of silence culminates with the creation of “the great register,” which is significantly both co-produced and non-chronological. The women, therefore, become active writers, speakers and possessors of knowledge (74) and select themselves those stories which will become history as entered into the register; further invocations in parts two and three inciting the women to (re)invent their own realities, histories, stories, and past (127) are thus also enacted. The importance of the register is emphasised by Wittig’s employment of *mise-en-abyme*, a typically postmodern defamiliarising device, “which disturbs the orderly hierarchy of ontological levels (worlds within worlds), in effect *short-circuiting* the ontological structure, and thus foregrounding it” (McHale 1994: 14). The great register captures *en abyme* the open, polysemic and avant-garde nature of Wittig’s *Les Guérillères*, as well as similar messages in her critical writings. Further manifestations of new works include the compilation of a dictionary (106, 108) and the participation of both “elles” and “ils” at the end of the war in the renaming of their new world (198). Finally, this call to women to both wield language and create a new language is enacted textually: most fragments comprise the relation of stories and events; books, public reading, and writing are emphasised (16-7, 74, 84-5, 129-30); predominant use of the active voice positions the women as subjects of discourse; repetition, particularly of “elles disent,” produces an incantatory, oral quality which emphasises the power of the word. While the deconstruction of patriarchal language and narratives, the use of *mise-en-abyme*, and *gynesis* characterise a decidedly postmodern style and politics, the call to women

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<sup>16</sup> “Whatever they have not laid their hands on, whatever they have not pounced on like many-eyed birds of prey, does not appear in the language you speak. This is apparent precisely in the intervals that your masters have not been able to fill with the words of proprietors and possessors, this can be found in the gaps, in all that which is not a continuation of their discourse, in the zero, the O, the perfect circle that you invent to imprison them and to overthrow them” (Wittig 1985a: 114). In the French original this poem is separated by the emboldened, capitalised list of women’s names.

to become *subjects* of language echoes the revised humanism elaborated in the critical writings.

Wittig's critical commentary concerning language typically seeks to align both a postmodernist and reformulated modernist politics. Like Butler, Wittig believes that "sex" belongs to a discursively produced reality, a reified second-order which is the cause of oppression. While in this instance the constructing power of language serves oppression (Wittig 1992c), its positive transformation is equally capable of effecting corresponding change at the "conceptual-philosophical level and the political one" (Wittig 1992h: 89). Wittig also acknowledges the (postmodern) disjunction between language and reality, although her specific analysis focuses on the material damage that language nevertheless effects on social bodies that it aims to interpret: "Physical or social reality and language are disconnected. Abstraction, symbols, signs do not belong to the real. There is on one side the real, the referent, and on the other side language. [...] I say that even abstract philosophical categories act upon the real as social. Language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it" (1992h: 77-8; also 1992d). Having thus far relied on a postmodern approach, Wittig draws henceforth on modernist assumptions to support her claim for the transformatory capacity of language. This faith in humanism impels Wittig to re-examine the emancipatory potential of the Enlightenment philosophers' "social contract" - the concept that society could be "established with the agreement of its members and for their best good" (1992d: 37). As language is perceived as the fundamental basis of the social contract, its transformation is deemed capable of reconstructing the prevailing heterosexist ideology (Wittig 1992d). Wittig's humanist view of language claims, furthermore, that social constructions are disempowered via speech acts which appeal to the universality of language and a transcendent ontology of unified and equal persons (1992b; 1992e; 1992i). Such a vision of language parallels Wittig's humanist pursuit of a sexuality freed from power and relations of domination:

What is smothered by all kinds of talk, whether it be that of the street or of the philosopher's study, is the first language [...]: the one in which

meaning has not yet occurred, the one which is for all, which belongs to all, and which everyone in turn can take, use, bend toward a meaning. For this is the social pact that binds us, the exclusive contract (none other is possible), a social contract that exists just as Rousseau imagined it, one where there are neither men nor women, neither races nor oppression, nothing but what can be named progressively, word by word, language. (1992i: 93)

Thus, women are able to “speak” themselves out of oppression; their positioning as authoritative speaking subjects will entail the overthrow of both the feminine and the linguistically constructed categories of sex. Although the postmodern and modernist positions coalesce in their shared belief in the power of language to execute change, as Butler demonstrates, their philosophical underpinnings radically diverge: in the postmodern view power can never be transcended, only redeployed (Butler 1990a; Roof 1994). Finally, however, if *Les Guérillères*’ vested interest in the women’s constitution as subjects may be regarded as reflecting such humanist sovereign speech acts, the novel also offers an alternative politics; the lack of discernible characters, multiple, unidentifiable narrators and perspectives, yields, on the other hand, a postmodern decentred subject – hence, Moi remarks about *Les Guérillères*, “When the text no longer offers an individual grasped as the transcendental origin of language and experience, humanist feminism must lay down its arms” (1988: 80).

This investment in postmodern fictional strategies, manifest in the novel’s form and the thematic issues discussed above, equally informs its other stylistic features – demythologising and generic play. While, on the one hand, the novel’s (de)mythologising arises from a postmodern alliance with the literary fantastic and narratological non-realism, on the other hand, it comprises a (feminist) postmodern reworking of structuralist anthropology - Lévi-Strauss’ *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* and Barthes’ *Mythologies* (1970; 1973a). Like a number of feminist postmodern authors - Cixous, Carter, Winterson, Wolf - Wittig recasts the ideological dimension of (post)structuralist semiology into a politically critical tool: firstly, in order to examine the way in which “woman” is the constructed product of

(patriarchal) mythology and symbolism; secondly, to destroy binary hierarchisation; thirdly, to expose the latter's underlying phallocentrism. In *Les Guérillères*, this mechanism manifests itself largely via a temporary inversion, and then displacement, of gender hierarchy. Thus, the pervasive vulvar symbolism in part one of the novel – its celebration, and, ultimate renunciation – plays a major role in Wittig's deconstructionist programme. Initially, reverence for the vulva coincides with the acquisition of body awareness and emerging feminist consciousness, recovery of non-reproductive sexual bodily parts, and displacement of the phallus as universal signifier; its ultimate erasure, however, enacts a refusal of the reversal of the binary hierarchy in favour of the feminine and thereby rejects both neo-femininity and synecdochic interpretations of the body. Cultic veneration of the vulva finds its departure point in the “féminaires” (feminaries) whose play on “bestiaire” (bestiary) is reminiscent of the derogatory association of women and animals. Indeed, the feminaries' representation of traditional notions of women – objectification of the body and reduction to genitalia – indicate that their likely authors are men.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, their cataloguing of the female body in terms of natural metaphors (42, 60, 66-7), geometric shapes (43, 67), and symbols (67), initially equips the women with a means of overthrow. The circulation of myths and symbols privileged by the feminaries – including, amongst others, the O, zero, circle, and sun – are employed to perpetuate a new vulvacentric ideology (61). Objects, legends, and myths are reinterpreted as insignia of vulvar symbolism – the compass (11), lucky horseshoe (61), rings, jewels (67), and legends of the Round Table and Holy Grail (61-2). Albeit provisional, vulvacentrism mirrors the way in which the current patriarchal ideology is maintained and naturalised via mythologisation. Furthermore, Wittig's symbolism and mythology – both prior and subsequent to vulvacentrism – exemplifies extended employment of feminist postmodern demythologisation.

During the stage of vulvacentrism, the O, circle, and zero – universally signifying the unity of inverse opposites, infinity, totality, and harmony (Brunel 1992; Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996) – are emphatically linked and rendered interchangeable with

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<sup>17</sup> See Birkett (1996), who directs our attention to the bibliography at the end of *Les Guérillères* and its list of well-known texts claiming to be authorities on sexuality, language and society (e.g. Zwang).

“l’anneau vulvaire” (the vulval ring) (16, 35). This representation of the O and circle as vulval ring displaces ancient symbols of women as vessel, vase, and urn, thereby subverting their reduction to womb and procreation (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996). The O as vulva manifests itself in *Les Guérillères* in the large Os which punctuate the novel, the “O continu” (continuous O) of the siren’s song (16), and the emblem of Amaterasu, the sun-goddess (35). Wittig’s feminist postmodern demythologising strategy revalorises the monstrous man-eating bird/fish-women of Greek myth whose fantastical condition is ascribed to divine punishment (Brunel 1992; Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996; Grimal 1974, 1990; Robinson and Wilson 1972; Tripp 1970; Warner 1994). As traditional icons for the sun, the O and circle also anticipate the reclamation of traditional solar mythology and symbolism by vulvacentrism. Linked symbolically to the positive side of the male/female binary hierarchy - creation, light, life, law, reason, arts, supreme power, war, and the male sex organ - the sun traditionally dons its glory on numerous transhistoric and transcultural solar gods<sup>18</sup> – and, by extension, men (Brunel 1992; Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996; Grimal 1990; Robinson and Wilson 1972). Women, by comparison, are conventionally associated with the moon, dark sky, primordial darkness, the underworld, and attendant negative symbolism: darkness, passivity, dependency, fluctuation, death; numerous moon goddesses associated with virginity, nature, fertility, darkness, and maliciousness, incarnate this lunar symbolism (Brunel 1992; Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996; Grimal 1974, 1990; Robinson and Wilson 1972).<sup>19</sup> However, in *Les Guérillères* solar symbolism supports the edifice of vulvacentrism; the sun is appropriated by the women and associated primarily with their vulvas, which are repeatedly bestowed with two of the sun’s attendant qualities – gold and shining light (18-9, 24, 60-1, 62,

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<sup>18</sup> Sun Gods: the Titan Helios, Apollo/Phoebus of the Olympian dynasty, Roman Sol, and Ra, Osiris, and Horus of the Egyptians, Hindu Vishnu, Buddha, the Judeo-Christian Christ; and perhaps less well-known the Babylonian Shamash, (early Indian) Vedic Suyra, Mayan Itzamna, Polynesian Tane, Aztec Quetzalcoatl, (early Italian) Etruscan Usil, Celtic Lugh (Irish), Nudd (British), and Llew Llaw Gyffes, Nordic and Teutonic Balder, and pagan Russian Dazhbog.

<sup>19</sup> Moon goddesses: the Titan Selene, Hecate and Olympian Artemis, Romans Diana and Luna, Egyptian Isis, Chinese Heng-ugo, Etruscan Losna, Nordic and Teutonic Nanna, Aztec Metzli, Mayan Ixchel, and Central and South American Chia. While the sun/male, moon/female dichotomy is accepted as wide-spread, there are notable exceptions: Japanese, German, nomadic pastoral, Mongol, Turkic, Celtic, southern Semitic, and Indo-European myths or languages (for the variety of reasons behind these variations see reference).



73). Firstly, “shining” is the literal translation of the names of many sun gods; secondly, gold universally denotes the sun, divinity, royalty, knowledge, fire, and immortality (Brunel 1992; Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996; Opie and Tatem 1990). The patriarchal castration-myth of the toothed vagina is clearly rendered meaningless in this resplendent world of vulvacentrism.

The reclamation of the sun and its attributes for women finds its culmination in the novel’s pantheon of sun-goddesses, notably Amaterasu and Cihuacoatl, invoked to aid the subversion of patriarchal order and ascribed the insignia of war, fire, and divine wrath (34-5, 35-6, 37). Wittig demythologises the legend of Ama-Terasu, who despite her unusual status as sun deity, provider of light to humanity, and unique reversal of the gender-based binary hierarchy underpinning Shinto mythology, retains nevertheless a subservient position in the Japanese *Kojiki* (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996; Grimal 1974; Robinson and Wilson 1972).<sup>20</sup> Through Cihuacoatl Wittig demythologises a more unfamiliar mythology: the accession to sun-deity of this Aztec figure who abandoned her baby reiterates Wittig’s rejection of maternity as the defining feature of woman (Grimal 1974). Transposed into its fiery element, the sun also appears in a feminised version of the Prometheus myth (62) and in the Eve-Medusa-Eurydice who possesses “la vraie connaissance du mythe solaire” (73):

Une femme nue y marche. Son beau corps est noir et brillant. Ses cheveux sont des serpents fins et mobiles qui produisent une musique à chacun de ses mouvements. C’est la chevelure conseillère. On l’appelle ainsi parce qu’elle communique par la bouche de ses cent mille serpents avec la femme porteuse de la chevelure. Orphée, le serpent préféré de la femme qui marche dans le jardin, sans cesse lui conseille de manger du fruit de l’arbre du milieu du jardin. [...] Ou bien il lui est répondu que, dès qu’elle aura mangé le fruit [...] elle aura la connaissance. [...] Sophie Ménade dit que la femme du verger aura la vraie connaissance du mythe

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<sup>20</sup> While the sun/moon dualism in most mythology is based on the masculine/active and feminine/passive dichotomy, Japanese and German mythology are exceptional in so far as the perceived active nature of fecundity associates the sun with goddesses. Nevertheless, despite her status as sun-goddess Amaterasu’s description remains vague and undetailed.

solaire que tous les textes ont à dessein obscurci. (Wittig 1990 [1969]: 72-3)<sup>21</sup>

This beautiful woman, coiffed with musical and counselling snakes, demythologises the traditional Greek legend of Medusa as monster, castrating femininity, or victim of metamorphosis (Brunel 1992; Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996; Grimal 1974, 1990; Tripp 1970; Robinson and Wilson 1972; Warner 1998). The Judeo-Christian myth of woman as nature and subservience, depicted by the Fall and the birth from Adam's rib, is also overthrown – this Eve is black, autonomous, incorporated with a pagan monster, and keeper of the solar mysteries (Brunel 1992; Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996; Lefkowitz 1986; Warner 1994).<sup>22</sup> Thus, rather than forfeiting Eurydice to the underworld, snake-Orpheus has guided her from “the hell of ignorance” towards a “positive quest for knowledge” (Crowder 1983: 131).

Vulvacentrism, however, is put under erasure at the end of part one, which depicts the ritual burning of the feminaries and the resignification of all symbols and myths venerating the vulva. The women realise that “les féminaires aient rempli leur office,” they are “démodés,” and “imprégnés [...] de vieux textes qui pour la plupart ne sont plus entre leurs mains” (67-8).<sup>23</sup> In order to avoid becoming “prisonnières de leur propre idéologie” (80), the metaphors (74, 93), symbols (86), hyperboles (93), and myths (38), which initially established a discourse on female sexuality, are henceforth systematically and ritualistically recanted: “Elles ne disent pas que les vulves dans

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<sup>21</sup> “A naked woman walks therein. Her beautiful body is black and shining. Her hair consists of slender mobile snakes which produce music at her every movement. This is the hortative head of hair. It is so called because it communicates by the mouths of its hundred thousand snakes with the women wearing the headdress. Orpheus, the favourite snake of the woman who walks in the garden, keeps advising her to eat the fruit of the tree in the centre of the garden. [...] Or else the answer is given that, as soon as she has eaten the fruit [...] she will acquire knowledge. [...] Sophie Ménade says that the woman of the orchard will have a clear understanding of the solar myth that all the texts have deliberately obscured.” (Wittig 1985a: 52)

<sup>22</sup> While this figure's head of snakes clearly recalls the image of Medusa, it may also be interpreted as a reworking of Eve and the serpent, an interpretation of Eve which appears in numerous literary texts. Indeed, the serpent in Zola's *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* is described as visible among the locks of Eve's hair.

<sup>23</sup> “the feminaries have fulfilled their function. [...] thoroughly indoctrinated as they are with ancient texts no longer to hand, these seem to them outdated.” (Wittig 1985a: 57)

leurs formes elliptiques sont à comparer aux soleils, aux planètes, aux galaxies innombrables. Elles ne disent pas que..." (86).<sup>24</sup>

Elles disent qu'au point où elles en sont elles doivent examiner le principe qui les a guidées. Elles disent qu'elles n'ont pas à puiser leur force dans des symboles. [...] Elles disent qu'il faut alors cesser d'exalter les vulves. Elles disent qu'elles doivent rompre le dernier lien qui les rattache à une culture morte. Elles disent que tout symbole qui exalte le corps fragmenté est temporaire, doit disparaître. (Wittig 1990 [1969]: 102)<sup>25</sup>

This relinquishment of vulvacentrism reveals Wittig's fictional and critical repudiation of neo-femininity, *écriture féminine*, and metonymic representations of bodies-in-parts (Roudiez 1986; Wittig 1992a; 1992b; 1992e). These issues, however, which find their fictional debut above, bear much greater import for Wittig's following novel and thus inform the subsequent discussion of *Le Corps lesbien*. For present purposes, the major significance of this renunciation of vulvacentrism, as emphasised by Butler and other critics, lies in its adherence to one of the central tenets of postmodern feminism: "In contrast to a strategy that consolidates women's identity through an exclusionary process of differentiation, Wittig offers a strategy of reappropriation and subversive redeployment of precisely those 'values' that originally appeared to belong to the masculine domain" (Butler 1990a: 126; also Crowder 1983; Duffy 1990; Porter 1989, 1992). Indeed, this can be witnessed in Wittig's further manipulation of symbolism, mythology and generic play.

While Wittig's demythologising machine pursues its course of deconstruction, the novel's mythological rewritings no longer revolve around vulval symbolism - the O, zero, circle, and sun undergo a process of resignification. The O and the zero adopt the latter's traditional meaning of destruction prior to regeneration (Chevalier and

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<sup>24</sup> "prisoners of their own ideology"; "They do not say that vulvas with their elliptical shape are to be compared to suns, planets, innumerable galaxies. They do not say that...." (Wittig 1985a: 57, 61)

<sup>25</sup> "They say that at the point they have reached they must examine the principle that has guided them. They say it is not for them to exhaust their strength in symbols. [...] They say that they must now stop exalting the vulva. They say that they must break the last bond that binds them to a dead culture. They

Gheerbrant 1996) and signify henceforth the zero point of departure for both a new writing and anti-hierarchical coalition. This is manifest in *Les Guérillères'* ancient sect of "Ophidiennes" (105-6), "coalition of O's" and redoubtable weapon the "ospah" (149-50), the collective conspiratorial sign (174-5), burial mark (178-9), and overthrow (162). The circle also adopts its traditional symbolism of harmony, cosmic unity, and overthrow (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996), appearing in the depiction of the Eastern stupa (97), war-dances imitative of the Whirling Dervish (133), and subversion (162). The vulval-sun, centrepin of the vulvacentric chapter, is resignified as a harbinger of prosperity (94, 109, 137, 189). Finally, Wittig's feminisation and revalorisation of patriarchal myths encompass henceforth those pertinent to the novel's depiction of epic sex-war: war dances celebrating the Roman Minerva (132-3, 142) redeem this goddess of wisdom, arts, crafts and war, who despite her increasing popularity over Mars, plays nevertheless no direct part in Roman myth (Grimal 1974, 1990; Robinson and Wilson 1972; Tripp 1970). Also, as warriors, the women compare themselves to Othar (183), traditionally Egyptian Hathor, associated with the sun, executor of humanity, goddess of music, dancing, and love; in their anger they invoke Out to crush the heavens (183) thus subverting the Egyptian myth of Nut, supporter of the celestial vault (Grimal 1974; Robinson and Wilson 1970). However, the novel's paradigmatic act of demythologisation resides in the subversion of the Amazon myth, which heralds Wittig's final (feminist) postmodern strategy – the rewriting and fusion of traditional and popular genres.

The novel's title – "female guerillas" – along with reference to "Hippolyte [...] la reine des Amazones" (121),<sup>26</sup> the (Amazon) race of Sauromatae (161), and the first all-female state (164) clearly invoke an Amazonian mythology. While Wittig's separatist community of female warriors sustains this analogy, the latter enact nevertheless a reversal of the traditional Amazon myth. The much-debated historical reality of Amazonian culture is extraneous: ancient writers - historians and poets alike (Herodotus, Aeschylus) – collude in their presentation of the Amazons as a realistic threat to "civilised" Greek society and were more interested in the dissemination of

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say that any symbol that exalts the fragmented body is transient, must disappear." (Wittig 1985a: 102)

universal human values than the distinction between fact and fiction (Lefkowitz, 1986). Transposed, like all things un-Greek (Scythians, Lycians, Egyptians, Colchians), into Greece's Other, its barbaric counterpart, the Amazons act as a negative foil to the former's civilisation and masculinist ideology (Lefkowitz 1986; Tripp 1970). The restriction of Greek women to the domestic sphere was the product of a universally accepted belief in biological difference, gender segregation and hierarchisation; women were born to serve, men to govern. As an antithesis, the Amazons, or *a-mazos* ("without breast"), were self-governing warriors who raised only female children, mated outdoors with strangers, and fought a coward's battle using ambush, horseback, bows and javelin. The Amazons, therefore, monstrously transgressed a natural gendered order: male authority; differentiation between male and female activities; and, most importantly, biological distinctions between male and female sexes (Brunel 1992; Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996; Lefkowitz 1986; Porter 1984). According to the ancients, it was the chaos unleashed by their contravention of natural order which empowered the Amazons to defeat their male opponents; significantly, however, they were vanquished by all the Greek heroes who opposed them. Thus, echoing numerous critics, Porter concludes:

the myth of the Amazons [...], was the creation of feminophobic males wishing to disparage the notion women could fight (and, by extension, to disparage the notion that they could secure and maintain political independence), by showing that in every respect their hypothetical society would embody the antithesis of Greek values. (1989: 94)

Wittig's (de)(re)mythologising – reminiscent of Christa Wolf's seminal works *Kassandra* (1983) and *Medea* (1998) – reverses Amazonian mythology and its attendant values: traditionally slain by Heracles (Grimal 1990), Hippolyta usurps the latter's position by defeating the (Nemean) lion and thus completing Heracles' legendary first labour (121). Similarly, the (Amazon) Sauromatae or Sarmatians, pejoratively named after the *sauros* (lizard milk) on which they fed their babies (Lefkowitz 1986), are revered by Wittig's women: marriage is prohibited prior to the

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<sup>26</sup> "Hippolyta [...] queen of the Amazons...." (Wittig 1985a: 85)

defeat of three enemies (161). The disparity between the traditional Amazons and Wittig's "guérillères" displaces the ancient Greek binary gender hierarchy; these warrior women are both feminine and masculine, and while anatomically female perform a Butlerian proliferation of gender positions occupied by a particular sexed body. Thus, while clearly usurping aggressive domains from which women have traditionally been excluded – fighting, war-dancing, farming, hunting – they are depicted also in range of other areas, such as games, dancing and peaceable negotiation. Furthermore, as opposed to ablating one breast, interpreted by the ancients as portraying the desire to *be* men rather than women, Wittig's warriors bare their breasts with pride – resplendent, protective, but also aggressive:

Elles se tiennent au-dessus des remparts, le visage couvert d'une poudre brillante. [...] Les assiégeants sont près des murs, indécis. Elles alors, sur un signal, en poussant un cri terrible, déchirent tout d'un coup le haut de leurs vêtements, découvrant leurs seins nus, brillants. Les ennemis se mettent à délibérer sur ce qu'unaniment ils appellent un geste de soumission. Ils dépêchent des ambassadeurs [...]. Elles, faisant moduler leurs voix dans des stridences qui exaspèrent l'oreille, avec des flèches avec les pierres avec la poix brûlante, une à une, soutiennent le siège [...]. Au-dessus des murs les combattantes sont vues, chantant sans s'arrêter, leurs grandes bouches ouvertes sur les dents blanches. Dans leurs visages noircis, les joues brillent encore. Certaines ont de grands rires et, portant en avant leurs seins nus, dans un mouvement brutal, elles manifestent leur agressivité. (Wittig 1990 [1969]: 143-4)<sup>27</sup>

The above quotation, exemplifying Wittig's manipulation of the subversive excess of

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<sup>27</sup> "They stand on the ramparts, faces covered with a shining powder. [...] The male besiegers are near the walls, indecisive. Then the women, at a signal, uttering a terrible cry, suddenly rip off the upper part of their garments, uncovering their naked gleaming breasts. The men, the enemy, begin to discuss what they unanimously regard as a gesture of submission. They send ambassadors [...]. The women, modulating their voices into a stridency that distresses the ear, withstand the siege, one by one, with arrows stones burning pitch [...]. The combatants are visible above the wall, singing without pause, their mouths wide open over white teeth. Their cheeks still glow in their blackened faces. Some laugh out loud and manifest their aggressiveness by thrusting their bare breasts forward brutally." (Wittig 1985: 99-100)

the female grotesque and carnivalesque laughter, introduces the displacement of the ancient Greeks' other main binary hierarchy - the civilised/barbaric dichotomy. Like most postmodern allegories, where good/bad is transposed into Apollonian versus Dionysian principles (McHale 1994), *Les Guérillères*' polar oppositions inevitably collapse: the women's self-definition as barbarians (188), numerous savage (war) cries, and primitive communities, are counterposed by images of "civilised", peaceable and futuristic societies; furthermore, while the women are linked to Apollo (sun, arts, wisdom) through their possession of solar symbolism, their intoxicated dances – topoi of utopianism and the carnivalesque (McHale 1994; Levitas 1990) – depict them as Bacchantes (132-3, 142), or "Dionysian revolutionaries" (McHale 1994: 175). Finally, unlike the traditional Amazons, Wittig's warriors win their battles and form a coalition with men – and, in doing so, reverse the rules of the traditional epic genre.

On one level, this engagement with epic marks both postmodernism and the *Nouveau Roman*'s rewriting and integration of popular and traditional genres; on another level, it comprises a feminist postmodern critique of binary hierarchisation underlying traditional literary genres. Besides its celebration of masculinity, the epic is deemed the natural province of male writers, even by contemporary critics:

The heroic fantasy almost always creates masculine figures: this phenomenon can be explained by the physical superiority of men, the social position of women until recent times, and by motherhood. At a deeper level, we should consider the hypothesis that the heroic is a masculine fantasy: there are many women creators in the history of literatures, but none have been tempted by the epic world. (Brunel 1992: 564)

Wittig's self-avowed derivation of *Les Guérillères* from twelfth-century epic the *Chanson de Guillaume d'Orange* (Shaktini 1992; Wittig 1994) qualifies such oversimplistic generalisations; female characters Guibourc and Ermengard, unique on account of their cross-dressing and participation in battle, provide the model for Wittig's "guérillères." Traditionally, women in the epic genre occupy a number of

formulaic parts: beguiling obstacle to the heroic task, temporary play-thing, helpless tears, gentle Christian haven, and unattainable virgin (Brunel 1992; Porter 1989). Inspired by the ladies of Orange and a feminist postmodern displacement of gendered stereotyping, *Les Guérillères*' epic fragments depict marching columns of female warriors (108-9, 120, 130, 132), heroic battles (135-6), the razing of cities (155, 188), defence of towns (143-4, 191), seizure of industry and communications (137), and the tearful cowardice of captured men (139, 140, 148). Wittig reformulates specific sequences from the "heroic model": the individual male hero is replaced by the collective hero(ine) "elles" (Wittig 1994), the patriotic enumeration of heroes by the lists of women's names, both void of the patronymic and drawn from wide-ranging cultural, historical and mythical sources. Furthermore, the women endure a gestation and rebirth similar to the traditional hero's period of obscurity and successive (re)births (Brunel 1992) – only at the price of acquired body awareness and feminist consciousness do the women of part one emerge as heroes. Employing the literary fantastic trope of body-as-landscape (Porter 1992), the women overcome a number of obstacles presented by the surroundings and representative of a detachment from patriarchal culture – the flesh-ridden sea as menstruation (112), the exploration of peat-bogs as masturbation (19), and the crevice-seeking "glénures" as parodies of the penis (28). Thus, unlike rare epic women who "lose their heroism with their virginity" (Brunel 1992: 564), Wittig's warriors accede to heroism through their acquisition of "sexual maturation" (Porter 1992: 256).

Finally, this rewriting and integration of popular and traditional genres – drawing on epic, mythology, legend, fairy tale, literary fantastic, carnivalesque, female grotesque, *histoire de loups*, science fiction, and utopia – adheres to a *Nouveau Roman*, carnivalesque, and feminist postmodern belief in the subversive potential of intertextual, polyphonic, open literary structures. Thus, the chapter returns to its opening theme – the palimpsest – manifest in Wittig's description of the novel as "un collage," "un montage," "une forme ouverte, non achevée," "qu'on ne peut pas [...] attribuer de genre" (Wittig 1994: 116, 122):<sup>28</sup> "Comme tous mes livres mais plus peut-

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<sup>28</sup> "an open, unfinished form", "one that cannot be classified generically." (My translation)



être qu'aucun autre, *Les Guérillères* est composé d'éléments complètement hétérogènes, de fragments de toute sorte, pris un peu partout, qu'il a fallu faire tenir ensemble pour former un livre" (Wittig 1994: 116-7).<sup>29</sup> Notwithstanding its reworking of another traditionally masculinist genre, Wittig's final generic layer of utopia - a rare intervention in a predominantly dystopian age - is illustrative of this postmodern fantastic investment in indeterminate hybrid-genres (Bartkowski 1991; Bouchard 1992; Levitas 1990; McHale 1994). Various labels as a "dynamic", "unstable", "open", "carnavalesque", "grotesque", and "meta-" utopia, *Les Guérillères* exceeds the limitations of "static" (nineteenth-century and structuralist) utopian formulae, providing instead both a narrative structure and political vision in excess, in motion, indeterminate, self-reflexive, lacunary, dys-eutopic, and desirous of reader response (Anderson 1994; Armitt 1996, 1999; Bartkowski; Bouchard; Levitas; McHale; Porter 1989, 1992). Displaying the "extended chronotope" or "polychronotope" of postmodern and fantastic fiction (Brooker 1999; Cornwell 1990; Pearce 1994), this utopia is also indeterminate in time and space; the mélange of genres sets the novel simultaneously in the future and antiquity, in primitive, industrial and fantastic locales. Thus, while science-fiction habitations (123-4) and futuristic weaponry (155, 200) appear alongside primitive hunter-gatherer communities (70, 122-3) and mythical weapons (149-50, 173-4), Wittig's "elles" – appearing variously as silenced women, feminist activists, mythical goddesses, Amazons, and epic heroes – find their final transmutation as a new species of woman: "Sous l'action répétée du jeu des doigts une membrane se crée entre eux qui semble les unir, puis les prolonge, à la fin elle déborde de la main et descend le long du bras, elle s'étend, elle s'allonge, elle leur fait comme une aile de chaque côté du corps" (Wittig 1990 [1969]: 190).<sup>30</sup> Like their previous transfigurations, however, these carnivalesque female bodies foster the capacity for subversion and transformation: read in conjunction with Russo's "aerialism" and female grotesque, these poly-eyed (78), winged-women (190-1)

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<sup>29</sup> "Like all my novels, but perhaps more than any of the others, *Les Guérillères* is composed of completely heterogeneous elements, all sorts of fragments, taken from all over, that had to be held together in order to form a novel." (My translation)

<sup>30</sup> "Under the repeated play of movement in the fingers a membrane grows between them that seems to join them, then prolong them, until eventually it extends beyond the hand and descends along the arm, it grows, it lengthens, it gives the women a sort of wing on either side of their body." (Wittig 1985a: 132)

perform a disruption of clean lines and (patriarchal) monoperspectivity (Armitt 1999; Russo 1995) – indeed, they provide the platform to the hybrid, leaky, and metamorphosing bodies of Wittig's subsequent novel, *Le Corps lesbien*.

While Wittig's novels diverge in their stylistic, generic and thematic focus, reflecting the avant-gardist search for constant innovation, they nevertheless derive from the same artistic and political principles - defamiliarisation, experimentation, feminist materialist deconstruction and the material text. Thus, although *Le Corps lesbien* develops a number of stylistic features reminiscent of *Les Guérillères*, these are combined with further innovations; similarly, themes glimpsed in the former novel – lesbianism and the (female) body – become the explicit focus of the subsequent work. The novel is characteristically composed of short, non-chronological prose poetry passages separated by large expanses of blank page. The prose passages witness violent encounters between two lesbian lovers whose quest for union and consummation – dissection, devouring, penetration, and resurrection – depicts the multiple configurations of lesbian sexuality. A second text, comprising a capitalised, emboldened, large-font list of external and internal female bodily parts, functions and products alternates with the former at intervals of twelve to fifteen pages. Occupying the entire blank space of a double page, the list often terminates abruptly with half of the final word appearing only pages later when the list resumes. Thus, even more so than in *Les Guérillères*, the reader is unable to discern which of the two texts disrupts the other.<sup>31</sup> Notwithstanding their allegiance to the postmodern palimpsest and feminist defamiliarisation, discussed above, both the list and prose poems contribute to the novel's central themes: ritual (dis)(re)assembly of the female body; metamorphous subjectivity; limitless lesbian interaction and coition; rejection of anatomical, gynaecological, and pornographic texts; deposition of genitality; displacement of the male, heterosexual gaze; and despecularisation.

