



English Studies in Latin America

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Source: *White Rabbit: English Studies in Latin America*, No. 8 (December 2014)

ISSN: 0719-0921

Published by: Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

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Ontological Uncertainties of Identity in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Gabriel Romero¹

This essay explores ontological uncertainties of subjectivity in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The novels address the question whether subjectivity is innate or constructed, or a combination of both? The main characters of these novels experience existential crises and question to what extent they are in control of their own subjectivity. Are they born into a pre-given identity or are they in control of shaping their identity according to free will? Or is identity perhaps a social construction indoctrinated by society? In my analysis of these novels I read subjectivity as a phenomenological problem and compare how the novels tally with and contrast to the philosophies of Judith Butler, Donald Hall and Georg Hegel. In conclusion, I advocate the idea of subjectivity as a paradox between a limited free will and a self-conscious inability to control external and internal pressures.

KEYWORDS: Postmodernism. Subjectivity. Performativity. Constructedness.

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This essay aims to explore to what extent Angela Carter's *Night at the Circus* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* address the ontological uncertainties of identity. Do Morrison and Carter support the idea that identity is constructed or performed, or do they leave space for the idea that identity is an essence already found within? Can the characters in their novels distinguish between the identity that has been forced on them, or deliberately been constructed by them, and the 'true' identity behind this construction, or are the characters unable to distinguish between these two? Is there a doer behind the characters' deeds that can be recognized as possessing an agency or a free will, or are the deeds only repetition of an imposed pre-constructed identity? This essay will explore how these authors address these existential questions in their novels.

Early in Carter's novel the reader is introduced to the uncertainty around Fevvers' ontological status: "Fevvers, the most famous aerialist of the day; her slogan, 'Is she fact or is she fiction (Carter 3)?" As Magali Cornier Michael has pointed out, Fevvers' identity is "a site of apparent contradictions: woman and bird, virgin and whore, fact and fiction, subject and object (509)" which prompts readers to carefully scrutinize the 'truth' behind Fevvers' identity. Sarah Sceats argues that Part 1 of the novel depicts Fevvers as "the agent of her own construction or reconstruction" by giving her the space to tell her own story (86). As several critics have pointed out (Dennis 123, Michael 500), the first part of *Night of the Circus* presents Fevvers as a being in control of her own commodification who sets the limits of how much of her may be consumed. In this context, the slogan functions as commercial propaganda with the aim to sell an orchestrated mystification of a profitable commodification. But on a deeper level, the function of the slogan can be read beyond its function as a commercial trick, because it poses a question regarding identity that concerns not only Fevvers but several of the characters in the novel.

Jack Walser, a young American journalist, has taken upon himself the task to find out the truth about Fevvers' identity by conducting an extensive interview. When Walser observes Fevvers'

performance, he looks for clues that will reveal her true identity. Walser finds that Fevvers performs her somersault in the air at twenty-five miles an hour in comparison to the average aerialist who does it at sixty miles per hour. Her ability to move in slow-motion in the air, and thus defy gravity, may be taken as an evidence that she does possess the capacity to fly, and hence would be a real bird-woman. Besides the slow-motion trick, Walser does not perceive anything remarkable in Fevvers' performance that couldn't have been performed by a wingless aerialist. Walser argues that any performative artist must enhance the constructedness of their performance in order to be able to sell it as a spectacle.

For, in order to earn a living, might not a genuine bird-woman – in the implausible event that such a thing existed – have to pretend she was an artificial one? He smiled to himself at the paradox: in a secular age, an authentic miracle must purport to be a hoax, in order to gain credit in the world (Carter 16).

Here, the craft behind the performance is highlighted. A performative artist performs stunts that have been acquired through stern exercise and not something that is innate. Furthermore, Fevvers' success also depends on the suspension of whether she is 'fact or fiction.' The audience, as Walser points out, seems indifferent to get to the bottom of Fevvers' ontological status ("Why isn't the whole of London asking: does Fevvers have a belly button (Carter 16)?"), but is rather contented being left with the doubt, which is part of the show, as long as they get to observe an eye-catching spectacle. In fact, Fevvers exaggerates her exotic features by turning herself into the spectacle that the audience expects her to be: "I commenced to dye my feathers at the start of my public career on the trapeze, in order to simulate more perfectly the tropic bird (Carter 24-25)." At this point, it seems that Fevvers is conscious of the productivity behind her performance, and seems to be in control of distinguishing between the commodification of herself and the agent behind it. As *Night at the Circus* proceeds from London to St. Petersburg and finally to Siberia, the distinction between

authenticity and illusion becomes less clear. Walser has a hard time believing that Fevvers is an authentic bird woman, but finds it difficult to say what it is in her proportions that are distorted, since there is no original with which to compare. Walser notices that he can identify in Fevvers an air of doubt regarding her own ontological status: “there was an air about her that suggested, whilst convincing others, she herself remained unconvinced about the precise nature of her own illusion (Carter 185)”. The self-awareness that surrounded Fevvers in Part 1 has turned into doubt as the novel proceeds. Fevvers struggles to distinguish between the boundaries between the authenticity and the illusion of her identity.

