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Rewriting Women: The Narratives of Angela Carter and Kathy Acker

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Departmental Honors Thesis

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

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Dedication

For the women of my past, present, and future. I hope you see yourselves in the pages that follow. Thank you for being the thing I find myself most impassioned to write about.

And why don't you write?

Write! Writing is for you,

you are for you;

your body is yours, take it.

—Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the significance of contemporary readings of feminist writers Angela Carter and Kathy Acker and traces the genres and theories they utilize: magic realism, pastiche strategy, and postmodern feminism. Through their employment of these aesthetic and expressive strategies, they position themselves kairotically as writers conscious of the context from which they are writing in. This paper explores Acker and Carter's adherence to the arguments of postmodern feminism through their navigation of feminine identity, sexuality, and their critiques of patriarchy and capitalism. For this paper's argument that contemporary audiences should continue to read Acker and Carter, the evidence drawn from their text seeks to highlight the ways in which their concerns continue to be the concerns of contemporary audiences while leaving room for some thematic adaptability.

INTRODUCTION

Writers Kathy Acker and Angela Carter utilize the strategies of the postmodern feminist literary tradition to disrupt oppressive structures of patriarchy and capitalism while amplifying marginalized depictions of feminist sexuality and the gynocentric experience. Both writers use the techniques of magic realism and postmodern pastiche to subvert and challenge the patriarchal centered narratives in the dominant canon of literature. The poststructuralist field of queer theory and the rhetorical concept of kairos provide support for this paper's argument that these two writers should be read in the contemporary, as their position as rereading and rewriting authors allow their works to be continuously adaptable to the needs and wants of their readers.

This paper outlines the significance of contemporary readings of feminist writers Angela Carter and Kathy Acker and traces the genres and theories they utilize: magic realism, pastiche strategy, and postmodern feminism. Through their employment of these aesthetic and expressive strategies, they position themselves kairotically as writers conscious of the context from which they are writing in. These innovative approaches both limit and empower their voices, as they acknowledge the power of rereading and rewriting narratives. As authors, they allow contemporary audiences to continue engaging with their works from new, critical lenses, such as considering queer theory or intersectionality. This paper explores Acker and Carter's adherence to the arguments of postmodern feminism through their navigation of feminine identity, sexuality, and their critiques of patriarchy and capitalism. For this paper's argument that contemporary audiences should continue to read Acker and Carter, the evidence drawn from their text seeks to highlight the ways in which their concerns continue to be the concerns of contemporary audiences while leaving room for some thematic adaptability. By considering queer theory and kairos, contemporary readings of these two authors can best adapt the writings

of Acker and Carter to the contemporary concerns that the pairing could not predictively account for. Their works remain relevant through their acceptance of how narratives and terminology are transient things, which allows their work to be reconsidered in ways they could not conceive. While their narratives shift in impact, the systems which they seek to critique, primarily capitalism and the patriarchy, continue to control dominant conversations in literature. This continuation of oppression on the female spirit, sexuality, and body solidifies that the narratives of these two authors continue to carry cultural significance and relevance for a contemporary audience.

The continual relevance of Acker and Carter receives some acknowledgement from popular and academic audiences. However, with the premature passing of both authors in the 1990s, scholarship on them diminishes significantly as the twenty-first century progresses, with a stark decline around 2005. The focus of scholarship varies, from analysis on their depictions of sexuality, to how their narratives can be reread, or their adherence to postmodern tradition are all topics of scholarly conversation. The consensus of researchers from the last decade is that both writers are feminists that engage in postmodern strategies and are worth reading today. For example, *Tactical Readings: Feminist Postmodernism in the Novels of Kathy Acker and Angela Carter*, written by Nicola Pitchford in 2001, is the last in depth analysis of these two authors in conjunction. Pitchford argues that their narratives are facilitators for feminism to move past its divide surrounding sexuality and obscenity, and this point makes reading them now important as a lot of their more radical arguments have become more mainstream. This paper extends Pitchford's practice of contemporarily considering them in conjunction, for a paired analysis of this length has not been done since Pitchford's. However, with both Acker and Carter receiving posthumous biographies in the last ten years, and both continuing to receive some scholarly

coverage, why has the practice of paired analysis between them been abandoned? There are several older analyses which illuminate the productiveness of considering them together, however it seems history has forgotten the themes which used to tie them together; this gap in scholarship informs the exigency of this paper. While scholarship on Acker and Carter has diminished in the 21st century to a sparse number of articles considering their adherence to the tradition of postmodern feminism and categorizing their representations of sexuality as punk and gothic respectively, this paper seeks to provide an overview of the many lenses that can productively engage with these writers in conjunction with each other.

The sections of this paper seek to highlight the many lenses, theories, and concepts which appear in Acker and Carter's work. As a contemporary analysis, the sections acknowledge the era-specific conversations surrounding Acker and Carter's work while also highlighting contemporary interests relevant to reading their work.. This paper outlines the continuously kairotic conversations that Acker and Carter's narratives facilitate as some of their criticism remains relevant to a contemporary audience. Considering a multitude of topics present in the work of Acker and Carter is essential to conducting a contemporary reading, for "The available arguments on a given issue change over time because the people who are interested in the issue change—their minds, their beliefs, their ages, their locations, their communities, and myriad other things" (Crowley and Hawhee 47). The kairotic situation from which Acker and Carter write shifts throughout their careers and has continued to evolve since their deaths. Reading their texts kairotically means engaging with their themes and ideas in a way which considers the context of the contemporary. Their texts emerge from the historical and material conditions from which they write, but they continue to speak to current conditions such as the permeation of gender roles, the policing of feminine sexuality, and the backsliding of feminism in the last thirty

years. While many of the conditions they critique still exist today, the contemporary reader faces additional concerns, such as intersectional and queer voices needing expression. Contemporary readings of their works introduce considerations Acker and Carter would not have been able to predictively consider with accuracy, leading the pair to place the work of making meaning from their texts in the hands of the reader. In order to not misrepresent their thematic arguments and the intentions behind their writing, it must be acknowledged that the situational kairos in which these two authors were writing has shifted leading up to this contemporary reading. The “ever-changing arguments” relating to the works of these two authors all bear their own situational significance. Despite shifts in kairos, themes of Acker and Carter’s texts continue to hold relevance and embody significant means of thinking about feminine identity, sexuality, and the systems which constrain them.

Acker and Carter’s position as postmodernists allows them to write while being conscious of the ways in which knowledge and how to attain it are constantly shifting. Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* argues the problematic nature of viewing rationalism and empiricism as a totalizing binary where reason alone can provide knowledge on a subject. The dominant canon and metanarratives favor the masculine application of rationalism that derives knowledge from its application of male reasoning onto the topics of female identity and sexuality; this male centric point of view is known as androcentrism: “the mechanism of injustice which enables cultural prejudice against femininity; it is the mythology that functions in dominant discourse to devalue unmasculine traits, values, ways of being and ways of knowing in order to preserve masculine power” (Devorah). Postmodern feminist writers take on a gynocentric perspective, as they present perceptions of self, society, and sexuality from a feminine point of view. While this contemporary reading takes place outside of the postmodern

era, the movement facilitates the way Acker and Carter craft and situate their narratives. The postmodern era, defined by the questioning of assumed truths posed by dominant narratives, evades simplistic definitions. French philosopher and literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard navigates the challenge of defining the term in *The Postmodern Condition*. He is reluctant to provide a straightforward definition, but for convenience's sake and by "Simplifying to the extreme, [he] define[s] *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives... To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past has relied on it" (Lyotard XXIV). This is the fundamental principle of postmodernism and it leaves much to interpretation and application for clearer understanding. As feminist authors seeking to present historically oppressed narratives of female experience, postmodernism allows Acker and Carter to address the failures of the dominant narratives. This shift in agency that postmodernism facilitates provides obscured narratives with the authority to contribute to the literary canon, as "Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (Lyotard XXV). The subjectivity and diversity of experience and identity which postmodernism facilitates through the abandonment of metanarratives introduces an uncomfortable confrontation between readers and displays of an empowered other. Arguably, this could explain the reasoning behind scholars deeming the work of Acker and Carter pornographic, "a bit extreme" (Day 1), and "full-frontal assaults" (Gaiman). The traumatic scenes which surface in Acker and Carter's narratives reflect the traumatic situations from which they are writing with raw intensity. The discomfort of an audience engaging with these texts gives their works a clear connection to the postmodern era and the goals of its subversion of metanarratives that evokes a sense of unfamiliarity from the

audience. While the pair diverge at their stylistic strategies and craft, they converge in their commitment to dismantling oppressive structures of dominant narratives through their candid portrayal of female experience, even if this means taking on traumatic or graphic events.

Postmodern Feminism.

Applying the theory of postmodernism to feminism calls upon the problematic nature of the wave model's approach to feminism and the assumption that experiences of womanhood are universal. Postmodern feminism seeks to deconstruct the metanarrative of the white, financially well off, cisgender, straight woman and explore the multitudes of femininity and female experience. The woman's gender still bears significance in understanding her experiences with herself and the world, but it cannot be the only thing considered when trying to understand her, for "While some women share some common interests and face some common enemies, such commonalities are by no means universal; rather, they are interlaced with differences even with conflicts" (Fraser and Nicholson 391). Postmodern feminism positions gender within a more complex social context which sees the woman as more than her physical form and sex. By removing the concentration from biological universalism, "Postmodern-feminist theory... would replace unitary notions of 'woman' and feminine gender identity' with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among others" (Fraser and Nicholson 391). This shift in perspective facilitates a deeper and more explorative understanding of femininity. By considering what influences expressions of femininity, such as class, race, sexuality, and trauma, postmodern feminism eradicates the assumption that a universal woman exists and that she is easily definable. Postmodern feminism calls for the rejection of the wave model of feminist theory, citing its inability to transcend the gender binary

that positions women at a disadvantage. It offers a completely subjective form of feminism meant to reflect the endlessly subjective nature of femininity. Postmodern feminists such as Beauvoir, Cixous, and Irigaray embrace the symbolic power of feminine sexuality, using the woman's genitalia and sexual experiences as metaphors within their argument. They cite the woman's sex as containing multitudes in its form and capabilities which situates postmodernism as a necessary strategy to address the woman's natural multitudes.