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<sup>31</sup> This effect has been unnecessarily neglected in the English translation. While the list interrupts and divides individual prose fragments, the list itself always appears completed with the final word in full rather than dissected and appearing pages later. Furthermore, not only has the font-size of the list in the English translation been reduced, thus limiting the block of words to one page rather than two, but this list is surrounded on the single page by wide bands of spacing rather than running from top to bottom without margins.

|                  |         |         |             |
|------------------|---------|---------|-------------|
| LE CORPS LESBIEN | LES     | SUCS    | LES         |
| LA CYPRINE       | LA      | ACIDES  | LES FLUIDES |
| BAVE LA SALIVE   | LA      | LES     | JUS LES     |
| MORVE LA SUEUR   | COULÉES | L'ÉCUME |             |
| LES LAR          | LE      | SOUFRE  |             |

(Wittig 1976 [1973]: 22-3)<sup>32</sup>

*Le Corps lesbien's* defamiliarising and palimtextual narratology and linguistic features, exceeding even those of *Les Guérillères*, also have a direct bearing on the novel's key themes. Located within an Amazonian-Sapphic community, the novel's prose poems take Wittig's linguistic feminine universalism to its ultimate conclusion: the exclusive feminisation, or lesbianisation, of textual space. Nouns, first names, indefinite pronouns ("quelqu'une", "certaines"), and indefinite articles ("une") appear in the feminine form; those which retain a masculine form don new feminine endings, epithets and adjectives.<sup>33</sup> This endeavour to universalise the minority point of view is

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<sup>32</sup> THE LESBIAN BODY THE JUICE  
 THE SPITTLE THE SALIVA THE  
 SNOT THE SWEAT THE TEARS  
 [...] THE JUICES  
 THE ACIDS THE FLUIDS THE  
 FLUXES THE FOAM THE SULPHUR

(Wittig [trans. Le Vay] 1986: 28)

See above for comments concerning the inadequate stylistic layout of the English translation. Also, Le Vay's translation of "LA CYPRINE" as "THE JUICE" does not convey the full sense of the French original. The word is another name for the Greek goddess Aphrodite, who was honoured at Cyprus. Wittig's neologism bears a poetic resonance as well as a shock value and denotes the secretion which is produced by the female body during sexual activity. Another possible translation would be "CYPRIN[E]" which Nicole Brossard takes from Wittig and uses in her novel.

<sup>33</sup> "Someone," "some of them," "one." It is impossible to render these effects in the English language: firstly, no distinction is made between masculine and feminine articles and pronouns; secondly, adjectives and nouns do not carry a masculine or feminine gender. Wittig feminises archaic forms ("agnelle", "she-lamb"), words which are conventionally not recognised to have a feminine form ("bourelleuse", "executioner") and true neologisms ("enfouurrée", "furred one/woman"). Words which appear to retain their masculine form, such as Osiris, are feminised by the surrounding epithets and adjectives: "toi alors m/on Osiris m/a très belle tu m/e souris défaite épuisée" (Wittig 1976 [1973]: 87). ["then you m/y Osiris m/y most beautiful you smile at m/e undone exhausted" (Wittig 1986: 80)]

also manifest in the novel's most striking innovation – the bisected “*I*” (“*j/e*”)<sup>34</sup> – which like its predecessors “*on*” and “*elles*” (Wittig 1964; 1990 [1969]) takes on a generic meaning as the feminine subject. This split, including the similar sundering of possessive adjectives and reflexive pronouns, seeks to denote woman's displaced sense of self within a heterosexual patriarchal order: firstly, her entry into an alien language; secondly, the violence visited on the (female) integral body. Indeed, both body and language are similarly textually ruptured and disrupted.

I [*Je*] as generic feminine subject can only enter by force into a language which is foreign to it [...]. The “*I*” [*Je*] who writes is alien to her own writing at every word because this “*I*” [*Je*] uses a language alien to her; [...] If in writing *je*, I adopt this language, this *je* cannot do so. *J/e* is the symbol of the lived, rending experience which is *m/y* writing, of this cutting in two which throughout literature is the exercise of a language which does not constitute *m/e* as subject. *J/e* poses the ideological and historic question of feminine subjects. (Wittig 1986: 10-1; also 1992h)

The above quotation reveals Wittig's on-going meditation on the dual possibilities of language as liberator and prisoner raised by the previous novel: locutionary acts assert sovereignty and place “*I*” in a relationship of equality vis-à-vis other speaking subjects; however, the imposition of gender onto woman and her consequent association with the “particular” point of view precludes any recourse to an “*I*” which invokes the total, ungendered, universal human subject (Wittig 1992h; 1992i). Hence, the novel pursues an “*I*” “both global and particular, both universal and unique” (Wittig 1992h: 88) and demonstrates that “the paradise of the social contract exists only in literature” (Wittig 1992i: 100). Wittig's universalisation – usurpation of

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<sup>34</sup> As Ostrovsky (1991), Nelson-McDermott (1994) and Anderson (1994) comment, the alienation and fragmentation conveyed by “*j/e*” cannot be rendered in English. Firstly, Le Vay's italicisation of “*I*”, intended to overcome the impossibility of splitting the monosyllabic pronoun, might have been better conveyed by *I* or *Je*. Indeed, one could claim that: “The English translation gives a feeling exactly opposite to that which Wittig intends. Instead of reproducing the split subject (*j/e*) and thus indicating the difficulty a female (lesbian) subject has in entering a male-dominated language system, the italicisation of a single, whole pronoun emphasises the “importance” of that *I*. A whole, inviolable *I* makes the violence in the text malicious; it puts the speaker irrevocably in a position of power in relation to the Other” (Nelson-McDermott 1994: n2 328). Secondly, unlike the French “*je*”, the English “*I*” entails no signification of the speaker's gender (Anderson 1994; Wittig 1992h).

the generic subject and universal point of view – intends to elevate “j/e” to the stature of sovereign subject empowered to lesbianise the textual world. Thus, *Le Corps lesbien*’s universalising programme, developed from *Les Guérillères*, inevitably recapitulates the latter’s dual politics: initially deriving from a feminist postmodern impulse to eradicate the categories of sex from language (masculine/feminine; man/woman), Wittig’s appeal to the Cartesian subject and Enlightenment philosopher’s social contract reconfirms an investment in political modernity.

The bar in the *j/e* of *The Lesbian Body* is a sign of excess. A sign that helps to imagine an excess of “I,” an “I” exalted. “I” has become so powerful in *The Lesbian Body* that it can attack the order of heterosexuality in texts and assault the so-called love, the heroes of love, and lesbianize them, lesbianize the symbols, lesbianize the gods and the goddesses, lesbianize the men and the women. This “I” can be destroyed in the attempt and resuscitated. Nothing resists this “I” (or this *tu*, which is its same, its love), which spreads itself in the whole of the book, like a lava flow that nothing can stop. (Wittig 1992h: 87)

While Wittig’s first person pronoun has indeed been described as “the most powerful lesbian in literature” (Marks 1979: 376), read in conjunction with the feminist postmodern fantastic the bisected “I” yields other possibilities. Here indeed is an “I” “in excess” – though not in the sense that Wittig intended – an “I” in constant motion and metamorphosis between human, animal, flower, and mineral forms; hence a carnivalised or cyborg subjectivity. Furthermore, it is impossible to ascertain that the writing subject does not vary between one prose fragment and the next, or fluctuate between “j/e” (I) and “tu” (you), creating the possibility of an infinitely multiple narration. On another level, the fractured subject establishes a new reciprocity between “I”/“you,” self/other, and subject/object. Adopting *fin-de-siècle* lyricism, the prose poems rewrite the latter’s traditionally hierarchical dualistic relations - the assimilation of “you” (feminine, other, object) by “I” (masculine, self, subject) (Linstrum 1988).<sup>35</sup> As opposed to erasing the other in order to magnify the self, the

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<sup>35</sup> Wittig’s novel incorporates a great number of intertexts from Baudelaire to du Bellay. Most of these

mutual and role-reversing sado-masochistic encounters between “j/e” and “tu” create a (third) space beyond subjectivity/objectivity and masculinity/femininity (Linstrum 1988). Furthermore, at other textual moments “j/e” and “tu” constitute – linguistically and/or metamorphically – the same being. Thus, in this sense, the text produces an “I” radically different from the masculine, unified Cartesian subject:

Unlike the egocentric *Je* of Descartes, whose propensity for abstract thinking constituted an unmistakable proof of his unified being, the splintered *j/e* of *Le Corps lesbien* acquires her identity as a sentient creature uniting body and soul with another female. The very antithesis of the Cartesian, uniform and self-centered subject, the variable and life-giving *j/e* of *Le Corps lesbien* alters not only the typographical aspect of the language but also its intrinsic nature. (Rosenfeld 1984: 236)

Finally, therefore, like the “elles” of *Les Guérillères*, “j/e” encapsulates those issues fundamental to the novel’s fabric. On one level, Wittig adheres to the postmodern palimpsest, defamiliarises the sexism of the French linguistic system, and achieves the feminist postmodern objective of abolishing the categories of sex in language; however, her aim to universalise the “particular” point of view and inaugurate women as sovereign subjects draws on political modernity. Thus, whereas *Le Corps lesbien* stages the postmodern, Wittig’s critical practice as a whole seeks to create a new modernism within postmodernism. Indeed, this pattern is manifest also in the novel’s subsequent treatment of lesbianism and the (female) body.

According to Wittig, the lesbian is precluded from the category of “woman” on account of her non-participation within the heterosexual economic system and “naturally” resides beyond “sex”: “Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is *not* a woman, either economically, politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific relation to a man, a relation that we have previously

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are treated with some irony, particularly on account of their negative portrayal of female and lesbian characters e.g. Baudelaire’s “L’Invitation au Voyage,” “Un Voyage à Cythère,” “La Chevelure” (Baudelaire 1993 [1857]).

called servitude [...] a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or stay heterosexual” (Wittig 1992b: 20; also 1979; 1992b; 1992c; 1992e). Based on this tenet, lesbianism, and lesbian society, are perceived as vantage points authorised to expose heterosexuality as a “cultural construct” masquerading as natural and pre-social fact (Wittig 1979; 1992a; 1992b; 1992d; 1992e). For Wittig, heterosexuality conceals its primary design – man’s social domination and appropriation of women’s (re)production – through the dissemination of heterosexist mythology: biological difference, genitality, and reproductive sexuality (Wittig 1997; 1992a; 1992b). On account of this specifically sexual control, Wittig’s Foucauldian analysis focuses on heterosexuality’s social configuration of bodies: firstly, the arbitrary unification of a discontinuous group of physical attributes, functions and sensations under the fictional heading “sex”; secondly, the subsequent fragmentation of the body through the false unity imposed by “sex”. Wittig writes: “Sex [...] is taken as an ‘immediate given,’ a ‘sensible given,’ ‘physical features,’ belonging to a natural order. But what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an ‘imaginary formation,’ which reinterprets physical features [...] through the network of relationships in which they are perceived” (1992b: 11-2; also 1992b). Thus, the withdrawal from heterosexuality, represented by lesbianism, is perceived as the only alternative to heterosexual “interpellation.” In Wittig’s view, therefore, lesbianism constitutes not merely sexual identity, or “the desire for one’s own sex,” but a social and political class executing “resistance to the norm” (1979: 114); hence, her repeated reference to lesbians as “fugitives slaves,” and “runaway wives” (1992d: 45; also 1992b; 1992e). Wittig’s paradoxical position, as seen below, encapsulates the tensions of essentialist anti-essentialism.

As the above outline demonstrates, on one level, Wittig’s lesbian theory is initially formulated as a challenge to binary sex whose cultural formation and interpretation of social bodies she effectively deconstructs; on another level, however, her critical realisation of this feminist postmodern objective is paradoxically dependent on political modernism. Thus, according to Roof (1994), Wittig’s theory is paradigmatic of a certain “lesbian metanarrative” whose challenge to binary sex/gender links the “epistemological certainties of real experience” (political modernism) with “the

uncertainties of discredited knowledge” (postmodernism). Embodying the position of “pure” postmodern feminism, Roof perceives this paradox as a deliberate obfuscation of modernist identity and essence beneath a façade of lesbian postmodernism (1994: 57):

The problem of postmodern flux versus epistemological certainty that characterizes criticism of the work of such overtly lesbian writers as Monique Wittig [...] reveals a critical anxiety about the relationship between the lesbian and the postmodern. In the criticism of the work of these [...] authors, the term *postmodern* plays a significant definitional role, but is also subject to a tremendous ambivalence and shifting that might be ironically characterized as postmodern. At least this postmodern anxiety reveals precisely how problems of definition and the postmodern cooperate in the reestablishment of identity and certainty even as they suggest there is none. (Roof 1994: 54)

Roof’s analysis highlights the dual foundation of Wittig’s lesbian project – the formulation of a revised modernism within a postmodern frame – and its unresolved tensions. Indeed, by arguing that “a lesbian is not a woman,” Wittig appeals in modernist terms to the truth-value of lesbian material existence; as seen in Chapter One, however, for feminist postmodernism the epistemological certainties of real experience are always already constructed. Thus, Wittig’s postulation of a position beyond “sex” – like all reference to a pre- post- or para-social “reality” outside the terms of culture – is meaningless and belongs to “myths of transcendence” (Butler 1996: 154). Furthermore, Wittig’s endeavour to displace one dichotomy in reality creates another – paracultural lesbian subject versus hegemonic heterosexual culture – realising a consolidation of binaries as opposed to their abolition. Indeed, lesbianism is now dependent on heterosexuality for its very definition: “This metanarrative sustains what appears to be postmodernity in its style and apparent transgression of gender and personal boundaries, but rather than refusing gender categories, it tends to reify them and its graphic violence seems to reiterate them” (Roof 1994: 62; also Butler 1996). Thus, Wittig’s proposition of a homosexual position unconditioned by heterosexual norms has been criticised as a “purification of homosexuality, a kind of



lesbian modernism" (Butler 1990a: 121) espousing a "pure lesbian subject" (Roof 1994: 57). From a postmodernist perspective, homosexual and heterosexual discourses inform one another, investing "structures of psychic homosexuality within heterosexual relations, and structures of psychic heterosexuality within gay and lesbian sexuality and relationships" (Butler 1990a: 121; also Wiegman 1994). Similarly, increasing numbers of "lesbians bearing arms, lesbians bearing children, lesbians becoming fashion [...]" suggest a lesbian subject traversed by both heterosexual and homosexual signs, "inside and outside, minority and majority, *at the same time*" (Griggers 1994: 123, 129). Wittig's binary (paracultural lesbian/constructed heterosexual) also precludes both the possibility of a "volitional or optional heterosexuality" (Butler 1990a: 121) and recourse to subversive strategies of parody and redeployment within heterosexuality itself which inform feminist postmodern theory. Whereas feminist postmodernism locates agency in subversive resignificatory practices and personae, Wittig is inevitably limited to an Enlightenment conceptualisation of agency which condemns women to either the second half of the binary or a struggle to reverse power. In addition, Wittig's postulation of heterosexuality and phallogocentrism as *the* constitutive discourses of sexuality is directly challenged by postmodernism's examination of a multitude of power centres including race and ethnicity (Butler: 1990a; Griggers 1994). Finally, therefore, while Wittig seeks an identifiable lesbian within the context of postmodern flux, for the postmodernist the category of "lesbian" is indefinable and unknowable, or as Wiegman argues: "the lesbian postmodern slips and shifts. Monique Wittig's decidedly modernist proclamation: not just that the lesbian is 'not a woman' but the lesbian is not – cannot continue to be – 'the lesbian' either" (Wiegman 1994: 16).

Interpretations of *Le Corps lesbien* which depend primarily on Wittig's theory risk reducing the novel to a reproduction of the latter's dual politics (Roof 1994); read independently and in conjunction with the feminist postmodern fantastic, however, the novel depicts the paradigmatic indefinable and excessive lesbian(ism) of feminist postmodernism. On one level, the prose poems depict a multiplicity of postmodern lesbian interrelations which exceed traditional categories, boundaries and taboos. Loss, separation, and jealousy appear alongside animal-metamorphosis and sado-

masochistic encounters – dissection, penetration, cannibalism, and absorption – inaugurating “a carnivalesque state of uncensored emotion, sensuality and hedonistic liberation” (Whatling 1997: 241). Notwithstanding its endeavour to convey the raging desire for each and every facet of the beloved’s body, this limitless display of emotions, physical interpenetrations, and violent unions, both prior, during and after death,<sup>36</sup> heralds categorical crisis – the opposition love/pornography as well as labels eroticism, perversion, sadism, masochism, and necrophilia are rendered meaningless (Ostrovsky 1991).

M/on clitoris l’ensemble de m/es lèvres sont touchés par tes mains. A travers m/on vagin et m/on utérus tu t’introduis jusqu’à m/es intestins en crevant la membrane. Tu mets autour de ton cou m/on duodénum rose pâle assez veiné de bleu. Tu déroules m/on intestin grêle jaune. Ce faisant tu parles de l’odeur de m/es organes mouillés, tu parles de leur consistance, tu parles de leurs mouvements, tu parles de leur température. [...] J//ouvre la bouche, j/e reçois ta langue tes lèvres ton palais, par toi monstre adoré j/e m/e mets à mourir tandis que tu ne cesses pas de crier autour de m/es oreilles. (Wittig 1976 [1973]: 33-4)<sup>37</sup>

As this poem demonstrates, on another level, the violent love scenes enact both the dissolution of culturally constituted female bodies and the social body “Woman.” Hence, on the one hand, Wittig’s celebration of traditionally denigrated female bodily parts and, on the other, her demotion of areas traditionally interpreted as essentially feminine. By displacing patriarchy’s construction of synecdochic bodies, this new-found erogeneity – comprising topography, viscera, functions, and products – realises

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<sup>36</sup> Instances during death: (Wittig 1986: 9, 30, 32-3, 33-4, 45-6, 52-3, 67, 71-2, 93-4, 99-100, 108-9, 134-5, 137-8, 166-7); instances after death: (Wittig 1986: 25-6, 27, 146-7, 169-70, 177-8). Notwithstanding their contribution to the categorical crisis of the love scenes, this prolific manifestation of desire during death also plays an important role in subsequent discussions: firstly, “j/e” and “tu’s” accession to single entity; secondly, the “double body” of the carnivalesque.

<sup>37</sup> “M/y clitoris m/y labia are touched by your hands. Through m/y vagina and m/y uterus you insert yourself breaking the membrane up to m/y intestines. Round your neck you place m/y duodenum pale-pink well-veined with blue. You unwind m/y yellow small intestine. So doing you speak of the odour of m/y damp organs, you speak of their consistence, you speak of their movements, you speak of their temperature. [...] I open m/y mouth, I admit your lips your tongue your palate, I prepare to die by your side adored monster while you cry incessantly about m/y ears.” (Wittig 1986: 37-8)

the integral albeit fluid body called for in *Les Guérillères*. Thus, like Wittig's criticism, the novel's prose poems intertextually target woman's reduction to womb and procreation, centre-pin of biologically essentialist identity: Freud's reproductive construction of genitality and postulation of female sexuality as impenetrable, dark continent; similarly, Zwang and Jayle's centralisation of reproduction and authorisation of anatomist, poet, and lover as sole interpreters of enigmatic feminine desire (Birkett 1996; Chisholm 1993; Shaktini 1990a). These gynaecologists, cited in the bibliography to *Les Guérillères*, are parodied through the poem's "surgical realism," scientific diction, and lover's authoritatively self-expressed desire; elsewhere, they are challenged by the list's positioning of reproduction among a heterogeneous catalogue of disparate bodily functions (144-5). Thus, as Butler argues, *Le Corps lesbien* encapsulates the postmodern body-paradigm whose actions "outside of the reproductive matrix produces the body itself as an incoherent center of attributes, gestures and desires" (1990a: 125) resulting in "the dissolution of the binary framework, in the emergence of essential chaos, polymorphousness, the precultural innocence of 'sex'" (1996: 152).

This paradigm is achieved on another level by the dissolution of Enlightenment dichotomies subject/object and self/other. *Le Corps lesbien* rewrites traditional (patriarchal) love poetry's gender polarisation: active male subject, passive female object. Firstly, Wittig's lovers are all women; secondly, "j/e" and "tu" – potentially representing an infinite variety of narrators – fluctuate between and along the poles of active subject (central self) and passive object (otherness) within the novel's sadomasochistic encounters. Thus, as opposed to presenting fixed, or even alternate, roles – unrelenting sadist versus yielding masochist – the novel's limitless power relations are more often "ambiguous, wrought with anxiety, contradiction and violence" (Linstrum 1988: 39) with the result that the "consent, of subject [and] object [...] [is] always under negotiation" (Whatling 1997: 243). Certain poems initially presenting fixed roles unfold a violent coupling which entails the orgasmic abjection of both lovers (71-2; 99-100, 166-7). Furthermore, while certain sadistic acts inflame the lover's pleasure (39-40, 55-6, 79, 82, 89-90), others engender pity, pain, desire, and remorse (27; 137-8, 99-100). Indeed, when such pity is interpreted as rejection,

power relations between the lovers reach an unparalleled ambivalence: “des larmes jaillissent fortement de tes yeux m//éclaboussant, tu dis qu’il t’est insupportable de m/e voir te vomir, une plus grande pitié m/e vient encore, j/e m/e mets à te remanger aussi vite que j/e peux [...] à l’intérieur de m/oi j/e te retiens” (137-8).<sup>38</sup> Conversely, the beloved’s pleasure in forced submission (71-2, 98-9, 143) is replaced elsewhere by impregnable fearlessness and authority over refusal and consent: “tu découvres m/es dents en scie. Tu dis que tu n’éprouves aucune peur de cet aspect peu engageant de m/a personne. [...] [T]u m/e laisses mettre à nu les muscles de tes joues, [...] tu m/e laisses sectionner tes seins [...]. [T]u m/e dis que j/e n’ai pas le pouvoir de te faire souffrir” (171).<sup>39</sup> Finally, rather than discrete categories or rigid sadomasochist roles, fear, pain, abjection, pleasure, and joy constitute a continuum of simultaneous emotions and relations; hence, “j/e’s” declarations: “j’ai plaisir de peur” (93),<sup>40</sup> “une joie et une horreur innommables m/e viennent, c’est ainsi que j/e m//anéantis la tête soutenue par tes mains” (85),<sup>41</sup> and:

Ta main ton bras par la suite sont entrés dans m/a gorge, tu traverses m/on larynx, tu atteins m/es poumons [...] j/e crie mais non pas de peine, j/e suis rejointe atteinte, j/e passe de ton bord, j/e fais éclater les petites unités de m/on m/oi, j/e suis menacée, j/e suis désirée par toi. [...] [J]/e suis habitée, j/e ne rêve pas, j/e suis introduite par toi [...] j/e te rassemble dans tous m/es organes, j/e m//éclate [...] j/e suis pour finir sans envers

<sup>38</sup> “tears spurt strongly from your eyes spattering m/e, you say it is unbearable to see m/e vomit you up, I am overcome by greater pity than ever, I begin to eat you again as fast as I can [...] I retain you within m/e.” (Wittig 1986: 122)

<sup>39</sup> “you disclose m/y sawlike teeth. You say that you feel unafraid of this unprepossessing aspect of m/y person. [...] [Y]ou allow m/e to lay bare the muscles of your cheeks, [...] you allow m/e to sever your breasts [...]. [Y]ou tell m/e that I am impotent to make you suffer.” (Wittig [trans. Le Vay] 1996: 150-1) The beloved’s power of consent and refusal in relation to her position as masochistic object, reinforced by extensive repetition in the passage of “tu m/e laisses”, is more emphasised in the French than in the English translation due to active properties of the French “me”. In addition, Wittig’s French “laisses” has two further layers of meaning: “tu me laisse” also means “you are leaving me/letting me down”; there is also the sense of “une laisse” or a “lead” (for an animal) i.e. you are leading me. These two latter meanings, therefore, comprise an oxymoron, which further emphasises the ambivalence of sado-masochistic relations in the text.

<sup>40</sup> “I enjoy fear.” (Wittig 1986: 86)

<sup>41</sup> “I am seized by unnameable joy and horror, thus I abase m/yself m/y head supported by your hands.” (Wittig 1986: 79)

sans endroit m/on estomac apparaissant entre m/es seins m/es poumons  
traversant la peau de m/on dos. (Wittig 1976 [1973]: 108-9)<sup>42</sup>

Deconstructing the conventionally rigid and dualistic sadomasochistic encounter, this ambiguous configuration of power results in the psychical and physical fragmentation of “j/e” and the grotesque realignment of her bodily boundaries. This ambiguity is amplified by Wittig’s predominant use of the passive voice, conventionally disfavoured in the French language in relation to the empowering *active* voice. The traditionally active (speaking) subject – “j/e” – positions herself as passive and receptive object vis-à-vis the beloved (Ostrovsky 1991; Rosenfeld 1984). Thus, through the force of ambiguity *Le Corps lesbien*’s sadomasochistic encounters effect a proliferation of binary power relations, demonstrating that “When oppressors themselves are oppressed, and the oppressed develop alternative forms of power, we are in the presence of postmodern relations of power” (Butler 1996: 154). Hence, also, Whatling’s defence of the novel against charges of gratuitous violence: “read minus or regardless of the violence at the heart of her writing, then Wittig is violently misread and the inherent ambiguity of her message expunged” (1997: 240).

The dissolution of the subject/object and self/other binary is also effected through the lovers’ (feminist) postmodern “union” – the incorporation of “j/e” and “tu” within one being – described in other terms as a “third person” or “third state” (Linstrum 1988: 43). This accession to single entity is achieved most simply during sexual acts, often comprising violent interpenetrations and mutual “orgasmic” deaths; or, at a more complex, or “complete” level, through the fantastic merger of physical bodies which recalls the close alliance between the literary fantastic and sexuality and its association of sex with death (Palumbo 1986a). Finally, this integration is produced via the innovative transitivity of grammatically intransitive verbs.

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<sup>42</sup> “Your hand followed by your arm have entered into m/y throat, you traverse m/y larynx, you arrive at m/y lungs [...] I cry out but not from pain, I am overtaken seized hold of, I go over to you entirely, I explode the small units of m/y ego, I am threatened, I am desired by you. [...] I am inhabited, I am not dreaming, I am penetrated by you [...] I reassemble you in all m/y organs, I burst [...] finally I am without depth without place m/y stomach appearing between m/y breasts m/y lungs traversing the skin of m/y back.” (Wittig 1986: 98)

Les bouts de tes doigts sont gainés de miroirs souples. Ils rayonnent ils accrochent la chaleur ils irradient ils brûlent. M/es veines et m/es artères touchées s'embrasent peu à peu. [...] Une odeur de chair brûlée monte, tu m/e tiens à bras-le-corps à présent, la calcination te gagne, une fumée fait écran tout au-devant de tes yeux, les muscles grésillent disparaissant autour de nos pommettes. Nos crânes noircis se heurtent enfin, enfin désossées enfin avec des trous noirs pour te regarder sans mains pour te toucher j/e te suis tu m//es irréversiblement m/a plus aimée. (Wittig 1976 [1973]: 134-5)<sup>43</sup>

The above poem typifies the coalescence of “j/e” and “tu” as one: physically, through sexual death by fire; linguistically, through the transitive use of the intransitive verb “être” (to be). Intransitive verbs express an action which adheres to the subject without requiring a direct object; rendering such verbs transitive (reflexive), therefore, transfers the action from subject to object (the beloved) dissolving the oppositions subject/object and self/other (Ostrovsky 1991; Rosenfeld 1984). Wittig’s innovation – “J/e te suis tu m/es” – conveys a unity unexpressed by grammatically correct “j/e suis toi tu est moi” (I am you you are me);<sup>44</sup> indeed, for Rosenfeld, this latter transitive employment of the “copulative verb,” traditionally emphasising the masculine subject, suggests “unlimited exchanges of female subjects with the body of another self” (1984: 237). Thus, rather than conveying an attempt to transcend power, which is what the modernist aspects of Wittig’s criticism suggested, the differentiation of the bisected “I,” the lovers’ ambivalent relations, and the fluctuating bodily contours proliferate both power and sexual identities beyond the binary frame. Ultimately, therefore, as several critics have argued (Chisholm 1993; Shaktini 1990a; Whatling 1997), the reader is unable to determine who or what “j/e,” “tu,” or indeed the lesbian body, is.

<sup>43</sup> “The tips of your fingers are sheathed in supple mirrors. They radiate they catch the heat they irradiate they burn. M/y veins and arteries affected gradually catch fire. [...] A smell of burnt flesh rises, now you hold m/e round the waist, the roasting reaches you, a smoke-screen forms before your eyes, the muscles splutter disappearing around our cheeks. At last our blackened skulls clash together, at last boneless with black holes to see you with without hands to touch you I am you you are m/e irreversibly m/y best beloved.” (Wittig 1986: 119)

<sup>44</sup> The effect of the French original cannot be rendered in English as these verbs are not reflexive in

Thus, *Le Corps lesbien* depicts the paradigmatic (feminist) postmodern body, despite criticism from some quarters of feminist postmodernism as well as her own modernist concepts. Through the force of Foucauldian ambiguity, fragmentation and proliferation, Wittig's prevailing narrative strategy of disintegration dissolves binary sex. Indeed, in allegiance with Guattari and Deleuze, Wittig argues: "For us there are, it seems, not one or two sexes, but many (see Guattari/Deleuze), as many sexes as there are individuals" (Wittig 1979: 119). The latter's "schizoanalysis", outlined in Chapter One, posits a libidinal "délire" capable of initiating revolution, disrupting constrictive Oedipalisation, undoing totalities, and facilitating access to privileged areas of primitivity, spontaneity, fragmentation and flux (Deleuze and Guattari 1995; Sarup 1993). Hence the novel's disintegrating and fusional bodies stage a Deleuzian "deterritorialisation," revealing that rather than integral persons there is only fragmentation and connections between "desiring machines." Furthermore, the fluctuating bodily contours in *Le Corps lesbien* – fragmenting, fusing and metamorphosing – displace those margins that constitute bodies at all. Thus, the novel also enacts Butler's radicalisation of Foucault's theory, depicting the body as "a set of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and maintained" (1990a: 33).

The construction of stable bodily contours relies upon fixed sites of corporeal permeability and impermeability. Those sexual practices in both homosexual and heterosexual contexts that open surfaces and orifices to erotic signification or close down others effectively reinscribe the boundaries of the body along new cultural lines. Anal sex among men is an example, as is the radical re-membering of the body in Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*. [...] Further, the rites of passage that govern various bodily orifices presuppose a heterosexual construction of gendered exchange, positions, and erotic possibilities. The deregulation of such exchanges accordingly disrupts the very boundaries that determine what it is to be a body at all. (Butler 1990a: 132-3)

At this juncture, postmodern theory encounters the grotesque; Wittig's open, hybrid, coupled, and heterogeneous bodies are those of the carnivalesque and postmodern female grotesque (Armitt 1999; Chisholm 1993; Russo 1995; Whatling 1997). Indeed, *Le Corps lesbien's* reconfiguration of the physical body stages a Bakhtinian revolution of the body politic represented by its dissolution of the hierarchical, isolated, and sealed-off classical body (Bakhtin 1984b: 29). Hence, the prevalence of carnivalesque bodily images – innards, orifices, effusions and protrusions; digestion, defecation, and copulation; doubling, hybridity, and metamorphosis. From this perspective, the sadomasochistic encounters turn the body inside out displaying muscles, nervous system, intestines and major organs, blood and arteries, bones and skeleton; indeed, they are even terminated by Bakhtinian orgasmic births in death (Bakhtin 1984b: 26, 52). Furthermore, the body itself is a constantly self-generating site of protrusions, excrescences, and effusions, both biological and fantastic: burgeoning spores, pores, boils, and hair; proliferating fingers, ears and nose; and torrential orgasms:

Des grandes parcelles de gélatine se détachent tremblantes transparentes. Les lèvres écartées rose tyrien à l'envers laissent passer les fragments en nombre toujours plus grand. Les doigts pris dans le flux bougent un peu s'allongent se desserrent ramènent leurs bouts le long des lèvres [...]. Le flot devient continu, la cyprine écumeuse blanchie dans ses tourbillons remonte jusqu'aux épaules [...]. [L]a fenêtre s'ouvre brutalement sous la poussée de nos membres flottant sur une grande masse de liquide lactique bleuté [...] le flot montant débouche dans le ciel, adieu continent noir de misère et de peine adieu villes anciennes nous nous embarquons pour les îles brillantes et radieuses pour les vertes Cythères pour les Lesbos noires et dorées. (Wittig 1976 [1973]: 19-20)<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> "Great fragments of gelatine become detached trembling transparent. The parted lips tyrian pink on the inside let the fragments pass in ever-increasing numbers. The fingers caught in the flux move slightly elongate relax draw their tips along the lips [...]. The flow becomes continuous, the foamy juice whitened in its eddies rises to the shoulders [...] the window opens abruptly under the thrust of our limbs floating on a great body of bluish lactic liquid [...] the rising wave debouches in the sky, farewell black continent of misery and suffering farewell ancient cities we are embarking for the shining radiant isles for the green Cytheras for the dark and gilded Lesbos" (Wittig 1986: 26). See earlier comments on the translation of "cyprine" as "juice."