Buffo the clown experiences similar control of his performance as Fevvers does in Part 1. Buffo, however, points out the dangers that the commitment to a performative role bring: “... in that moment of choice ... exists a perfect freedom. But, once the choice is made, I am condemned ... to be “Buffo” in perpetuity (141).” Buffo highlights that he had control when creating his character, but after this, there is no possibility of change. Fevvers’ belief that she performs out of free will and that other options are available is debunked by Lizzie as an illusion: “All you can do to earn your living is to make a show of yourself... You must give pleasure of the eye, or else you’re good for nothing. For you, it’s always a symbolic exchange in the marketplace; you couldn’t say you were engaged in productive labour, now, could you, girl (217)?” In her imagination, Fevvers performs willingly, but as Lizzie points out, it appears that Fevvers has no other choice in life than becoming the performative artists that the audience expects her to be. Judith Butler argues that gender identity is performative and that no subjects pre-exist deeds (Butler 34). The idea of a core is an appearance created by repeated acts that are experienced as natural.

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being (Butler 45).

In *Nights at the Circus*, the performativity of identity does not only concern gender but also sheds light on the performative nature of her status as a bird-woman. The difficulty for Fevvers is that she was ‘hatched from an egg’ and born into an identity that is collectively constructed by the perspectives of her spectators. Since her identity has been imposed on her from an early age, she experiences it as natural and is unaware of its constructedness. In a similar fashion, Butler argues that boys and girls are moulded into culturally constructed conceptions of gender. The control that Fevvers possesses over her own commodification is hence an illusion since her artistic role is something that has been created by the gaze of her spectators. The ability to construct a role, in both Buffo and Fevvers’ cases, is hence only an illusion of freedom. However, *Night at the Circus* does not reduce Fevvers’ selfhood to being only the performative. At this point, it is important to differentiate between identity and subjectivity/self in order to understand Fevvers character in depth. Sceats highlights that Carter distinguishes “between self and identity” (92). Sceats explains that identity “is socially conferred or constructed through performance” and that the self, in contrast, is “what Carter means by ‘inwardness’” (92). David E. Hall defines identity as a “particular set of traits, beliefs, and allegiances that, in short- or long-term ways, gives one a consistent personality and mode of social being” and subjectivity in his view “implies always a degree of thought and self-consciousness about identity, at the same time allowing a myriad of limitations and often unknowable, unavoidable constraints on our ability to fully comprehend identity (3).” Fevvers makes the distinction between her “me-ness” and her performative identity and argues that the “me-ness” is her essence that cannot be given away.

‘My being, my me-ness, is unique and indivisible. To sell the use of myself for the enjoyment of another is one thing; I might even offer freely, out of gratitude or in the expectation of pleasure – and pleasure alone is my expectation from the young American. But the essence of myself may not be given or taken, or what would there be left of me (333)?

Fevvers recognizes her ability to maintain a distance from her performative role at the circus, but what she has also become conscious of is that her infatuation with Walser makes her vulnerable, and this vulnerability possesses the strength to shake the foundation of the self. Walser has through his journey with the circus experienced this fundamental change.

He was as much himself again as he ever would be, and yet that 'self' would never be the same again for now he knew the meaning of fear as it defines itself in its most violent form, that is, fear of the death of the beloved, of the loss of the beloved, of the loss of love (347).

Carter highlights that "anxiety is the beginning of conscience, which is the parent of the soul but is not compatible with innocence" (347). Jeanette Baxter argues that "progress can only emerge out of 'difficult' or dystopian situations such as being in love"(106). The fear of exposing herself as vulnerable causes Fevvers to doubt the stability of her selfhood.

She felt her outlines waver; she felt herself trapped forever in the reflection in Walser's eyes. For one moment, just one moment, Fevvers suffered the worst crisis of her life: 'Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am (344)?