In her text *The Second Sex*, French feminist writer and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir argues that the topic of woman and femininity is something which must be continuously explored, for "If we accept, even temporarily, that there are women on the earth, we have to ask: What is a woman?" (Beauvoir 25). The existence of women constitutes the necessity to explore the concept of femininity, the woman, and her sexuality. Beauvoir does not suggest that there will be a universal conclusion to draw or a singular gynocentric solution, but the lack of a singular answer does not mean the question should be ignored. While masculine-centered reasoning pursues a singular truth, Beauvoir confronts the failures of androcentrism's obsession with singularity by asserting that "Feminine arousal can reach an intensity unknown by man" (Beauvoir 464). Masculine logic fails to capture the multitudes of reality concerning feminine identity and sexuality. Beauvoir sees it as the postmodern feminists' responsibility to pursue the unanswerable question of what it means to be a woman and reminds her readers that the lack of a singular answer does not diminish the significance of the question. She encourages the practice of writing for this exploration, as it allows the individual woman to record her perspectives and experiences for the female reader.

Hélène Cixous' text, "The Laugh of the Medusa" continues this exploration of postmodern feminism and its relationship with literature and sexuality. Cixous argues to

positively position women's differences from man, referring to this as a form of bisexuality which allows for the authority of the phallic monosexuality of Freud to be constructively challenged (Cixous 883-884). The reclaiming of feminine sexuality outside of Freudian worship of the one true phallus allows for women theorists to feel their own genitalia as representations of themselves and their struggles. Cixous utilizes the abundance of pleasure capable through female sexuality, or feminine *jouissance* (Kristeva), to metaphorically depict the significance of postmodern feminism in comparison to its predecessors. Comparing women's continuous efforts towards female liberation to the woman's ability to repeatedly orgasm, Cixous argues that "Her libido will produce far more radical effects of political and social change than some might like to think. Because she arrives, vibrant, over and over again, we are at the beginning of a new history, or rather of a process of becoming in which several histories intersect with one another" (Cixous 882). The woman's ability to engage with her sexuality in greater duration and intensity than man invigorates her ability to continue on the path of progress. There cannot be one, complete all-encompassing feminism— this would honor the language of the phallus. Women must work continuously, arriving at new possibilities, again and again.

Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which is Not One* explores the concept of feminine sexuality removed from the phallogocentric understanding of woman's genitalia and sexuality as a passive thing. Irigaray appropriates the significance given to the phallus' singularity to argue that the woman's lack of a singular sex organ implies that the multitude makes her greater. "Woman 'touches herself' all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two— not divisible into one(s)— that caress each other" (Irigaray 24). Taking this division of genitalia to represent the social situation of the woman, "*She is neither one nor two*. Rigorously speaking, she cannot

be identified either as one person, or as two. She resists all adequate definitions. Further, she has no 'proper' name. And her sexual organ, which is not *one* organ, is counted as *none*. The negative, the underside, the reverse of the only visible and morphologically designatable organ... the penis" (Irigaray 26). The female's genitalia evades simplistic understanding and definition, resulting in man's language remaining ignorant of it. The challenge to define feminine sexuality is marked by societal and personal barriers. In a masculine society that champions domination of a singular entity, whether through colonization, political achievement, or sexual penetration, the desire for a binary where one singular truth and champions over another is the main desire of hegemonic society. Acknowledging the way that the phallus shapes societal conventions and interactions positions female sexuality as worthy of exploration and calls limiting, proscriptive systems into question.

Beauvoir's argument that the question of femininity is important to explore despite it lacking a singular, phallic and androcentric answer facilitates the ways in which Irigaray and Cixous symbolically use the woman's genitalia as metaphors for the woman's multiplicity. The touching vulva and repeating female orgasm support postmodern feminism's goal to present the female mind and body as things that exist in abundance. These metaphoric employments of the woman's body facilitate female writers of the postmodern era and beyond to take up the challenge of symbolically portraying their own experiences and sexuality through the creation of literature. The female creative utilizes her trauma, alienation from her soul, and the commodification of her body as creative inspirations that allow her to record productive narratives concerning her pursuit for candid, gynocentric self-expression. The language and strategies of Beauvoir, Irigaray, and Cixous honor the efforts of postmodern feminism's goal to empower women in their own construction of responses to the question of "What is a woman?"

The multitude of responses to this question is clear in the multitude of feminist sects that follow postmodern feminism. While there are numerous concentrations of feminism that emerge after the postmodern feminist tradition, this paper employs postmodern feminism as a facilitator of these newer sects due to its abandonment of the wave model and its embracing of subjectivity. While this paper could be productively written while only considering cultural feminism, ecofeminism, lesbian feminism, mainstream feminism, Marxist feminism, or radical feminism, adherence to postmodern feminist conceptual terrain facilitates the potential for indirectly considering each of these. Additionally, considering Acker and Carter through their contextual situation within the era of postmodern feminism best represents their authorial inspirations and intentions. Writing as women allows Acker and Carter to demonstrate the importance of creating female narratives and gynocentric mythology. Cixous argues in favor of this practice, stating that by writing, a woman gives herself agency and authority over herself (875). Writing allows women to concretely situate themselves within a larger historical and literary context, arguing that they too deserve consideration.

Through the acquisition of their own place within the literary sphere, postmodern feminists seek to shift the power dynamics that constrain them. While postmodern feminists do not see gender and the patriarchy as the only influences on women, they acknowledge the importance of considering these structures, when other theories of social change, including classical Marxism, completely ignore the need to consider criticisms of gender (Ebert 888). By illuminating and critiquing the influences of the patriarchy on sexuality, capitalism, and earlier forms of social theory, postmodern feminism works to create theory untainted by its influence. Postmodern feminism skeptically considers the normalcy of power dynamics and existing theories, and this view is essential to the postmodern thinker, as “Disbelief is also a figure for

reading, responding, and interpreting— it is a crucial aspect of the infamous postmodern condition” (Gustar 342). The postmodern tradition values the power of individual experience and reason. This perspective, while emerging from the tradition of Western individualism, allows for an intersectional understanding of things such as identity, sexuality, and systems of power. It is important for those who engage with postmodern works to remember the cornerstone principles of postmodernism: skepticism, rejection of hegemony, and the failures of androcentrism. To remain effective, postmodern feminism cannot be appropriated to validate one interpretation over another, and it must remain conscious of the ways in which any one interpretation of femininity will inevitably differ from another.

Angela Carter and Kathy Acker.

Both Angela Carter and Kathy Acker situate themselves as significant writers of the postmodern feminist era through their strategic use of magic realism and the pastiche; they demonstrate the potential for writers to successfully shift existing, dominant narratives into productive and previously side-lined perspectives through fictitious stories that draw on issues in reality. Reading these two authors in conjunction offers a demonstration of how different applications of strategies in symbolism and genre still facilitate postmodern feminist writers giving their own understandings of female identity and sexuality.

Born in 1940, British writer Angela Carter serves as the elder member of this postmodern feminist pairing. In her lifetime, she wrote ten novels and four collections of short stories, before her untimely death in 1992 at the age of fifty-one. Many of her works confront existing pieces of fiction; this paper considers two of her most influential works: her exploration of the social fictional character of the Winged Woman that emerges during industrialization in her text *Nights*

at the Circus and her collection of rewritten folklore, *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales*.

Considering these two texts allows this paper to depict the themes present in Carter's most popular texts while also examining the ways in which she writes a multitude of female characters with different feminine experiences. To address the necessity for intersectionality in contemporary feminism, Carter's collection of fairy tales offers the most diverse range of perspectives, as the collection rewrites mythology from across the world, adapting it to feminist perspectives from a variety of cultures.

Through her exploration of existing themes and characters, Carter positions herself as a rereading and rewriting author that considers her texts as living things, and this allows her to question the threads of society and their appearances in fiction. By rewriting existing narratives, she seeks to engage in the critical process of analyzing cultural artifacts and contributing her perspective into the canon of fictitious literature. She gives her audience permission to reread and rework her narratives sharing her opinion that "Once I've finished a piece of work, it doesn't belong to me anymore but to the person who reads it, who will bring their own history and experience of the world to bear on it when doing so and will rewrite it to suit themselves. A piece of fiction is never static" (British Council). She sees her works as living, breathing things that are shaped by an upbringing on the part of the reader. Her willingness for audiences to manipulate her texts and bend them to their will allows her to position her fiction as works that will always maintain relevance and be continuously adaptable to the needs and desires of readers. An analysis of Roland Barthes' post structuralist argument of "The Death of the Author" extends too far beyond the scope of this paper, but it is critical to acknowledge that both Carter and Acker place responsibility on their readers to do the work of making meaning from their texts.

Embracing ambiguity in her texts and her life, native New Yorker Kathy Acker was born in 1947 (the date is disputed). Throughout her lifetime, she wrote approximately twenty novels, several collections of short stories and manuscripts, and created various media art projects. Like Carter, she passed away prematurely in 1997, at the age of fifty. Her abundance of works is rich in theme and form: from experimental spoken word recordings to existential art pieces, she embodies the punk movement of the late 20th century. Acker's writing is highly contextual and autobiographical fiction, drawing from her lived experiences and the society which surrounds her. In some instances, she plagiarizes existing, male-written narratives. For this paper, analysis considers *Empire of the Senseless*, her science fiction interpretation of a world shaped by Ronald Reagan's presidency, which thrusts America into an alternative but strikingly similar reality; consideration is also given to *My Mother: Demonology*, which loosely retells the relationship between French poet Colette Peignot and French philosopher Georges Bataille, while also containing a substantial *Wuthering Heights* subplot. Scholars widely regard *Empire of the Senseless* as a turning point in Acker's career, where her pastiche strategies become less concrete and more imaginative and symbolic. *My Mother: Demonology* depicts Acker's autofictional narrative flare and gives insight into her work grappling with her attempts to understand her own femininity. While these texts are not Acker's most popular works, they offer this paper insight into her shifting strategies as a writer and her work on deconstructing the narrative form and engaging with the topics of this paper.

Acker sees this act of retelling existing narratives as essential to her writing process and her identity as a writer, sharing that "So the quality of making or creation in me that comes out—whatever it is in me has to do with making—is based on a reactive rather than an active principle. I don't see a blank page when I'm writing. Ever" (McCaffery 91). She directly draws

inspiration from the lives and works of those who have influenced her, both positively and negatively. While she does not directly give her audience the permission to reread her fiction in the way Carter does, she sets herself up in the chain of self-contextualization through literary expression and canon appropriation which encourages readers to do so as well. Just as Acker knows she is never looking at a blank page when she begins writing, she expects her audience to do the same with her works, passively adapting existing information and manipulating it to their own benefit.