Exceeding the gender limitations of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, this Russoesque postmodern female grotesque reverses the abjection of female bodily processes by the male grotesque tradition (Russo 1995). In addition, its recuperation of female grotesque excess intertextually targets Freud's "dark continent" metaphor and the "sterile" lesbianism of Baudelaire's "Lesbos" and "Femmes Damnées" (Baudelaire 1994 [1857]; Birkett 1996; Shaktini 1990a, 1982). Thus, the gaping body displays its apertures: conventional sexual orifices – mouth, vagina, and rectum – as well as extraordinary punctures and perforations effected both through sadomasochism and transmogrification: "Des perforations se produisent dans ton corps et dans m/on corps joints, nos muscles accolés par homologie s'écartent, le premier courant d'air qui s'infiltré dans la brèche se propage à une vitesse folle [...]. [N]os deux corps [...] sont à présent un organisme unique parcouru de vibrations trépidant plein de ses propres courants..." (121-3).<sup>46</sup> Hence, a return to the coalescence of "j/e" and "tu" within one entity; or, in carnivalesque terms, "two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated and born" (Bakhtin 1984b: 26). The Bakhtinian double body, which is performed in one sense by the sadomasochistic acts discussed above, is also realised through this integration of "j/e" and "tu". Notwithstanding its synthesis of life and death, the movement from single bodies to double entity is always incomplete: "à un moment donné ta peau se fend de ta gorge à ton pubis, la m/iennne à son tour éclate de bas en haut, j/e m/e répands dans toi, tu te mélanges à m/oi [...] j/e sens nos intestins se dérouler les uns dans les autres [...] j/e t'aime m/a mourante..." (53).<sup>47</sup> Like the carnival body, therefore, these fluid boundaries are receptive to the outside world and the body of the other: "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. It is cosmic, it represents the entire material bodily world in all its elements" (Bakhtin 1984b: 26-7).

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<sup>46</sup> "Perforations occur in your body and in m/y body joined together, our homologously linked muscles separate, the first current of air that infiltrates into the breach spreads at a crazy speed [...]. [O]ur two bodies [...] now constitute a single organism pervaded by vibrations quivering full of its own currents..." (Wittig 1986: 108-9)

<sup>47</sup> "at a given moment your skin splits from throat to pubis, m/ine in turn from below upwards, I spill m/self into you, you mingle with m/e [...] I feel our intestines uncoiling gliding among themselves [...] I love you m/y dying one..." (Wittig 1986: 51-2)

The lovers' bodily union with the outside world is manifested most obviously through their myriad metamorphoses – insects; animals; protozoa; bird and fish; snake; sea, river, and rain; earth, flower, and metal. On one level, these transmutations depict the fluidity, hybridity, and limitlessness of postmodern lesbian desire; indeed, while relations between human and metamorphosis, or between both metamorphosed lovers, are always sexual, it is the lovers' touch or gaze which often catalyses the transformations. Thus, whereas certain metamorphoses are "completed," others capture the body in the process of "becoming": "Une onde pressante émise par m/on cerveau sous le toucher de tes doigts dans m/es épaules descend. M/on dos s'ouvre entre les omoplates pour laisser passer les membranes en éventail comprimées par les côtes. [...] Les ailes déployées battantes te frôlent ne t'empêchant pas de t'approcher [...] sombrement m/a très désirée j/e te circonviens" (77-8).<sup>48</sup> Finally, a population of metamorphoses contain their hybridity within a single form – grotesque half-human figures (Bakhtin 1984b; Kayser 1963) first glimpsed in *Les Guérillères*. Like their predecessors, these metamorphosing and "aerial" bodies equip the women with a means of *flight*: firstly, the subversion of the body politic through "aerialism"; secondly, escape from the Freudian "black continent" of oppressed feminine desire:

Tes paumes contres m/es paumès une défaillance m/e prend [...] j/e vois m/es pores se dilater, j/e vois tes pores le faire, ouverts ils sécrètent par milliers des cheveux fins [...]. [T]u m//incline dans tes bras, tu m/e montres comment prendre le vent, tu cherches un courant, tous les cheveux s'étendent de part et d'autre, ils nous soulèvent, ils nous permettent de nous envoler, j//essuie m/es larmes contre toi m/on enfourrurée, j/e flotte m/es bras sur tes bras, le vent démêle nos chevelures [...] adieu continent noir tu mets le cap pour l'île des vivantes. (Wittig 1976 [1973]: 88-9)<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> "An urgent wave descends emitted by m/y brain under the touch of your fingers on m/y shoulders. M/y back opens between the shoulder blades to release the fan-shaped membranes compressed by the ribs. [...] The unfolded beating wings brush against you not preventing you from drawing near [...] sombrely m/y so desired one / enfold you." (Wittig 1986: 73-4)

<sup>49</sup> "Your palms against m/y palms a faintness overcomes m/e [...] / see m/y pores dilate, / see your pores do likewise, open they secrete fine hairs in thousands [...]. [Y]ou show m/e how to catch the wind, you seek a current, all the hairs stretch out on either side, they raise us up, they enable us to fly

From this perspective, *Le Corps lesbien* achieves Russo's paradigmatic postmodern female grotesque. By depicting a transcategorical, unhierarchical, and heterogeneous lesbian body, Wittig generates carnivalesque revolution demonstrating that "the lesbian body is an anti-body" (Chisholm 1993: 202). Secondly, elaborately exposing itself to the reader's gaze, this "spectacularized" body inverts that which is formerly perceived as grotesque (Russo 1995) initiating a feminist postmodern questioning of "the perceived boundaries and conventional definitions of what it might mean to identify as a lesbian" (Whatling 1997: 241). Finally, the novel's "aerial" bodies exceed the Bakhtinian limitation of the grotesque to "the lower bodily stratum" and interpretation of the female body as intrinsically grotesque.

This chapter has investigated the position of Wittig's criticism and fiction in relation to modernism and postmodernism, focusing in particular on this author's conscious attempt to reformulate philosophical, political, and aesthetic aspects of both traditions for incorporation in a feminist framework. In many respects, Wittig embodies a 1970s historical position, variously termed "materialist deconstructionism" and "essentialist anti-essentialism" (Landry and MacLean 1993), which sought to align materialist feminism with contemporary poststructuralist theories. In this sense, therefore, she approximates Lovibond and others who seek a dialectical fusion of modernism and postmodernism. However, in spite of criticism from "pure" feminist postmodernists, the former achieve a successful synthesis based on a positive commitment to the reformulation of *both* terms, producing a "weak" version of the decentred subject. Wittig, by contrast, selects the most advantageous aspects of postmodernism – its challenge to gendered binaries – yet refuses to reflect this, in any way, at the level of the subject. She retains, instead, an uncompromised sovereign subjectivity. As this chapter has demonstrated, this produces a tension, of greater and lesser degree, both in her critical writings and in the individual novels themselves. Whereas *Les Guérillères* reflects the criticism's adherence to sovereignty, it also presents the reader with a radically fragmented subjectivity. Taking this to a further extreme, *Le Corps lesbien* belies the author's modernist leanings by depicting the

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away, I wipe m/y tears against you m/y furred one, I float m/y arms on your arms, the wind mingles our hair [...] farewell dark continent you steer for the isle of the living" (Wittig 1986: 81-2). See

shifting, mobile sexual identities of the lesbian postmodern. Nevertheless, ironically, it is the radically fragmented nature of these latter identities, brought about by the highly linguistic and “material” nature of the text, which erode the possibility of postmodern agency.

## Chapter 5. Jeanette Winterson: The Lesbian Postmodern

In Winterson's *The Passion* (1988 [1987]) and *Sexing the Cherry* (1990 [1989]) identity adheres simultaneously to postmodern and modernist paradigms, suggesting that their notions of subjectivity are in fact coterminous. Hence a deconstruction of the unified selfhood of colonial technologies - war, exploration, heroism, travel, and imperialism; the role of memory and writing in the (re)construction of the past; the subversive repetition of substantive identity through clothes, disguises, and aerialism; and its fracturing and multiplication through postmodern fantastic topoi and narratology. Identity is further fragmented through Romantic/romantic love whose transcendentalism introduces the novels' seemingly paradoxical investment in humanist concepts. Indeed, the characters' pursuit of self-knowledge and freedom despite their multiplicity, as well as the acquisition of the latter through transcendent love, is suggestive of Romanticism's search for a lost centre of personality. Similarly, albeit part of postmodernism's double-coded strategy, the novels' Romantic elements, complex use of doubling, and play with traditional narrative conventions (closure) are suggestive of a correlative unity of identity over and above their otherwise postmodern fragmentation.

The colonial discourses of war, exploration, and heroism, as well as the literary narratives of travel/questing, also produce sexed and gendered identities, in particular the binary oppositions male/female, public/domestic, active/passive, rational/irrational. These narratives are deconstructed through a "feminisation" of the male protagonists, whose redirection on fluid and labyrinthine journeys leads to their relocation within an alternative "feminine" topos. Indeed, representative of gender fluidity, such fantastic spaces figure subversive enactments of cross-dressing, drag, butch/femme role models, and aerialism. Gender fluidity and subversion find their paradigm, however, in the novels' primary female characters, whose recourse to the postmodern fantastic - the grotesque, the cyborg, and aerialism - enables their subversion of masculine hegemony. Nevertheless, albeit an anti-essentialist signifier, this association between (postmodern) fluidity and the "feminine" risks reinscribing conventionally gendered paradigms.

The novels' juxtaposition of heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual characters, as well as the absence of homophobia and material lesbian issues, evinces a lesbian postmodernism, which deconstructs the homo/hetero binary and rejects the essentially marginal status of the lesbian body. The result is a repositioning of the lesbian at the centre of modernity. Heterosexuality, radical lesbianism, and colonial images of the lesbian are challenged, firstly, by the male characters' "feminisation", androgyny, and homosexual encounters and, secondly, by the female characters' mobile sexuality, cross-dressing, and recourse to the cyborg and female/lesbian grotesque. Indeed, both novels draw on the subversive re-enactment of sexual identity and desire manifest in cross-dressing, butch-femme models, and artificial body parts. Nevertheless, while sexual passion occasions, on the one hand, a postmodern fracturing of coherent identity, it provides access, on the other, to the transcendent humanist qualities of self-knowledge, freedom, and destiny.

Located at the founding moments of modern subjectivity, *The Passion* demonstrates the production of the Cartesian subject through colonial technologies. Indeed, imperial warfare is dependent on the Enlightenment's clear-cut boundaries between self and other; this occasions Henri's initial belief that it is not about killing people "[...] just the enemy [...] Someone who's not on your side" (8). Hence, also, his unwittingly naïve and comic recourse to national identity stereotypes, reflecting "the appropriation of Cartesianism for purposes of imperialism" (Clingham 1998: 59): "We knew about the English [...]. How they committed suicide with unseemly cheerfulness. The English have the highest suicide rate in Europe. I got that straight from a priest" (8). Nevertheless, Henri's recurrent reflections on the multiplicity of identity, his diary, and encounter with postmodern fantastic characters, not only bear witness to the postmodern reconceptualisation of agency as the conscious awareness and negotiation of competing discourses, but also suggest the existence of such notions within modernity itself. Indeed, relinquishing the war narrative's stable selfhood, Henri deserts the army and takes flight towards the fluid topology of Venice, inverting the literary travel/quest's conventional pursuit of stable selfhood (Brunel 1992 [1988]; Stowers 1995). Travelling through conquered countries in foreign disguise, Henri deconstructs the colonial war's discourse based on the self/other dichotomy. Firstly, as the conqueror "No one's on your side," "Your enemies take up more room than your friends" (79). Secondly, the Russian peasants'

basic life-style and self-sacrifice for the Czar, or "the Little Father," reflect his own peasant origins and projection of Napoleon as surrogate father. This occasions Henri's recognition of heterogeneity, "Is every snowflake different? No one knows" (81), and the performative nature of (national) identity:

We found no friends of France on our journey, only crushed enemies.  
Enemies like you and me with the same hopes and fears, neither good or  
bad. I had been taught to look for monsters and devils and I found ordinary  
people.

But the ordinary people were looking for devils too. [...] And if I had  
thrown off my disguise? What then, would I have turned into a devil  
before their eyes? (105)

The germ of this deconstruction is rooted in Henri's reflections especially on multiple identity and his encounter with Domino, Patrick, and Villanelle, whose fantastic attributes constitute a contravention of realism and its correlative sovereign selfhood. Patrick, the disgraced Irish priest and French army look-out, possesses a telescopic left eye, which is paradigmatic of the fantastic's concern with vision/seeing. Ensclosed in a magic-realist world of Irish goblins and telescopic visions, Patrick's multifarious stories reveal the narrative construction of reality/identity and the subsequent decentring of the "truth": "He was always seeing things and it didn't matter how or what, it mattered that he saw and that he told us stories. Stories were all we had" (107). Similarly, the origin of Napoleon's midget groom, Domino, as a circus acrobat foregrounds his adherence to postmodern fantastic notions: such as identity as performance and the unreliability of memory in the (re)construction of the past. For Domino "[...] every moment you steal from the present is a moment you have lost forever. There's only now" (29); hence, he places the word future under Derridean erasure (86). Finally, magically marked at birth with ambiguity - webbed feet resistant to the knife and an ability to walk on water - Villanelle's multifarious identities aid Henri's reconstruction of Cartesian subjectivity.

Henri's own philosophical reflections also encompass the role of memory and writing in the (re)construction of identity. Demonstrating the deferral of meaning - and hence identity - his childhood revisitation is inspired by the smell of porridge and the

recognition that "Now, words and ideas slip themselves in between me and the feeling" (25). The subsequent disunity of identity has recourse to the fantastic's mirror motif:

This morning I smell the oats and I see a little boy watching his reflection in a copper pot he's polished. His father comes in and laughs and offers him his shaving mirror instead. But in the shaving mirror the boy can only see one face. In the pot he can see all the distortions of his face. He sees many possible faces and so he sees what he might become. (25)

Reversing both the imperial war and the quest narrative's construction of coherent subjectivity (Brunel 1992 [1988]; Stowers 1995), this war experience heralds the necessity of co-existing with the present, forgetting the past and acknowledging human heterogeneity and the constructive nature of memory: "By forgetting. We cannot keep in mind too many things. There is only the present and nothing to remember" (43). Hence, a reversal of Enlightenment subjectivity, for "unlike the Lockean function of memory - to preserve consciousness through time in order to guarantee identity - the *loss* of memory here is what makes sense of the world. [...] Forgetting is the function of memory that guarantees sanity, hence, consciousness, hence subjectivity" (Moore 1995: 113-4). Indeed, a (re)construction no more reliable than human memory, Henri's diary - framed as the novel itself - comprises an endeavour to write "so that I wouldn't forget. So that later in life [...] I'd have something clear and sure to set against my memory tricks. [...] 'I don't care about the facts [...]. How I feel with change, I want to remember that'" (28). Indeed, metafictional frame-breaks shifting to the time-frame of the Venetian madhouse (81, 103, 140, 159) reveal his continual reworking of the narrative: as in his reflections on his love for Villanelle; on the need to "go on writing so that I will always have something to read" (159); and, more significantly, the repeated refrain - "I'm telling you stories. Trust me" (5, 13, 39, 69, 160). It is difficult to discern if these words belong to Henri, the other characters, or the author herself. Furthermore, by concluding his narrative, and hence the novel, with this refrain, Henri foregrounds the narrative production of identity and reality. Nevertheless, it is in Venice that Henri fully embraces a postmodern fantastic identity.



Indeed, it is in this quintessentially postmodern fantastic locale, whose parameters are forever shifting - rendering it "all border" (Seaboyer 1997: 484-5) - that the reconceptualisation of the subject reaches its apogee. Venice is first introduced in Villanelle's account of her mythical, postmodern fantastic origins and subsequent shifting identity symbolised by the mercurial city itself: "The city I come from is a changeable city. It is not always the same size. Streets appear and disappear overnight, new waterways force themselves over dry land" (97). This is confirmed by Henri's own subjective experience of Venice, which resists the deployment of maps and rationality embodied by Napoleon (and the war narrative) in favour of forked pathways suggestive of multiple possible identities:

I got lost from the first. Where Bonaparte goes, straight roads follow, buildings are rationalised, street signs may change to celebrate a battle but they are always clearly marked. Here, if they bother with street signs at all, they are happy to use the same ones over again. Not even Bonaparte could rationalise Venice.

This is a city of madmen. (112)

While "the city can absorb anyone [...] every nationality" (122), its concealed, unmapped interior city, populated by marginalised, outcast identities "recalls the ancient myth of the labyrinth, a fluid space of transformation and danger that has traditionally stood for the psychic inward journey, and increasingly for textuality itself" (Seaboyer 1997: 484-5). Indeed, the "inner cities" which "do not lie on any map" comprise one of *The Passion's* repeated refrains, eventually becoming symbolic of the multiple identities housed in each individual. As an inner city inhabitant, the witch-like old woman, formerly the "Lady of Means," predicts the husband/cook's return, the loss of Villanelle's heart, and her performative identity: "'You're a Venetian, but you wear your name as a disguise...'" (54). Indeed, born of the quintessentially fluid, carnivalesque "city of disguises" (49, 56, 100), Villanelle's amphibious body and cross-dressing demonstrate not only the performative nature of identity but also postmodern choice and agency through the conscious negotiation of discursive interpellations. As outlined above, Villanelle's contravention of Cartesian subjectivity is further symbolised by her fantastic attributes, in particular, the webbed feet, verified by Henri and Villanelle's own business-minded, rational step-father.

Whereas Henri's notions of identity shift in the course of the novel, Villanelle not only represents from the outset a performative subjectivity but acts to confirm - often through numerous doubling incidents and reflections - Henri's burgeoning fluidity. Thus, mirroring Henri's childhood scene (above), albeit substituting his theory about forgetting in favour of dreaming, Villanelle reflects:

All time is eternally present and so all time is ours. There is no sense in forgetting and every sense in dreaming. [...] Thus the present is made whole. On the lagoon this morning, with the past at my elbow [...] I see the future glittering on the water. I catch sight of myself in the water and see in the distortions of my face what I might become. (62)

On another level, reversing love's traditional association with loss of selfhood, the unity of identity is fragmented through Romantic/romantic love which nonetheless reveals itself as transcendent. As "a lukewarm people" (7) fearful of the fragmentation wrought by emotional excess, the French find in Napoleon an outlet for the experience of obsessive love: "He was in love with himself and France joined in" (13). Henri recognises war "as a form of erotic displacement" (Seaboyer 1997: 487) and links such passion to the thrill of "true" gambling - one of the novel's repeated motifs - which likewise shatters the selfhood: "You play, you win, you play, you lose. You play. [...] Dicing from one year to the next with the things you love, what you risk reveals what you value" (42). Henri concludes, therefore, "If we had the courage to love we would not so value these acts of war" (154). The gambling motif, however, reaches its paradigm in Villanelle's Poe-like tale of one man's gambling forfeit of "dismemberment piece by piece beginning with the hands" (93). The story comprises "an allegory for the risks Villanelle and Henri take, which lead to the shattering not of the physical body but of the ego [...] although its pain is registered on the body" (Seaboyer 1997: 500). Indeed, Villanelle's literal and metaphorical wager of her heart in a game of Chance, or obsessive love, results in the fracturing of her selfhood. Furthermore, whereas attempts to defy love occasion "My first upsurge of self" (68), obsessive love is compared to a sudden, uncertain, foreign journey "along the blood vessels" (68) and a proliferation of possible identities:

I looked at my palms trying to see the other life, the parallel life. The point at which my selves broke away and one married a fat man and the other stayed here, in this elegant house. [...]

Perhaps our lives spread out around us like a fan and we can only know one life, but by mistake sense others. (144)

Nevertheless, an investment in the transcendentalism of Romantic/romantic love manifests itself in Villanelle's declaration that "Passion is not so much an emotion as a destiny" (62) as well as in the endurance of her love in spite of separation. Similarly, Henri remains fractured years later by his love for Villanelle (103). Furthermore, this love/passion occasions the ultimate fracturing of his ego through its incitement to murder, collapsing the prior boundary between himself and the war's violence; Henri retreats to the madhouse with his nightmare re-enactments and irreconcilable split selfhood. However, paradoxically, this same love ultimately provides a self-knowledge which both characters have sought throughout, despite their fragmentation. Hence, a new-found ability to "read" himself as "Wordlessly, she explains me to myself" (122), for "whatever she touches, she reveals" (123).

I think now that being free is not being powerful or rich [...] but being able to love. To love someone else enough to forget about yourself even for one moment is to be free. [...]

When I fell in love it was as though I looked in the mirror for the first time and saw myself. [...] This was me. (154)

As Moore concludes, "[Winterson's] Byronic investment in love-as-philosophy takes the form of a critique of the Cartesian subject that admirably furthers the goals of some postmodern theories" yet evinces "a perhaps disturbing faith in the transforming powers of romantic love, a Romantic investment in self-knowledge and sexual obsession, that accords ill with postmodern conventions of irony and isolation" (1995: 105).

Transcendent identity is manifest, on another level, in the novel's villanelle form, Romantic motifs, and doubling incidents/reflections, which underpin the novel's unity in spite of its postmodern narrative style and subjectivity. Like the musical villanelle,

the novel is comprised of narratological doubles: Henri's narrative (section one), Villanelle's narrative (section two), and their combined narrative (section four), which each conclude with the turn of the New Year. Similarly, both ultimately refuse, firstly, the present and its multiple identities - witness Villanelle's relinquishment of cross-dressing and Henri's self-enclosure in the madhouse - and, secondly, obsessional love, for Villanelle the wife of the map-merchant and for Henri, Villanelle herself.

The novel's ubiquitous doubling is reinforced, on another level, by the prevalence of Romantic repeat refrains: among others, "I'm telling you stories. Trust me" (5, 13, 39, 69, 160); "You play, you win, you play, you lose. You play" (42, 66, 73, 133); "what you risk reveals what you value" (42, 89, 91); "the valuable, fabulous thing" (90, 94, 98, 104, 120, 133, 150). Thus, set in the period of High Romanticism - the birth of the nation-state, the fascination with Venice - this self-conscious use of the refrain as well as references to Romantic poetry, "reinforce the post-Romantic sensibility of the whole" (Seaboyer 1997: 492-3). Notwithstanding Winterson's own (postmodern) objection to bibliographical reductionism, her critical work *Art Objects* (1996b [1995]) encapsulates this simultaneous investment in postmodern notions of multiple identity, art's transcendent status as a liminal space for the profusion of identities, and the transcendental sovereignty of *Art* itself. Thus, she writes how "Art is a way into [...] other personalities" (1996b [1995]: 26) for "It is not necessary to be shut up in one self [...]. The artist knows this" (116); but also of how art's formal beauty and search for authenticity enables "The attendant personalities that are clinically labelled as schizophrenia [to] be brought into harmonious balance" (116).

The discourse of imperial warfare - heroism, travel, conquest, and nationalism - also plays a major role in the production of sexed and gendered identities. As Dawson's study, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire, and the Imagining of Masculinities*, demonstrates:

The soldier hero has proved to be one of the most durable and powerful forms of idealized masculinity within Western cultural traditions since the time of the Ancient Greeks. Military virtues such as aggression, strength, courage and endurance have repeatedly been defined as the natural and

inherent qualities of manhood, whose apogee is attainable only in battle.  
(1994: 1)

Such narratives, revolving around the masculine subject's sloughing off of innocent boyhood and accession to maturity and sexual prowess through the experience of combat, are reflected in Henri's own narrative:

When I came here I was just like them [...] but my companions are no longer the shy boys with cannon-fire in their eyes. They are rougher, tougher. [...] [T]hat's what army life is about. [...]

Here, without women, with only our imaginations and a handful of whores, we can't remember what it is about women that can turn a man through passion into something holy. (26)

Hence, the war narrative's production of rigid gender dichotomies manifest in the relation between the soldiers and both the brothel and army-based prostitutes: "Soldiers and women. That's how the world is" (44). This is consolidated by the novel's (de)construction of national identity stereotypes, reflecting nationalism's construction of gender dichotomies: "Within nationalist discourse, narratives about soldier heroes are both underpinned by, and powerfully reproduce, conceptions of gender and nation as unchanging essences" (Dawson 1994: 11). Indeed, as a product of the same masculinist narrative - represented by the loutish, drunken cook - alleged sexual prowess reveals itself as violence and brutality. The cook, who "went out whoring most nights" (15), introduces the new recruits to women and brothels. This scene, comprising Henri's original (Freudian) trauma (and the primary motivation for its re-enactment by murdering the cook/husband in Venice) reveals, firstly, the prevalence of "female communities" in Winterson's fiction<sup>1</sup> (Stowers 1996) and, secondly, the origins of Henri's resistance to the war's masculinisation process. "Female communities", associated with the fantastic and symbols of the house, town, palimpsest, and island, figure gender fluidity, the maternal, textual lesbianism and female solidarity. As Stowers (1996) argues, the brothel comprises one such female "community" or zone on Henri's path towards its paradigm in Venice. Unschooled in

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<sup>1</sup> And in other contemporary women writers such as Angela Carter, Michèle Roberts, Monique Wittig.

masculinity, Henri differs from his compatriots: he fears his virgin experience; desires water not wine; experiences repressed anger towards the cook; envies the prostitutes' mutuality and evades sex through a "feminine" headache. Furthermore, the brothel's lack of glamour reveals to him the discursive production of woman-as-temptress and object of lust by war and church. Henri's traversal of both conventional masculine and feminine spheres deconstructs the gendered war narrative and reveals the roots of his feminisation.

Firstly, the war narrative is deconstructed by Henri's contravention of its gender codes: his "skinny frame" secures a feminine position as "wringer of chicken's necks and later a cook" (5). Furthermore, as a "young man who can't pick up a musket to shoot a rabbit" (28), Henri rescues soldiers from the battlefield but fails to engage in combat. Secondly, the war discourse adheres to a masculine linearity - male activities, exceptional individuals, sovereignty - which is challenged by Henri's traditionally feminine palimpsestic narrative - memories of home, his mother, and metafictional inserts. Hence, he presents "a re-positioning of history, a remapping of a palimpsestic her-story [...] against any claims to truth. Stressing the subjective, story-telling nature of his accounts, Henri becomes reminiscent of [...] female travellers" (Stowers 1995: 144). This narrative locates the origins of failed masculinisation in, firstly, his parent's unconventionally gendered roles and, secondly, his tendency towards the feminine and/or the maternal. Georgette displays an unfeminine strength in her religious convictions, which lead to filial defiance and human endurance. Furthermore, despite her own inevitable wedding, she privileges (religious) passion: "it is better to burn than to marry" (9). Claude, by comparison "a slow-witted but kindly man" (10), manifests a traditional femininity in his gentleness, patience, and lack of sexual aggression. Thus, proposing to Georgette, "He had shaved, he was wearing his nightshirt and he smelled of carbolic soap. [...] He got into bed beside her and stroked her face and taking her hand put it to his face. She was not afraid. After that, whenever he wanted her, he tapped at the door in just the same way and waited until she said yes" (11). Henri inherits his mother's passionate excess, coined by Villanelle as a "heart [...] too wide for his skinny chest" (146); and from his father a "feminine" approach to women and sex. Indeed, he visits the brothel scented with carbolic soap (12) and remains celibate until his encounter with Villanelle ("I came to women late like my father" (12)). Furthermore, Henri's

narrative focuses on his mother, revealing an attachment to the feminine and/or the maternal over and above the father-son relationship. He is not only "homesick from the start [and] missed [his] mother" (6), preferring to stay at camp with her Bible than visit the brothel, but "When Claude had finally gone to bed and we were alone, we didn't talk. We held hands until the wick burnt out and then we were in the dark" (34). This feminisation reaches its paradigm in his relationship with Villanelle in Venice, who represents a fluidly gendered albeit distinctly feminine/maternal selfhood: "I had never lain like this with anyone but my mother" (140).

On another level, the above discussion of the war's masculine discourse - and its deconstruction - may also be framed in terms of the travel/quest narrative. Both Western and non-Occidental variants involve the masculine subject's accession to manhood, sovereign subjectivity, and heroism through travel and separation from the feminine other (Brunel 1992 [1988]). *The Passion*, however, manifests two different travel paradigms: firstly, the conventionally male, involving Henri's position as travelling cook and infantry expeditions in a quest after Napoleon, representative of masculinist linear history; and, secondly, the deconstruction of this narrative by Henri's palimpsestic stories, his tendency towards the feminine/maternal, and journey towards Venice (Stowers 1995). The (feminine) gender fluidity of the paradigm represented by Venice is suggested by Villanelle and Henri's interlacing stories, mirror and repeat motifs, as well as the redirection of journeys towards the "the cities of the interior" (68, 114, 150, 151) - the self, the "blood vessels" (68), and the heart. Hence, "journeys [...] turn to a form of travel which is no longer based on the coherent, conquering self, being transposed instead to a mercurial interior exploration into feminine multiplicity" (Stowers 1995: 143). This demythologisation of traditionally masculine genres constitutes a crucial element of the novel's allegiance to postmodern feminism/lesbianism's project for gender deconstruction (Farwell 1996; Palmer 1995).

Indeed, opposing Napoleon's masculinist paradigm, "Venice [...] is a postmodern city par excellence in its mutability" (Doan 1994b: 148-9), "a postmodern hyperspace universe" and "fairy tale forest" (Moore 1995: 115-6), representing fluidity signified as "feminine". Hence, its association with conventionally feminine attributes - night-time, darkness, secrets, water, artifice, disguise, and masquerade. Thus, while

"Venice is a site within which the neat binary oppositions of true/false, pious/sinful, mind/body, masculine/feminine, Thanatos/Eros collapse", it signifies "death and the body of woman. For as long as cities have existed, they have been symbolically figured as feminine; Venice's seductive, decorative beauty, its historical reputation for duplicity, and its topography, at once contained and enclosed by water and penetrated by it, has rendered it an ideal vehicle for the historical and cultural burden of ambivalence that inheres in the female body" (Seaboyer 1997: 484-5). Similarly, Venice is paradigmatic of Stowers' (1996) "female communities," which are simultaneously fluidly gendered yet feminine. Indeed, Kutzer (1994), Seaboyer and Stowers' recourse to potentially essentialising paradigms - psychoanalysis and French feminism - in their interpretations of Venice as a rejection of the Father (Napoleon) in favour of the maternal (body), the pre-Oedipal, and the feminine highlights a potential danger. Notwithstanding the novel's otherwise successful deconstruction of dichotomous genders, the conflation of "femininity," albeit as a non-essentialising signifier, with gender fluidity and the quintessential postmodern/fantastic risks reflecting (patriarchal) postmodernism's perpetuation of the representation of woman as irrational other (see Chapter 2). This, of course, is further witnessed in the novel's attribution of gender fluidity to its female character Villanelle.

Villanelle's fluid gender derives from fantastic attributes occasioned, firstly, by her imbrication in Venetian legend and, secondly, her representation of the amphibious city of disguises. Indeed, the novel discloses the hierarchically sexed, gendered, class-based codes surrounding boatmen's mythology, in particular their wives' ritual for unborn children, in order to emphasise its Butlerian parodic/comic misperformance by Villanelle's mother: "She must [...] beg for a clean heart if her child be a girl and boatmen's feet if her child be a boy" (50). Following the magical disappearance of her "weak and foolish" (50) husband after his contravention of the rule never to bare webbed feet, Villanelle's mother drops the rosemary, fails to locate the grave of the most recently deceased (her husband), and sinks the boat with an abundance of salt. That the contravention of the ritual's gendered regulations, reversing the prayer and granting Villanelle masculine webbed feet, is accompanied by the sun's eclipse, red hair, and the inability of the midwife to surgically separate the toes, demonstrates the unnaturalness of fluid gender according to the boatmen's



guild. Indeed, the ritual's misperformance enacts the subversive re-signification of the boatmen's (and Napoleon's) masculinist paradigm.

It is the dual gender encodings marked upon Villanelle's body which occasion gender ambiguity. On one level, possessing the feet of a water bird, Villanelle is linked to the cyborg and the carnivalesque, for "she is a mixture of human and animal, and the instability of such abject mixture reinforces the mutability of her gendered identity" (Seaboyer 1997: 496), reflecting Venice's own amphibiousness. On another level, the webbed feet render her, in Venetian terms, physically quasi-hermaphroditic (Doan 1994b; Moore 1995), recalling the fantastic's deployment of androgyny as a signifier for gender fusion. Thus, "Contradicting the Lacanian framework within which one 'is' or 'has' the phallus, Villanelle [...] identifies with both feminine and masculine subject positions; as with the city that is her mirror, this double identification is written on the body" (Seaboyer 1997: 497). This is manifest in Villanelle's matter-of-fact attitude to sex, sexual assertiveness, sexual initiation of Henri, refusal to succumb to the rape's victimisation, and rejection of marriage in spite of pregnancy. However, it finds its apogee in Villanelle's cross-dressing, drag acts, and redeployment of butch/femme lesbian sex roles, which originate in the casino's liminality.