The decline of scholarship within the field of literature and women's studies on Acker and Carter is not to say that their work has been forgotten. From Disney princesses without knights in shining armor to her works being adapted for film, television, and theatrical productions, the influence of Carter's revisitation of folklore and feminist retellings are shaping contemporary media production (Vincent). Contemporaries are still working to understand Acker's life and writing: *After Kathy Acker: A Literary Biography* takes on Acker's life and literary legacy. Acker's participation in visual arts and media may be her most lasting legacy in the contemporary world, with galleries such as *I, I, I, I, I, I, I, Kathy Acker* drawing inspiration from her life's work and presenting contemporary and queer interpretations of its themes in visual arts, literature, and performance. Since both writers demonstrate and encourage the practice of rereading and rewriting, a contemporary reader finds themselves in an extremely privileged position as co-creators in the practice of making meaning in their works. Unlike the challenges that come normally with reading older texts under the lens of new theory, such as debating whether or not Shakespeare meant to include queer characters or if Anne Bradstreet can be considered a feminist, Acker and Carter consent to having their narratives reworked and reunderstood. This proactiveness and consideration for future readers is exceptionally valuable

considering that both continued writing up until their deaths, leaving only speculation for how much more they each could have written. Reading them within the contemporary expands the impact of their collections and honors the power of literature to transcend life and become legacy.

Why These Two?

If contemporary readers pick up the texts of Angela Carter and Kathy Acker, they open themselves up to the opportunity to hear from postmodern feminist writers that sought to impact the way women view themselves, the world, and literature. Novels provide narratives that allow individuals to experience things outside of their own physical lives, allowing them to build definition and community surrounding their identity and ideas. Beauvoir explains that she thinks “certain women are still best suited to elucidate the situation of women” (Beauvoir 35). Reading Acker and Carter positions them as women worthy of consideration and acknowledges the work they put forth relating to the question regarding women. Reading the works of this pair offers more than a connection to postmodern feminist writers, it provides women with folklore and mythology that empowers female readers. Both Acker and Carter are seen as having been ahead of their time, and so the necessity of reading them within the contemporary world grows; “If these two textual revolutionaries can change readers’ views of their positions in the sexual power structure, then radical fictional texts can make a real change. And if they can’t perhaps no fiction can” (Draine 333). Reading as an act of exploration and as a means for interacting with new information positions fiction as an influential tool for those passionate about social change. Postmodern feminists such as Acker and Carter are able to convey their arguments through persuasive narratives that make the mundane magical but still preserve the fundamental factors

behind it. There is a danger in letting Acker and Carter's legacies fade into the past, and Draine's "Angela Carter and Kathy Acker: Not a Eulogy" stresses the importance of allowing the pair's work to continue influencing readers and contemporary conversations about feminism. For feminism to continue along the recurring arrival of progress that Irigay explains, readers must be able to embody the postmodern feminist tradition and engage with texts critically, examining the hegemonic paradigms that shape literature. As Draine puts it, "Such readers can be greatly aided by the tactical fictions of writers like Acker and Carter, who offer models of active, resistant reading of the culture, particularly its sexual and sexualized aspects" (Draine 334).

Acker and Carter's works offer narratives and characters that insistently question the systems that most blindly accept. Using their works as tools of guidance, readers can engage with texts of the past and present with an evaluative and skeptical eye. The act of reading is more than entertainment, and "Acker's and Carter's fictions call for readers who are consciously and politically engaged in reading, rereading, and revisioning" (Draine 337). By memorializing the systems and current issues that constrain them in their narratives and characters, Acker and Carter position themselves as creative historians that offer audiences the ability to adapt themes in literature to fit contemporary perspectives and issues. Both Acker and Carter encourage their readers to engage in this practice. By selecting these two authors, this essay honors the work of two women who took pride in exploring their experiences and perceptions about femininity and female experience. While their narratives cannot be universally or intersectionally applied to define the contemporary woman, reading and engaging with their texts opens the possibility for readers to rewrite their narratives and construct productive conversations surrounding feminist literature. Through their use of magic realism and the pastiche, they exemplify how to adapt

existing narratives in productive ways that craft impactful fictitious narratives situated in issues drawn from reality.

Magic Realism.

Stephen Siemon's explanation of the genre in "Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse" and Tamás Bényei's "Rereading 'Magic Realism'" drives this paper's analysis of magic realism as it appears in the texts of Acker and Carter. Magic realism subverts the expectations of assimilation to stable, existing genres and dominant theories of literature (Siemon 10). Honoring the postmodern tradition, magic realism places value in narratives which challenge existing metanarratives and established theories of thought. The term itself is an oxymoron, where the obsession with rational detail is paired with the fantastical, not in a subversion of rational versus irrational, but in an appropriation of the value given to rationality (Siemon 10). The genre emerges as criticism of the ways in which colonials seek to define and limit the mythology and imagination of the oppressed as irrational and insignificant. Functioning as a literary device and trauma response, magic realism returns power and validity to the imagination of those that are silenced by metanarratives. Through the insertion of fantastical detail, writers may establish a universe similar, yet distinctly different, where conflicts manifest symbolically. By subverting the binary of the rational against the irrational, the perceived singularity of truth is dismantled, allowing for challenges to the dominant narrative to be made. Emerging from postcolonial literature, magic realism embodies the work of obscuring dominant narratives and giving voice to oppressed narratives (Siemon 16). Magic realism not only critiques the oppression of imagination and control of creation under colonialism but facilitates a

shared response to postcolonial life (Siemon 20). It is distinct from fabulism in literature, as it includes metaphors which are meant to critique colonialism and systems of power.

Due to magic realism's acknowledgement of the oppressive power of metanarratives, it would be erroneous to ignore the role realism plays in the genre. While "The magical world view is generally regarded as the opposite of rational and empirical thought, although even classical anthropology did not always find it easy to draw clear conceptual boundaries between the two... magic renders problematic the very process of distinguishing concepts from images and things" (Benyei 157). The works include their magical elements without attempting to convince an audience to believe them. There is no attempt to conform to rationality or construct traditional realism, as these texts call for a complete suspension of belief from the first word on the page. Through these subversive texts, the line between rationality and irrationality becomes obsolete, as there is no purpose in designating magic from reality: they have meshed into one. Magical elements in these narratives find grounds for existence in their thematic purposes, they are physical manifestations of ideas, struggles, and commentaries which are granted interaction with the world through their physical being. By using magic to provide these concepts agency, narratives can further explore these topics as they interact with other characters and shape the landscape around them. Positioning magic not as a lack of rationalism, but as a supplement to the weaknesses of androcentrism and other privileged positions of rationalism, empowers the magical to address issues which rationalism fails to resolve (Benyei 158). The rejection of dominant rationality leaves the audience responsible for interpreting the applicableness of the values brought about by the magical elements. The magical brings all aspects of the rational into conversation with each other, questioning how relationships between structures and symbols come to be and holistically viewing all elements of the narratives to share some form of

connection (Benyei 164). Acker and Carter both use subversive portrayals of sexuality coated in magic to represent the telling of women's stories, the dismantling of the one, rational phallic narrative, the questioning of western hierarchy, the criticism of late stage capitalism, and their limitless application of metaphor through magic realism calls into question every thread which makes up the fabric of society.

Pastiche Strategy.

Discourse surrounding the literary strategy of the pastiche primarily focuses on whether or not it resembles a form of plagiarism. For the purpose of this paper and its arguments, analysis aligns with the perspective that the pastiche is not a form of plagiarism facilitates the analysis below. Rather than plagiarizing the form and style of the pieces they reference, Acker and Carter utilize the pastiche as a means to access and provide their perspective on existing themes and plots within metanarratives: this is a strategy of rewriting more than a strategy of plagiarism. Since this is the way both Acker and Carter employ the strategy, delving into discourse surrounding pastiche would prove to be an unnecessary tangent which would raise more questions than it would answer. The question of pastiche as plagiarism does little to evaluate the effectiveness of a piece's pastiche strategies, for while not being a piece of literature, Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" serves as an iconic example of the postmodern era's use of pastiche. Mercury's use of opera and choral vocals borrows from existing musical genres, yet his stylistic decisions and use of distortion and guitar make the song unarguably his. Queen's ability to bring flamboyance and new energy to existing techniques does not take away from the legitimacy and history of opera, it simply gives the song a stylistic depth which subverts and rewrites existing media.

Pastiche rewriting relies on subversion and does not come from a place of nostalgia but from a place of making up for lost time and opportunity. There is no yearning for a return to this time of oppression and no argument that history can be rewritten. Rather, the pastiche embodies the postmodern tradition by subverting the metanarrative's portrayals of experience.

“‘Rewriting’ is a (post)modern strategy for what I call ‘activating the ‘other’ suppressed and concealed by dominant modes of knowing: it articulates the unsaid, the suppressed, not only of texts and signifying practices but also of the theories and frames of intelligibility shaping them” (Ebert 888). This epistemological work crafts new portrayals which have been continuously denied from conversation. Its appropriation of dominant narratives acts as both a literary and social strategy. Since dominant narratives have already received praise and criticism, pastiche writing does not take away from these narratives. Pastiche writing gives new narratives a way into accepted canons of literature while also calling into question why these metanarratives are accepted as true. Oppressive narratives cannot be seen as victims to pastiche, as the power they hold prevents them from assuming the role of the disadvantaged.

While pastiche texts appropriate the value given to metanarratives, “The master narratives are not buried in the unconscious of these texts, nor do they create a vacuum that longs to be filled,” as their absence allows room for the pastiche narrative to exist; “female texts often evoke this unrepresentable as the not yet presented” (Friedman 242), illuminating what the master narratives fail to depict. To call pastiche writing plagiarism ignores the very purpose of the strategy, as these narratives are not looking to add to the existing canon of these dominant narratives, but rather look to tear them down. The social systems which are represented in master narratives do not translate positively through the pastiche, as the strategy does not wish to preserve the very thing it is critiquing. Engaging in pastiche strategies causes Acker and Carter to

write hysterically, speaking outside of themselves as they seek to understand the mind and body subject to the traumas of their experiences. In dominant narratives, “Women are sacrificed to the abstract theory of Woman, split into body and theory-of-body, cut off from themselves once more, and in this sense, re-hystericized” (Brennan 251). The pastiche in postmodern feminism appropriates the language of hysteria, taking it not as a critique of the disposition of women but as a critique of the society which produces the hysteria. “What Acker’s writing suggests is that pastiche is hardly a neutral mode but is impelled by some utopian longing of the male soul to reclaim its place in the ‘center’ of language” (Brennan 251). Appropriating the masculine desire for centrality positions the woman outside of herself and the grasp of her oppressor. Authors engaging in the pastiche attempt to completely remove conversations of feminism from the masculine structure of power which seeks to influence the structure of feminism. This post-structuralist approach honors the postmodern tradition by abandoning accepted portrayals of rationalism to construct ideas outside of the existing canon. Postmodern feminism acknowledges that hysteria emerges from the traumatic diaspora between women and the idea of women. This hysteria brought on by the confusion of identity causes writers such as Acker and Carter to challenge the hegemonic utopian goals of the patriarchy. There is no neutrality in feminine existence, only submission or rebellion. To write critically of these systems confronts the necessity for women to actively engage with existing narratives; pastiche writing offers one strategy for women to work their way into the center of language and literature.

ON THE PURSUIT OF FEMININE IDENTITY

The Hysterical.

Since the philosophical work of Aristotle and Plato, the mind and soul have been seen as a masculine, superior force and the body as a feminine, lesser component of self. Aristotle positions the woman as the body and the man as the soul, concluding that this difference should result in the view that “the female state as being as it were a deformity” (Blamires, Pratt, and Marx 41). Plato’s instructions for men warn them that “To have more concern for your body than your soul is to act just like a woman” (Spelman 115). Capitalism exploits this association of the body as weak and feminine, commodifying the aesthetic as something to be sold. This allows the masculine to engage with the female body outside of themselves, keeping their soul and rational mind untainted as the masculine body is removed from their sense of self and the feminine they concern themselves with is not their own. The use of feminine aesthetics as commodities under capitalism weaponizes the sense of being women have historically been given in their body. From the construct of virginity to the purpose of sexual submission to a husband, the body is given to the woman to leverage herself with. Within late capitalism, the woman that is aware of her position as an aesthetic commodity can weaponize it, utilizing it strategically for her own advancement. However, to understand her own soul and sense of rationality, she must speak outside of the body she has been allowed. Speaking outside of herself is a traumatic and hysterical act, as she has not been given the platform of the soul which man has been told he possesses. Woman may speak outside of herself through writing, as this is removed from her physical body and provides a vessel for the soul she has been told she lacks (Brennan 266). Appropriating the language of hystericism allows the woman to work around the limitative view

of her body as a commodity. In Marxist theory, a commodity is “an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference” (Marx *Capital, Volume 1*). This definition illuminates the way masculine intention and desire controls the power of the female body— only allowing it the power to be wanted by man.

The woman speaks hysterically when she seeks to remove herself from the commodity she has been seen as since birth, for “Being born a girl is already a death sentence, because the body of a girl is colonized by culture the moment she arrives” (Yuknavitch). The writings of Acker and Carter argue that the woman’s body is a doomed vessel for expression from the minute it comes into existence. To be born a woman is to be subject to the constraints of the society which welcomes her and must face the traumas it inflicts onto her. The separation between body as feminine and the mind and soul as masculine plagues the worlds in which Acker and Carter’s characters find themselves. The female protagonists are often all too aware of their position within the eyes of others. Finding themselves denied rationality, they find themselves in the peripheral. However, it is within the peripheral that they can evade man’s vision. From the sidelines, the absurdity with which man constructs society is obvious, as it can be critiqued from the outside. A character from Carter’s story “The Tiger’s Bride” learns how to navigate the world around her while being seen only as a body and lacking the rational mind and soul to coexist with men. She reflects that: “I knew they lived according to a different logic than I” (Carter 63). Her knowledge that her femininity forsakes her causes to engage with the world skeptically, as the hypocrisy of man makes her a victim. Her body, and the bodies of others unlike the white man, are seen as commodities meant to serve as aesthetics and tools for

upholding the elite. Through the weaponization of the hysterical, the woman uses her emotional depth to write herself into another form of being.

Carter presents this employment of hysteria in *Nights at the Circus* through the character Sophie Fevvers, the winged circus woman who escapes poverty and prostitution through teaching herself how to fly. Her voyeuristic audience derives more pleasure from the question of whether she is real than from watching her fly. However, this ignorance allows her to fly and live however she pleases, as her audience is distracted by the question of her body. With all eyes focused on her body, her actual self is hidden from the gaze of the audience. Sophie explains how she is able to get away with this, for “What would be the point of the illusion if it looked like an illusion?... Is not the whole world an illusion? And yet it fools everybody?” (Carter 16)

The practice of hysterically existing outside of herself empowers her to create an illusion of self that she presents to others. Acknowledging the constructed illusions of society, she does not find herself out of place in her elusive self, as she fits into the public sphere which relies on the acceptance of illusions for the balance of power. Appropriating the success of societal illusions allows the woman to transcend the bounds of her body. Sophie uses her audience’s ignorant obsession with her physical form to provide her liberation. Rather than allowing herself to be exploited for her body, she transforms it into a mystical entity which entralls others and empowers herself. Her liberation allows her to provide for other women in the novel; she brings up her poor house manager, Lizzie, and aids another woman’s escape from her abusive partner. Once she, a caged bird, achieves liberation, she can work to free other women around her, and “Does that seem strange to you? That the caged bird should want to see the end of cages, sir?” (Carter 38) Once she feels that her flying and hysterical existence outside of herself provides her

the ability to succeed and know herself outside of masculine influence, she seeks to share this process of empowerment with other women.

In *My Mother: Demonology*, Acker's autofictional character, Laurie, finds herself pessimistically engaging with the challenge of only being denied a mind and only given a body that is subject to the masculine: "I can't find out who I am. I know nothing about my body. Whenever there's a chance of knowing, for any of us, the government, Bush if you like, reacts to knowledge about the female body by censoring" (Acker 62). Cultural war exists because of the societal dominant's refusal to acknowledge and create space for whom they deem the other. They rely on censorship for this, and Acker again references George Bush as a metaphor for the patriarchy's infiltration of society and its control over the female body. Acker utilizes George Bush's funeral as a recurring metaphor for the generational and systemic reliance on male sexuality in society. Considering this a "rape by the father," the patriarchy's longstanding influence over expressions of female sexuality is critiqued as an intimate betrayal taught to women from a young age. She feels that understanding herself in terms removed from the masculine influence is impossible, as even language finds itself shaped by man, meaning the words used to describe herself and her body are reliant on an omnipresent "him." Laurie finds herself being denied knowledge of the only thing society allows her to have. Here, it is Acker writing hysterically, as her autofictional narratives allow her to express her experiences through a fictitious creation of her own mind.

Acker and Carter write their characters in a way which captures the tension between societal perception and intrinsic subjectivity. While society constructs female identity through consideration of women's labor and characteristics of her body, the identity within the woman struggles to be represented or understood (Mohanty 6). By considering the role lived experiences

play in shaping identities, the two authors give meaning to their characters and experiences while recognizing that they do not define them. To define one's identity through interactions with the other makes identity reliant on the other. The subjectiveness of self which Acker and Carter's characters embody demonstrates that by removing the systems by which society attempts to define women with, there is little tangible detail left to work with as her mind and soul have been historically denied exploration.

Feminine Sublime.

Barbara Freeman's *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* offers a feminist construction and critique of the sublime. Historical understandings of the sublime in literature utilize it as a strategy for portraying the relationship between man and nature. However, this is a masculine understanding of what sublimity is, and the feminine sublime "is no longer a rhetorical mode or style of writing, but an encounter with the other in which the self, simultaneously disabled and empowered, testifies to what exceeds it" (Freeman 16). In terms of the feminine sublime, sublimity occurs almost entirely within the self, as the subject works to make sense of themselves outside of masculine definition. Encountering the daunting challenge of knowing themselves both provides the potential for self-discovery and places the individual at opposition from others. In this tension, the individual finds common ground to establish truths of themselves that can be identified within the social landscape. There are magnitudes of feminine identity present in the works of Acker and Carter. Their presentations of femininity are inherently sublime as they are too large to be understood fully, yet they are seen as something beautiful. Whereas masculine narratives primarily place the sublime within scenes of nature, the sublime is an internal thing for the woman. Through the practice of postmodern feminism, her subjectiveness causes the concept of knowing herself to be a continuous and daunting process. It

is a fruitless task to attempt to confidently define womanhood, femininity, or the female body and experience. The terminology and theory under the patriarchy and capitalism fail her, and she exists in multiplicity. The sublimity of woman results in her evasion of definition, as “There is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman.... You can’t talk about *a* female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes” (Cixous 876). The view of women as challenging to concretely define becomes central to the arguments and view of postmodern feminism. The feminine sublime calls for the exploration and examination of the subjectiveness of the woman; one way to explore this is through literature.

However, while conversations can address the concept of the feminine sublime, there is no universal narrative that will eliminate the sublime subjectivity of women. Thus, Acker’s autofictional narrative structure falls short at defining women outside of herself, and Carter’s representations of various female women cannot present a productively conclusive understanding. The concept of the woman is transient, shifting through time and social space, defined by each that beholds it. Acker’s character Laurie acknowledges the problematic nature of trying to understand herself: “Me, I’m insufficient, all I am is fantasies that tear ‘me’ apart. How can I be anything but a lie?” (Acker 248); the challenge of trying to know herself seems counterintuitive, as even if she shapes an identity for herself outside of masculine understanding, masculine society renders it purposeless. By shaping her existence outside of her reality, she finds herself ostracized from her identity, as she exists beyond the realms of acceptability. Removing herself leaves behind nothing of value where the “real” is, making the judgment of realness one that looks upon her with extreme harshness. Her identity becomes too subjective for it to have any real meaning or even being identified. Laurie also addresses the similarities women and nature share through their sublimity: “The physical world that is always changing,

menstruating, turning to shit and turning its shit and sex, putrefaction into our white minds. All that is flesh will rot; women give birth to flesh” (Acker 173). The natural processes of the female body mirror the acts of nature, arguing for an association between the woman and nature, the woman and the public, the woman and the earth. The ability of women to bring forth new life preserves the processes of creation that nature embodies outside of capitalism.