Indeed, associated with carnival's gambling and masquerade motifs, the casino's liminality stages many of the novel's significant incidents, including Villanelle's encounter with "the Queen of Spades" (the married lover). Villanelle's cross-dressing, drag, and butch role-playing, which further signify her fluid gender, originates within but extends beyond this liminal space: on the one hand, "I dressed as a boy because that's what the visitors liked to see. It was part of the game, trying to decide which sex was hidden behind tight breeches and extravagant face-paste"; on the other, "This was required, but the moustache I added for my own amusement" (54). Drawing on Queer Theory, such cross-dressing, drag, and butch acts - or parodic/comedic re-enactments - subvert the naturalised distinction between inner (gender) and outer (sex) and occasion their proliferation beyond the essentialised, binary frame. Deliberating over the ethical necessity of revealing her alleged "true" gender to her female beloved, Villanelle approximates Judith Butler's thinking in her acknowledgement of gender as a corporeal style: "And what was myself? Was this breeches and boots self any less real than my garters?" (66). Hence, cross-dressing,

drag, and butch role-playing grant Villanelle access to postmodern agency, choice, and resistance through an awareness of her gendered construction and the disparity between differently gendered subjectivities. Thus, Doan comments on *The Passion*, "Cross-dressing thus manoeuvres the dresser into a position of power, not only the power of knowledge and the ability to control perception but also, and more important, the power and freedom to play with choice" (1994b: 148-9). Furthermore, the textual figuration of such acts comprise "metafictional discussions about lesbian and female representation in language and narrative" (Farwell 1996: 170); hence, presenting a further reversal of masculinist literary paradigms.

Notwithstanding its reflection of the fantastic's "transgressive" sexualities, the novel's integration of heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual relationships espouses a lesbian postmodern destabilisation of modernity's hetero/homo binary. Hence, Henri's encounter with an array of im/explicitly homosexual/bisexual minor characters: the army captain, Irish Bishop, Napoleon's bath attendant, brothel prostitutes, cook/husband, and madhouse warder. This integration is mirrored in the relationships of the main characters - Henri and Villanelle's heterosexual union and Villanelle and the Venetian woman's "lesbian" affair. Indeed, the novel eschews radical lesbianism's recourse to the lesbian's essentialist marginality, revolutionary body, and identity-based politics. Firstly, excepting Villanelle's acknowledgement "It was a woman I loved and you will admit that is not the usual thing" (94), the novel evinces an absence of homophobia and other lesbian material issues. Secondly, the co-existence of (homo)(hetero)sexuality, the unassuming, albeit central, status of Villanelle's "lesbian" relationship, and the unobtrusive employment of lesbian narrative aesthetics and intertexts reveals that all sexualities are imbricated in the dominant order, or that "Lesbian experience can be at the centre and not the margins [...] of modernity itself" (Moore 1995: 107). Hence, we witness a realisation of Wittig's project of "universalisation" (see Chapter 4), which is reflected in Winterson's own critical writing:

When I read Adrienne Rich or Oscar Wilde [...] the fact of their homosexuality should not be uppermost. I am not reading their work to get at their private lives [...]. If each were not an exceptional writer, neither

would be able to reach beyond the interests of their own sub-group. (1996b [1995]: 109)

However, the novel's insertion of lesbian/bisexual desire is clearly political in its endeavour to subvert heterosexual hegemony and its attendant binaries. Indeed, in this sense, drawing on postmodern lesbianism's non-essential signifier, its sexually fluid spaces (travel, female communities, brothel, Venice, casino), characters and politics are nevertheless signified as "lesbian" (Doan 1994b; Farwell 1996; Moore 1995; Stowers 1995, 1996). Hence, Farwell's (1996) "textual lesbianism" and Moore's terms "teledildonics" and "virtual lesbianism" to encapsulate "the ambiguous status of lesbianism in Winterson's fiction. Even while it insists upon a constant deferral of fixed sexual identities [...], [it] imagines the space in which such deferral can take place as linguistically or imaginatively lesbian" (1995: 104-5).

Lesbian postmodernism's deconstruction of heterosexuality's hegemony is manifest, on one level, in the "feminisation", androgyny, and incestuousness of Henri's heterosexual relationships, which reveal both the multiplicity of *heterosexualities* and Henri's status as a "virtual (postmodern) lesbian" subject. Firstly, Henri rejects the masculine sexual subjectivity and discourse embodied by the cook/husband which is produced by the colonial technologies of war, travel, and heroism. Secondly, failing to acknowledge Villanelle's sexuality as in any way unusual, "Henri's respect for lesbian relationships [...], the way in which they seem to dwarf his own, suggests a lesbian perspective made possible (paradoxically) by Winterson's use of a male narrator" (Moore 1995: 112). Indeed, drawing on the fantastic's motif of androgyny, his encounter with the sexually ambiguous Villanelle and the ambivalent domain of Venice render him - and thus the novel's depiction of heterosexuality - sexually androgynous. Hence, his feminine shyness vis-à-vis Villanelle's matter-of-fact sexual assertion: "I blushed and mumbled something about the Russians having fled" (87). Furthermore, Henri's feminine non-possessiveness is juxtaposed with Villanelle's challenge to conventional male/active; female/passive binaries: "I think about her body a lot; not possessing it but watching it twist in sleep. She is never still" (123). Lack of sexual possessiveness is further reflected in Henri's feminine frame, equation of sex with love, and gentleness. "I have learned to take pleasure", says Villanelle, "without questioning the source" (148). This, indeed, is what Henri learns by the end

of the novel, shifting the goalposts of conventional heterosexuality towards heterosexualities, bisexuality, or "virtual lesbianism" (Farwell 1996; Moore 1995) in order to accept the (male) madhouse warder's love, for "I've learned to take what's there without questioning the source" (157). On another level, heteronormativity is challenged by the novel's recourse to the fantastic's incest motif, for while sharing no blood relation, their relationship is framed as that between brother and sister as witnessed implicitly in their mutuality, mirroring, and doubling. Thus, invited to remain in Venice, Henri's passion renders him unable to "stay and be her brother" (117). Similarly, Villanelle rejects Henri's marriage proposal because "[...] You're my brother" (117, 122): "He loves me, I know that, and I love him, but in a brotherly incestuous way. He touches my heart, but [h]e could never steal it" (146). Thus, heterosexuality is no longer presented as singular but variegated in its sexual identities and desires.

As a city for the bored and the perverse, Venice is representative of both postmodern sexual fluidity and Foucault's discussion of the eighteenth-century's simultaneous demarcation and production of aberrant sexualities. Reflecting feminist postmodernism's subversive redeployment of sexually assertive women, Venice's paradigmatic character, Villanelle, is "no stranger to love" (59). She is sold as an army prostitute, wagers her body to soldiers, and remains unvictimized by the cook/husband's rape: "I didn't try to move, he was twice my weight at least and I'm no heroine" (64). Furthermore, her interest in physical pleasure as opposed to its source leads to an easy bisexuality: "I am pragmatic about love and have taken my pleasure with both men and women, but I have never needed a guard for my heart" (59-60). On another level, however, this sexual mobility arises from her hermaphroditic, carnivalesque, cyborg body and symbolic link with Venice: its amphibiousness and fluidity; association with gambling; its location "between God and the Devil"; cross-dressing and masquerade. Indeed, recalling aerialism, it is Venetian aerialists who provide Villanelle with her Deleuzian model of sexual desire, providing a frame of reference for the subsequent sexual encounter between Villanelle and the wife of a Venetian merchant: "one will dangle by the knees and snatch a kiss from whoever is standing below. I like such kisses. They fill the mouth and leave the body free. [...] Passion is sweeter split strand by strand. Divided and re-divided like mercury then gathered up only at the last moment" (59).

Located within the liminality of the casino, the Venetian woman's own ambiguity is marked by her mask, redder hair than Villanelle, and, above all, the card she draws - the Queen of Spades: "'A lucky card. The symbol of Venice. You win'" (59), "The unpredictable wild card" (144), recalling Pushkin's similarly named tale of sexual obsession. Comprising a Deleuzian coming-together of two surfaces, "suddenly draining her glass [she] stroked the side of my face. Only for a second she touched me and then she was gone and I was left with my heart smashing at my chest" (59). Their erotic climax, which emphasises a non-phallic, momentary infusion of two surfaces with erotic energy, recalls various lesbian poetics/theory: firstly, Irigaray's imagery from "When Our Lips Speak"; secondly, Grosz's Deleuzian lesbian desire; thirdly, Queer Theory's cross-dressing, drag, and butch-femme models.

[W]e separated our pleasure. She lay on the rug and I lay at right angles to her so that only our lips might meet. Kissing in this way is the strangest of distractions. The greedy body that clamours for satisfaction is forced to content itself with a single sensation and [...] so the mouth becomes the focus of love and all things pass through it and are re-defined. It is a sweet and *precise* torture. (67) [My italics]

Such cross-dressing, drag, and butch-femme roles, comprise a parodic mimicry of heterosexuality or a subversive excess comparable to the (lesbian) grotesque body (Farwell 1996). Cross-dressed as a man throughout their encounters, Villanelle enacts a butch lesbian sex-role; similarly, rather than simply reflecting heterosexual femininity, her lover assumes a lesbian femme role in her overt display of femininity for the butch viewer: "She dresses for me. I have never seen her in the same clothes twice" (73). Indeed, such encounters exemplify lesbian postmodernism's emphasis on the role of both the context and the reader for the success of the cross-dresser or butch/femme's parodic repetition of heterosexual identity and desire. Thus, the lover colludes with Villanelle's butch performance commenting about the loss of her moustache "'You shaved it off'" (65). Despite Villanelle's anxiety, "She thought I was a young man. I was not" (65), her question "What was it about me that interested her?" (66) lies in the butch role's deconstruction of both masculinity/femininity and male/female binaries. This reaches its paradigm in a tense scene during which the Venetian woman - as Villanelle's ideal gender-reader - invites her to remove articles

of clothing, which will reveal Villanelle's female body. However, eventually, "I went back to her house and banged on the door. [...] She looked surprised. 'I'm a woman,' I said, lifting up my shirt [...]. She smiled. 'I know.' I didn't go home. I stayed" (70-1).

Eroticism derives, therefore, from the specificity of the cross-dresser or butch/femme's (mis)performance of heterosexual dichotomies as well as the partner/viewer's ability to "read" its subversive re-enactment. This is further demonstrated by Villanelle's relationship with the cook/husband, who reveals himself to be inadequate as a gender-reader. While he is initially unable to decipher her "true" sex, Villanelle enjoys the power of the cross-dresser to manipulate (sexual) identity. Indeed, her codpiece approximates Queer Theory's theorisation of the role of artificial body parts in the subversive re-enactment of heterosexuality. Thus, recalling in particular Halberstam's parodic strap-on dildo, "I catch him staring at my crotch and now and again I wear a codpiece to taunt him. My breasts are small, so there's no cleavage to give me away, and I'm tall for a Venetian" (56). Nevertheless, discovering that Villanelle is a woman, the cook/husband tries to control her (sexual) performance and reduces her to a woman's role - rape then marriage - revealing the contingency of Queer Theory's subversive re-enactments on a non-heterosexual, or liminal, context. Indeed, despite his apparent sexual fluidity, his oppressive manipulation of Villanelle's performance, as well as his status in the novel as representation of traditional masculinity, reveals the fixity of conventional heterosexuality.

However, like the inscription of identity, sexual identity and desire reveal themselves similarly imbricated in both postmodern and humanist discourses. Hence, the fragmentation of the selfhood through sexual passion, which comprises "the condition that most resembles a particular kind of mental disorder" (62). This is reinforced by the symbolic association between gambling and sexual passion in their ability to fragment subjectivity, which becomes one of the novel's repeat refrains ("Somewhere between fear and sex passion is" (55, 62, 68, 74, 76)). For Moore, "The very imprecision of [this] location [...] constructs the 'virtually lesbian' space in which characters and readers move through various subject positions [...] as possible libidinal identifications" (1995: 114). Nevertheless, as above, the description of sexual love as "destiny", self-knowledge, "freedom," "nobility" and endurance

adheres to a humanist interpretation of sexual passion as transcendent. Indeed, while sexual passion furthers postmodern concerns, the novel's love-as-philosophy becomes a transcendent formula about the nature of passion: "Passion will work in the fields for seven years for the beloved and on being cheated work for seven more, but passion, because it is noble, will not long accept another's left-overs" (144-5). In *The Passion*, "desire," therefore, "is an emotion which transcends all specificities, and which we all recognise as 'the same thing'" (Pearce 1994: 174).

In another way, however, this corresponds to the novel's recourse to (humanist) lesbian romance conventions, what Moore describes as "the transforming powers of romantic love, a Romantic investment in self-knowledge and sexual obsession" which "will be familiar to readers of lesbian fiction, in which 'all for love' is a recurrent theme and romantic obsession a structuring form" (1995: 105). Nevertheless, these lesbian romance conventions are recontextualised in a postmodern frame, which, firstly, enables the novel to simultaneously posit the fragmentation of the subject while retaining the notion of desire and, secondly, literalises or postmodernises the latter's clichés - in particular through the fantastic tale of Villanelle's heart. Indeed, the heart motif first emerges during the war narrative, which necessitates its relinquishment in order to maintain a coherent selfhood and ability to engage in battle. The metaphorical status of the above is questioned by the fantastic tale of Villanelle's lost heart, which she gambles in a game of Chance, or love. Possessing no heart(beat), Villanelle sends Henri to redeem her heart from the Venetian woman's house; he locates it in a throbbing, stoppered jar and rescues it from permanent imprisonment within the woman's unfinished tapestry of Villanelle: "if the tapestry had been finished and the woman had woven in her heart, she would have been a prisoner forever" (121). Furthermore, the literalisation of the heart motif motivates the specific brutality of Henri's murder of the cook/husband by ripping open his chest to check he has a heart, which he then scoops out and offers to Villanelle. Finally, the interplay between postmodern and humanist positions is reinforced by the juxtaposition of passion with numerous biblical intertexts and scenes of religious fervour; while human passion is perceived as ultimately more dangerous on account of its (postmodern) fracturing of the self, its continual association with religion lends it an element of transcendence.

Located, like *The Passion*, at the founding historical moment of subjectivity, *Sexing the Cherry* similarly reveals the Cartesian subject as the product of colonial discourses - albeit in this case (sea) travel, adventuring, exploration, scientific discovery, and heroism. Indeed, such colonial narratives, which subscribe to Enlightenment concepts of linearity, closure, sovereignty, and clear-cut boundaries between self and other, or self and external world, are represented by the historical personage of Tradescant - hero of early modern sea exploration and botanical scientific discovery for Charles I. Inspired by the discovery of England's first banana to become Tradescant's apprentice, Jordan aspires, like Henri, towards the imperial travel/exploration narrative's construction of stable selfhood: "When I left England I thought I was running away [...] from uncertainty and confusion but most of all running away from myself. I thought I might become someone else in time, grafted onto something better and stronger" (80).

However, the travel narrative - and concomitant stable selfhood - is challenged by Jordan's palimpsestic, anti-linear narrative and his journeys into the imagination, the mind, and the self, which, unlike *The Passion*, are literalised as fantastic realms, or chronotopes. Collapsing the boundary between self/other or self/world, Jordan foregoes an account of his external journeys, "the truth as you will find it in diaries, maps and logbooks" and "travel book[s]" (9), in favour of internal journeys, comprising those obscured by - and hence situated in the lacunae of - colonial scientific discourse. He therefore follows "the path not taken and the forgotten angle [...] the ones I might have made, or perhaps did make in some other place or time" (9). This journey, comprising a search for the self, leads not to the discovery of exotic fruits and peoples but (postmodern) multiple/split identities and subjectivity-as-movement, represented by the repeated metaphor of Jordan's flight from himself - "I was giving myself the slip" (10). Thus, relocated within the fluidity and infinity of time, space, and consciousness, journeys are redefined as: "An effort to catch up with my fleet-footed self, living another life in a different way" (80). Time, space, and place consequently "have no meaning":

All times can be inhabited, all places visited. In a single day the mind can make a millpond of the oceans. [...] The journey is not linear, it is always



back and forth, denying the calendar, the wrinkles and lines of the body. The self is not contained in any moment or any place, but it is only in the intersection of moment and place that the self might, for a moment, be seen vanishing through a door, which disappears at once. (80)

Thus, travels of "the inner imaginative life" espouse a postmodern open-endedness, labyrinthine plurality, and infinity: "I have set off and found that there is no end to even the simplest journey of the mind. I begin, and straight away a hundred alternative routes present themselves" (102). Hence, like *The Passion*, these virtual parallel worlds and simultaneous temporal perspectives question Enlightenment notions of origin. Indeed, "redeploy[ing] John Locke's notions of identity [...] as the duration of consciousness created through repetition in time" (Clingham 1998: 62), Jordan recognises more clearly than Henri the fictional nature of childhood: "I will have to assume that I had a childhood, but I cannot assume to have had the one I remember. [...] I have heard people say we are shaped by our childhood. But which one?" (92).

In another way, the correlation between fluid travel and identity draws, like *The Passion*, on the traditional association of rivers and water with fluidity, reflecting also the fantastic and non-Occidental tribal belief in the power of naming (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996). Hence, Dog-Woman names her foundling after a river and the breaking of a mother's waters, "a name not bound to anything, just as the waters aren't bound to anything" (11). Indeed, not only do "All rivers run into the sea" (137), but sea travel reveals the world's primary "fluidity" (136-7) and its interconnections. The reversal of colonial travel/exploration suggests, therefore, in Moore's terms, how:

modernity itself - the regime of the subject, of the bounded body, of fixed identity - is rewritten as only one of many possible ways of describing human experience, and postmodern understandings of fragmented bodies and multiple subjectivities are seen to have been there all along, produced by [...] the impossible demands of Enlightenment modernity rather than challenging or rejecting them. (1995: 116)

Fluid identity reaches its paradigm, however, in the internal "enchanted cities" themselves whose shifting parameters, aerialism and aerialists foreground, like Venice, the fluid, performative, co-present nature of identities.

Travel, therefore, becomes a picaresque journey across the enchanted cities or chronotopes of Jordan's inner mind in pursuit of selfhood understood as an "escape from the weight of the world" (17). Hence, the shifting boundaries and topology of the "city of moveable buildings," whose nomadic inhabitants continually relocate their houses, occasioning longevity as opposed to fixity's "discontentment" and "disease." Jordan encounters a series of fantastic characters - eleven of the traditional fairy tale's twelve dancing princesses - whose lack of gravity and ability to float/fly introduce the novel's association between dancing and aerialism: "when we danced we were the envy of all the rest because our feet seemed never to touch the floor. Fortunately our dresses were long, and so no one caught sight of us, floating" (97-8). This weightlessness becomes symbolic of performative subjectivity, as well as of the fluidity of space, time, matter, and consciousness, and is encapsulated by their encounter with the floating city and its fantastic inhabitants:

In time all of the people began to adjust to their new rolling circumstances and it was discovered that the best way to overcome the problem was to balance above it. [...] [E]veryone [...] learned to be acrobats.

As it became natural for the citizens to spend their lives suspended, the walking turned to leaping, and leaping into dancing, so that no one bothered to go sedately where they could twist in points of light. [...]

After a few simple experiments it became certain that for the people who had abandoned gravity, gravity had abandoned them. (96-7)

However, it is in the fantastic zone/chronotope occupied by the twelfth dancing princess, Fortunata, that Jordan's liquid identity and journey, transposed into the romance quest, reaches its apogee. Indeed, love is repeatedly associated with journeys, incorporating, therefore, travel's further symbolism for multiple identity. Thus, for Jordan his beloved Fortunata is "a woman whose face was a sea voyage I had not the courage to attempt" (21). As in *The Passion*, however, love effects both a postmodern multiplicity and a humanist self-knowledge: "Was I searching for a

dancer whose name I did not know or was I searching for the dancing part of myself?" (40). Recalling the traditional romance quest, this journey is associated with arbitrary time, "the scene I have just described to you may lie in the future or the past. Either I have found Fortunata or I will find her" (93). Thus, the novel has recourse, on the one hand, to humanist notions of transcendent love. As Pearce puts it:

Romance [...] claims its own chronotope: operates according to a time-keeping which (in Winterson's texts at least), is wilfully ahistorical and universal. Throughout the centuries, lovers have fallen in and out of the black hole of love, and in their falling entered a world cut off from the rules of time and space. (1994: 181)

As Pearce argues, however, although inspired by the love quest, the "enchanted cities" exceed the romance chronotope's suspension of time with a postmodern investment in "the *synchronicity of time*: the simultaneity of past, present and future" (1994: 182). Indeed, while Fortunata confirms Jordan's postmodern notions, she fulfils his humanist search for self-knowledge and freedom, located in a coexistence with time - represented by dancing, acrobatics, floating, flying, and the refrain "empty space and points of light" (91, 144) - which is symptomatically humanist and postmodern.

Indeed, at their first encounter, Fortunata, the quintessential aerialist, "balanced the yards of rope without faltering. She was a dancer. [...] She was climbing down from her window on a thin rope which she cut and re-knotted a number of times during the descent" (21). Similarly, for her sisters, "She was, of all of us, the best dancer, the one who made her body into shapes we could not follow. She did it for pleasure [...]. The winds supported her" (60). However, while Fortunata's dancing school comprises a postmodern realisation of performative identity and the fluidity of time, space, matter and consciousness, its recourse to the metaphors of religion, Eastern spiritualism and transcendent art is suggestive of New Age postmodern philosophies<sup>2</sup> and humanist universals.

*She believes that we are fallen creatures who once knew how to fly.*

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<sup>2</sup> For example, the increasing tendency to fuse quantum mechanics with Eastern spirituality's universal consciousness.

[...]

*It is her job to channel the light lying in the solar plexus, along the arms, along the legs, forcing it into fingertips and feet, forcing it out [...].*

*She asks them to meditate on a five-pointed star in the belly and to watch the points push outwards, the fifth point to the head. She spins them, impaled with light [...]. And it is then that the spinning seems to stop, that the wild gyration of the dancers passes from movement to infinity. (72)*

Thus, while, on the one hand, weightlessness and lack of gravity have recourse to postmodern aerialism, on the other, they comprise components of Eastern religion's description of the accession to universal consciousness. Indeed, Jordan similarly associates "the coil of pure time" (90), or "the heightened condition of superconductivity," with "Artists and gurus [...]. Passion, delirium, meditation, even out-of-body" (91), suggesting also that the realisation of postmodern synchronicity with humanist universal consciousness comprises the transcendent quality of art. Thus, reflecting ideas expounded in Winterson's *Art Objects* (1996b [1995]):

a criterion for true art [...] as opposed to its cunning counterfeit, is its ability to take us where the artist has been, to this other different place where we are free from the problems of gravity. When we are drawn into the art we are drawn out of ourselves. We are no longer bound by matter, matter has become what it is: empty space and light. (91)

Hence, Jordan achieves a sense of unity and coherence above and beyond his postmodern fragmentation, which is available to all individuals capable of accessing the inner selfhood of the mind or imagination. For Clingham, therefore, as opposed to the Burkean or Kantian sublime, the novel "elicits and appeals to a commonality in human experience, founded in the imaginative experience of the human body". This, he argues, is reminiscent of Samuel Johnson's notion of the sublime which records "the *continuity* between the shock and expanse of the mind that others associate with the sublime, *and* the rational operations of other faculties that keep the individual grounded" (1998: 70).

A similar fusion of humanist and postmodern notions of subjectivity is manifest in the figure of the Dog-Woman, Jordan's narratological double and adopted mother. Occupying the chronotope of the historical present 1630-66, Dog-Woman espouses seventeenth-century conservatism: an adherence to traditional notions of the universe, sex and gender, and, above all, an active allegiance with royalist counter-revolution. Hence, her apparent endeavour to maintain Enlightenment dichotomies as in her opposition to Jordan's botanical grafting and discovery that time and matter are relative. Though reactionary, this introduces a contrary Rabelaisian cast to Dog-Woman's narrative. Firstly, her narrative evinces an antipathy to transcendentalism and metaphysics and, secondly, a "presentness", embodied by its emphasis on causality and corporeality. Indeed, "all the great historical moments of the chronotope Dogwoman inhabits are represented in terms of bodies" (Pearce 1994: 178), including Charles I's beheading, the plague, the Fire of London, as well as her own murderous endeavour to purge London of Puritans. Comprising "the exaggeration of everything earthly" (Farwell 1996: 184), the continual emphasis on her incredible size and strength render Dog-Woman paradigmatic of the comic grotesque; hence, the repeated association of her body with mountains. Despite its link with counter-revolution, as opposed to revolution, Dog-Woman's quintessentially Bakhtinian body "function[s] on a narrative level as a source of power and agency" (Farwell 1996: 184). Thus, indifferent to the gypsy's refusal to read her palm, "I was not discouraged; I am enough to make my own fortune in this pock-marked world" (105). Similarly, at the witch-woman's prediction that Jordan will break her heart, Dog-Woman expounds a postmodern adherence to the fictional nature of identity and agency as the negotiation of competing narratives:

I could have snapped her spine like a fish-bone. Had I done so, perhaps I could have changed our fate, for fate may hang on any moment and at any moment be changed. I should have killed her and found us a different story. (14)

Furthermore, despite her conservatism, Dog-Woman at times mirrors Jordan's adherence to postmodern notions of fluid time and the unreliability of memory in the reconstruction of the past and childhood which elides the conventional distinction between fiction and reality. Thus, "I sing of other times, when I was happy, though I

know that these are figments of my mind and nowhere I have ever been. But does it matter if the place cannot be mapped as long as I can still describe it?" (14-5). Similarly, subverting "Childhood, the founding experience of identity in the Lockean schema" (Moore 1995: 118), she "can remember some incidents, but the sense of time passing escapes me. If I were to stretch out all that seemed to happen, and relive it, it might take a day or two. Where then are all the years in between?" (108). However, in comparison to Jordan, whose weightlessness and lack of gravity - or aerialism - reflect his slight frame, Dog-Woman's huge, grotesque body acts to emphasise her own paradoxically "aerial" nature. Dog-Woman's aerialism derives, in part, from her recourse to the literary fantastic's motif of invisibility, which shifts the boundaries between self and other: "I was invisible then. I, who must turn sideways through any door, can melt into the night as easily as a thin thing" (14), for "in the dark and the water I weigh nothing at all" (40). Firstly, like her huge size, invisibility grants Dog-Woman a postmodern agency and the ability to purge the world of Puritans. Secondly, it is linked to angels, recalling both Jordan and Fortunata (100) as well as Armitt's (1999) association between aerialism and angels: "No one saw me. Like the angels, I can be invisible when there is work to be done" (89). Indeed, this quality is reflected by the angelic quality of her "voice as slender as a reed [...] [which] has no lard in it" (14), the opposite of Fevvers' grotesque voice like the rattle of dustbin lids (see Chapter 6). Finally, like Jordan, Dog-Woman's postmodern aerialism is paradoxically occasioned by the transforming power of transcendent love. Whereas her weight breaks her father's legs "my mother, who lived only a while and was so light that she dared not go out in the wind, could swing me on her back and carry me for miles. There was talk of witchcraft but what is stronger than love?" (25).

Finally, the novel's simultaneous deployment of humanist and postmodern narrative conventions - and concomitant subjectivity - is manifest in its structure and a number of related devices such as pictorial narrative headings, lack of chronology, complex and multi-layered use of doubling, fusion of chronotopes and characters, and play with the conventions of narrative closure. Thus, the novel's anti-linearity and palimpsestic intermingling of Jordan and Dog-Woman's narratives, including also those of their modern counterparts - Nicholas Jordan and the female ecologist - reinforce its investment in the postmodern fluidity of time and identity. However, while the pictorial headings for the four main narrative persona (banana for Dog-

Woman, pineapple for Jordan, split banana for the ecologist, split pineapple for Nicholas Jordan) and the eleven princesses (female figures), as well as the use of spacing, indicate postmodern collage and the independent status of narrative parts, they are suggestive of a modernist impulse to bring coherence to an otherwise fragmented narrative. Nevertheless, rather than a simple modernist device, this reflects feminist postmodernism's own double-codedness - or "use [of] the traditional narrative system [...] as a paradigm which must be questioned and manipulated for its own purposes" (Farwell 1996: 170-1).

Similarly, the novel's numerous sets of doubles - particularly those traversing chronotopes - reinforce, on the one hand, the postmodern fluidity of time and identity while imposing a coherence above and beyond fragmentation. As the primary narratological doubles, Jordan and Dog-Woman's narratives are not only juxtaposed, but at times contain similar philosophical reflections and repeat and take up where the other leaves off (16-7). Jordan's ability to traverse chronotopes leads to his discovery of another double - or complement - Fortunata, whose philosophical ideas and narrative words similarly echo his own. However, doubling reaches its paradigm in Jordan and Dog-Woman's twentieth-century counterparts, Nicholas Jordan and the ecologist, creating "a continuum of political activists and protesters linking the past and the present" (Palmer 1995: 187). Firstly, Nicholas Jordan closely echoes Jordan's narrative words and ideas, including the discovery of the first pineapple, navigation, love, aerialism, freedom, heroism, departure from Deptford, an act of arson, and even an encounter with Dog-Woman's counterpart, the ecologist ("I felt I knew her" (138)). Secondly, Dog-Woman's persona re-emerges in several aspects of the ecologist's life, such as a lonely childhood and love of dogs, her alter ego of a fantastically huge woman, invisibility, purging the world of capitalists, reflections on multiple time and identity, and the mirrored sex scene. However, achieving the novel's paradigmatic act of spatio-temporal fluidity, their respective chronotopes - the historical present 1630-66 and the historical present of the twentieth century - coincide at times, producing both encounters between and a fusion of "transworld" characters (McHale 1994) - or "an intersubjective 'dance' with one another across time and space" (Pearce 1994: 184). Hence, the encounter between Nicholas Jordan and Tradescant (82, 115-6, 121) and the fusion of Dog-Woman and the ecologist as they move in and out of one another's chronotopes (82, 128):

At that time we lived in a council flat on Upper Thames Street in London, by the river. [...] I walked along the embankment watching the boats going up and down. [...]

I looked at my forearms resting on the wall. They were massive, like thighs, but there was no wall, just a wooden spit, and when I turned in the opposite direction I couldn't see the dome of St Paul's.

I could see rickety vegetable boats and women arguing with one another and a regiment on horseback [...]. (128)

Not only is this traversal of chronotopes seen as unproblematic and liberating, it reveals "the seventeenth-century and the twentieth-century moments as part of a historical continuum, not as consecutively structured, but rather as interwoven, or superimposed, and integral to the apprehension of the simultaneity of all time" (Clingham 1998: 69). Doubling also forms part of the novel's strategic (postmodern) deployment of narrative closure as it both ends and commences with Jordan's Romantic encounter with his *Doppelgänger* in the fog (9, 143), suggesting the completion of his search for selfhood. Similarly, following their instigation of the Fire of London and the burning of the polluting factory, "Closure happens as all the narratives coincide in the purgation through fire of a perverse social order. In fact, the ending neatly brings together the two historical strains as well as all four narrative voices in an event that would befit the closure of a linear story" (Farwell 1996: 186).

The colonial discourse of sea travel, heroic scientific discovery, and British imperialism - represented by Tradescant - also plays a role in the production of sexed and gendered identity. Imbricated in a patrilinear, teleological narrative "whose name [...] places him in a lineage committed to collecting and classifying" (Stowers 1995: 145-6), the hero Tradescant follows his father "a hero before him" (101). Indeed, drawing on the historical topoi of (botanical) science and discovery, Tradescant functions in the novel as a belated Oedipal father figure, initiating Jordan into a masculine travel chronotope and removing him from his mother. Thus, albeit outshone by his mother's size and heroism and signified by the (feminine) pineapple, Jordan endeavours to conform to the sexed/gendered stereotypes of Tradescant's traditional model, reflecting the eighteenth-century colonial exploration narrative's historical division of male and female, public and domestic (Dawson 1994):



I want to be brave and admired and have a beautiful wife and a fine house. I want to be a hero and wave goodbye to my wife and children at the docks [...]. I want to be like other men, one of the boys, a back-slapper and a man who knows a joke or two. (101)

However, while Tradescant sleeps, Jordan travels in dreams to those feminine areas eclipsed by masculine travel - the chronotopes of the enchanted cities - which "In a boy [...] might be indulged, but I'm not a boy any more, I'm a man" (102). Thus, as in *The Passion*, travel adheres to two different paradigms: the masculine narrative (above); and the feminine - palimpsestic, labyrinthine, digressional - route, which effects a multiplication and feminisation of Jordan's identity rendering him akin to female travellers (Stowers 1995). Although he eventually fulfils the criteria of the masculine hero - indeed, the mock-heroic - returning with England's first pineapple, his lack of (patrilinear) family background and his experiences in the feminine chronotopes lead to his eschewal of conventional masculinity: "He could have been a lord had he wished it. The King wanted to heap honours on him [...]. But Jordan would not. He said he wanted to sit by the river and watch the boats. There were looks then; they could not understand him" (140). Ultimately, Jordan returns to his mother - the feminine and the maternal - whose heroic narrative, outlined below, absorbs his own.