Similarly to Laurie’s decision to abandon the rational, Carter’s Sophie Fevvers finds herself facing a similar decision. Her physical form and liberty to fly disrupts the rational and positions her as a spectacle, and “She deformed the dreams of that entire generation who would immediately commit themselves wholeheartedly to psychoanalysis” (Carter 11). No amount of outsider analysis can understand Fevvers, from Freud’s masculine view, to the character of Jack Walser, a reporter seeking to write a story on Fevvers. Walser fails at this, becoming a circus clown to remain close to Fevvers, as he finds himself drawn in by her sublimity. Sophie Fevvers unarguably exists outside of the expectations placed on her and for others to grow close to her, they too must abandon the rational. Upon Sophie’s embrace of her physical form and the potential it provides her, she reflects that “You might say that this gulf now before me represented the grand abyss, the poignant divide, that would henceforth separate me from common humanity” (Carter 29). While accepting her sublimity comes with a discomfort towards the prospect of continuing into an unknown. Accepting the daunting, yet beautiful truth of being a woman and desiring to know herself requires a complete acceptance of the sublime, even though it remains daunting. Rejection of the masculine does not promise acceptance elsewhere, it simply presents an abyss where it is clear that the feminine is too subjective to ever be entirely known. This removal of the female self from the masculine influenced society weighs the choice of staying within masculine control which misrepresents and exploits you, or venturing into the

feminine abyss where there is no promise of definition, only exploration. Carter's character, The Tiger's Bride, reflects on her ability to face this abyss: "Had I not been allotted only the same kind of imitative life amongst men that the doll-maker had given her?" (Carter 63) Comparing herself to a doll crafted by a man with the intelligence God provides him, the Tiger's Bride argues for equality through a biblical reasoning. She, possessing the same gifts from God as man, possesses the ability to craft as well. The creative power of women comes to provide them with some means of making sense of the abyss. While she cannot define herself or give the woman a universal identity, she can explore her own internal and external ideas. Her imagination sets her free, as she can craft a world removed from reality.

The Lack of Female Language and the Role of Female Writers.

The imaginative power of Acker and Carter's characters reflects their own agency as writers. Returning to Cixous, female writers play a significant role in the liberation of women, as *l'écriture féminine*, or feminine writing, creates the mythology for women's half of the world. This task, of creating depictions of female experience, is a daunting one, as female writers must manipulate masculine languages, genres, and literary styles. The challenging nature of being a female creative is a hurdle Cixous, Carter, and Acker all overcome by presenting their writings to the public. Through their acceptance of their creative power, they seek to empower others and give them the tools and literary tradition to contextualize themselves. For the female writer, "Her language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible" (Cixous 889). Cixous sees the role of *l'écriture féminine* as a cornerstone practice for the advancement of women. Memorializing her experiences, thoughts, and perspectives allows the female writer to provide for her audience. The dominant metanarratives fail to address the soul of the female

reader, leaving her with no text speaking directly to her: until a female writer takes on the challenge. The writing of women does not assume itself to be a metanarrative, therefore it does not constrain its reader to the confines of its words, characters and plots. Serving as female mythology, the texts rather serve as source material for the reader to craft their own imaginative understanding of their subjectivity.

The dominance of the masculine and metanarratives systematically suppresses female expression and creativity and shapes language and writing. The female writer finds herself facing the reality of “The laws of silence and the loss of language. For us, there is no language in this male world” (Acker 168). In this instance, Acker embodies her character Laurie. She finds herself desperate to write, but all the tools available to her are masculine ones. This is why she engages in strategies such as postmodern feminism, magic realism, and pastiche: they allow her to write with masculine tools while still challenging their principles. Acker’s writing, which is highly autobiographical, demonstrates her journey to utilize her creative agency as a means for self-discovery and social subversion. Appropriating the themes and strategies of dominant literature, Acker presents her writing as “The only way to annihilate all that’s been written. That can be done only through writing. Such destruction leaves all that is essential intact” (123). Subversion is only successful when the elements being critiqued are transparently presented within the subversive piece. Critics deem Acker’s narratives problematic for their gruesome depictions of violence and sexuality, but in order for Acker to convey the severity of these issues, they must be present in her narrative as they are in her life. Splicing together scenes of traumatic experience allows Acker as a female writer to memorialize the raw uncomfortableness of female experience. “It’s necessary to cut life into bits,” she writes, “for neither the butcher store nor the bed of a woman who’s giving birth is as bloody as this” (267). The tragedy and bloodiness of her

life is not watered down for readers; rather, the exceptionally brutal moments are cut from her life and brought together in compilation. Cutting life into smaller pieces allows Acker to present a multitude of examples to affirm her critiques of society. She recognizes the disturbing nature of the scenes she presents, but they must be as bloody in writing as they are in life. It is not the blood of birth or death which makes a person, but the suffering and bloodiness of life in between. Writing her experiences into auto fictional mythology presents her readers with narratives which consider the role trauma informs one's understanding of self.

Trauma-defined characters in Carter's *Nights at the Circus* find themselves similarly reflexive of the ways in which they transform their trauma through their creative expression. Mignon, a young girl, knows only the animalistic abuse of ape trainer Lamarck until Sophie Fevvers aids her escape from the violent relationship. Her trauma obviously causes her mental, emotional, and physical pain, "But it was as though the scarcely-to-be-imagined tragedy of her life, the sea of misery and disaster in which she swam in her precarious state of innocent defilement," that she familiarizes herself with the tools that provide her "all found expression, beyond her consciousness of her intention, in her voice" (Carter 132). Mignon possesses a beautiful voice, but she sings without knowing the meaning behind the words until she begins her romance and harmonic performances with the Princess of Abyssinia. Once she possesses the power to sing with intention, her creative agency solidifies as a legitimate means for moving on from her trauma and progressing in herself and her relationships. With romantic and creative support from the Princess, Mignon finds the power to sing with creative intention rather than as a coping mechanism. This channel of creative expression liberates her, and without a portrayal of her past suffering, an audience of Carter's story would fail to recognize the beauty in her creative

transformation. While Mignon is not a writer, she too finds power in taking an existing creative form, song, to rebel against the trauma the masculine inflicts on her life.

The female creative utilizes her trauma, the alienation from her soul, and the commodification of her body as creative inspirations that allow her to facilitate productive conversations concerning her pursuit for self-expression. Capitalism attempts to make these creative efforts profitable and the patriarchy attempts to make them masculine serving. For her to escape the commodification of her creation, she must flee the reaches of the system, starting with the masculine rationalism which upholds metanarratives. Acker portrays this concept through her character in *Empire of the Senseless*, Abhor, who is only partially human, as the failures of androcentrism deny her a complete self. Traditional knowledge fails her on her quest to know herself and “if human civilization is the same thing as alienation and isolation and, and if it is, what can knowledge be?” (Acker 58). Like language, alienation, isolation, knowledge and androcentrism are all products of the masculine society. The female writer, empowered by gynocentrism, recognizes the reality that there is no universal experience, but the Western world’s systems of capitalism and patriarchy uphold androcentrism and thrive on the assertion that there is. This weaponized, singular portrayal of existence upholds the rhetoric of phallogocentrism which preserves rigorous hierarchies of social, economic, and sexual power. The permeation of androcentrism causes the female writer to exist as the *Other*, as Beauvoir explains; from societal structures to the formation of language, woman finds her existence to be conditional on the masculine. Lacking the language to understand herself within masculine society, the woman must flee into a feminine abyss, seeking comradeship and sympathy from other *Others* that society fails.

Failures of Androcentrism and Building Female Community.

Androcentrism and the masculine view of women position women as the inferior other that gains a purpose only through association with man. Beauvoir explains that the woman finds herself as an *Other* because “Humanity is male, and defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being” (Beauvoir 26). While there is a challenge to establish a communal feminine identity, it is clear that a sense of female community helps the characters of Acker and Carter’s novels understand themselves outside of the context of man. Postmodern theory offers a clear connection between possessing a sense of community and possessing a clear sense of self, for, as Lyotard says, “A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever” (Lyotard 15). Women are familiar with the concept of looking to others for a sense of self; the “mother” and the “wife” only know identity through reliance on the other. Acker and Carter’s characters are hesitant to define themselves through their relationships, as they wish to construct portrayals of themselves outside of the masculine view.

Carter’s “The Tiger’s Bride” is a character who finds herself fighting against a masculine-reliant identity, and she notices this masculine compliance with fabricated identity from an early age. When her father gambles her away, she notes that her proprietor “is a carnival figure made of papier mâché and crêpe hair; and yet he has the Devil’s knack at cards” (Carter 53). His societal power and physical form are both constructed ideations, but since they succeed at securing his desired advancements, there is no reason for him to question the reality of his identity. Unlike the masculine, which benefits from existing within a societal imaginary, the woman positions herself as reliant on feminine sublimity as an outlet for escaping the illusion which oppresses her. The Tiger’s Bride understands that androcentrism and societal illusion

cannot provide her acceptance or understanding, and reflects that man “I was a young girl, a virgin, and therefore men denied me rationality just as they denied it to those who were not exactly like themselves, in all their unreason” (Carter 63). Characters such as the Tiger’s Bride find themselves denied the privilege of masculine rationalism explaining their grievances, and so in need of a type of logic and understanding which does not exist within the masculine world. By abandoning androcentric society, the woman leaves herself defenseless and without theories of reason to find comfort and understanding in. Thus, to navigate this pursuit for gynocentric perception of understanding and feminist-centered order of language, Acker and Carter’s characters accept the sublimity of their identities, they find themselves in desperate pursuits for community with others who feel unknown and described by Beauvoir’s *Other*.

Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* is largely told from the perspective of reporter Jack Walsler: a man who finds himself bored with the stories of man’s world and immediately fascinated by the sublime wonder of Sophie Fevvers. He finds himself disappointed by the failures of androcentrism, as “War and disaster had not quite succeeded in fulfilling that promise which the future once seemed to hold” and he feels his time will be more fulfilling by “concentrating on those ‘human interests’ angles that, hitherto, had eluded him” (Carter 10). His shift to human interests, specifically the life and pursuits of Sophie Fevvers, marks his departure from the rational world. He finds himself captive to the wonders of Fevvers’ life in the circus, abandoning the predictable cycles of war and masculine struggles for power, and enters the feminine abyss as a bystander who cannot take his eyes off the irrational, sublime magnificence of Fevvers. She introduces him to the hidden reality that she, while unique in her form, is not unique in her ambitions; she is simply the start of “the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground” (Carter 25). Originally representing the woman entering industrial society, Sophie’s

position as the winged woman positions her as a symbol of feminist progress. Her physical form, with actual wings that provide her flight, transforms her from a metaphor into a manifestation of the concept of the winged woman. While she faces isolation in her physical form, she possesses a female community through her desire for liberation. Carter utilizes magic realism to give the concept of a physical form, confronting her audience with a character that possesses the agency to transform ideas of feminism into action. Acker and Carter's utilization of magic realism positions them as clear critics of androcentrism, as the genre deconstructs the value given to the masculine view and entertains the power and validity of the gynocentric and irrational.

Giving value to what the metanarrative sees as irrational mirrors the process of empowering female voices through postmodern feminist writing. Acker's character, Laurie explains that "If folly is female, the essence of femininity is folly" (Acker 83). The abandonment of reality and rationality is an inherently female practice as identity fails to depict the subjectivity of women. Removing herself from reason allows the woman to consider herself outside of the systems which feel they have already defined her. This abandonment of masculine rationalism is seen as a foolish and immature decision, a rejection of accepted knowledge that leaves the individual an outsider. Kristeva describes this as a decision to reject the Symbolic Order, and this decision allows the woman to embrace the feminine sublime and search for connection within the feminine abyss. While the unknown provides no comfort, it allows the female characters to express themselves without judgment or oppression. Laurie, and consequently Acker, find themselves within this liberating void: "I'm a woman who's alone, outside the accepted. Outside the Law, which is language. This is the only role that allows me to be as intelligent as I am and to avoid persecution" (Acker 253). In the abyss, the only thing the characters of Acker and Carter can rely on is the company of other women who have made the same decision as them. This

shaping of a community with others who have rejected the masculine constructions of society is the only hope for prosperity outside of the realm of reality. Acker's character remarks that this community is devoid of boredom, as there is much work to be done (14). Through the imagination and understanding of the failures of society, these female intellectuals of the abyss can come together to construct new possibilities. Laurie's acceptance of the abyss does not mirror the experience of death or complete loss of self, for "Death itself isn't enough to obliterate: I knew there was still only rubble, riot, that which now goes by the name *society*. I don't know what to do about all that I see and experience. I can only ask to *dream*" (Acker 215). Death, or removing one's consciousness from the stressors of society leaves the corruptive society in tack. Death promises Acker's characters no escape from the trauma of their lives, as the world will continue without them. Society cannot simply die. Despite not having the answers or solutions to the questions and problems that plague her mind, Acker's protagonist must continue living with the weight of not being able to change her surroundings. To cope with this, she turns to dreaming, to writing, and to pursuing the abyss. Kristeva's construction of the female orgasm as "the little death" offers Acker and Carter's characters an escape through their sexuality. The woman's sexuality thus allows her to envision and create an alternative space which is not confined to the structures of society which burden her.

ON THE EXPLORATION OF FEMININE SEXUALITY

Empowerment of Female Sexuality.

Julia Kristeva's concept of jouissance and the female orgasm as the little death solidify the relationship that female identity, sexuality, and mortality play in postmodern feminism. Kristeva explains the woman's connection with her sexuality as a "totality of enjoyment," and

that “‘jouissance’ is sexual, spiritual, physical, conceptual at one and the same time” (Kristeva). This construction of female sexuality and all the components of feminine eroticism extend past the limiting body which Aristotle and Plato give her. Describing feminine pleasure as a “totality of enjoyment” through a feminist redefinition of jouissance allows for the characters of Acker and Carter’s novels to possess expansive control over their sexuality and the levels of sexuality which they allow others to engage with. Beauvoir supports this portrayal of feminine sexuality, as she argues that “Woman can transcend caresses, arousal, and penetration toward achieving her own pleasure, thus maintaining the affirmation of her subjectivity” (Beauvoir 471). Since both identity and sexuality exist in multitudes for the woman, they become intertwined with each other. For the woman to understand her mind, she must be able to reclaim her body and know her sexuality. Beauvoir concludes that “It is largely because woman does not recognize herself in it that she does not recognize her own desires” (Beauvoir 456), and for the woman to know herself, she must take self-possession over her own body and selfishly embrace her sexuality in its entirety.

When Laurie engages with her own eroticism, she explains that “Being able to come, I decided while touching myself, necessitates being able to relax and enter another world. To come is to dream” (Acker 43). The little death of the female orgasm allows for a zone of complete erotic possibility that removes sexual submission from the male gaze, as Acker and Carter’s characters are submissive to their own sexuality rather than the desires of men. This decision to submit to one’s own sexuality acts as a radical employment of agency, as the individual becomes both sides of the dynamic, submissive and dominant, leaving no room for the pervasive other; unabashed female sexuality provides the freedom to dream of an existence outside of submission. Exploring their sexuality as women, characters are able to understand themselves in

a context outside of societal constructions. This process of liberation through sexuality transports the female character from the world which demands public sexual submission and places her in one of intimate sexual submission to self. The female orgasm becomes a selfish endeavor which allows her to escape from the other and connect to her internal self.

However, there is a possibility for the woman to positively engage with her sexuality while involving another. As the female orgasm in solitude offers the woman escape through the little death and allows her to momentarily dream, Cixous argues that “The new history is coming; it’s not a dream, though it does extend beyond men’s imagination” (Cixous 883). In order for this dream to transform into reality, the woman’s sexuality must extend beyond the masculine gaze and understanding of its truth. In Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*, Mignon, once entering a romantic relationship with the Princess of Abyssinia, finds herself fully embracing her sexuality with another. Fevvers positively remarks at the magnitude of Mignon’s transformation: “Can this truly be the same ragged child who came to me for charity those few short weeks ago?... Love, true love has utterly transformed her” (Carter 276). Mignon’s ability to experience her sexuality and sense of self removed from the masculine abuses of her previous partner transforms her very being. Before, she was merely a suffering child, but love transforms her into an empowered woman. By having a female partner, Mignon’s expression of female sexuality remains within the internal realm of female sexuality, allowing it to preserve the characteristics of jouissance.

Sexual objectification, or the outside perspective of female sexuality, strips female sexuality of the multiplicity which Kristeva argues for through jouissance. Public, masculine perception of female sexuality “occurs independently of what women want; it is something done to us against our will” (Kristeva). This problematic view functions as an “objectifying perception

that splits a person into parts serves to elevate one interest above another” (Bartky 55). The dominant perception of female sexuality positions the woman as submissive and inferior. Sexual submission from women has come as a product of the social submission expected from them. The resulting abuse of this submission results in masochism and sexual exploitation at the expense of the woman. In order to remove the concept of sexual submission from the consequences of man’s manipulation, Acker and Carter present pervasive depictions of female hyper sexualism. Their characters are hyper aware of how others view their sexuality and consequently view their bodies as something to conquer. In *Empire of the Senseless*, Acker’s character Abhor shares her perspective on the dynamic: “I don’t think humans fuck therefore lovingly relate to each other in equality, whatever that is or means, but out of needs for power and control” (Acker 54). Sexual experiences with others hold significance with the female characters of Acker and Carter’s novels, as they are seen as struggles for power. Through skeptically viewing their relations with others as selfish attempts for conquest, they protect themselves from perceiving them to mean something more. Sexual attraction does not come with the promise of adornment or concern for the other’s advancement; it comes from inner desires. Being fuckable does not equate to value unless the female actively uses it for a means of advancing herself.

Commodification of the Body.

The woman has the option to engage with her sexuality as a means for social advancement because of the ways masculine sexuality shapes society. Capitalism makes it so that “The woman’s body is an object to be purchased; for her it represents capital she has the right to exploit” (Beauvoir 507). While male sexuality mirrors the very systems which construct our societies (a hierarchy that relies on a dynamic of power and submission), women’s sexuality

can only be embraced through the normalization of the female sex outside of serving the masculine through pleasure and reproduction. Women's sexuality outside of commodification and production is shunned from the public sphere and deemed unnecessary, as it then fails to serve to male sexuality through providing masculine pleasure or contributing to reproduction. Capitalism requires the commodification of the body or "The transformations of relationships, formerly untainted by commerce, into commercial relationships, relationships of exchange, of buying and selling" (Encyclopedia of Marxism). Through both prostitution and marriage, relationships and sexual engagement gain transactional value under capitalism. In both dynamics, there is a form of exchange occurring between the two parties. Selling sex through prostitution clearly exemplifies this sort of transactional work, and the dynamic of marriage does so less obviously and will be discussed later. In either dynamic, the female body becomes a commodity meant to be seen as an object to be sold and bought. Aristotle and Plato's association between the woman and the body again forsakes her, as she becomes a material good under capitalism. With her body seen as a commodity, her labor, through reproduction and childrearing becomes seen as an intrinsic function rather than a true form of labor. Arguing that the woman's labor is a natural process rather than a conscious effort alienates her from the fruits of her labor, as "Human productive activity... is 'objectified' in its products... But in capitalist production, the capitalist has a right to appropriate what the workers have produced" (Bartky 58). This alienation from her labor results in alienation from her human nature, as she suffers a disconnect from her sense of self-worth and accomplishments. This relationship is dehumanizing to the individual as her agency is stripped from her and attributed to the system which exploits her.

Capitalism thrives on its ability to maintain control over the individual, not least through making the individual reliant on the system for a sense of self and purpose. Acker's character,

Laurie, has felt this aspect of capitalism since her adolescence: “From this I learned that childhood was the time when I was destroyed. When all of us were destroyed” (Acker 185).

Capitalism destroys the potential for a self which exists internally. Through the process of ostracization and weaponization of capital, the self becomes something almost entirely outward, reliant on the other and systems of power to find meaning and value. All individuals under the system of capitalism find themselves forsaken by this system, and from childhood their sense of self is destroyed in order to commodify their bodies and minds for the systems of capitalism.