In the reverse direction, accessing the chronotope of the twentieth-century present, Tradescant encounters Nicholas Jordan, who also aspires towards the hero narrative's conventional sexed and gendered roles embodied in his *Boy's Book of Heroes*. However, confirming Dawson's (1994) study of the war film, Nicholas Jordan similarly acknowledges the formulaic, fictional status of masculine heroism as narrative production:

If you're a hero you can be an idiot, behave badly, ruin your personal life, have any number of mistresses and talk about yourself all the time [...]. Mostly they enjoy the company of other men, although attractive women are part of their reward. (117-8)

Indeed, as Jordan's mirror, lacking capitalist single-mindedness, Nicholas Jordan both eschews and regenders this narrative by recognising its real existence in the single struggle of a female ecologist - his feminine complement - whose own narrative and heroic endeavour ultimately absorb his own. As Pearce argues, "[Their] journeys [...] may thus be seen as a quest for a new order of heroism: a heroism defined in terms other than conventional masculinity," "an alternatively defined gender" and "[their] own feminine 'supplement'" (179-80). These roles are achieved in the enchanted cities.

Indeed, like Venice, the enchanted cities as "female communities" (Stowers 1995, 1996), female "chronotopes" (Pearce 1994), and fluid "boundary spaces" (Farwell 1996) represent a gender fluidity that is nonetheless signified as feminine. Jordan's initial encounter with a "female community", the pen of prostitutes, introduces the principal themes relating to sex and gender - cross-dressing, women's language, conventional men's stupidity, women's solidarity, the good/bad woman dichotomy. Thus, in Foucauldian terms, women's language is both produced by and exists in resistance to the dominant order's phallogocentrism: "There was a silence, and it seemed as though they were communicating without words. Then one spoke to me and explained" (30). Attesting to the solidarity and lesbian undertones of Stowers' "female communities", as well as deconstructing the colonial discourse's binary construction of good/bad women, the prostitutes are in political and sexual collusion with the nuns. Indeed, the mobile circuits of women, their provisional (re)grouping against the phallogocentric order recalls, firstly, the tactics of feminist postmodern coalition and, secondly, Foucauldian resistance: "Their owner, being a short-sighted man of scant intelligence, never noticed that the women under his care were always different. There was an unspoken agreement in the city that any woman who wanted to amass a fortune quickly would go and work in the house [...]. He [...] had financed the futures of thousands of women, who were now across the world or trading" (31). Cross-dressed as a woman, Jordan examines the world of femininity, noting, firstly, the "number of people who, anxious to be free of the burdens of their gender, have dressed themselves men as women and women as men" (31), secondly, the "conspiracy of women" (32), and, thirdly, women's "private language":

A language not dependent on the constructions of men but structured by signs and expressions, and that uses ordinary words as code-words but meaning something other.

In my petticoats I was a traveller in a foreign country. I did not speak the language. I was regarded with suspicion. (31)

As an aid Jordan receives a list of ten rules, which parodically redeploy conventionally gendered stereotypes: "5. Men deem themselves weighty and women light. Therefore it is simple to tie a stone around their necks and drown them should they become troublesome" (32). This particular rule introduces the distinction between Jordan and conventional men: described as slight in frame and carried further on his journey by a flock of sea birds, Jordan possesses a lightness - or aerial quality - that associates him with the gender fluidity and subversiveness of aerialism.

Indeed, the novel's recourse to aerialism as a feminist subversive strategy reveals itself at the following "female community," the abode of eleven of the twelve dancing princesses, which comprises, furthermore, a feminist postmodern rewriting of the traditional fairy tale. Recounted as a series of one-page narratives, indicative of their status as independent stories as well as the multiple versions of feminist postmodern fairy tales, the princesses' narratives each commence where the original ends - with marriage: "Traditionally [...] the place of narrative quiescence because the situation after marriage is unnarratable" (Farwell 1996: 182). Thus, "we were all given in marriage, one to each brother, and as it says lived happily ever after. We did, but not with our husbands" (48). Instead, marked with a number of parodic literary intertexts (from, for example, Browning, and Byron), marriage comprises a narrative space or chronotope which they cross on their journey towards reunification, subverting masculine narrative closure. While most of the husbands comprise conventional male types - sadist, glutton, oppressor, failed hero - it is the quality of aerialism which often aids their resistance to the masculine narrative. Thus, the vision of a stag in mid-flight over a fence recalls the past, "when I had been free to fly, long ago, before this gracious landing and a household of things" (53). Similarly, becoming the chained falcon her oppressive husband construed her as, the ninth princess "flew off his wrist and tore his liver from his body, and bit my chain to pieces and left him" (56). However, evading marriage altogether, aerialism reaches its paradigm in Fortunata,

the twelfth dancing princess, who "On her wedding day [...] flew from the altar like a bird from a snare and walked a tightrope between the steeple of the church and the mast of a ship weighing anchor in the bay" (60).

Located on an island, a traditional symbolic site of female communities, Fortunata teaches others to be aerialists/dancers, and dedicates herself to Artemis whose narrative - a feminist postmodern demythologisation of Greek myth - reveals the struggle between male and female narratives, or the definition of heroism. Artemis refuses marriage in favour of men's heroic freedom: "she had simply hoped to take on the freedoms of the other side, but what if she travelled the world and the seven seas like a hero? Would she find something different or the old things in different disguises?" (131). Indeed, this binary is deconstructed, firstly, through her discovery that in the role of "hero" her other selves elude her and, secondly, through Orion's attempt to narratologically subject her: "He didn't want her to talk, he knew about her already. [...] But Artemis did talk" (132). While Orion's rape of Artemis constitutes an attempt to position her in his masculine hero narrative, by murdering him she refuses such traditional positioning. This frames the encounter between Jordan and his feminine complement, Fortunata, whose refusal to leave the island or allow Jordan to remain constitutes, like Dog-Woman, a rejection of the position of his narrative closure: "I wanted her [Dog-Woman] to ask me to stay, just as now I want Fortunata to ask me to stay. Why do they not?" (101). Indeed, in all of these "female communities", "Instead of helping him or even providing him with an obstacle to conquer, the women have repositioned themselves in relation to one another and do not function as they should in an heroic story" (Farwell 1996: 181-2). Instead, "the returning gaze of others now demanding recognition is [a] female voyeurism which [...] 'feminises' the male explorer" (Stowers 1996: 73). However, while, as Stowers claims, "Instead of merely reversing gender, Winterson's travel tropes reinvent masculinity into a flux of genders" (1995: 142), as with *The Passion*, it must be questioned whether the use of the signifier "femininity" for fluidity risks reinscribing the gendered binaries of literary history and conventional postmodernism.

This use of the "feminine" as a signifier for fluidity is manifest also in the novel's innovative metaphor for the genesis of a new species of gender removed from the binary codings enforced by reproductive sex - grafting. Thus, "Grafting is the means

whereby a plant, perhaps tender or uncertain, is fused into a hardier member of its strain, and so the two take advantage of each other and produce a third kind, without seed or parent. In this way fruits have been made resistant to disease and certain plants have learned to grow where previously they could not" (78). Born without the bounds of reproductive sex and through scientific manipulation, thereby inciting the wrath of the Church, Jordan's cherry tree is nevertheless female: "But the cherry grew, and we have sexed it and it is female" (79). Thus, reversing Linneaus' historical classificatory system based on alphabet, sexuality, and reproductive parts, Jordan's model comprises a "feminization of masculinity [...] a bisexuality which is based on the free-play of identities and heterogeneous desires associated with *femininity*" (Stowers 1995: 148). For Langland (1997), however, the subversiveness of the grafting imagery derives from its Derridean "(re)citation" or Butlerian "(re)performance" of Marvell's contemporary "The Mower Against Gardens" (1681), which maintains the conventional seventeenth-century stance against altering nature. Indeed, from a Butlerian perspective, grafting realises the necessity of mobilising multiple sexual discourses at the locus of identity in order to render such categorises permanently problematic; hence, the hybrid, or third sex/gender, which is free from the binarisms of patriarchal hegemony (including traditional grafting). As a mirror of the grafted cherry tree, Jordan himself is a foundling - hence, without "seed" or "parent" - which further indicates his own status as fluidly gendered:

The fact that Jordan – himself adopted [...] and thus in a sense created without seed – chooses to experiment on the cherry, an emblem of virginity and a euphemism for the hymen, anticipates a solution well beyond the fruit metaphor or the superficial "peel" of cross-dressing; it is a solution that anticipates a different order to supplant the old. By imagining nascency emerging from virginity created and sustained outside binaries, outside of the seed, Winterson nips the old order in the bud before it even begins; a liberatory displacement that brims with new gender configurations and enacts a plausible "convergence of multiple sexual discourses," to borrow Butler's terms. (Doan 1994b: 152)

By contrast, reflecting Marvell's mower, Dog-Woman's adherence to traditional seventeenth-century doctrine is further indicated by her castigation of botanical

hybrids as sexless, genderless "monsters". Dog-Woman endeavours throughout to conform to sexed and gendered stereotypes, in particular the traditional feminine qualities of maternity, graciousness, and charity. Thus, seeking to transport herself as "as a hero's mother" (108) following Jordan's return, she orders new clothes, a carriage, and "busied [herself] as a good woman should, cleaning the hut and brushing down the dogs" (135). Despite the phallic power granted by the banana icon heading her narrative sections, she condemns England's first banana as a fruit that: "no good woman could put [...] to her mouth, and for a man it was the practice of cannibals" (13). Indeed, the 1630-66 present "is a chronotope in which relations between the sexes, as between rich and poor, king and commoner, will remain unchanged: which is why Jordan has to journey elsewhere" (Pearce 1994: 179).

As outlined above, however, Dog-Woman's conventionality - and, hence, that of the seventeenth century - is belied and rendered problematic by her fantastic size - a recourse to both Butlerian drag performance and the female/lesbian grotesque, which repeats/recites sexed and gendered performance/conventions in ways that subvert them. Unable to bear a child herself, because "you have to have a man for that and there's no man who's a match for me" (11), Dog-woman's maternity manifests itself in her nourishment of foundling Jordan "as a hill of dung nourishes a fly" (12). Not only is she bigger than Jordan, which is "not how it's supposed to be with sons" (101), but neither Jordan nor Tradescant are able to confer gallant or filial attention: "Tradescant [...] tried to take my bundle, which immediately flattened him to the ground. Very tenderly, as a mother knows how, I scooped him up into my arms, the bundle on top of him, and [...] we entered the gate" (29). As Langland concludes, "This strength that can nurture or destroy works to deconstruct a metaphysic that places maternal tenderness in the continuum with weakness and ineffectuality" (1997: 102). Similarly, her most violent, murderous actions call on the name of feminine charity, which is reinforced by their continual recourse to Biblical language and reference. Puritans are "dispatched for an early judgement" or left "trembling the way they will on the Last Day" (66), for "Many of them have set upon me for my insolence, and most of those are dead. Out of charity, such as I am famed for, I left one or two crippled" (84). While, Dog-Woman adopts feminine passivity, "I am gracious by nature and I allowed myself to be led" (25), her huge size occasions fear and terror in her male viewers. Dog-Woman's repeated endeavour, therefore, to

encapsulate the paradigm of maternity in charity, graciousness, and physical weakness, reveals its basis in stereotypical behavioural norms constructed from relative body size, mass, and strength. On one level, as Langland (1997) argues, Dog-Woman's (subversive) repetition of traditional feminine virtues through the medium of her fantastic strength and mass approximates Butlerian drag performance, disrupting the alleged unity between anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance.

In another way, however, Dog-Woman is paradigmatic of the female/lesbian grotesque's subversion of the production of feminine bodily norms through physical excess. Indeed, notwithstanding the Rabelaisian dimensions of her character, excess manifests itself in her physicality and physical appearance - rank body odour and pock-marked face: "How hideous am I? My nose is flat, my eyebrows are heavy. I have only a few teeth and those are a poor show, being black and broken. I had smallpox when I was a girl and the caves in my face are home enough for fleas" (24). This close bodily kinship with "countless lice and other timid creatures" (21) and her family of dogs render her also an example of Haraway's cyborg "monsters." Dog-Woman's excessive size and strength, witnessed in her ability to catapult an elephant into the sky and expunge the world of Puritans, inspires terror and fear in her male compatriots, opponents, and suitors, whose continual comparison to small animals - "weasel" (12), "vermin" (24), "monkey" (28), "rat" (88) - reveals their obvious weakness. However, Dog-Woman's principal heroic act, purging London of Puritan rule, redeploys not only the female grotesque but also its related themes of stunting and aerialism. Firstly, sold by her father as "the subject of an exhibition" on account of her large size, "I burst the bonds of the barrel and came *flying* out at my father's throat" (107) (my italics). Secondly, it is her paradoxical aerial invisibility, which enables her to dispatch the Puritans without arrest. Finally, Jordan not only recognises in her the heroism he pursued, "I want to be like my rip-roaring mother who cares nothing for how she looks, only for what she does" (101), but (excepting the ultimate paragraph) the final section of the novel narrates his actions from Dog-Woman's perspective. Thus, "The grotesque female body positions Dog-Woman as the narrator and agent of her own story, a story which gradually absorbs Jordan into it, repositioning him at the closure of the narrative" (Farwell 1996: 184).

This positioning is mirrored by Dog-Woman's twentieth-century counterpart, the feminist ecologist, whose bodily excess reinforces the female grotesque's subversiveness and provision of postmodern agency: "I wasn't fat because I was greedy; I hardly ate at all. I was fat because I wanted to be bigger than all the things that [...] had power over me. It was a battle and I intended to win" (124). Shedding this *physical* excess in adulthood, she retains this persona as an internal alter ego, suggesting the female grotesque not only as a physical reality but also as a potential subversive mind-set:

I had an *alter ego* who was huge and powerful, a woman whose only morality was her own and whose loyalties were fierce and few. She was my patron saint, the one I called on when I felt myself dwindling away through cracks in the floor or slowly fading in the street. Whenever I called on her I felt my muscles swell and laughter fill up my throat. (125)

This feminist postmodern agency supports her multifarious struggle against patriarchal hegemony, or her positioning within male narrative. This is evidenced, firstly, in her solitary ecological campaigning; secondly, in her violent re-education of capitalists and militarists in feminism and ecology; and, thirdly, in her challenge to the conventional husband demanding conformity to traditional stereotypes. Thus, she reintroduces the novel's theme of heroism, including its public/domestic gendered division, "[men] all want to be heroes and all we want is for them to stay at home and help with the housework and the kids. That's not the kind of heroism they enjoy" (127). However, it is the ecologist's campaign - a matter of *domestic* as opposed to foreign concern - which eventually redefines Nicholas Jordan's conceptualisation of heroism, for "Surely this woman was a hero? Heroes give up what's comfortable in order to protect what they believe in or to live dangerously for the common good" (138). By joining her at the river camp, Nicholas Jordan similarly symbolically repositions himself as part of her narrative rather than attempting to absorb her into his.

Like *The Passion*, *Sexing the Cherry* eschews radical lesbianism's identity-based politics and investment in the inherently radical status of the marginal lesbian body. Instead, the novel's "virtual lesbianism" (Moore 1995) or "textual/metaphoric



lesbianism" (Farwell 1996) deconstructs the central/marginal and homo/hetero binaries, re-inscribing at the centre of modernity a fluid, mobile sexual identity and desire which is nonetheless signified as "lesbian". Thus, Jordan's position as a "virtual lesbian" subject is manifest in his ability to traverse sexual identifications and his androgynous confusion of heterosexuality's clear-cut sexual identity categories. Firstly, Jordan fails to conform to the colonial discourse's sexual objectification of women and, secondly, he reveals, in the person of Nicholas Jordan, its inherent homosociality: "There was a lot about camaraderie and mates. It's not homosexual, of course" (118). Recalling the alleged derivation of the term "homosexual" from the historical sexual cross-fertilisation of plants (Stowers 1995), as well as the novel's deployment of grafting for "dynamic, and fluid [...] sexual positionings" (Doan 1994b: 153), Jordan's desire to have a graft of *Tradescant* comprises "his own fantasy of homosexual union" (Moore 1995: 119). Similarly, while, on one level, Jordan achieves classic "wholeness" through his "heterosexual" encounter with Fortunata, his "boundary crossings", as Farwell points out, "are fraught with homosexual implications" (1996: 183). Indeed, Jordan's cross-dressed sexual encounter with the ghostly apparition, Zilah, condemned to death following the discovery of her lesbian, incestuous relationship, draws on the literary fantastic's motifs of incest, homosexuality, and necrophilia: "asking me if I were the sister [...] [she] courteously invited me to bed with her, where I passed the night in some confusion" (33). Notwithstanding this incident's low-key manifestation of homophobia, Jordan's drag-act misperforms heterosexuality thereby enacting its subversive repetition.

As manifestations of "female communities" or the fluid topology of postmodernism, the enchanted cities chronotope embodies a sexual fluidity or melange of (homo)(hetero)sexual narratives, which Jordan fails to acknowledge as in any way unusual. As traditional icons of lesbian fiction and theory, such female communities reveal the novel's redeployment of lesbian aesthetics. While, some of the prostitutes "had lovers in the convent" (31), Fortunata's location on an island - symbolic of lesbianism's excess of patriarchy (Stowers 1996; Wittig 1976 [1973]) - reveals her rejection of heterosexual closure. The novel's low-key manifestation of homophobia re-emerges in the subversive repetition of the fairy stories of the dancing princesses: the "salty bliss" (48) of the eldest princess' relationship with a mermaid; Rapunzel and the fifth princess' vilification "one [as] a witch and the other a little girl" (52); and, the

seventh princess' discovery that "The man I had married was a woman. They came to burn her. I killed her with a single blow to the head before they reached the gates" (54). Couching their intimacy and happiness in the style of lesbian erotic poetics, including the imagery of narcissistic doubles ("We rose [...] and slept [...] as twins do. We had four arms and four legs [...]. [W]e read [...] sitting back to back" (54)), as Doan (1994b) argues, this tale's unhappy conclusion is suggestive of the limitations of subversive parody - a repetition of marriage and hence cross-dressing - as an enduring strategy against heteronormativity.

As outlined above, however, the experience of sexual passion/love draws on both postmodern and humanist paradigms: on the one hand, it effects a (postmodern) shattering of the self and multiplication of identities and realities; on the other hand, its transforming powers, provision of self-knowledge, and access to universal consciousness are suggestive of humanist transcendent qualities. Thus, the repeated association between love and (feminine) travel, manifest in the novel's redeployment of the love quest, reveals the propensity of sexual love to multiply selfhood and provide access to the fluid enchanted cities. The enchanted cities' inhabitants themselves engage in philosophical discussions about sexual love, revealing two basic factions: those who chain passion in order to circumvent its allegedly destructive nature; those who free passion believing it capable of motivating human greatness. Jordan advocates the latter, which, on the one hand, subscribes to aerialism in its rejection of "the school of heaviness" (38) and, on the other, espouses a belief in the (humanist) transformative power of love manifest in Penelope and Sappho's love-lorn feats. Similarly, the transcendent quality of enduring, irrepressible love reveals itself in the apothecary's inability to provide love's cure and the city whose "entire population had been wiped out by love three times in a row" (75). Indeed, as a counterpart of the seventeenth-century Puritans, the rulers - a monk and a whore - condemn the whole city to death following their involvement in the fourth revolutionary uprising of love. Developing Henri's conclusions in *The Passion*, as opposed to this "true" love or "great passion", selfish love cherishes the beloved as an image of its own dreams:

A man or woman sunk in dreams that cannot be spoken, about a life

they do not possess, comes suddenly to a door in the wall. They open it. Beyond the door is that life and a man or a woman to whom it is already natural. [T]he secret life is suddenly revealed. This is their true home and this is their beloved.

I may be cynical when I say that very rarely is the beloved more than a shaping spirit for the lover's dreams. (74)

The coalescence of postmodern and humanist notions relating to sexual love are encapsulated by the use of "passion, delirium" to describe "the heightened condition of superconductivity" (91), that locale accessed also by art and Eastern meditation. As outlined above, while this adheres, on the one hand, to postmodern aerialism and the multiplication of identity, it suggests, on the other hand, a humanist universal consciousness. Indeed, for Moore, this dual stance, comprising the postmodern decentred subject and the self-seeking subject of lesbian romance, is indicative of the novel's "virtual lesbianism"; for "(by insisting on the importance of love and desire as well as that of the exploded subject), [...] *Sexing the Cherry* might be Winterson's most 'postmodern', most 'lesbian', most postmodern-lesbian text" (106).

Dog-Woman's chronotope of the 1630-66 present, by comparison, is rooted in traditional sexual dichotomies; nevertheless, its manifestation of the fantastic's transgressive sexualities - homosexuality, masochism, bestiality, necrophilia - reveal the sexual hypocrisy of the Puritan's male-elitist guild. As correlatives of "the school of heaviness", the Puritans' endeavour to repress sexuality by strapping down sexual organs and making love through a hole in the sheet is parodied by Dog-Woman's comic naivety: "Then lust must be a powerful thing, if to kiss her that most resembles a hare, with great ears and staring eyes, brings it on" (27). Notwithstanding its comic parody, this repeated association between sex/sexuality and animals/vegetables, manifest in both her reflections on and sightings of sexual encounters, embodies the Rabelaisian nature of Dog-Woman's narrative. However, not only do the Church's preventative sexual carvings occasion "a bulge here and there where all should be quiet and God-like" (34), but the Church fathers reveal themselves open to sexual favours from "Common women, women in need of a pastor's touch" (68) and display at the brothel an array of sexual "perversity" - masochism, sodomy, and bestiality. Hence, Dog-Woman learns that "'There is no usual manner [of sexual satisfaction]

only the unusual'" (86). Dog-Woman's Bakhtinian, matter of fact, comic-grotesque naivety is extended towards the male population at large, redeploying their stereotypical lack of sexual discernment. Hence, when the flasher, equipped with a "thing much like a pea-pod" and then "a cucumber," requests she treat it "as you would a delicious thing to eat" "I did as he suggested, [...] biting it off with a snap" (40-1). It is later that she discovers that "men's members, if bitten off or otherwise severed, do not grow again," which constitutes "a terrible mistake on the part of nature" considering their desire to insert them "anywhere without thinking" (106).

However, it is Dog-Woman's, and the ecologist's, embodiment of the female/lesbian grotesque - or "virtual/textual/postmodern lesbianism" (Farwell 1996; Moore 1995) - whose excess subverts both heteronormativity, radical lesbianism, and late nineteenth-century sexological and literary images of the lesbian "monster." Recentring homosexuality within the centre of modernity, Dog-Woman's excessive sexuality makes no distinction between male and female partners: "I am too huge for love. No one, male or female, has ever dared to approach me. They are afraid to scale mountains" (34). Indeed, her breasts "whose nipples stood out like walnuts" (10) and "orange"-sized clitoris redeploy colonial discourse's construction of the exotic, indigenous lesbian monster encountered abroad, whose "unnaturally" elongated clitoris rendered them capable of giving and receiving pleasure. Thus, the postmodern lesbian's textual excess and monstrosity, which deconstructs woman-as-body and woman-as-object, comprises "the means to gain control over representation" (Farwell 1996: 170) and a correlative postmodern agency. As Farwell concludes, therefore, Dog-Woman's "virtual lesbianism" derives not from sexual encounters with women; rather:

She is the grotesque and exaggerated female body that conditions postmodernism's metaphoric construction of the lesbian body, and she functions primarily as a disrupter of textuality and its positioning of woman. Her sexual encounters, rather than indicating heterosexuality, imply the impossibility of heterosexuality in a woman who creates her own narrative and claims her own agency. (1996: 185)

Hence, Dog-Woman's singular sexual experience:

I did mate with a man, but cannot say that I felt anything at all, though I had him jammed up to the hilt. As for him [...] he complained that he could not find the sides of my cunt and felt like a tadpole in a pot. He [...] urged me to try to squeeze in my muscles [...]. I took a great breath and squeezed with all my might [...] I saw I had pulled him in, balls and everything. He was stuck.

[H]e burrowed down the way ferrets do and tried to take me in the mouth.

‘[I] cannot take that orange in my mouth. It will not fit. [...] You are too big, madam.’ [...]

It seemed all in proportion to me. These gentlemen are very timid. (106-7)

At the same time, this subversive sexuality derives from Dog-Woman's embodiment of the cyborg monster's affinity with animals, for as she declares "the love I've known has come from my dogs" (34). Nevertheless, Dog-Woman's narrative equally evinces both postmodern and humanist notions of love: whereas the postmodern grotesque inspires "terror" in her childhood paramour, the sales boy, and both fear and greed in her father, the humanist transformative power of love enables her mother to carry her for miles.

Thus, rather than portraying a historical separation between postmodernism and modernism, the novels' relocation of postmodern characters at the inception of modernity reveals the existence and imbrication of postmodern identity within modernity itself. Thus, juxtaposed with postmodernism's alternative fluid paradigm, colonial discourse's production of unified subjectivity is relativised as one means of approaching the fragmentation and uncertainty of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century socio-historical changes. While colonial discourses equally give rise to modernity's sexed/gendered dichotomies which are deconstructed by postmodernity, postmodernism's own recourse to the feminine as a signifier of fluidity risks relocating sex and gender within the former's dichotomous model. Similarly, the Enlightenment's demarcation of "natural" sexuality occasions its subversive proliferation through the simultaneous production of aberrant counterparts, effecting a deconstruction of hetero/homo and a repositioning of lesbianism at the very centre of modernity.

Finally, Winterson's unique intervention in the modernism/postmodernism debate arises from her subsumption of postmodern decentred subjectivity within the unifying framework of a series of transcendent schema. Hence the novels' thoroughgoing inscription of postmodern fragmentation is counterbalanced by equally extreme, albeit universal, systems - Art, love, and Eastern spiritualism - suggesting the necessity of an overall point of anchorage. Indeed, in *The Passion*, Henri's submergence by insanity is the result of an inadequate mainstay for his fragmented subjectivity. However, rather than causing a tension in Winterson's work, her individual alliance of modernist universals with postmodern fluidity mobilises the fragmented subject within supportive transcendent systems. Firstly, she combines modernist and Romantic notions of transcendent Art, evoking their dual ability to defamiliarise reality, challenge accepted ideologies, and, crucially, produce radically fragmented subjectivities. However, it is Romanticism, above all, and its notions of "beauty", which informs these novels, providing their underlying mirroring/doubling, which subsumes the novel's otherwise postmodern subjectivity and narratology. According to Winterson's Romantic notions, Art and beauty have transformative powers granting people access to a deeper consciousness, self-awareness, and union. Romantic love encapsulates similar transformative powers, represented by its ability to both effect a fragmentation of the subject and the acquisition of self-knowledge. While the novels play, to some extent, with Romantic and lesbian romance conventions, situated within the context of her entire *oeuvre*, Winterson evinces an uncompromising adherence to Love as a radically destabilising, fundamentally transforming experience.

## Chapter 6. Angela Carter: The Enigmas of the Feminist Postmodern Fantastic

Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1993a [1977]) and *Nights at the Circus* (1994b [1984]) comprise picaresque fictions whose fantastic zones figure discrete social and philosophical orders and, most importantly, effect a (de)(re)construction of the subject. The former novel evinces the predilection of Carter's early fiction towards demythologisation - an examination and critique of the construction of myths of "woman" both by patriarchy and variants of feminism. This is effected mainly through the journey of Evelyn/Eve, whose transsexual operation reflects, firstly, a demonstration of the commodification and performativity of femininity and, secondly, a deconstruction of conventional masculinity. Similarly, through Tristessa, the film star and quintessential masochistic woman, who reveals herself a man, the novel has recourse to the role of drag-performance in the demonstration of feminine performativity. Nevertheless, albeit exemplary of the early fiction's deconstruction of myths of woman, it is not until the later work, *Nights at the Circus*, that Carter fully develops and fictionalises the role of performativity, masquerade, and the comic-grotesque in the subversion of gender myths. Although *Nights at the Circus* manifests this new direction, its double-coded perspective vis-à-vis these modes brings a new emphasis to the role of both the reader/viewer and the context/location in their subversion of (gendered) identity. Thus, while both the Western rational subject and gendered subjectivity are deconstructed through the novel's carnival locales - whorehouse, circus, unknown country - their status also as surrogate panopticons reveals their imbrication in the containment and commodification of potentially unruly (sexual) identities for the (male) consumer public. Similarly, albeit paradigmatic of the subversive potential of the female grotesque, aerialism, and female masquerade, the winged *aerialist* Fevvers also demonstrates the continual impact of the reader/viewer as well as the context/location on gender performance.

As this manifestation of the carnivalesque indicates, Carter's novels combine postmodern strategies with an abundant recourse to the *topoi* of non-realist genres, drawn in particular from science fiction, the fantastic, and Gothic. Hence "You could read them as science fiction if you wished [...] a lot of the heaviest analysis has come from the SF critics" (Carter in Haffenden 1985: 87). It is Gothicism, however, which encapsulates Carter's interest in the subversive and symbolic potential of non-realist

modes. These novels redeploy a "feminist postmodern fantastic" critique of myths of woman.

Reflecting recent trends in postmodern and Gothic writing, therefore, Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* presents a dystopic, futuristic and quasi-science-fiction projection of American space.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the novel's epigraph - "In the beginning all the world was America" - foregrounds the country as a fusion of past and future and, above all, a European construct. Deriving from Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, which depicts late seventeenth-century colonial America as a "state of nature" prior to the civil government's written, social law (Brown 1994), the novel's dystopian zones - in particular New York and the desert - reveal instead the fracas of civil war. The journey from east to west through a series of chronotopes and postmodern fantastic enclosures, which reproduces on a structural level the postmodern reconstruction of war and its division of geographical space, constitutes for McHale "the paradigmatic representation of America as the zone" (McHale 1987 [1994]: 51). Indeed, while each zone represents a different social structure, heralding a reassessment of Eve/lyn's<sup>2</sup> subjectivity, it is the dystopic vision of civil war that remains a principal backdrop to the text. New York is a fusion of warring factions; in the underground city, Beulah, the women pursue military exercises; even in the isolation of Zero's ranch the war's progress appears in newspaper scraps among the garbage. Nevertheless, Carter's use of the picaresque, placing characters in situations demanding philosophical enquiry and personal reassessment "like the speculative fictions of the Enlightenment" (Jordan 1992: 123), stages primarily a deconstruction of subjectivity. These chronotopes are reproduced, on another level, in postmodern fantastic "enclosures" - Beulah, a fusion of science fiction and myth; Tristessa's Gothic glass monument to feminine suffering - whose desert location exemplifies postmodern fiction's reconstruction of the American desert as a fantastic interior space (Brown 1992; McHale 1994 [1987]). Finally, Eve/lyn's picaresque journey evinces an increasing disruption of conventional reality and chronology, reflecting a progression through "realism, surrealism, mythology and science fiction" towards an

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<sup>1</sup> For a comparison between the novel's depiction of America as postmodern space and Baudrillard's seminal work *America* (1986) see Armitt (1996).

<sup>2</sup> Due to the sex change operation, reference to the character from the scene at Beulah onwards will use the gender-neutral terms: Eve/lyn, s/he.



"initiat[ion] into the realms of the fantastic" (Armitt 1996: 165).

The first chronotope or zone, New York, undercuts Evelyn's preconceptions, which are ironically revealed as his garrulously European subscription to America's own celluloid self-production as the rational, modern democratic, technological opposite of the European city, embodied characteristically by the movies of Tristessa, the novel's quintessential representative of simulacra. Built "in strict accord with the dictates of a doctrine of reason" and in direct opposition to "those vile repositories of the past, sewers of history, that poison the lives of European history", the city has become instead the underside of carnival - "chaos, dissolution, nigredo, night" (16). Evelyn's childhood exam question on the status of the country as "the bastard child of the French Enlightenment" reveals that this America is set "at a time when the Age of Reason that postdated Locke has already clearly run down" (Brown 1994: 94). In place of a "clean, hard, bright city", Evelyn discovers "a lurid Gothic darkness" (10), a host of prophets declaring the end of the world, and environmental deterioration in terms of piling garbage and acid rain. A further disintegration is witnessed, on another level, by the variety of warring factions that herald the first stirrings of civil war: the "angry Women" and the combat-suited blacks. Within this city, an ever shifting grotesque parade of the dark side of Bakhtinian carnival - murder, rape, pillage and prostitution - crosses Evelyn's path. The black prostitutes, conflated with the carnivorous gutter rats and hence functioning as "an anthropomorphic image of woman as filth" (Armitt 1996: 166), problematise the notion of carnival as a wholly liberating device for women. Indeed, "Leilah, the city's gift" (25), who leads Evelyn into the Gothic "geometric labyrinth of the city" (21), reveals a conflation of the body of woman with that of the city. While, on the one hand, this comparison "reverses the usual association between the phallic erections of urban architecture and its ability to intimidate its female inhabitants" (Armitt 1996: 165), its depiction of rape re-emphasises, on the other, the dangers of carnival vis-à-vis woman.