The woman faces the challenge of finding capitalism’s reach permeating her body; Laurie finds its control rotting her from the inside: “Though we had learned that our cunts and vaginas aren’t the sources of disease, we had no idea how to get rid of maggots. We had been fed on the meat” (Acker 56). The commodification of female sexuality does not originate within the woman: it originates in the masculine view of the woman’s body as private property. It is not her desire for her genitals to be the center of the disease which is sexual exploitation. This role is forced onto her by society at a young age, as she is fed the myth that she must be a commodity and further that she must enjoy it. Even after recognizing that this suffering is not her fault and does not originate from within her, she does not have the means to overturn the society which fed her the lies and commodifies her body. Acker’s character, Abhor, reflects on the firm grasp of capitalism by explaining that even to escape capitalism, one must first be wealthy and well off through the system: “Wealth was the price and cost of political escape. Wealth was the price and cost of capitalism” (Acker 3). To be able to remove oneself from the ostracization of labor and the commodification of self is itself a privilege, as it is a costly endeavor to remove oneself physically and mentally from the systems of capitalism. The reaches of capitalism know no bounds; it shapes the social landscape, the woman’s body, and her sense of self; its ability to

imprison the individual by making them reliant on it results in the view that it is an inescapable problem for the western woman.

Carter's Sophie Fevvers finds herself all too aware of the control capitalism has over her, even as a winged woman. In her time as a young woman, she works as a prostitute, employing the body capitalism positions as a product. However, she makes it clear that this is not a display of female sexuality or jouissance:

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

Fevvers elaborates that the prostitution is not empowering or enjoyable to her but only exists as a means for economic advantage. The feigned ignorance of the man who willfully exploits female sexuality as a commodity perceives it as a genuine expression of feminine eroticism and assumes it to be pleasurable to the woman, here again man over relies on androcentric thought to force masculine reason onto the woman. This misconception provides the man with the ability to dismiss the emotional nature of sexual interaction. Their emotional disengagement allows for the purchasing of sex to assimilate with the casualness of all other transactions under capitalism. Assuming the woman benefits bifold from selling her body, through sensory and monetary fulfillment, allows the man to position himself as a savior and provider. Manipulating the reality of buying sex into a mutually erotic exchange allows him to engage with prostitution as a means of charity and selfless useful use of his sexuality, rather than a weaponization of his capital and ability to exploit his subordinates. Arguing that sex “has no real existence unless given freely,”

Carter's Sophie Fevvers stresses her own agency. Enthusiastic consent makes sex legitimate to her, and without it, the act remains a transactional performance. Calling this performance "simulacra" returns to the theme of the woman creating a separate self outside of her body, and by engaging in sex only with her body, the man only engages with a representation of the woman, not the reality of her being.

Conundrum of Marriage.

Similarly to prostitution's facilitation of the masculine's consumption of the female body as a commodity, marriage allows for a kind of legal possession and financial control to be exerted onto the woman. For this paper's discussion of marriage, the heterosexual, Western dynamic of the legally bound nuclear family is assumed because of its performance as a tool of the interlocking systems of patriarchy and capitalism; considering the variety of other marriage dynamics possible would dilute criticism as the same implications cannot be applied without complication. However, it is important to note that this dominant structure of marriage does not exist in solitude, and that there are varying forms of marriage that exist which can remedy or exacerbate the qualities of the marriage dynamic explored within this argument. Acknowledging the variety of forms marriage takes is critical, as:

Many women in many places lacked (and many still lack) the elementary right to choose our own mates; but for some women even in our own society today, this is virtually the only major decision we are thought capable of making without putting our womanly nature in danger; what follows even after is or ought to be a properly feminine submission to the decisions of men (Bartky 53).

Almost universally however is the truth that marriage functions as a legal demonstration of the commodification of the woman's body and her position as a living piece of capital. This assigned

value of the relationship is a prominent theory in the work of both Marx and Engels, as “Marriage... is incontestably a form of *exclusive private property*” (Encyclopedia of Marxism). Marriage which involves a contract between a man and a woman legalizes the power struggle of the patriarchy and allows it to exist in both the public and private spheres. With the existence of two spheres, the public and the private, and the existence of two individuals in the marriage, the man becomes assigned the social, public sphere which he seeks to dominate with his perceived soul and inherent rationality, and the woman becomes assigned the domestic, private sphere which has already been dominated by the masculine and is perceived to best be served by the woman’s labor, body, and emotion.

This abuse of the woman’s facilities and her confinement to the private sphere is seen as a form of collective crime to Acker’s character Abhor, who expresses the belief that “The poor can reply to the crime of society, to their economic deprivation retardation primitivism lunacy boredom hopelessness, only by collective crime or war. One form collective crime takes on is marriage” (Acker 7). Marriage traditionally is seen as a form of social and economic stability, as it offers a legal binding which transforms the capital of one into two. Relying on the prospect of marriage for security is problematic however, as it facilitates a dynamic which preserves the subordination of the woman. Calling this a form of collective crime alludes to the dangers women expose themselves to through marriage to men. The woman traditionally becomes bound to the domestic sphere through marriage and thus becomes reliant on the man’s social and economic power. Marriage solidifies the intertwined control of the patriarchy and capitalism over the female body, as the married woman becomes dependent on the financial status of her husband. Public perception of the woman’s sexuality also changes under the control placed upon her through marriage. Acker’s character Laurie argues that the financial and sexual control

placed upon women through marriage is seen as acceptable, “For doesn’t marriage in this society render anything acceptable? Freaks cannot live as freaks because in reality there are no freaks: there are only those society people who’ve carved identities out of fear” (Acker 132). Marriage renders the woman’s sexuality socially acceptable, as the married woman’s sexuality is directly under masculine control. Expressions of sexuality outside of prostitution and marriage are deemed immoral and perverse as they do not allow for profitization and control by the patriarchy and capitalism.

Marriage makes the prospect of gaining capital through utilization of the body and sex acceptable. Whereas prostitution allows for a woman to gain capital through a variety of masculine figures, the marriage ties her down to the capital potential through one man. Carter’s character Sophie Fevvers calls out this double standard in the masculine judgment of feminine sexuality by questioning: “What is marriage but prostitution to one man instead of many?” (Carter 21) Marriage limits the woman’s ability to gain capital through her sexuality to a singular man, and this preserves the dynamic which positions the male in power. The woman becomes reliant on him in order to express her sexuality, and if the woman attempts to gain capital through a man other than her husband, she faces moral and social hurdles. Thus, the woman finds herself to be a prostitute to one: reliant on his capital and still positioned as the inferior. Carter’s story “The Tiger’s Bride” features a character which fully understands her position as a commodity and the value of her sexuality. Both Fevvers and the Tiger’s Bride utilize men’s reliance on the commodity they possess in order to advance themselves. For Fevvers, it is an economic endeavor, for the Tiger’s Bride, it is a social investment. After her father gambles away everything else of monetary value, he gambles her body. The Tiger’s Bride recognizes this, reflecting that “For now my own skin was my sole capital in the world and today I’d make my

first investment” (Carter 56). The failures of her father means she must use her body’s position as capital to secure better prospects for herself. She knows that her identity, sexuality, and financial standing will be dependent on her husband, so she invests in herself in order to secure a husband from whom she can benefit.

CONCLUSION

Considering Queer Theory.

The characters of Acker and Carter’s novels find themselves navigating their identities, sexualities, and positions within existing systems in ways that reflect their social and economic contexts. Just as Carter and Acker appropriate the value given to the masculine metanarratives into their own narratives, contemporary readers and creatives are appropriating the pair’s writing as inspiration to read and write about their own experiences in a similar way. Through the utilization of queer theory, contemporary audiences access a way to reread the works of Acker and Carter. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, which is widely regarded as a cornerstone piece of queer theory, demands that reliance on binaries be abandoned, as they result in narrow understandings of culture (Sedgwick 11). Sedgwick demonstrates the failures of binaristic thinking through her deconstruction of the metanarrative’s binary between knowledge and ignorance. By pairing knowledge with rationalism and ignorance with irrationalism, Sedgwick argues that metanarratives' narrow view of knowledge allows queer truth and knowledge to be found in the irrational and ignorant. Ignorant heterosexual readings of texts results in the overlooking of queer symbolism, as any perceived queerness within a text is dismissed as irrational. Queer readings of texts often rely on this weakness of heterosexual readings to construct their own interpretation of meaning in texts. Through the ignorance of

heterosexual readings, queer readers are able to make new meaning and access knowledge otherwise overlooked; ignorance becomes empowering and the means for acquiring knowledge. Readers have been told “Don’t ask; You shouldn’t know” (Sedgwick 53) when it comes to questioning texts in the master canon. However, postmodern feminism’s manipulation of texts within the dominant canon opens the door for queer readings. This is why “the process of making salient the homosocial, homosexual, and homophobic strains and torsions in the already existing master-canon... especially revealing” (Sedgwick 51). The acts of rereading and rewriting allow for an appropriation of the master canon’s significance while catering to the voice of the other. Work done by postmodern feminists to challenge hegemony opens the potential for queer theorists to deconstruct texts in a similar way. Like Acker and Carter, queer theorists hope that what is considered a literary text becomes deconstructed through their subversive interactions (Sedgwick 13). Thus, *Epistemology of the Closet* is a queer and feminist book, championing the strategies of postmodern feminism and the potential of its strategies to benefit other groups (Sedgwick 15).

Acknowledging the relationship between postmodern feminist theory and queer theory positions Acker and Carter’s narratives as prone to contemporary queer rereadings. However, this is not to say that the narratives will entirely mesh and resemble queerness, as this process takes considerable rereading from the audience. Rereading Carter’s text with a consideration of queer theory requires work from the reader, and “If some dissonance emerges between Carter’s take on sexed identity and that conceptualized by queer theory, this does not disqualify Carter’s texts as worthy of interest” (Carroll 20) but rather allows the audience to read critically. “Too ready an appropriation of Carter’s texts as ‘queer’ might overlook” (Carroll 20) the contexts within which Carter was writing. Several of Carter’s works depict queer characters: *The Passion*

of *New Eve*'s focus on the problematic dynamic between two transgender women and *Nights at the Circus*'s interracial, homoerotic relationship between two peripheral female characters. These relationships, while concretely existing within her narratives, do not have the means to unproblematically exist in the contemporary without the work of a rereading audience.