Drawing on the postmodern fantastic motif of the mirror and its "mirrorings" of identity - the central symbol of Carter's entire *oeuvre* - the New York zone stages Evelyn's first encounter with woman-as-myth in the figure of Leilah, the erotic dancer and embodiment of woman-as-temptress. Indeed, in *The Passion of New Eve*, the mirror exists as a gateway to other realities; the introduction of a double and/or a split

psyche; a problematised vision; a return to the Lacanian mirror stage; and, most importantly, a demonstration of the production of femininity. It is via the mirror that Leilah, symbol of woman-as-temptress, makes herself into a projection of Evelyn's male fantasies and objectified other - soulless woman made flesh. This construction takes place as a nightly ritual in which Leilah dons the apparels of seductive femininity - exotic furs, lipsticked nipples and fetishist boots:

Her beauty was an accession. She arrived at it by a conscious effort. She became absorbed in the contemplation of the figure in the mirror but she did not seem to me to comprehend the person in the mirror as, in any degree, herself. [...] She brought into being a Leilah who lived only in the not-world of the mirror and then became her own reflection. (28)

Thus, the mirror that refracts Leilah into the "other" is also the mirror of the male gaze, which by projecting onto woman an image of herself as object that is unrelated to her own sense of subjectivity occasions both her objectification and her split subjectivity - "the feminine impasse". However, while the novel draws on Berger (1972), Doan and Mulvey's examination of women's objectification by the male gaze in fine art, media, and cinema (Butler 1990), it is not until *Nights at the Circus* that these are developed to incorporate subversive strategies. Instead, the novel challenges the construction of femininity through a feminist redeployment of the mirror motif, which redoubles Leilah in a series of reincarnations, each showing different versions of femininity. Firstly, she appears as Sophia (Wisdom), Evelyn's guardian at the feminist city of Beulah, who "looked like a woman who has never seen a mirror in all her life, not once exposed herself to those looking glasses that betray women into nakedness" (54). More significantly, Leilah reappears at the end of the novel as the feminist guerrilla leader, Lilith; hence a demythologisation of "that culturally suppressed originary mother" (Armitt 1996: 174). As Chevalier and Gheerbrant indicate:

Lilith was [...] the woman created before Eve, at the same time as Adam, and not from his rib but, like him, fashioned directly from clay. She claimed equality with Adam, since both were created from dust. [...] As a

wife supplanted by or deserted for another woman, Lilith was to stand for the hatred of family life, of marriage and of children. [...] Lilith is the nocturnal female satyr who tries to seduce Adam. (1996 [1969]: 608)

Indeed, Lilith had disguised herself as Leilah in order "to lead the wary into temptation [...] to conceal the nature of my symbolism. If the temptress displays her nature, the seducee is put on his guard" (174). However, these versions of femininity reveal themselves no less constructed than Leilah: Lilith's recourse to high-blown rhetoric and symbolism emphasises performativity; secondly, both espouse a woman-centred feminism, which, as the novel indicates, is equally imbricated in the production of false mythologies of femininity - "Lilith, all flesh, Sophia, all mind" (175). Hence also Eve/lyn's comments, "I knew [Lilith] could not abdicate from her mythology as easily as that; she still had a dance to dance even if it was a new one, even if she performed it with absolute spontaneity" (179). This includes, furthermore, an acknowledgement of his/her own previous role - as male viewer/reader - in the construction of Leilah as a projection of male desire: "What's become of the slut of Harlem, my girl of bile and ebony! She can never have objectively existed, all the time mostly the projection of the lusts and greed and self loathing of a young man called Evelyn, who does not exist, either" (175).

The most radical character doubling/splitting, however, takes place via Eve/lyn in the following zone, the American desert, and one of its fantastic enclosures, the intertextually constructed, albeit feminist, city of Beulah. Recalling the postmodern fantastic's conflation of the body of the landscape with that of the characters, this journey is staged as a search for the self against the desert's arid purity and reflection of "the landscape of [his] heart" (41). Hence the desert as a fantastic zone or *tabula rasa*, "the waste heart of that vast country [where] I thought I might find that most elusive of chimeras, myself" (38). This creation of an interior space of unreality redeploys "one of the most potent European postmodern images of America" (Brown 1994: 94), marking a progression from an earlier tendency to set American fiction on the border between civilisation and wilderness as a zone separate from reality (McHale 1994 [1987]). Indeed, recalling Baudrillard's depiction of the function of the American desert as symbolic of the emptiness of institutions and culture as mirage, "In Carter's work [...] the desert [...] becomes the ultimate stage/screen backdrop to a

variety of bodily performances" (Armitt 1996: 172). At the heart of the desert Evelyn discovers the Gothic/fantastic enclosure of Beulah, a mytho-technological underground city where "myth is a made thing, not a found thing" (56) pursuing the reinstatement of matriarchal symbols.

While the women's symbol, the broken phallus, embodies their modern guerrilla warfare against patriarchy, their city, modelled on the architecture of the womb, symbolises their reinstatement of anti-patriarchal, woman-centred myth. As a locale where "extremes meet", albeit here in the guise of science and mythology, Beulah comprises an intertextual reference to Blake's similarly named realm. However, this Beulah comprises a parody of, firstly, Bunyan's gateway for pilgrims on their route to heaven and, secondly, Blake's "daughters of Beulah", the female Muses, who "exist only in relation to the male, for the male, and in man's imagination" (Schmidt 1989: 62). As a locus of feminist guerrilla fighters, this labyrinthine city, constructed as "an inscrutable series of circular, intertwining, always descending corridors" (57), renews the Gothic link between the labyrinth and radical political subversion (Botting 1996). Furthermore, its comparison to "the labyrinths of the inner ear [...]; the linear geography of inwardness, a tracing of the mazes of the brain itself" (56) as well as its modelling on the womb re-establishes the postmodern fantastic correlation between the landscape and the body/psyche of the character, Evelyn. However, "the Minotaur [or monster] at the centre of the maze" (58) is Mother, the women's leader, a self-constructed surgical construction and patchwork of the Cybelean priestess' severed breasts. Mother's "bull pillar [...] neck" and body "breasted like a sow [with] two tiers of nipples" represents, firstly, a carnivalised hybridity of human/animal and, secondly, a mytho-religious embodiment of the multi-breasted Artemis or "self-fulfilling fertility" (59). Reversing Blake's gendered binary, "Time is a Man, Space is a Woman, and her Masculine Portion is Death" (Schmidt 1989), Mother establishes a philosophy of feminine eternity based on the proposition that "time is a killer. [K]ill time and live forever" (53). However, the over-stylised litanies and operatic stage-effects surrounding Evelyn's rape by Mother, as well as her depiction as "a bloodhound bitch in heat" (64), parodies "Mother's glorification of the womb, female space, biological essentialism (which stands for one position within the women's movement in the 1970s)" (Schmidt 1989: 63). Hence the novel reflects Carter's critical rejection of both patriarchal *and* feminist mythology, for "Mother goddesses

are just as silly a notion as father gods" (1993b: 5). This is consolidated by the novel's ending, which while acknowledging the "useful function" of woman-centred myths represents their demise in Mother's physical and mental deterioration.

Mother comprises a reincarnation of the Gothic mad scientist, who embodies in Carter's fiction the construction of myths of woman. Indeed, following his symbolic regression to the mirror stage in "the humid viscera" of Beulah's "simulacra of the womb" (52), Evelyn is forced under Mother's surgical scalpel and transsexually crafted into the "New Eve" - a symbolic rebirth of woman intended to contravene the original Eve's paradigmatic embodiment of (feminine) weakness and flesh. Hence Carter draws on the transsexual's subversive re-enactment of gender identity. The motif of the mirror as a dramatisation of the feminine impasse is underlined through Eve/lyn's transsexuality, which reveals the dislocation between "gender" and "sex" - or conventional representation of inner self and outer physical appearance. As Eve/lyn comments, "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 was only a lyrical abstraction of femininity to me, a tinted arrangement of curved lines" (74). In an examination of mass-media constructed femininity, Eve/lyn is subjected to a round of psycho-surgery: films of motherhood, non-phallic imagery, Hollywood starlets, visions of man's inhumanity to woman. Eve/lyn him/herself has been made into the culturally perfect image to which women conventionally aspire and yet inevitably fall short of. This media brain-washing reflects the notion of Baudrillardian simulacrum - a society peopled with empty media images. Despite the "psycho-surgery", Eve/lyn's experience of a split consciousness initially continues to make its presence felt, reflecting male mental processes and female bodily experience or the split subjectivity of the feminine impasse as Eve/lyn recognises him/herself as his/her own "masturbatory fantasy" (75). It is at the following fantastic enclosure, Zero's desert harem-ranch, that Eve/lyn most clearly performs a subversive re-enactment of traditional femininity and becomes, like Tristessa, an embodiment of Tiresias who experiences both "male" and "female" sexuality.

Zero's realm, modelled on both de Sade's novels and Western male (Nietzschean) philosophy, stages Eve/lyn's sado-masochistic apprenticeship in femininity as

primitive and animalistic. Banned from the accoutrements of Western civilisation - speech, knives and forks - and subjected to beatings, pig's food, and a covering of animal excrement, the harem self-consciously embodies woman as natural, soulless, and "sub-human" (Schmidt 1989: 3). Furthermore, the jealous discord amongst the harem members reflects this novel's examination of female relations within patriarchy as a competition for identification with male power. Eve/lyn's transsexuality, in particular his/her continual endeavour to *act* as a woman, reveals femininity as a repetition of gendered rules; hence his/her embodiment of the fate of all woman to "spend their whole lives in just such imitations" (101). It is the feminine excess or over-performance created through his/her transsexuality, however, which most clearly creates a disjunction between inner and outer: "I roused Zero's suspicions because I began to behave too much like a woman" (101). Indeed, recalling feminist postmodern notions of masquerade and performance, while raped by Zero, it is the male violator's role that s/he identifies with: "I felt myself to be, not myself but he; and the experience of this crucial lack of self, which always brought with it a shock of introspection, forced me to know myself as my former violator at the moment of my own violation" (101-2). The Sadeian and Nietzschean versions of femininity, in particular their respective gendered binaries of weak and strong, are challenged by Zero's comic death and, in particular, his physical handicap and mental delusions, which he had compensated for through his sadistic, autocratic behaviour. Indeed, as indicated by his symbolic name, Zero "symbolises the person without powers of his or her own who can only exercise delegated power" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996 [1969]: 1144).

Zero's murderous pursuit and discovery of the novel's ubiquitous film-star, Tristessa, leads to another Gothic enclosure, Tristessa's glass mansion - a monument to feminine suffering. The metaphor of the mirror for the construction of other selves re-emerges in Tristessa's self-production as a Hollywood starlet: "Tristessa is a lost soul who lodges in me; [...] she came and took possession of my mirror one day when I was looking at myself" (151). However, the motif of the mirror undergoes other transformations in relation to this character and metamorphosed into the cinema screen makes of Tristessa a Hollywood projection of male-fantasised feminine suffering. On a further level, the mirror is transformed into a Baudrillardian metaphor for the self-referential, non-signifying image or simulacra in the world of

"hyperreality" or cyberspace. Tristessa represents the stereotypical romantic and mythical woman combining attributes of beauty, passivity, suffering and virtue. Tristessa's function as symbolic female masochist is indicated by her stage name "de St Ange", the name of the woman who inducts the virgin Eugénie into libertinism in Sade's *Philosophie dans le boudoir* (Schmidt 1989). Hence, "she teaches sadism, just as Tristessa's suffering taught sadism to young Evelyn" (Schmidt 1989: 64). The importance of Tristessa as a representation of the cultural production of femininity is manifested by her textual ubiquity: her cinematic suffering inspires Evelyn's sadistic erotic pleasure as a boy; her films support Eve/lyn's psycho-surgery at Beulah; Zero hails Tristessa responsible for his impotence. Yet as a mythical creature and an abstraction from real life, Tristessa is unable to adapt to the new Hollywood vogue for the girl next door without appearing "like Dido in the laundromat." However, drawing on transvestism and drag-performance as a subversive re-enactment of femininity, Tristessa - recalling Tiresias' sexual experience as both man and woman (Grimal 1990 [1951]) - ironically reveals him/herself at the end of the novel as a man:

*That was why he had been the perfect man's woman. He had made himself the shrine of his own desires, had made of himself the only woman he could have loved! [...] [N]o wonder Tristessa had been able to become the most beautiful woman in the world. (128-9)*

Nevertheless, recalling Carter's commentary, "only a man could think of femininity in terms of that slogan" (Carter in Haffenden 1985: 86), Tristessa's self-production embodies an emphatically conventional male interpretation of femininity. Notwithstanding his/her own proclamations on "Passivity, the absence of being. [...] To be a pane the sun shines through". (137), Mother also perceived "the awfully ineradicability of his maleness" (173). Thus despite its demonstration of performative gender, it is not until *Nights at the Circus* that these postmodern notions are fully recuperated into subversive strategies for the destabilisation of sex and gender categories.

Tristessa's glass edifice and tears, both further metamorphoses of the mirror, emerge as modern manifestations of the Gothic mansion depicted in true fantastic form through the problematised vision of a moonlit water reflection. Sealed within a

femininity that has become defunct within Hollywood, and was in any case an illusion, Tristessa had served merely as a reflector for a cultural idea: "an object as lucid as the objects you made from glass; [...] an idea of himself; no ontological status, only an iconographic one" (129). Thus, Tristessa becomes illustrative of the individual as a simulating machine of cultural images in which autonomy and imagination are lost. Indeed, through Tristessa the novel problematises the humanist feminist search for a pre-mass-mediated authenticity and a true female self by demonstrating that we have only known reality - and hence gender - via its mediated representation. To remove the individual without the bounds of *all* socio-historical, mass-mediated constructions one runs the risk of facing a void. Hence in spite of Zero's murderous rage, s/he perfunctorily performs a series of stylised roles: "Touchingly, now she tries to put herself to rights; she has decided she is receiving visitors - what else can have happened? [...] 'Welcome', she says, 'to Juliet's tomb. How charming of you all to come on such a dark night'" (124).

Tristessa's performance of femininity is cut short by his/her enforced marriage and sexual union with Eve, whose double transsexualism outstages the four cross-dress weddings at the end of de Sade's *Juliette*. For Siegel, therefore, "Carter dreams the one inversion that Sade avoids, an exchange of clothes and roles between the man and woman" (1991: 11). Nevertheless, despite Eve/lyn and Tristessa's embodiment of transsexualism and drag-performance, including its indication of the performativity of femininity, as well as the former's status as "androgynous [...] cyborg" (Armitt 1996: 176), their subsequent escape and love-making in the desert proves the continuing prevalence of gender stereotypes. Indeed, it is at this point that Eve/lyn appears most fully to integrate her newly acquired femininity, exploring its sexual pleasures with a gendered rhetoric that risks emulating the language which condemned Leilah to an embodiment of female sexual degeneracy: "I wanted the swooning, dissolvent woman's pleasure I had, heretofore, seen but never experienced" (147). Thus, recalling Cixous' problematic endeavour to deconstruct gender dichotomy through the coalescence of masculine and feminine, Eve/lyn coins their sexual marriage as a perfect union of masculine and feminine: "we are Tiresias" (146), "He and I, she and he, are the sole oasis in this desert" (148); "undifferentiated sex, we made the great Platonic hermaphrodite together" (148); "Masculine and feminine are correlatives which involve one another. I am sure of that - the quality and its negation are locked



in necessity" (149). As Siegel concludes, therefore, while the wedding and sex scenes "do insist upon the constructed, antinatural quality of gender, they do not release passion from determination by the concept of femininity as the binary opposite of masculinity or from the association of masochism with femininity" (1991: 12). Compared with *Nights at the Circus*' subversive redeployment of male masochism, *The Passion of New Eve*'s perpetuation of conventional Victorian masochism as the quintessential feminine difference to the male norm suggests that "the lifting of the mask/masque reveals nothing but the male desire that the feminine exist so that masochism can be connected to an other" (Siegel 1991: 12).

In *Nights at the Circus*, the Western rational subject is (de)(re)constructed, on one level, through the novel's fantastic-postmodern topoi: its picaresque form and tripartite journey across London, St Petersburg, and Siberia, accompanied by an increased prevalence of the fantastic and a host of carnival motifs. Revealing Carter's interest in folklore, these motifs also comprise a folkloric "tripartite ritual structure and its attendant symbolism," "consciously chosen by Carter and [...] used [...] in effecting the transformations of her major characters" (Turner 1987: 29, 42). Jack Walser is the main object of this transformation and I want, in what follows, to track the novel's arguments principally through the changes Fevvers and the circus effect in his cultural, gendered, and professional assumptions. As an American journalist, or debunker of "humbugs," with "eyes the cool grey of scepticism" and "the professional necessity to see all and believe nothing" (10), Walser sets out initially to uncover another hoax: "Fevvers, the most famous *aerialist* of the day," whose fantastic wings occasion the slogan "Is she fact or is she fiction" (7). The omniscient narrator indicates, however, that Walser's carefully erected boundary between self and world is, in fact, the result of an absence of selfhood occasioned by a lack of emotional engagement, introspection, and imagination. Couched "in terms of a narrative pact between writer and reader" (Finney 1998: 166), Walser's fear for the loss of his fragile sense of self anticipates his lesson in the narrative construction of identity. Thus, "it was almost as if he himself were an *objet trouvé*, for, subjectively, *himself* he never found, since it was not his *self* which he sought" (10). Hence his survival of a number of adverse experiences encountered as foreign correspondent and his successful journalistic function as a disengaged, transparent lens. Walser evinces, therefore, a

disregard of postmodern agency and its concomitant *voluntary* choice between subject-positions:

Walser had not experienced his experience *as* experience; sandpaper his outsides as experience might, his inwardness had been left untouched. In all his young life, he had not felt so much as one single quiver of introspection. If he was afraid of nothing, it was not because he was brave; [...] Walser did not know how to be afraid. So his habitual disengagement was involuntary; it was not the result of judgement, since judgement involves the positives and negatives of belief. (10)

<sup>3</sup>This deconstruction of identity, on the one hand, and emphasis on "selfhood" and "experience," on the other, which is manifest throughout the novel, reveals, firstly, postmodern feminism's strategic deployment of humanist terminology for the purposes of deconstruction and, secondly, Carter's specific combination of postmodern feminism with socialist-feminist materialism (Magali 1994). Indeed, "although experience, like gender, is a construct rather than an essence, it does not necessarily follow that it is, thus, without authority in constituting subjectivity. It is precisely the neglect of 'experience' in postmodern/poststructuralist theory that Carter critiques" (Robinson 1991: 79). As the above indicates, in *Nights at the Circus*, which was "intended as a comic novel" (Carter in Katsavos 1994), the (de)(re)construction of Walser's (sovereign) selfhood is characteristically accompanied by humorous or tragi-comic effect.

In part one, or the London chronotope, Walser's sovereign selfhood is challenged by his interview with the novel's paradigmatic fantastic character - the winged, bird-woman Fevvers. Indeed, this section, primarily comprising Fevvers' oral narrative, has recourse to a number of postmodern fantastic strategies which contravene stable selfhood - self-production/performance; female grotesque; female masquerade; the cyborg; parodic literary intertexts; narrativisation of identity, and narrative agency (discussed below). Walser's rational selfhood, represented by his clear-cut distinction between fact and fiction, is challenged by his recollection of her aerial performance. Firstly, while he posits an invisible wire, her thirty foot leap to the trapeze and beating wings, rustling the pages of his notebook, "almost displaced his composure but [he]

managed to grab tight hold of his scepticism just as it was about the blow over the ledge of the press box" (16). Secondly, as opposed to the aerialiste's traditional creation of illusion through the dissimulation of labour, Fevvers' "physical ungainliness" and contravention of the law of physics - a "disconcerting pact with gravity" (17) - reveals the effort of performance.

What made her remarkable as an aerialiste, however, was the speed - or, rather the lack of it - with which she performed even the climactic triple somersault. [...] Indeed, she did defy the laws of projectiles, because a projectile cannot *mooch* along its trajectory; if it slackens its speed in mid-air, down it falls. But Fevvers, apparently, potted along the invisible gangway between her trapezes with the portly dignity of a Trafalgar Square pigeon flapping from one proffered handful of corn to another, and then she turned head over heels three times, lazily enough to show off the crack in her bum. (17)

Thus, failing to surpass the feats of the conventional aerialist, it is her over/under-performance, or the limitations of her act, which lead Walser to suspend disbelief and interpret her act as a clever double bluff; for "in a secular age, an authentic miracle must purport to be a hoax, in order to gain credit in the world" (17). As Gamble argues, therefore, "the erosion of Walser's objectivity has actually begun before the interview takes place" (1997: 161).

During the interview Walser's scientific scepticism manifests itself - comically - in his contemplation of her navel, which a real bird-woman would not possess having been hatched rather than nourished by the placenta: "Why isn't the whole of London asking: does Fevvers have a belly button?" (18). However, his distinction between fact/fiction and rational/irrational is eroded by the presence of Fevvers' ambivalent, carnival, cyborg selfhood - human/bird, classical/profane, highbrow/lowbrow - as well as her embodiment of the female grotesque and masquerade manifest in her excessive size, mannerisms, and subversive gaze (discussed further below). Thus, Walser projects this ambivalence onto his surroundings: "Perhaps, perhaps...my brain is turning to bubbles already [...] but I could almost swear I saw a fish [...] wriggling, alive-oh, go into the bath when she tipped the jug. But he had no time to think about

how his eyes were deceiving him because Fevvers now solemnly took up the interview shortly before the point where she'd left off" (20). Indeed, "Fevvers has to overcome his skepticism by the sheer power of her rhetoric" (Finney 1998: 166) - including her narrative manipulation and palimpsestic stories interwoven with those of her foster-mother, Lizzie. Walser is thus newly positioned as the object of narrative, as opposed to its subject, which "yarned him in knots, and then - stopped short. Dropped him" (89). Hence the commencement of his postmodern lesson in the role of imagination, illusion, and narrative in the construction of identity: "Like all readers of fiction, Walser has to be lured out of his skeptical frame of mind and induced to accept the improbabilities of a world of invention" (Finney 1998: 165).

Finally, Walser's rational selfhood is challenged by Fevvers and Lizzie's fantastic ability to manipulate temporality which, on one level, demonstrates their deployment of fantastic props - here Ma Nelson's clock - and, secondly, their ability to decelerate or accelerate narrativisation. The clock's fixed time at twelve recalls Carter's long-standing predilection for spatio-temporal cusps as magic realms, for it manifests "the shadowless hour, the hour of vision and revelation, the still hour in the centre of the storm of time" (29). Thus, while Big Ben strikes midnight several times during the interview, "correspond[ing] to that registered by the stopped gilt clock, inside," "For the first time that night, Walser was seriously discomposed" (42). Indeed, at the end of the interview - and their oral narrative - the recovery of conventional time is accompanied by a diminishment of Fevvers' fantastic selfhood and grotesque size, which suggests that her fantastic selfhood was, in fact, a narrative construct or a result of the temporary creation of fantastic spatio-temporality:

During the less-than-a-blink of time it took the last chime to die there came a vertiginous sensation, as if Walser and his companions and the very dressing-room itself were all at once precipitated down a vast chute. It took his breath away. As if the room that had, in some way, without his knowledge, been plucked out of its everyday, temporal continuum, had been held for a while above the spinning world and was now - dropped back into place. [...] She [Fevvers] seemed to have diminished in size, to have shrunk to proportions only a little more colossal than human. [...]

The colour left her cheeks and she looked haggard and very much aged in the colourless light of morning [...]. (87)

The subsequent pursuit of Fevvers to St Petersburg as circus clown and undercover reporter heralds a further stage of Walser's (de)(re)construction mediated through the carnival topoi of the travelling circus, the picaresque journey, the unknown country and performance - postmodern-fantastic metaphors for the oppositional other. Indeed, the journey itself as well as the ambivalence of St Petersburg constitute ideal locales for the loosening of Walser's rational selfhood. Characteristically encapsulating Carter's dual allegiance to (postmodern) feminism and socialism, St Petersburg comprises, firstly, a self-conscious literary construct of beauty, which redeploys Andrei Bely's *Petersburg* (Russo 1994), and, secondly, "the beastly backside" (104) of social reality.

However, it is the circus itself, which constitutes the paradigmatic carnival topos in Carter's fantastic postmodern novel. The clowns in particular effect an inversion or suspension of the conventional world order and an erosion, witnessed especially in Walser again, of self/other, human/animal, inside/outside. Thus, while the Russian circus house's pervading essence of civet and musk erodes the distinction between "lovely ladies" and "the hairy pelts of the beasts," marking the fusion of "grime [and] luxury peculiar to the country" (105), the circus ring itself conjoins both creation and destruction: "uroboric snake with its tail in its mouth, wheel that turns full circle, the wheel whose end is its beginning, the wheel of fortune, the potter's wheel of life on which we are all broken. O! of wonder; O! of grief" (107). This ambivalence as well as the high blown rhetoric and literary tropes of the above quotation anticipate the novel's dual perspective vis-à-vis the carnivalesque and the circus (as well as performance and masquerade), revealing, firstly, both their regenerative powers *and* their dark underside and, secondly, their discursive/narrative genesis. Walser, however, acknowledging the "polyvalent romance of the image" (107), "is a male spectator oblivious to the transcendent powers of the circus. [H]e is first of all an American on the brink of the 'American Century,' filled with all the common sense [...]. Secondly, he is a journalist and a professional debunker, sent to reveal the secrets of the trade, to sort, discard, and exploit the travesties of the circus" (Russo 173). Nevertheless, the clowning profession reveals the (re)creation of identity.

through narrative, language, and performance, offering Walser the possibility to reconstruct himself as a different subject:

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 [...] 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 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.

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Indeed, as the other circus performers increasingly demonstrate, "The extent of these characters' mastery of discourse, the degree of their ability to represent themselves in opposition to how the wider culture represents them, is an index of their ability to work through their exploitation" (Robinson 1991: 126). As philosopher and madman, the head clown, "Buffo the Great," is paradigmatic of the above paradox, embodying both the subversive freedom of self-production and the reification of identity performance - "the object and yet - yet! also he is the subject" (119). As a quintessential grotesque figure, donned with a bladder for a wig, Buffo "wears his insides on his outside [...] stor[ing] his brains in the organ which, conventionally, stores piss" (116). Similarly, his circus performances self-consciously approximate the postmodern (de)construction of the body: "he starts to deconstruct himself. [...] shake! shake! shake out his teeth, shake off his nose, shake away his eyeballs, let all go flying off in a convulsive self-dismemberment" (117). On the one hand, Buffo expounds postmodern notions of choice, agency, and volition granted through their "outcast and disregarded state" (121): "'We can invent our faces! We *make* ourselves'" (121). On the other hand, clowning may be an *involuntary* practice, the result of failure at another circus role. Furthermore, even as a *voluntary* choice the clowns are condemned to perform their roles in perpetuity:

'Yet' [...] 'am I this Buffo whom I have created? Or did I, when I made

up my face to look like Buffo's, create, *ex nihilo*, another self who is not me? And what am I without my Buffo's face? Why, nobody at all. Take away my make-up and underneath is merely not-Buffo. An absence. A vacancy.' (122)

In addition, by inheriting a "story [which] is not precisely true but has the poetic myth of truth and so attaches itself to each and every laughter-maker" (121), Buffo displays, according to Finney, an awareness of Proppian or Greimasian narrativity in which "a particular role or *actant* in a story can be filled by any number of successive characters or *acteurs*" (1998: 171). Juggling with masks, identities, and lurid phallos, the clowns' performance becomes a "dance of disintegration; and of regression; celebration of the primal slime" (125) indicative of the un-doing of identity. Like the other circus performers, the clowns eventually become what they perform – "absence" or in Buffo's case: firstly, a literal "textual deconstruction"; secondly, a literalised "carnival grotesque" through incontinence and physical disintegration; thirdly, a "madman" given to murderous, tragi-comic performance and eventual incarceration in a Russian assylum. Indeed, the clowns reveal the circus as both the underside of carnival spectacle and the Foucauldian mental hospital, for "Clown Alley [...] was a place where reigned the lugubrious atmosphere of a prison or a mad-house; amongst themselves, the clowns distilled the same kind of mutilated patience one finds amongst inmates of closed institutions, a willed and terrible suspension of being" (116). In this sense, they represent society's construction of institutions/arenas for the suppression - hence control and also exploitation - of illegitimate and potentially disruptive marginal identities. Sharing the same state of consciousness and permanent visibility that induces self-surveillance in the panopticon's inmates, and marked by their individualised abnormalities, carnival identities - ex-centricity, difference, femininity - are commodified by the dominant culture for the pleasure of the consuming public. As Gass demonstrates, whereas "The clowns represent contained chaos" "The circus provides a forum whereby society may indulge itself without, in fact, exposing itself to the dangers that the clowns represent. We must not forget that carnival is a legitimized event 'allowed' by the power structure" (1994: 74). Hence the narrator's explicit commentary:

The clowns. See them as a band of terrorists. No; that's not right. Not terrorists, but irregulars. A band of irregulars, permitted the most ferocious piracies as long as, just so long as, they maintain the bizarrerie of their appearance, so that their violent exposition of manners stays on the safe side of terror, even if we need to *learn* to laugh at them, and part, at least, of this laughter comes from the successful suppression of fear. (151-2)

On another level, therefore, the clowns' lack of the carnival-grotesque's regenerative powers renders them "quintessential romantic grotesque figures" (Turner 1987: 49). However, while Buffo's madness anticipates, on the one hand, the progressive symbolic disintegration of the circus and its performers, on the other, it heralds the specific transformation or (de)(re)construction of the novel's primary characters - Walser, as indicated, but also Fevvers, the Princess, Mignon, and Samson. Hence Buffo literalises his (and the clowns') self-professed role as Christ-figure, "The despised and rejected scapegoat", "doomed to stay down below, nailed on the endless cross of the humiliations of this world!" (119, 120). Buffo (and later the clowns) constitute examples of folklore's symbolic sacrificial figures whose destruction constitutes a purifying act for the transformation of other characters and, as Turner has it, an endeavour to immolate contemporary literary theory's unquestioning subscription to "the frozen, static, compartmentalized condition of the grotesque" (1987: 46).

The omniscient narrator indicates the destabilising effect of clowning on Walser's stable selfhood, in particular following the tigress' injury of his right arm, which precludes his ability to write. "For the moment," therefore, "his disguise disguises - nothing. He is no longer a journalist masquerading as a clown; [...] force of circumstance has turned him into a *real* clown" (145). Thus, his earnest endeavour to perform his new role as "Human Chicken" quickly turns to anger at his humiliation, revealing that "[his] new profession was beginning to make demands on him" (153). At the same time, however, Walser's selfhood is challenged by the anthropomorphism of the circus animals and the beastliness or dehumanised status of the circus members; hence there appears an erosion of the boundaries between self/other, human/animal. Firstly, the impressario's starch-ruffed pig, Sybil, whose divinatory powers reflect those of the mythical Sibyl(s), contributes primarily to the novel's comedy. Holding



"great store by his pig's commercial acumen" (162), Sybil informs *all* his decisions about the hiring and firing of circus members. Thus, at Walser's interview "Sybil studied the cards for a moment, squinnied again at Walser, appeared for a few moments sunk in thought, then [...] nudged out: C-L-O-W-N. And sat back on her haunches gratified" (101-2). The chimps from the "Educated Apes" act, however, behaving with "more decorum" than "the non-simian habitués of the Imperial Circus" (163), play on the meanings of "human" and "beastliness" in order to deconstruct both the myth of Western (male) rationality and the alleged "jolly relativity" of carnival topoi. The chimps' principal act comprises a school routine or lessons delivered by their "leader", the chimp-Professor. However, like the clowns, the "Educated Apes" literalise or become the identities that they perform, rendering their performance a "parody" of educated, rational humanity (141-2).

Indeed, the novel comically juxtaposes humans and animals by interweaving Walser's naked participation in the chimps' lesson in human anatomy and voice production, including a recitation of Hamlet's well-known soliloquy "What a piece of work is man!," and a grunting scene of copulation between Mignon and the Strong Man. Hence the Western rational subject is thoroughly deconstructed; Walser makes a fool of himself and the Strong Man reveals himself more animalistic than the animals. Their perfunctory "performance" of the school room routine masks their *real* continual attempts to study and receive lessons in humanity, including human anatomy and, above all, writing - an indicator of the characters' ability to work through their oppression. Indeed, narrative agency enables the Professor to negotiate in writing the management of the chimps' circus act and their contract, "Nature did not give me vocal cords but left the brain out of Lamarck" (169). Nevertheless, recalling Walser's reflections on the necessity of a real miracle pretending to be illusion, the impresario responds, "If there ain't a man in the ring with you, people'll think you're just a bunch of high-school kids in monkey suits!" (169).