There is ample scholarly conversation on Carter's outdated portrayal of trans-femme characters in her novel *The New Eve*. However, these queer readings of the text utilize the beneficial practice of skepticism to acknowledge the success of the text while also critiquing its problematic features. While Carter portrays some acceptable secondary queer characters, the ways in which she crafts central queer characters is responsive to an older understanding of queerness. In her text, *Nights at the Circus*, "Carter's focus upon the inescapably queer body of Fevvers indicates that the uncovering of dissident identities is her central concern" (Gamble 223). Carter's employment of a female protagonist who stands six feet tall, with broad shoulders and the wings of a bird presents a character that is undeniably queer in all senses. Her body stands distinct from the others of her species, queering her from society, thus making her an identifiable outsider. Positioning her protagonist outside of acceptable hegemony allows Fevvers to engage intimately with other characters that find themselves queered from society: for their gender, sexuality, appearance, and physical and mental disabilities.

Acker writes queerness in a similar way, writing what can be considered 'queer heterosexuality,' where cisgender, straight individuals are able to identify their disidentification with heteronormativity (Schlichter). Writing within the systems she critiques, Acker understandably cannot dismantle the entirety of capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and heteronormativity. Through her platform within the context of these situations, she inevitably benefits from them in some form. However, this does not diminish the significance of her

critiques, as she positions herself as willing to sacrifice the benefits they provide her in order to pursue systems of understanding that would work to lessen oppression (Lourenço 265). Acker cannot be faulted for her adherence to the systems she critiques, as they problematically demand her submission. They are the context within which expression is possible for her. While they oppress her, they also give her the opportunity to critique. Assuming that Acker's work can be read queerly without the work of a critical and rereading audience would "tell a simplistic tale" and falsely construct "an ethical and aesthetic understanding of her work" and "fail to grasp, on a conceptual and compositional basis, the complexities of work crafted across nearly three decades" (Lourenço 266). Since interpretation places responsibility on the audience to construct meaning of a text, a reader aware of this responsibility is best equipped for engagement with Acker and Carter's narratives.

It would be problematic to label either Acker or Carter as clear cut individuals and remark on their definitive position on any of the issues addressed in this paper. Both writers offer shifting and evolving perspectives across their careers. They exist within the context of their experiences and the era of their lives. To force them and their beliefs into the contemporary would be a misappropriation of their narratives. However, queer and contemporary readings of their texts are productive if the reader considers the contexts of their narratives. Without the process of rereading and rewriting, neither of these authors can be entirely accepted within the contemporary or queer canon, as they were never writing with that intention. However, since they were writing while aware of this limitation, they invite their readers to adapt and overcome this constraint. The complex nature of these writers and their texts demonstrates their understanding of their limitations as living beings within the context of their lives. The shifts within their lives suggest their acceptance of contemporary readings shifting the meaning taken

from their work. Reading their works within the contemporary context makes their works problematic in ways which neither Acker or Carter are qualified to predictively respond to, but their texts remain effective grounds for conversation as they place responsibility on their audience to adapt their texts and account for the passing of time and changing of ideas. This positions the reader as a significant actor in their texts, as the process of rereading and rewriting allows for their works to kairotically engage with contemporary concerns.

Kairos in the Contemporary.

A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the 2023 National Collegiate Honors Council Conference, and the argument defending presentation's relevance was that these two authors have tragically all but fallen into obscurity despite the continuing relevance of their work. While a trickle of new scholarship on either of the authors remains, it is a challenge to find young people, even active readers, feminists, or English majors, that recognize the names Angela Carter and Kathy Acker. Google searches of Angela Carter reached peak popularity in Fall 2004, fell to a comparable popularity of fifty percent in 2006, and since 2015 has hovered around twenty percent of the popularity she had in 2004 (Google Trends). Kathy Acker's popularity in 2004 outshines Carter, but she too has seen a steep decline in interest since 2010, now receiving about fifteen percent of the interest she saw in 2004 (Google Trends). This paper includes these trends to provide quantitative evidence that the careers of Angela Carter and Kathy Acker are fading into history. While feminism continues to be an important lens for viewing the world, Acker and Carter's voices are becoming quieter and quieter.

Conversations about feminism remain kairotic and poignant, and a 2020 survey from Pew Research Center reports that 61% of U.S. women feel that 'feminist' describes them very or somewhat well. However, the percentage of those who responded 'very well' falls at only 19%

(Barroso). Interestingly, the two groups with similar percentages for the overall view of very or somewhat well are women ages sixty-five plus and women ages eighteen to twenty-nine. The age groups of thirty to forty-nine and fifty to sixty-four both find themselves to identify less with feminism. While the age brackets of this survey do not exactly align with the generational breakdown, the findings of the survey still suggest that women of the Baby Boomer and Generation Z demographics currently hold the highest association with feminism. This is not to say that the two generations' understanding of feminism mirror each other, but it suggests that there has been a decrease in feminist values within the Generation X and Millennial demographics and that Generation Z marks a resurgence of interest in feminism. Generation Z carries the largest percentage of positive associations with the word “feminist,” with twenty seven percent responding “very well” and forty one percent responding ‘somewhat well’ (Barroso). With fewer Generation X and Millennial women associating themselves with the term ‘feminist,’ should Generation Z consider turning to women of the Baby Boomer era for feminist guidance? Many of the issues earlier feminist movements were concerned with continue to oppress women today: The Equal Rights Amendment sits unratified, *Roe v. Wade*’s overturning criminalizes female sexuality outside of childbearing, the wage gap persists, and systemic oppression and violence against women continues.

If Angela Carter and Kathy Acker were still living today, they would belong to the Baby Boomer generation, but the battles they fight within their texts continue to hold relevance and exigency for feminists today. With women of Generation Z displaying a resurgence of identification with the feminist movement, it is important for them to engage critically with the work of feminists that came before them. By critically engaging with the writings of Acker and Carter through the practice of rereading and rewriting, a contemporary, Generation Z audience

can apply the kairotically relevant themes and issues that appear in their texts to their own lived experience, honoring the postmodern tradition's goal of empowering the individual to reflect on and depict their lived experience and deconstructing the dominant metanarrative. Rather than relying on androcentric views of feminine identity and sexuality, contemporary audiences of Acker and Carter's work have the potential to embrace the traditions of postmodern feminism and expose themselves to the subjective multitude of feminine identity and sexuality. With the tools of Cixous, Kristeva, Beauvoir, and Irigaray, postmodern feminism and its writers lays the foundation for feminism to be an malleable and adaptable strategy for those looking to critically engage with their societies, surroundings, and selves. Carter's *Sophie Fevvers* best encapsulates the potential that postmodern feminism grants contemporary readers: she is the new winged woman and she hopes for a future where all women can fly.

Postmodern feminists acknowledge the role future generations will play and that the limitations of their era will cause their works to fall short at remedying the issues they are critiquing. Cixous uses the metaphor of a bow coming together with an arrow to propel the latter forward as a manifestation of the former's work and the charged power of the pair:

It is time to liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her— by loving her for getting by, for getting beyond the Old without delay, by going out ahead of what the New Woman will be, as an arrow quits the bow with a movement that gathers and separates the vibrations musically, in order to be more than herself. (Cixous 878)

As novelists, Acker and Carter are able to continue reaching audiences after their premature passings through readers that choose to propel their work onwards. The woman, constantly arriving at new understandings of herself and her sexuality must understand all the work of

feminists that came before her. Without the Old Woman, there could be no potential for a New Woman; any progress feminism makes is only possible through the acknowledgement and intentional challenging of what once was. Engaging with feminism allows the woman to become more than herself and to build a sense of female community. The energy from the bow of postmodern feminism kairotically positions current feminism as a fast-moving entity, propelling forward until it reaches its target. Because of feminism's desire for continuously evolving progress, its exigency never expires and its conversations remain kairotic. The image of the "New Winged Woman" symbolically portrays this continual process, as wings grant her the freedom to explore her identity and sexuality while capturing a more complete, bird's eye view of the structures that seek to confine her. Cixous argues that "Flying is woman's gesture— flying in language and making it fly. We have all learned the art of flying and its numerous techniques; for centuries we've been able to possess anything only by flying, stealing away, finding, when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crossovers" (Cixous 887). The emergence of the "New Winged Woman" embodies the history of women's work to accept progress and protection in each other, working around the systems that oppress them. Flying in language through writing allows women to imagine a world with a different set of rules and normalcy through magic realism and the pastiche. The metaphor of flying represents the boldness of women to overcome the masculine laws of nature and secure things for themselves. The subversion of expectations is critical; the channels accessible to women are not the main routes within the dominant canon, but peripheral passages which seem undesirable to those comfortable within hegemony. This results in female writers manipulating narrative form and genre conventions to make the literary tools they employ their own: they take ideas and fly with them.

Contemporary trends in media reflect that women are ready for flight, with films such as *The Little Mermaid*, *Barbie*, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, *Babylon*, and *Poor Things* telling gynocentric narratives that explore uncomfortable confrontations with the questions surrounding feminine identity, sexuality, and the woman's relationship with the patriarchy and capitalism. All of these films contain obvious influences from the work of postmodern feminism. *Babylon* and *Poor Thing*'s portrayals of unabated feminine sexuality explore the themes and questions apparent in Acker and Carter's novels. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* utilizes magic realism and warps the narrative structure to reflect on the purpose of life for a female immigrant. *The Little Mermaid*'s casting of Halle Bailey as Ariel came with right wing backlash, as it rewrote the iconic story while demonstrating the importance of representation and challenging of dominant narratives. *Barbie*, the top grossing film of 2023, utilizes magic realism to take on the question of femininity, the influence of the patriarchy, the commodification of the female body, and what it means to be a woman. While some of these films are more successful than others at critiquing the structures which constrain their characters, together they imply that women need female written, gynocentric female characters. The creation of female mythology through the narratives of print media and film memorializes the experiences and imagination of women.

Simplistically, this paper carries on the names of Angela Carter and Kathy Acker and seeks to encourage a younger generation of readers, feminists, and scholars to continue exploring the strategies of postmodern feminism, magic realism, and the pastiche that they utilize in their conversations surrounding feminine identity, sexuality and the systems that construe them. By considering queer theory and the kairotic situation of this pair, the paper encourages contemporary audiences to not just read the works of Acker and Carter but to reread and rewrite

them with a critical eye that allows for women to continue flying while participating in the tradition of feminine mythology-making.

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