Significantly, Walser's increasingly "dizzy uncertainty about what was human and what was not" (110) is effected through the gaze, which acts in the novel as a Foucauldian means of empowerment/disempowerment and hence also, at times, as a measure of mutuality. Thus, notwithstanding the chimp Green Hair Ribbon's continual endeavour to meet his gaze (109-10, 114, 163, 183), at his initial encounter

with the Professor: "Their eyes met. Walser never forgot this first, intimate exchange with one of these beings whose life ran parallel to his, this inhabitant of the magic circle of difference, unreachable...but not unknowable" (108). Similarly, the circus tigers evince a human consciousness and a "civilised" performance to classical music that leads them to "ponder the mystery of their obedience and [be] astonished by it" (148). In comparison, their unsmiling, unspeaking trainer, the Princess of Abyssinia, is dehumanised through her proximity to the cats, in particular by their jealousy at "the medium of human speech which nature denied them" (149). However, rather than a simple celebration of the cyborg's fusion of human and animal, the narrator's mockery of her alleged derivation as "a tigress's foster-child" (149), as well as the association of animal "speech" ("mewing") with their oppressed and beaten trainer Mignon, reveals the carnival's reduction of underprivileged identities to silent animals. As Fernihough argues, therefore, "the carnivalesque notion of the blurring of the boundaries between human and animal, or the destabilizing of the humanistic perspective, has its dark underside: the circus is one in which women are treated like 'dumb beasts'" (1997: 104). Nevertheless, drawing on the transformative power of music, Mignon and the Princess endeavour to achieve a utopian relationship between "innocent beasts and wise children" (155) and this is realised, albeit problematically, in part three. Thus, performing as the tigress' dancing partner in order to relieve her increasing "human" jealousy about Mignon and her mate, Walser's selfhood is again destabilised by the gaze. Carter's own short stories, "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" (1996 [1979]) and "The Tiger's Bride" (1996 [1979]), as well as Blakean imagery, contribute intertextually to the discussion of the relationship between human and animal while recalling the fictional construction of both human and animal identities:

Mignon whirled by [...] and Walser [...] thought: There goes Beauty and the Beast. Then, looking into the tigress's depthless, jewelled eyes, he saw reflected there the entire alien essence of a world of fur, sinew and grace in which he was the clumsy interloper and [...] he allowed himself to think as the tigers would have done:

Here comes the Beast, and Beauty!

[W]hile the dance lasted, they lived in perfect harmony. (164-5)

It is in this setting that Walser falls in love, which occasions a further fracturing of his rational selfhood and a tendency towards emotional engagement and imagination which heretofore precluded his discovery of his (postmodern) selfhood. While he experiences "an extraordinary sensation within his breast: his heart dissolved" (142) and "[his] eyes prickled" (162), Fevvers' thighs, recalling her role as female grotesque and aerialist, incite "a sudden excess of erotic vertigo" (143). Significantly, the momentary expression of love manifests itself in the mutuality of the gaze: "She looked towards him, her night-dark eyes brimming, and for once, there was no irony, malice or suspicion in them. His molten heart spilled out of his bosom and flowed towards her, just as one drop of mercury flows towards another" (142). Indeed, as the omniscient narrator indicates, "no woman ever tried to humiliate him before [...] and Fevvers has both tried and succeeded" (145). He is unmanned and on the way to being re-made, a process enacted through the fortunes of the circus to which I now turn.

Although both St Petersburg and the circus fail to (de)(re)construct Walser completely, rendering him "'Not hatched out yet'" (171), its progressive disintegration symbolically embodies his further transformation (along with that of Fevvers, Mignon, the Princess, and the Strong Man). While "it was a depleted company the Colonel would take across the tundra" (183), the circus finally disintegrates and disbands in the final chronotope, Siberia. Representative of the postmodern fantastic's destabilisation of identity through both the unknown country and the picaresque, the train journey across Siberia, whose liminality is indicated by its vast wilderness and snowy bleakness, is presented as a "progress[ion] though the vastness of nothing to the extremities of nowhere" (198). Here the picaresque reaches its apogee after the blowing up of the train by bandits and the further symbolic disintegration of the circus following the "sacrificial" deaths of the elephants and the tigers, whose forms transmute into the shattered mirrors; "the poor remains of the Colonel's circus" (227) are disbanded across the landscape, "putting them in places where they can discuss philosophical concepts" (Carter in Haffenden 1985: 87). Hence the fracturing of the narrative, abrupt shifts in tone and narration, and the juxtaposition of Fevvers and Walser's stories. Thus while Walser's third person narration relates his further (de)(re)construction within a shamanist village; newly deploying first person

narration, Fevvers relates the hijack of the circus members by bandits and a number of character reversals and transformations.

On one level, the novel stages an encounter with a number of characters ensnared in false ideals of human freedom: the bandits, or "brotherhood of free men," wrongly believe in the virtue and infallibility of higher authority - the Queen of England - in the aid of their misfortunes; the Maestro is duped by the corrupt mayor into starting a music school in the taiga; the Escapee's Rousseauian, Kropotkinian notions of the soul, deconstructed by Lizzie's Marxist emphasis on the historical construction of identity, succumb to the Colonel's capitalism. Hence the bandits' fantastic disappearance along with the clowns in a snowstorm incited by their "dance of death [...] for George Buffins that they might be as him" (242). However, as narrative constructs rather than substantiates, the clowns' disappearance constitutes a "denouement" precipitated by Lizzie, who asked them to perform for the bandits; or, as Fevvers responds to the Escapees' incomprehension, "I'm not in the mood for literary criticism" (244). Thus, like the other circus performers, "They become their true selves: that is, nothing" (Gamble 1997: 164). From the perspective of Turner's folkloric interpretation, "Through these means, the old structures can be shucked off, giving identity and interpretation a chance to reform. The various sacrifices purify the principal characters [...] allow[ing] them to enter the next stage of the rite of passage, the liminal stage [...] where a great deal of malleability of identity takes place" (1987: 53). In this way, therefore, the novel evinces the positive transformation of minor principal characters: the increasing introspection and discursive abilities of the former apish Strong Man; the utopian, Blakean<sup>3</sup> relationship between Mignon and the Princess and the Siberian tigers "burning as brightly as those who had been lost" (249). The fantastic postmodern erosion of the human/animal boundary - an endeavour "to find some accommodation with the bestial within" (Punter 1991: 147) - is effected by the transformative power of music, which "sealed the past of tranquillity between humankind and their wild brethren, their wild sistren, yet left them free" (275). Thus, reflecting Carter's own critical comments (Haffenden 1985: 89), Lizzie summarises the role of both the unknown country, the picaresque, and the circus motifs on the (de)(re)construction of identity:

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<sup>3</sup> See "The Little Girl Lost," "The Little Girl Found," and "The Tyger" - "Tyger Tyger burning bright..." in Blake (1990 [1815]) *Songs of Innocence and Experience*.

‘A motley crew, indeed – a gaggle of strangers drawn from many diverse countries. Why, you might have said we constituted a microcosm of humanity, that we were an emblematic company, each signifying a different proposition in the great syllogism of life. The hazards of the journey reduced us to a little band of pilgrims [...] upon whom the wilderness acted like a moral magnifying glass.’ (279)

It is Walser, however, the previous representative of materialist civilisation, who experiences the full impact of the postmodern fantastic topos of the unknown country comically represented by the Siberian shamanist community. "[B]uried alive in a profound sleep" (209) following the train crash, Walser's amnesia comprises a symbolic sloughing off of cultural and historical contexts, for "[he] no longer knew how to ask: 'Where am I?' Like the landscape, he was a perfect blank" (222). Indeed, both loss of social identity and in particular amnesia comprise "classic liminal feature[s] [...] the ultimate sign of the pregnancy of possibility that occurs in the liminal state" (Turner 1987: 53). Comically reduced to prelinguistic infantility, Walser's admission of sensory experience as opposed to factuality leads to his encounter with the Shaman, who "made no categorical distinction between seeing and believing. It could be said that, for all the peoples of this region, there existed no difference between fact and fiction; instead, a sort of magic realism" (260). However, shamanism also comprises a "performance" - including the arts of conjurism, ventriloquism, and expression - enacted for the benefit of the simple village folk; thus, Walser is inducted in "the supreme form of the confidence trick - others had confidence [in the Shaman] because of his own utter confidence in his own integrity" (363). The juxtaposition of the shamanist community with the Western characters provides, furthermore, a critique of Western concepts: in his regressed state Walser declares Hamlet's "What a piece of work is man!" (238); his re-enacted memory of the waltz is interpreted by the Shaman as "a barbarous dance" (259); Mignon and the Princess' classical music is seen as "the cacophony of uninvited gods" (268); and historiography is exposed as "white history, that is European history, that is Yanqui history" (265). While Walser's beard and reindeer skills suggest a different time scheme to the single week that Fevvers believes to have passed, the shamanist community's habitation of "a temporal dimension which did not take history into account" questions the West's "whole idea of the twentieth century, or any other

century [...] as a rum notion" (265). Similarly, Western paradigms of knowledge are deconstructed through the Shaman's "passionate academicism" and "pedantic" investment in the vast wilderness as "the encyclopedia, packed with information" (252-3).

Thus, paradigmatic of the fantastic's unknown country, Siberia offers the opportunity to "ridicule Western civilisation and its attempts at defining the Other in its own terms. [...] Carter [also] uses the motif of the unknown country [...] to represent ironically the process of signification and its arbitrariness and thus unreliability" (Neumeier 1996: 146-7). Indeed, decontextualised from Western thinking and society, Walser's returning memories and re-enactment of his recent past beyond the village are comically incomprehensible except as hallucinatory visions, although they provide him with a hitherto unrealised "'inner life', a realm of speculation and surmise within himself that was entirely his own" (260-1). Thus, inducted into the role of illusion, narrativity, and performance in the construction of identity, Walser's reconstruction is marked by his unquestioning acceptance - or re-reading - of Fevvers' performance as winged-woman. Indeed, as Carter indicates, Fevvers' carnivalesque laughter at the end of the novel ("I fooled you, then!" (294)), which appears to allude to her virginity and her wings, is more "a question about fiction" (Haffenden 1985: 90) - or her narrative creation of her own identity. Their reunion marks the end of the liminal phase and the commencement of "the reintegration phase" associated with the ritual imagery of "rebirth" and "light" manifest in the village woman's childbirth and the shift towards light in the Shaman's ritual hut (Turner 1987: 56).

In another sense, however, Walser's trajectory comprises a (de)(re)construction of traditional masculinity. His initial recourse to scientific rationality to investigate the bird-woman and his relegation of Fevvers to the object of his journalism establishes traditional gendered binaries (subject/object, rational/irrational) and parodies the conventions of the "'the seek and destroy' narrative [...] in classic Hollywood: the feminine enigma must be 'solved'" (Robinson 1991: 122). Indeed, located self-consciously at the end of the nineteenth century - and, by comparison, at the moment of its conception at the end of the twentieth - Walser's endeavour to penetrate the mystery of her wings represents "a displacement of the enigma of Fevvers' femininity" (Fernihough 1997: 90) - or the question of the "eternal feminine." Thus,

the novel recalls the nineteenth-century writers, artists, philosophers, and psychologists, who hoped to enlighten the "impenetrable obscurity" of female essence and sexuality. Fevvers' body, therefore, which "is always the centre of attention, prominent yet at the same time elusive and enigmatical", comprises "an exaggerated version of 'woman' as posited by late nineteenth-century doctors, sexologists and psychoanalysts" (Fernihough 1997: 90). Hence we witness an interplay between late nineteenth-century images of woman - the enigma of woman, the aerialist, woman as embodiment of the New Age, the angel in the house - and a feminist postmodern investment in the insubstantiality of sex and gender. It is to the ambiguous Fevvers that I now turn.

Fevvers' challenge to substantial sexed and gendered identity derives, on one level, from the intertextual production of her quintessential ambiguity - and hence her carnival stature - traversing high and low culture, the celestial and the profane, wisdom (her real name is Sophia) and unlearning. Indeed, her self-production as the "Cockney Venus" and "Helen of the High Wire" (7) reveals her status as narrative construct - and hence the narrative production of femininity - and continues Carter's demythologising project. As Finney argues, "Fevvers' personality is produced by the employment of literary tropes, especially paradox and oxymoron. Both the descriptions of her and her actions rely on a conjunction of seeming opposites" (1998: 79). Hence, the novel's textual re-performance of classical mythology - Helen of Troy, Leda and the Swan - which are comically subverted by Fevvers' grotesque excess. While "this Helen took after her putative father, the swan, around the shoulder parts" (7), she "launched a thousand quips, mostly on the lewd side" (8). For Hutcheon, therefore, the novel comprises a paradigmatic example of feminist postmodernism's subversive repetition of Western aesthetic representation, particularly in its parody of the Greek myth of Leda and the Swan and its reproduction in art and literature. Indeed, the novel redeploys both the *fin-de-siècle* and resurgent modernist interest in this theme:

The obsession was closely bound up with male reactions to the dramatically shifting gender relations of the period and the fear that some kind of degeneration was setting in [...]. Many artists expressed through

the swan's rape of Leda a fascination with what was perceived to be the new, degenerate woman's lasciviousness, as well as a desire to return woman to her "true" position of abject submission to male authority. (Fernihough 1997: 97)

Subverting this "cultural valorization of rape in Leda's story" (Blodgett 1994: 52), the novel's ending, in which the bird-woman Fevvers comically assumes the woman-on-top position, reduces Walser to the passivity of the Leda role. This marks a progression also from Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* (1994a [1967]), where Melanie's entrapped enactment of Leda reflects the early fictions' limitation in their demonstration - but not reversal - of the cultural construction of femininity. Furthermore, Fevvers' existence - and hence femininity - is only coincidental with the duration of the narration, for as Lizzie indicates, "'Fevvers', we named her, and so she will be till the end of the chapter" (182). Similarly, heir to a literary and cinematic range of female aerialists and "busty blondes" - Djuna Barnes' Frau Mann, Huysmann's Miss Urania, Mae West, Diana Dors - albeit recast differently, "She is at once an original and an already established narrative type or *actant*" (Finney 1998: 163). The status of Fevvers and her femininity as narrative construct manifests itself in the novel's play across this range of narrative genres and intertexts.

At the same time, as both aerialist, winged woman, and angel figure, Fevvers recalls the female grotesque's "aerialism" and its imagery as a strategy for the subversion of substantive sex and gender. Thus, "By directing the gaze of her audience upwards [...] she challenges their perceptions of where it is possible, or permissible, for a woman to go" (Gamble 1997: 162) and "dramatizes not only the lack of '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" (Fernihough 1997: 95). However, like the dual perspective of carnival above, the aerialism in *Nights at the Circus* is not unequivocally utopian. Firstly, while the image of the high wire indicates the "groundlessness of gender", on the one hand, in this novel it reveals also "the precarious balancing act of womanhood, an act in which self-assertion, making the body *visible*, always carries a certain risk" (Fernihough 1997: 89-90). Secondly, albeit a redeployment of liberal feminist and modernist images of transcendent flight, Fevvers reveals the attendant dangers of rooting postmodern strategies (e.g. aerialism)



in the mythologies of modernist liberation discourses. Hence Fevvers' embodiment of the late nineteenth-century depiction of the coming century's "new woman," represented by the angel. Thus, hailed in Paris as "l'aise Anglaise, the English angel" (8), "her arrival [...] will coincide with that of the new century. [...] And Fevvers has all the *éclat* of a new era about to take off" (11). Similarly, Ma Nelson, brothel madam and women's libber, interprets the young winged Fevvers as "an angel", "the pure child of the century that just now is waiting in the wings, the New Age in which no women will be bound to the ground" (25). At one level, therefore, the novel deploys the feminist postmodern grotesque's recourse to "off-beat angels" (Russo 1994: 29) as subversive aerial imagery, which directly "parodies that resilient nineteenth-century image of the angel in the house: the incredible fiction of a pure, modest, giving servitor without needs or libido of her own" (Blodgett 1994: 52). A similar deployment of angel imagery and flight manifests itself in Wittig's novel *Virgile, Non* (1985b) (*Across the Acheron* (1987 [1985])) and the critical writing of Cixous (1980a [1975]; 1980b [1975]) and Irigaray.

As an icon whose flight plays fast and loose with a variety of cross-currents ("horizontal and vertical, terrestrial and celestial") and whose form transcends traditional gender identities (angels traditionally being read as androgynous), the angel is the perfect symbol for the construction of a new, utopic reading of woman. (Armitt 1999: 192)

At another level, however, Fevvers' perception of "[her] body as the abode of limitless freedom" (42) recalls aerialism's roots in both liberal feminism and modernism's humanist investment in female flight as a metaphor for transcendence from (female) bodily containment. Indeed, as Carter indicates, Fevvers embodies a parody of Apollinaire's rhetorical figuration of the early twentieth-century new woman as a winged version of Sade's Juliette, who will "renew the world." Hence it presents a demythologisation of another modernist myth of woman. Indeed, notwithstanding her explicit elaboration of the limitations of the dominatrix Juliette as a feminist model in *The Sadeian Woman* (1993b [1979]), Carter's dual response to Apollinaire's figure ("How wonderful" and subsequently "Well no; it's not going to be as easy as that" (Carter in Katsavos 1994: 13)) is reflected in the way the novel continually undercuts Fevvers' utopian status as the new woman. Firstly, her depiction as angel is

juxtaposed with the grotesque, recalling her quintessential ambivalence. While her approximation to "a dray mare [rather] than an angel" is described as more fitting for "the elected divinity of the immanent century of the Common Man" (12), her attempted demonstration of flight reveals the labour and clanging machinery behind modernist futuristic imagery:

[she] lifted towards the ceiling a face which suddenly bore an expression of the most heavenly beatitude, face of an angel in a Sunday school picture-book, a remarkable transformation. She crossed her arms on her massive bust and the bulge in the back of her satin dressing-gown began to heave and bubble. Cracks appeared in the old satin. Everything appeared to be about to burst out and take off. (42)

Indeed, Fevvers' dawdling aerial performances, revealing labour and its bodily effects, further aligns her with the Victorian working girl as opposed to the angel in the house. The overblown rhetoric and Fevvers' use of literary tropes and intertexts also undercuts her utopian representation of the new woman by revealing it as a literary construct. Thus, for Fevvers, in the new century "all the women will have wings, the same as I. [S]he will tear off her mind forg'd manacles and fly away. The doll's house door will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed - " (285). This is undercut by the novel's Marxist mouthpiece, Lizzie, "It's going to be more complicated than that [...]. You improve your analysis, girl, and *then* we'll discuss it" (285). Furthermore, the novel ironically redeploys elements of Apollinaire's winged Juliette as well as the libertarian tradition, for "In a series of critical counterproductions of the affirmative woman [...] Fevvers is born and born again as an act [in the theatrical sense] of serial transgression" (Russo 1994: 166) as the embodiment of Cupid, Winged Victory, and the Angel of Death. Indeed, as these episodes indicate, rather than representing the utopian "freedom" of the "new woman", Fevvers-as-angel embodies her dual status as subject *and* object, the agent of self-production *and* constructed object of the viewer's gaze.

In another respect, Fevvers is a bird-woman, who "never docked via what you might call the *normal channels* [...] but [...] was *hatched*" (7). This approximation to the cyborg erodes the boundaries between self and other and locates Fevvers beyond the reproductive matrix's gendered binaries - "outside of the Oedipal triangle, outside the Law of the Father" (Schmidt 1989: 67). However, it is largely through its representation of another comic version of Fevvers' fictionality that her role as bird woman challenges substantive notions of sex and gender. Indeed, like her other identities, Fevvers' role as bird-woman is intertextually produced through her proximity to Helen of Troy, who was born of the union of Leda and Zeus-as-Swan, as well as the high-blown description of her first flight in the guise of a nightpiece or "night fable", which self-consciously "elevat[es] the grotesque body to nocturnal sublimity" (Russo 1994: 174-5). Located on the fantastic cusp of *Middsummer's Night*, this flight comprises a "marriage to the wind itself" with a naked Fevvers in the role of "the bride of that wild, sightless, fleshless rover" (33). However, while "The transparent arms of the wind received the virgin" leaving her "[...] secure in the arms of [her] invisible lover", (34) her inexperience concludes the episode as Lizzie hauls her onto the roof and away from death. Indeed, recalling her ambivalence, Fevvers' classical birth as Venus and Helen of Troy are juxtaposed with her lowly origins as "Cockney sparrow" (42) and apprenticeship as London "pigeonlet" (32). Furthermore, notwithstanding her 'scientific erudition (about flight), which contrasts humorously with her working-class lingo, her voracious appetite comically precludes "chicken, or duck, or guineafowl [...] [due to] not wanting to play cannibal" (77).

In these ways the novel presents Russo's female grotesque, Butler's drag-performance, and Mulvey/Doan's female masquerade (Finney 1998; Robinson 1991) as strategies for the destabilisation of sexed and gendered identity, manifest in Fevvers' production of both gender ambiguity and excessive femininity, including the consequent deconstruction of Walser's masculinity. However, the novel's dual perspective vis-à-vis carnival and aerialism equally informs its treatment of the above, revealing, ultimately, the continual risk of the appropriation of female spectacle by male hegemony and thus its ultimate dependency on context and "reader." Nevertheless, these theories advocate the practice of an exaggerated over-performance of femininity, whose subversive excess reveals the insubstantiality of gender and its congealment through repetition, subverting in particular the gendered dichotomies

subject/object, inside/outside. At "six foot two in stockinged feet [and] fourteen English stone" (158), Fevvers' excess is manifest, firstly, in her huge size, which "fill[ed] up all the mirror, all the room with her bulk" (52) and in full spread "obscured the roof-tree of the Imperial Circus" (158). Indeed, inverting the high/low dichotomy in comic-grotesque fashion, her poster "depicts her ascent from behind - bums aloft [...]; up she goes, in a steatopygous perspective, shaking [...] pinions large enough, powerful enough to bear up such a big girl as she. And she was a *big* girl" (7). Revealing the labour of performance - and hence of femininity - Fevvers' "ungainly", "kitsch", and "perfunctory" circus act, revealing "the meretricious in the spectacle" (14), marks the apogee of her success as an embodiment of self-production - or, we might say, of postmodern agency.

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. [...]

LOOK AT ME! (15)

Indeed, it is, in part, Fevvers' excessively *female* body, which renders her paradigmatic of the female grotesque. Firstly, continually in process and at the verge of eruption, it redeploys the male grotesque's conflation of the grotesque with female bodily processes. Secondly, its imbrication in a range of feminine accoutrements, in particular of an artificial or squalid nature, has recourse to the prosthetic grotesque and challenges woman's conventional equation with and male terror of female artificiality. Thus, undermining Fevvers' pseudo-sublime angelicism, the wings comprise "her humps, [...] big as if she bore a bosom fore and aft, her conspicuous deformity" (19), lying beneath "the soiled [...] dressing gown" like "an uncomfortable-looking pair of bulges, shuddering the surface of the taut fabric from time to time as if desirous of breaking loose" (7-8). While "the marvellous giantess" (42) unsettles Walser through her vast proportions, his perception is challenged also by her lumpy "marine aroma [...] that underlay the hot, solid composite of perfume, sweat, greasepaint, and raw, leaking gas" (8) coupled with "a powerful note of stale feet, final ingredient in the highly personal aroma, 'essence of Fevvers', that clogged the room" (9). Similarly, as "a prisoner of her voice" (43), Walser is challenged, firstly, through its grotesque dimensions of "dustbin lids" (7) and a "celestial fishwife"

(43) and, secondly, through her adoption of the masculine role of narrative agent: "But Fevvers lassooed him with her narrative and dragged him along with her before he'd had a chance to ask Lizzie if -" (60). Furthermore, "a mistresspiece of exquisitely feminine squalor" (9), Fevvers' dressing room manifests an overwhelming feminine excess - combining squalor and artificiality - which continually threatens to spill over and involve him in its mobile display. Thus, while Walser dislodges a "a noisy torrent of *billets doux*, bringing with them from the mantelpiece a writhing snakes' nest of silk stockings, green, yellow, pink, scarlet, black" (9), Fevvers "topped herself up with such a lavish hand that foam spilled into her pot of dry rouge, there to hiss and splutter in a bloody froth" (12). The juxtaposition of this "mess" like "an explosion in a *corsetières*" with the dressing room's "notable [...] anonymity [...]. Nothing to give her away" (13-4) is also loudly suggestive of femininity as performance.

This overstated *performance* of femininity - or display of excessive feminine squalor and artificiality - encompasses also its accoutrements: not only the randomly discarded assortment of garments but also the rounds of cold cream, brushing of "inexhaustible [...] sizzling and whispering hair" (19), and false eyelashes. Drawing on the postmodern fantastic image of the mirror, such descriptions are frequently mediated through its reflection, revealing the role of representation and illusion in the performance of femininity. Furthermore, by destabilising Walser through her look (7, 8, 19, 29-30, 33, 35, 48, 54, 78), the scene recalls Mulvey and Doan's examination of the conflation of male subjectivity with the agency of the gaze, including the subsequent critical development of its role in masquerade's subversion of the male gaze's fetishised objectification of woman. Thus, "[she] flashed a pair of vast, blue, indecorous eyes at the young reporter. [...] Then [...] confronted herself with a grin in the mirror as she ripped six inches of false eyelashes from her left eyelid with an incisive gesture and a small, explosive, rasping sound" (7). However, rather than revealing the "true" Fevvers, the stripped eyelashes merely disclose another artificial layer: "she battered her eyelashes at Walser in the mirror. From the pale length of those eyelashes, a good three inches, he might have thought she had not taken her false ones off had he not been able to see them lolling" (40). Indeed, used as a means of "bombardment", "challenge", and "attack" (54), Fevvers' eyes, which "burst open - whoosh! like blue umbrellas" (19), destabilise Walser's masculine equilibrium. By appropriating the agency of the look, an act conventionally punishable by death in

Western cinema on account of its signification of excessive desire, Fevvers effects Walser's emasculation. As Robinson argues, "Fevvers' appropriation of the gaze signifies her control over her narrative, just as, in classic Hollywood cinema, the woman's position as object of the gaze ensures that she remains powerless" (1991: 124). Thus, threatening to absorb the entire dressing room, her eyes comprise a *mise-en-abyme* of the novel itself and its notions of (sexed, gendered) identity:

Walser felt the strangest sensation, as if these eyes of the *aerialiste* were a pair 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. (30)

Evidently then, Fevvers' recourse to the female grotesque (and its aerialism), female masquerade, and drag-performance produces a gendered ambivalence. The combination of her active gaze, narrative agency, status as the latest version of the ambiguous aerialist, and overstated femininity produce a disruption of "the singularity of masculine/feminine positions by representing herself as both spectacle and spectator" (Robinson 1991: 125). Indeed, as Carter comments in interview, "Fevvers is basically Mae West with wings" (Haffenden 1985: 88), drawing on the latter's over-performed femininity, overt predatoriness, rumoured status as a female impersonator, and self-conscious self-creation (*The Sadeian Woman* (1993b [1979])). Indicating the relation between Carter's theories and those of Doan, Mulvey, and Butler, Fernihough states:

It could be argued that Mae West, the woman playing *herself*, the woman camped up as a woman, illustrates this "travesty of a travesty" perfectly: the *woman* in *feminine* drag explodes the inside/outside paradigm completely, destabilizing the very distinctions between natural and artificial, inside, depth and surface. The notion of imitating or impersonating one's "own" gender suggests, somewhat unsettlingly, that playing is itself of the essence. (1997: 93)

Hence Walser's contemplation "Is she really a man?" (35), his speculation that in a secular age a real bird-woman would have to masquerade as a hoax, and his comparison of Fevvers to the gaudily painted, wooden "carnival ladies for fairgrounds" (35). Indeed, confronted by her "stubbled, thickly powdered armpits" and "huge arms" capable of crushing him to death, Walser is convulsed by a "seismic erotic disturbance", propelling him to "scrambl[e] to his feet, suddenly panicking, scattering underwear" (52). Finally, notwithstanding the use of the fantastic clock and Fevvers' narrative agency, Walser's heterosexual gaze is challenged by Fevvers and Lizzie as a couple, or unit. Firstly, they evince female narrative agency in their guise as "two Scheherezades" (40) confusing Walser with their narrative mode of impacting stories. Secondly, they represent female homosociality, whose absence from Carter's earlier novels reveals its incomprehensibility in the terms of patriarchy's positioning of women. Thirdly, their physical incongruity, inverting the mother-daughter relationship through their relative body size and height, confuses his sense of generation and scale. Indeed, for Russo, Fevvers and Lizzie's unity operates on a number of levels: firstly "an intergenerational grotesque of the kind which Mikhail Bakhtin evokes in his paradigm of the grotesque [...] senile, pregnant hags" (178); secondly, a reconfiguration of the "new woman" as a "provisional, uncomfortable [...] coalition of bodies" (179); and, thirdly, "an improbable but necessary political alliance" (180) of Marxist materialism with feminist postmodernism.

However, as outlined above, Fevvers' status as female grotesque reveals itself as both a narrative and fantastic construct, manifesting itself, in one sense, as a result of the a-temporality produced by the magic clock's manipulation of Big Ben and Walser's wristwatch. Thus, "imbued with vivacity" (42) when Big Ben chimes midnight yet another time, the dressing room's relocation within "real" time results in her immediate diminishment in size and lapsed performance, whose "theatrical vivacity" she endeavours to muster "for the sake of the stage doorkeeper" (88). Furthermore, by revealing the intentionality of her performance of femininity and her investment in its effect on Walser, the interview anticipates her subsequent diminishment in stature once deprived of her audience, or the contingency of female spectacle on audience and "reader." Hence her array of surreptitious glances in order to gauge Walser's response. Firstly, "[she] let[s] a ripping fart ring round the room. She peered across her shoulder, again, to see how he took *that*" (11). Secondly, messily gorging

working-class food in a paradigmatic example of the comic grotesque and a parodic rewriting of "the *fin-de-siècle* stereotype of the 'consuming' woman" (Fernihough 1997: 98), "She gave him another queer look, as if she half hoped the spectacle of her gluttony would drive him away" (22). Thus, while Fevvers' own gaze (as seen above) subverts the phallic gaze's voyeuristic objectification of woman, as Doan and Mulvey maintain, it also demonstrates the ambivalent status of the masquerader as spectacle *and* spectator or subject *and* object as well as the sado-masochistic relationship between writer and reader. Finally, while "You did not think of calculation when you saw her, so finely judged was her performance" (12), it masks an avidity for profit. Hence, once more, the novel's ambivalent presentation of female spectacle which appears, on the one hand, as a means of self-production and hence (postmodern) agency and, on the other, a demonstration of the production of femininity as a commodity and the contingency of female self-production not only on a suitable audience and gender-reader but also on a suitable material context and economic relations.

As further proof of this, despite the economic profit gained from her own self-management/advertisement, motivated as much by avarice as the desire for autonomy, Fevvers' imbrication in mass-produced products as well as the way in which she barter herself to male aristocrats demonstrates the cultural commodification of femininity by and for the economically dominant male consumer market. Fevvers' iconography not only reaches the wastes of the Siberian shamanist community through "trade blankets", but her home city, London, is swept with "Fevvermania" in the guise of "'Fevvers' garters, stockings, fans, cigars [...] she even lent it to a brand of baking powder [...] up in the air went your sponge cake, just as she did" (8). Furthermore, located in a series of surrogate carnivals - Ma Nelson's whorehouse, Mme Schreck's house of female freaks, and the circus itself - the novel reveals the impact of context and viewer on self-production/performance and hence the underside of carnival. Thus, perched as the living statue of Cupid in the alcove of the whorehouse's drawing room, Fevvers "was a *tableau vivant* from the age of seven on [...] and for seven long years", where she "served [an] apprenticeship in *being looked at* - at being the object of the eye of the beholder" (23). This episode, furthermore, whose poised classical body becomes the leaky grotesque body at the inception of her "women's bleeding [...] along with the great goings on in [...] the bosom department"



(23), recalls Fevvers' destabilisation of the distinction between the classical and the grotesque. Her subsequent enactment of the Winged Victory, the famous statue of Athena's Roman counterpart, Nike, comprises a similar fusion of classicism and the grotesque. While Nike represents, on the one hand, "the personification of Victory" (Grimal 1990 [1951]), the beauty of upward mobility against onrushing air, and the paradigm of Hellenistic sculpture, it is in the guise of mass-produced Victorian bric-a-brac that Nike reemerges in the late nineteenth century. Hence "Fevvers poses as the advertisement and model for similar commodities; not exactly a prostitute herself, she nonetheless installs the myth of femininity as virgin space" (Russo 1994: 167). Nevertheless, whereas Fevvers' wings are ironically cast as artificial attachments, the phallicism of her sword-wielding arms, an imaginative attempt to represent the completion of the original of the dismembered female ideal, compromise its commodity value. As Fevvers comments, "Yet it may be that a *large woman* with a *sword* is not the best advertisement for a brothel. For, slow but sure, trade fell off from my fourteenth birthday on" (38).

Fevvers describes the period spent at the whorehouse as an apprenticeship in being the object of the (male) gaze. However, rather than waiting for "the kiss of a magic prince", she learns the way in which the masculinist deployment of myths of woman would "seal me up in my appearance for ever!" (39). Instead, progressing beyond the depiction of female competition in patriarchal society in Carter's early fiction, Fevvers seeks succour in female homosociality – a feminist sisterhood of "new women". In comparison to Mme Schreck's "Museum of female monsters", which represents Foucault's depiction of the nineteenth-century brothel as panopticon, Ma Nelson's whorehouse "as a surrogate carnival" stages positive "carnavalesque disruptions of established norms" (Magali 1994: 507). Firstly, the interior's "brace of buxom, smiling goddesses", bacchanalian satyrs, "drawing room snug as a groin", and "mighty marble staircase that went up with a flourish like [...] a whore's bum" recall the carnivalesque. However, while its "plain, sober façade", "graceful, scallop-shaped fanlight", "air of rectitude and propriety", reveal "how the Age of Reason built it" (25-6), its "leather armchairs with *The Times*", "oil paintings of mythological subjects", and the "lugubrious degree of masculine good behaviour" lend it the appearance of "the smoking room of a gentleman's club" (27). Indeed, recalling Carter's valorisation of the hardworking, honest, and commonsensical prostitute in

comparison to the patriarchal wife's unconscious engagement in unpaid prostitution in *The Sadeian Woman* (1993b [1979]), the novel blurs the boundaries between wife and prostitute – or the dichotomous patriarchal myth of the good/bad woman. Thus, while “Lizzie, faithful as any housewife in London, scrubbed and whitened the [front steps] every morning” (26), the faithful clients “formed such particular attachments [...] that you could speak of a kind of marriage, there” (38). Thus, intertextually challenging Baudelaire's narrative construction of prostitutes as degenerates and female sexuality as decadence, the prostitutes are “poor girls earning a living” (39) rather than “*damned souls*” (38). Similarly, the atmosphere in the whorehouse of “luxure, calme et volupté” (40)<sup>4</sup> derives not from their decadent sexuality, but from their “well-ordered habitation”, “intellectual, artistic or political [...] pursuits”, engagement as “suffragists” in pursuit of “Votes for Women” (39), and female homosociality:

it was a wholly female world within Ma Nelson's door. [...] Life within those walls was governed by a sweet and loving reason. I never saw a single blow exchanged between any of the sisterhood who reared me, nor heard a cross word or a voice raised in anger.

Reared by “these kind women [as] the common daughter of half-a-dozen mothers” (21), she exists beyond the Oedipal family. Indeed, when the whorehouse closes down, the prostitutes draw on their studies - typing, music, office work, accounts – in order to realise new careers: an agency for office work, a boarding house, a musical act at the music hall. Ironically, therefore, it is the prostitutes who “end up doing these 'new women' jobs” (Carter in Katsavos 1994: 13). Hence once again Carter's materialist emphasis on the role of both the material context and economic relations in her formulation of postmodern agency.

The dark side of carnival, once more, and the limitations of female grotesque “stunting” as inherently liberatory strategies are developed in Fevvers' role as the Angel of Death in Mme Schreck's “museum of woman monsters.” As an incarceration of “the damned”, or “prodigies of nature” (59), the “museum” represents Foucault's depiction of the panoptical brothel as the containment and commodification

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<sup>4</sup> Baudelaire (1994 [1957]) “L'Invitation au Voyage”, in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Paris: Grands Textes Classiques.

of potentially unruly identities and sexualities. Indeed, while effecting a reversal of gendered discourses, in particular the binary natural/unnatural, the museum's exploitation of female "freaks" reveals the problematics of Russo's utopian theorisation of the inherently subversive nature of female "stunts". Thus, while Fevvers claims that the women merely represent the flexibility of the human form, it is the male viewers "who hire the use of the idea of us" (70) who reveal themselves unnatural, or "troubled in their souls" (57), "for there was no terror in the house our customers did not bring with them" (62). However, as indicated by the name "Schreck" (terror), the museum comprises also a parody of Gothic narrative conventions, including its gendered roles. While the external building was "a gloomy pile [...] with a melancholy garden [...] blackened by the London soot [...] and inner shutters tightly barred", the interior is located in a dank, cellar converted into a crypt "known as 'Down Below', or else 'The Abyss'" (61). As Robinson argues, therefore, the crypt comprises "a fantastical geography of the female body, according to the masculine perspective. [...] It also suggests the mixture of horror and desire that characterises male constructions of the female body within Western discursive traditions" (1991: 128-9). As a combination of feminist postmodernism and feminist materialism, the novel juxtaposes elaborate Gothic conventions with bald statements concerning the economics of prostitution, revealing both the role of narrative conventions as well as the material context and economic relations in the (male) production of femininity. It is Mme Schreck, however, in the role of "Lady MacBeth" or "Virgil in Hell" (62), equipped with a black mantle and a "voice like the wind in graveyards" (58), who is paradigmatic of this parody of Gothicism, recalling "some kind of wicked puppet that pulled its own strings" (58). Hence the manservant's description of her uncanny demise, which is undercut by Lizzie's acknowledgement of its recourse to Gothic narrative conventions, "'That Toussaint! [...] He's a lovely way with words'" (85). Like the other characters, therefore, Mme Schreck becomes the very thing she performed:

It came to me that there was nothing left inside the clothes and, perhaps, there never had been anything inside her clothes but a set of dry bones agitated only by the power of an infernal will and a voice that had been no more than an exhalation of air. (84)

Indeed, Mme Schreck is reminiscent of a female type from Carter's early novels: firstly, the puppet or doll employed to demonstrate the reification of women into symbols and, secondly, the women who collude with patriarchy in the exploitation of other women for commodification. Similarly, Fevvers encounters three versions of the "mad scientist" figure that is characteristic of Carter's fiction - (metaphysical) scientist, toy-maker, and shaman - who are, firstly, also cast as "Gothic villains" (Neumeier 1996: 149) and, secondly, examples of the male commodification of woman. Indeed, their recourse to scientific theories, toys, *objets d'art*, and mythology recalls the above imagery of the reification of woman, particularly as erotic artefact. Representative of the traditional fetishistic male gaze, their objectification of the female acrobat comprises "the fantasy of controlling spectatorship, the fantasy of artistic transcendence and freedom signified by the flight upwards and the defiance of gravity, and the fantasy of femininity which defies the limits of the body, especially the female body" (Russo 1994: 44). Indeed, the novel's male viewers - Mr Rosencreutz and the Grand Duke - endeavour to appropriate - through accession to Fevvers' virginity - the symbolism of her wings. Hence the novel reinforces, once more, the underside of female spectacle.

The novel's dual perspective on the above themes equally informs its depiction, finally, of the circus, which simultaneously comprises a locus of positive transformation and a male-dominated arena for the exploitation of female spectacle. As outlined above, drawing on "the circus [as] an arena in which bodies and identities are, in the most literal sense, technologically achieved" (Fernihough 1997: 89), Fevvers represents the aerialist's parodic re-performance of femininity, which albeit compromised by the male viewer is associated nevertheless through its self-production with postmodern agency. Hence it enables a reinforcement of Fevvers' multifarious roles: as the female grotesque; the comic embodiment of Mae West; and a parodic version of de Sade's affirmative woman, Juliette.

Indeed, as indicated by the interspersal of Fevvers' encounter with Mignon and Mignon's life-story, the circus juxtaposes the Mae West/Juliette figure (Fevvers) with that of the virtuous victim model embodied by Marilyn Monroe/Justine (Mignon), revealing the inadequacy of both as positions from which to resist male oppression. Recalling Carter's description of her use of European intertexts as a kind of magic

realism - hence "a folklore of the intelligentsia" (Carter in Haffenden 1985: 81) - Mignon is paradigmatic in the novel of, firstly, the orphaned state of post-war Europe (Carter in Haffenden: 1985) and, secondly, woman's construction by Western aesthetic representation. Reflecting Carter's criticism of de Sade's Justine and the Monroe model (1993b), Mignon's oppression, abuse and manipulation by sadistic men reveal the inadequacy of a position of resistance which relies on purity and innocence - hence virtuous suffering - and the hope of a generous, higher authority - or, "a sympathetic audience" (Jordan 1992: 120). On another level, Mignon emerges from Goethe's representation of the Italian child-woman acrobat in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship and Travels* (1795), who dies as a result of her unrequited love for her master, following his purchase of her as a servant from a circus troop. As Steedman (1992) indicates, post-Goethe representations of Mignon evince anger at the child-woman's treatment and a consequent desire to find her a "home". This longing for a home(land) is reflected in her appearance in Beethoven, Schuman and Liszt, and Schubert's musical settings of Goethe's poem "Kennst du das Land?", which Mignon sings in the tigers' cage. Mignon re-emerged in every artistic form in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including Carter's direct source Allan Berg's opera *Wozzeck* (1925), becoming a trope for both sympathetic innocence and the *fin-de-siècle* (erotic) obsession with child-figures and juvenile *artistes*.

Thus, daughter to the historical wife-murderer Wozzeck and his numerous literary representations,<sup>5</sup> Carter's Mignon "had the febrile gaiety of a being without a past, without a present [...] without memory or history, only because her past was too bleak to think of and her future too terrible to contemplate" (139). Mignon's "resemblance to a spectre" (133) or "any young girl" (137) render her an apt impersonator of the dead. Hence she is the manifestation of another example of pliant femininity and female spectacle controlled by a "male scientist" figure, or Herr M the photography obsessionalist and significantly a "scientist *manqué*" (133). Subsequently adopted by the Ape-Man, "who took her on solely in order to abuse her" (140), her experience as the physically and sexually abused object of the circus men indicates the limitations of the Justine/Monroe model. Indeed, emphatically childlike in both her physical appearance and her mental reactions, her "pale, undernourished, unhealthy prettiness"

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<sup>5</sup> E.g. Georg Büchner's play *Woyzeck* (1988 [1836]).

(126), silence, and transparent voice parody also the *fin-de-siècle* eroticisation of the woman-child figure. Thus, Mignon's story indicates that in this novel the circus functions, ultimately, as a surrogate panopticon (Gass 1994) or "a debased version of carnival" (Fernihough 1997: 104), a reinforcement of the hierarchical, patriarchal order in which women are rendered "dumb beasts" through their production as female spectacle. This is reinforced by Colonel K, circus impresario and representative of "the living image of the entrepreneur" (147), whose manipulation of the circus women's publicity, significantly including Fevvers as a clockwork toy, demonstrates the ultimately male production of woman as spectacle.

Nevertheless, the circus also harbours the germs of a number of positive transformations, motivated by the transformative power of transcendent love, which are fully realised, as the novel moves to its close, in the final carnival space of Siberia. This appears, firstly, in the Princess and Mignon's utopian lesbian relationship; secondly, in the deconstruction of the Strong Man's bestial masculinity; thirdly, the (de)(re)construction of Walser's masculine rationality; and, finally, in Fevvers' rejection of profit in favour of love. Indeed, the most significant, perhaps, is the further (de)(re)construction of Walser's masculinity through the effects of Fevvers' status as female grotesque and his vertiginous experience of erotic love, which reverses the conventional representation of desire for the grotesque/freak figure as a slip towards degeneracy (Martin 1999). However, while Martin (1999) criticises both Carter and Winterson's female grotesques for their humiliation and creation of pliant male characters, and Carter's in particular for what she perceives to be its reversal of the gendered dichotomy of dominance and subordination, the couple represent rather a romantic, equal meeting at the turn of the new century. Indeed, for Siegel (1991), furthermore, Walser embodies a new reading of the male masochist, a further reversal of Victorian gender mythology. This reading opposes the conventional interpretation of male masochism by Freudian psychoanalysis and Victorian literature, which "have worked together to contain his rebellion within a conservative power structure" (Siegel 1991: 2). Drawing instead on the tradition of female Troubadours and courtly love as well as feminist postmodern fiction's interest in sadomasochism, the male masochist represents "a model of transgression, whose willing inversion of patriarchal values, including a jubilant offering up of the self, could unsettle the dominant discourse on masculinity" (2). Thus, while Walser comprises the "male masochist as

the New Woman's knight and his own savior in the battle against patriarchy" (10), Fevvers the "dominatrix [and] indescribable body always escaping containment in Victorian/Freudian language" (13), the novel's highly intertextual woman-on-top ending releases both gender and masochism from its discursive production.

Thus, in Carter's final scenario, while Walser embodies the novel's most radical transformation, the Siberian landscape that Fevvers abhors acts as a fantastic locale for her own (de)(re)construction. In particular it fosters an acknowledgement of the role of the reader/viewer in the success of gender performance as well as the necessity of risking one's singularity in the pursuit of love. Thus, recalling the other circus performers' tendency to become what they perform, Lizzie remonstrates with Fevvers for conflating her sense of selfhood with that of her commercialised self-production, "you've been acting more and more like *yourself* [...] like your own publicity [...] Ever the golden-hearted Cockney who don't stand on ceremony" (197-8). However, while for Lizzie, Fevvers' potential postmodern autonomy and a-historicism are inherently liberatory, for Fevvers, existence beyond *all* socio-discursive construction, including human relations, is unrealisable. Thus, "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 breaths. [...] Seized with such anguish of the void that surrounds us, she could have wept" (280). Instead, Fevvers' physical and psychological deterioration increases in proportion to the loss of her audience or admiring reflection and her progressive loss of self-confidence in her own self-performance. However, demonstrating the inevitable refraction of all interpretations through cultural contexts, rather than disclosing an essentialist femininity or authenticity, Fevvers' deterioration, involving the removal of one layer of her performed appearance, merely discloses yet another - her literalisation of the Cockney sparrow:

Although, from a distance, she could still pass for a blonde, there was a good inch of brown at the roots of Fevvers' hair and brown was showing in her feathers, too, because she was moulting. [...] every day the tropic bird looked more and more like the London sparrow as which it had started out in life, as if a spell were unravelling. (271)

Deprived of an audience since the circus members become accustomed to the sight of her - now shabby - wings and bereft of Walser, Fevvers "The Feathered Frump" (276) loses her self-confidence, or "the silent demand to be *looked* at that had once made her stand out" (277). As Lizzie summarises, "You're fading away, as if it was only always the discipline of the audience that kept you in trim" (280). In direct contrast with the Shaman's practised performance of "the supreme form of the confidence trick", Fevvers' faith in her self-performance, which had maintained her singularity, is diminished also by her subjection to a series of symbolic losses. Firstly, one of the wings which had been her enigmatic emblem is broken; secondly, the train crash destroys Lizzie's magic clock and handbag; thirdly, the loss of her magic sword to the Grand Duke diminishes "that sense of her own magnificence which had previously sustained her own trajectory" (273). And, finally, Fevvers' "heart has been a little broken" (234).

Indeed, it is the admiring reflection of Fevvers' newly beloved and currently lost Walser, "who kept the whole story of the old Fevvers in his notebooks" (273), that Fevvers requires to maintain her appearance and her singularity. Hence the novel's metafictional engagement in the conventions of the romance genre and further manifestation of the (humanist) transformative power of love, for Walser's face is presented as "that face of a beloved face known long-ago, and lost [...] that face which I have always loved before I ever saw it [...] the vague, imaginary face of desire" (204). Lizzie discloses both the gendered roles of the conventional romance, "[...] True lovers' reunions always end in marriage [...]. The nature of this custom is a 'happy ending'" (280-1), and the necessary gamble with one's "unique 'me-ness'" (282) in love, which inevitably involves the impact of the gaze of the other in self-performance; hence the risk of "turning from a freak into a woman" (283), or from a feminist postmodern agent to a symbolic myth of woman. Nevertheless, Fevvers' endeavour to pursue love as opposed to economic profit, the appearance of her lucky violets in the snow, as well as the immanent magic cusp of the new year are symbolic of both Fevvers and Walser's positive transformations. Thus, initially perceiving Fevvers as another hallucinatory image, which risks congealing her as myth and causing "the worst crisis of her life: 'Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?'" (290), his shamanist experiences allow Walser to



relate to Fevvers in a way that does not compromise her self-production: "What is your name? Have you a soul? Can you love?" he demanded" (291).

Hence the transformation of Walser's masculinity derives from a willing engagement in emotional experience, or love, which incurs "fear of death of the beloved, of the loss of the beloved, of the loss of love" (292-3). Restored to her previous gigantism, Fevvers embarks with Walser on yet another narrative performance, "That's the way to begin the interview!" [...] 'Get out your pencil and we'll begin!'" (291). As Fevvers' ideal gender-reader, or "reconstructed reader" (Boehm 1995: 45), Walser's initially patriarchal attempt to inscribe their experiences are reconstructed yet again at the turn of midnight, "Jack an ever adventurous boy, ran away with the circus for the sake of a bottle blonde" (294), revealing that "Carter's 'masculine' reader must abandon the androcentric world view and learn to interpret the feminist text anew" (Boehm 1995: 47). Furthermore, their ultimate sexual (re)union, including Fevvers' acknowledgement at having tricked Walser into believing her virginity through the "confidence" of her self-performance/narration, "self-consciously violates the one happy female fate patriarchal imagination has traditionally envisioned" (Blodgett 1994: 54). However, while the novel's ending is suggestive of another series of performances, its adherence to the transformative power of love suggests that "There comes a point [...] when the performance has to end [...]. There is real experience to be had in the world outside the circus" (Gamble 1997: 166).

Carter's examination of the "enigmas" of the feminist postmodern fantastic, including a simultaneous investment in and demonstration of the limitations of spectacle and self-performance/production as ways of resignifying, derives from her joint commitment to postmodern feminism *and* socialist (materialist) feminism. In this sense, she embodies a current trend, which seeks to rearticulate, far more radically than Wittig, postmodern notions of construction and performativity and materialism's central premise that the production of a signifying system is a material activity with attendant material effects. Some of the most thoroughgoing criticisms of Butler et al have come from feminist materialist quarters, challenging the undertheorised role of other individuals, the material context, and economic relations in identity construction and revalidating, at some level, the material effects of "experience" and "gender". Conversely, aspects of postmodernism have enabled an extension of materialism

beyond Marxian mechanical materialism. Indeed, by making economic relations a factor in the (male) production of femininity – and hence a potential threat to feminist postmodern agency – Carter recontextualises feminist materialism within a feminist postmodern frame. The current dialogue and mutual exchange between feminist postmodernism and materialist feminism, embodied, in one key instance, in Carter's work, represents one of the most successful endeavours to reformulate feminism's relationship to modernism and postmodernism. This position enables Carter to critique the construction of gender while simultaneously examining its role in the constitution of subjectivity as well as the material effects of that production.

## Conclusion

This thesis has sought to demonstrate that at both a theoretical and a literary level “feminist postmodernism” comprises a range of contradictory and shifting standpoints, which are nevertheless linked by their adherence, at some level, to postmodernism's philosophical and aesthetic concepts. In one sense, these positions within “feminist postmodernism” may be distinguished by their comparative relationship to the modernism/postmodernism debate, some aligning themselves entirely with postmodernism and others having recourse, in varying degrees, to the tenets of modernism. The thesis has eschewed, therefore, the search for a “pure” paradigm in favour of a broad, flexible framework, which rather than castigating theorists and writers who evince certain modernist tendencies, emphasises instead their fruitful engagement in feminism's more complex relationship to modernism/postmodernism. This is justified, I believe, by the positions taken by the range of postmodern feminist theorists discussed in “Chapter 1. Feminist Postmodernism”, and further reinforced by the work of the individual authors examined in subsequent chapters.

Of the four authors examined, Hélène Cixous is, in some respects, the most problematic, occupying a contentious and unresolved position within postmodernism that is much debated and disputed among feminist postmodern theorists. However, firstly, even those feminist postmodern theorists who would exclude Cixous from the feminist postmodern camp on account of her modernist tendencies are obliged to acknowledge her contribution to the wider field of feminist postmodernism. Secondly, as outlined above, it is not my aim to establish rigid categories. As one of the principal practitioners of *écriture féminine*, Cixous' position is, indeed, unique, comprising, on the one hand, an unparalleled example of poststructuralism's literary deconstruction of (gendered) binaries and the erasure of meaning, reality, identity and the author by the *scriptible* text. On the other hand, however, the novels reflect her theoretical conflation of postmodernism's shifting, fluid identities and sexualities with a concept of the essentialist, primordial female body. Furthermore, her depiction of the psychic coalescence of the masculine and the feminine is reminiscent of Freud's heterosexualisation of bisexuality through its interpretation as two heterosexual, albeit masculine and feminine, desires within a single psyche. Monique Wittig occupies a

similarly contentious position within feminist postmodern theory, which continually draws on her contribution to the feminist postmodern field while rejecting the modernist elements espoused, mainly, by her theoretical writings. She emerges as what we might describe as a “materialist deconstructionist”: combining a commitment to the postmodern project of gender deconstruction, on the one hand, with an explicit investment in the Enlightenment's social contract and sovereign subjectivity, on the other, as well as a modernist postulation of lesbianism as a transcendent category. This split is reflected, in a diluted form, in the novels themselves, which when seen in the context of Wittig's theory may be interpreted to support both her belief in modernist universals and the practice of postmodern deconstructionism. Read independently, however, or within the literary context of the (*nouveau*) *nouveau roman*, the novels, in particular *Le Corps lesbien*, present paradigmatic examples of the palimpsest and the radical fragmentation of sexual identities. The French authors, therefore, albeit occupying different and even opposing positions, derive nevertheless from a recognisably French tradition: the French literary and philosophical avant-garde's production of both the *scriptible* text and the (*nouveau*) *nouveau roman*. Their poststructuralist legacy, however, is redeployed according to their individual interpretation of further schools of French feminist thought along with their allegiance to opposite tendencies in philosophical or historical materialism and “feminine writing”.

While she is recognised as one of the most well-known British feminist postmodern writers, Jeanette Winterson's novels nevertheless retain an adherence to certain modernist concepts. Thus, in key respects, the fiction effects a successful deconstruction of unified subjectivity and the inscription of fluid sexed, gendered, and sexual identities. However, it subscribes also to a number of specifically modernist themes and attitudes: the transformative power and transcendentalism of love; the Romantic use of complex doubling, which assumes a unity of identity above its fragmentation; the autonomy of art; the universal consciousness of Eastern philosophy; and a celebration of the feminine as a signifier for fluidity. Indeed, despite her primarily postmodern interests, Winterson's characteristic adherence to Art's transcendentalism, to Romanticism, and the recent coalition of Eastern philosophy with new age postmodernism, provide her with universalising realms or theories which unify the characters' otherwise postmodern fragmentation. Equally

positioned as one of the most well-known British feminist postmodern novelists, Carter's fictions nevertheless espouse a similar, albeit decidedly less Romantic, adherence to the transformative power of transcendent love as well as a consistent combination of postmodern feminism with socialist feminist materialism. This perspective enables Carter to simultaneously emphasise the textual, performative nature of "lived" experience, identity, and gender, while demonstrating the material effects of social oppression on "real" individuals. In spite of their differences, Winterson and Carter derive from decidedly British literary, philosophical, and feminist traditions and, in comparison to the French writers' paradigmatic *scriptible* and highly "material" texts, bring a historical imagination to postmodernism's fragmented, intertextual narrative strategies which seeks, as in the texts examined, to locate fictional settings self-consciously at the founding moments of social modernity.

While acknowledging feminist postmodernism's ambiguous position vis-à-vis postmodernism *and* modernism, I have wanted nevertheless to demonstrate how feminist postmodernism - as opposed to its modernist feminist counterparts - provides the most successful means of challenging gender oppression. Whereas examples of modernist feminism - whether radical feminism, liberal feminism, or Marxist feminism - have recourse, in various guises, to Western philosophy's hierarchical binaries and notions of substantive identity (involving either woman's relegation to the second half of the binary or engagement in a reversal of power), feminist postmodernism seeks, as its primary project, to critique dichotomous thinking and the idea of the unified subject. Instead, understood as discursive or performative constructs, substantive identity and hierarchical binaries - including masculine/feminine; man/woman - are deemed open to re-construction, thereby providing individuals with a greater potentiality in terms of social roles and behaviour. Feminist postmodernism's theorisation of specific conceptual and textual strategies for the subversion of substantive, binary identities through practices of re-signification indicates a locus of feminist postmodern "agency", "resistance", or "choice", which occupies a central role in its critique. Indeed, the question of agency comprised one of the primary motivations of the present inquiry; my aim being to examine - and refute - those feminist arguments which viewed an investment in postmodern concepts - in particular the construction of identity - as necessarily foreclosing the formulation of autonomy. Hence my concern to highlight the

deconstruction of substantive, binary identities and the re-conceptualisation of agency in the works of the four writers examined.

As suggested above, Cixous and Wittig's deconstruction of sex and gender identity is marked by the legacy of a specifically French feminist and philosophical tradition. While Cixous' *scriptible* works either fragment the subject textually or occasion its complete erasure through the inscription of semantic chance, Wittig produces a characteristically linguistic and textual subversion of unified identity and a pluralisation of sexed, gendered and sexual positions. However, albeit for different reasons, both writers are unable to conceptualise feminist postmodern notions of agency. Firstly, whilst exemplifying the deconstruction of (gendered) binary identities, Cixous' writerly prose in fact approximates in its complete erasure of character, subjectivity, narrator and author to those postmodern texts criticised for textualising autonomy out of existence. Secondly, while Wittig's *Les Guérillères* allows glimpses of her theoretical espousal of modernist agency, especially in its endeavour to grant women access to the universal subject, the radicalism of *Le Corps lesbien*'s material and linguistic fragmentation of identity equally precludes the theorisation of autonomy. In comparison with these writers' linguistic, palimtextual strategies, Carter and Winterson challenge substantive, binary identity categories through textual and topographical performativity (using drag performance and carnival) as well as in a thematic deconstruction of the principal male characters. The effect is illuminating rather than wholly destabilising. Hence these writers achieve a simultaneous fragmentation of (gendered) identity and an acquisition of self-knowledge, and thus agency, which presents a model awareness of contradictory subject-positions. At the same time, a conception of postmodern agency and the related subversive re-enactment of identity categories derive in both Winterson and Carter's fiction from the topoi of transvestism, transsexuality, and transgender.

In a second, related respect, the thesis has meant to demonstrate that the combination of feminist postmodern philosophy with the feminist postmodern fantastic comprises one of feminist postmodernism's most powerful modes of literary critique. Hence the thesis has examined the formal, thematic, and philosophical similarities between, above all, the "sister" genres of the Gothic and fantastic and in particular their textual and topographical open-endedness and heterogeneity. My chief interest has been in

the ability of open-ended genres to challenge societal norms through their subversion of realist literature and concomitant rationalist philosophy. As the literary correlative of feminist postmodern philosophy, the feminist postmodern fantastic produces its own distinctive range of subversive re-performance and this is shown both textually and thematically in aerialism, the female grotesque, and the cyborg – which we can read as further manifestations of postmodern agency, resistance, and choice. Furthermore, the thesis demonstrates how the feminist postmodern fantastic redeploys the historical fantastic and Gothicism's symbolic representation of sex/sexuality and transgressive, tabooed or sexist, formulaic depictions of sexed, gendered and sexual identities. Indeed, while exploiting the fantastic/Gothicism's association with sexuality, in particular through the use of such topoi as doubling, incest, necrophilia, and rebirth, it also stages a reversal of its good/bad woman dichotomy, virginal heroines and marriage endings.

The above appears clearly in Cixous' demythologisation of Greek myth: in *Neutre*, the use of the Phoenix as an embodiment of sexual, textual flight and a bisexuality rooted in a coalescence of the masculine and the feminine; in *Promethea*, this character's animal metamorphoses, alignment with numerous multicultural, mythological figures (an expression of her sexual, textual fluidity) and, above all, her feminisation of the Greek myth of Promethea as an expression of her production of erotic and creative fire. However, while this tendency evinces the feminist postmodern fantastic investment in demythologisation, it is also evidence, in Cixous' work, of a simultaneous alliance of postmodern fluidity with the essentialist female body. Similarly, Wittig's feminist postmodern fantastic novels effect a demythologisation of a variety of multicultural mythologies. Examples include her redeployment of mythosymbolism and use of the carnivalesque (revolutionary dancing, laughter, the body-inside-out); the female grotesque and aerialism (winged, grotesque female figures and feminine bodily production); and a parodic re-performance of the male epic and utopian genres. Furthermore, Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien*, in particular, draws on the fantastic's close association with or replacement of sexuality as well as the depiction of sex as symbolic rebirth in order to produce a fluid lesbian sexuality. Winterson's novels exemplify the feminist postmodern fantastic's deployment of aerialism, the cyborg, and the female grotesque as subversive strategies: *The Passion* challenges substantive, binary sex, and gender categories through Villanelle's embodiment of

cyborg and carnivalesque hybridity and destabilisation of the self/other boundary. *Sexing the Cherry* predicates this disruption on a combination of aerialism with the re-performance of traditional fairy tale - the twelve dancing princesses - and the female comic-grotesque. Finally, paradigmatic of the enigmas of the feminist postmodern fantastic, Carter's novels illustrate the limitations and/or problematics of its subversive strategies and topoi (the carnival, the panopticon, aerialism, the female grotesque, female masquerade) revealing both the underside of spectacle and the continual impact of the viewer/reader on the subversive potential and autonomy granted by self-performance/production.

My argument, therefore, has been that the combination of feminist postmodern philosophy with the feminist postmodern fantastic comprises a crucial model (in the broad sense) of current feminist literary critique. If in the age of postmodernity postmodern fiction has taken the place of realism, it is the postmodern fantastic, which continues to produce a defamiliarisation of that "real". Indeed, notwithstanding Cixous, Wittig, and Winterson's continued output of feminist postmodern fantastic texts at the turn of the century, a "new" generation of feminist writers continue to adapt the feminist postmodern fantastic to similar ends. One of the *nouvelle génération de Minuit* (new generation of Minuit writers)<sup>1</sup>, Marie NDiaye's novels, *En Famille* (1990), *La Sorcière* (1996), *Un Temps de Saison* (1994), *Rosie Carpe* (2001), and her singular, minimalist play, *Hilda* (1999a) are continued evidence of the postmodern fantastic's challenge to the construction of identity. *En Famille*'s depiction of the protagonist's exclusion by her family on account of her difference and her subsequent endeavour to conform at all costs reveals a rejection of the commodification of identity by consumerism, media and literature. Set in emphatically banal, lower-middle-class locales in the French provinces, it relates the protagonist's existence in a Kafkaesque, fairy-tale nightmare or overdetermined allegory, including the continual appearance and doubling of her family members, metafictional references to her fictionality, and a range of fantastic sightings.

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<sup>1</sup> The French Minuit publishers are well-known, firstly, for their exclusive selection of experimental writers and, secondly, the limitation of the number of authors annually listed. To be part of the "new generation of Minuit writers" implies to be a part of the new direction in French literature.



Recalling Cixous and Wittig's *scriptible* and material texts (an unusual characteristic in contemporary British fiction), Janice Galloway's novels, *The Trick Is To Keep Breathing* (1999 [1989]) and *Foreign Parts* (1995 [1994]), depict the struggle for meaning in the face of the linguistic and textual fragmentation of identity and sanity and the subject's discursive construction through gender, power, and language. Similarly, Galloway's collections of short stories, *Blood* (1996a [1991]) and *Where You Find It* (1996b), confirm the new direction of postmodern feminist Gothicism. In contradistinction to Carter's highly folkloric, symbolic and fairy-tale Gothic stories, however, the Gothicism of Galloway's "Blood", "Meat", and "Where You Find It", emerges not in the use of conventional topoi, but in the introduction of the sinister and the uncanny into contemporary settings along with the erasure of the inside/outside boundary in relation to ordinary bodily phenomena. Hence the girl's horror in "Blood" at an uncannily endless flow of blood from the molar cavity threatening to engulf all; and in "Where You Find It" the transformation of a kiss into an uncannily dizzying, quasi-vampiric inhalation of the narrator's essence in which the mouth and tongue comprise a huge cavern of butcher's meat.

Similarly, Michèle Roberts' later novels, *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1999a [1987]), *In the Red Kitchen* (1999b [1990]), *Daughters of the House* (1994 [1992]), *Flesh and Blood* (1995 [1994]), *Impossible Saints* (1998 [1997]), *Fair Exchange* (1999c), *The Looking Glass* (2001a [2000]), and the short stories *Playing Sardines* (2001b) variously evoke and develop the forms and themes of the feminist postmodern fantastic. Manifesting a new direction in her fiction towards metafiction, textuality, and fragmentation, *Mrs Noah's* Ark-bound women embody various aspects of women's historical experience, revealing the textuality of woman and women's history. This is further developed by *In the Red Kitchen*, whose five shifting voices - comprising five conflicting accounts of women's history - remain unbound by either an omniscient narrator or the type of protagonist-author of the previous novel. With the exception of the magic realism and paradigmatic female community in *Daughters of the House* and the rewriting of the sexual, theoretical relationship between Wordsworth and Wollstonecraft in *Fair Exchange*, Robert's remaining novels further develop characteristic features of her writing in a magic realist deployment of religion, a rewriting of mytho-religious women saints, and a bawdy, Carter-like romp through history.

In conclusion, therefore, the works of NDiaye, Galloway, and Roberts serve to demonstrate the increasing growth of the feminist postmodern fantastic as a crucial mode of feminist literary critique, which simultaneously recalls the seminal works of Cixous, Wittig, Winterson, and Carter and yet takes the feminist postmodern fantastic in new - as yet uncharted - directions.

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