Here, Fevvers poses some fundamental questions, both epistemological and ontological, about subjectivity and identity. She questions the limits of the knowledge she has of herself and her identity and asks to what degree she is constructed by her own agency or by the perception of others, in this particular case by the perception of Walser. In order to gain desired recognition from the other, the self in a conscious or unconscious manner, transforms itself to comply with the expectations of that other. Fevvers is conscious about the impact the gaze of the other may have on her identity, but she remains uncertain to what extent this gaze may be rejected. Fevvers is here conscious of the limitations of the "ability to fully comprehend identity" (3) as Donald Hall argues

and thus illustrates the idea that she possesses a subjectivity that can ask epistemological questions about the limitations of her control of her identity.

Walser's final question to Fevvers points back to the beginning of the novel when he tried to find out about the truth behind Fevvers identity: "Fevvers, only the one question ... why did you go to such lengths, once upon a time, to convince me you were the "only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world"?" (349). Fevvers responds to this question by bursting into laughter that is heard throughout the whole village. Finally, Fevvers retorts Walser's question: "To think I really fooled you!" she marvelled. 'It just goes to show there's nothing like confidence (350)".

Cornier Michael argues that Fevvers's laughter is a proof of her ability to fool Walser about her ontological status as a bird-woman, and thus "challenges male domination as well as Western binary logic (518)." Cornier Michael's feminist reading of *Nights at The Circus* concludes that Fevvers "resists male-centered definitions of her by assuming control of her own self-construction and undermining the conventional opposition between reality and fiction (Cornier 518)." Although Cornier Michael makes a valid point about the subversive ideas of gender that the novel presents, it is doubtful whether Fevvers actually possesses the level of control she thinks she has. I would argue that the novel questions the stability of identity and thus rejects any claims of full control.

Helen Stoddart argues that Fevvers' laughter "is provoked by a pastiche- the fact that there is no original behind the parody that is being mocked (39)." Stoddart explains that pastiche according to Fredric Jameson "is a form of 'neutral' imitation which is without any sense that there is an original and 'normal' figure which is being mocked in the imitation (39)." Jameson's pastiche, Stoddart explains, is "without 'ulterior motive' or 'satirical impulse' and is, thus, 'without laughter'(39)." Stoddart argues that Butler's, rather than Jameson's, definition of pastiche tallies with Fevvers' laughter. Stoddart quotes Butler:

“The loss of the sense of ‘the normal’ ... can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when ‘the normal,’ ‘the original’ is revealed to be a copy, and inevitably a failed one, an ideal that no one can embody. In this sense laughter emerges in the realization that all along the original was derived (Butler 138-139) (39).”

Stoddart concludes that Fevvers’ laughter is the result of her ability to fool Walser that she was an original. However, Stoddart highlights that “the novel refuses to clarify which of these categories has been faked – the wings or the virginity- which further muddies the clarity, and indeed possibility, of the original (39).” I would argue that the laughter is not only the product of Fevvers’ ability to fool Walser, but is also the result of Fevvers’s understanding that any claim to possess full knowledge of one’s own identity is only an illusion. The laughter is the result of a paradox: How can an individual fool another person about his/her identity when full control of that identity cannot be claimed? Fevvers’ new epistemological insight is that she cannot possess full knowledge of her own identity, thus, previous claims of origin are revealed to have been an illusion. This insight does not deny that Fevvers does possess a certain level of agency – it rather highlights that the boundaries between what has freely been chosen and what has been imposed are blurry.

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* addresses the topic of identity within the context of mid-19th century slavery in the mid-west. The novel sheds light on how slave identity is constituted by the imposed identity constructed by the white slave-owners and the slaves’ resistance towards this identity. Paul D and Sethe learn that becoming a free subject is not achieved purely by being freed from slavery. To learn to live as a free subject is a process that implies revisiting painful and repressed memories of the past in order to start a healing process that will enable facing the future with hope and self-awareness. The present time of the novel is 1873 but Paul D and Sethe’s memories go back to their time at Sweet Home in the early 1850s when slavery still had not been abolished. Sethe’s resuscitated daughter Beloved comes back as memory incarnated to challenge both Sethe and Paul D to go

through a painful process of ‘remembering’ the past in order to understand how their own identities have been shaped. Crucial for both Paul D and Sethe’s self-awareness of their present identities is to acknowledge that the slave identity that has been imposed on them by both the more ‘benevolent’ Mr. Garner and his more vicious successor Schoolteacher is a constructed identity that dehumanized them to be nothing more than commodities on a white man’s farm. At first, Paul D does not experience life at Sweet Home under Mr. Garner as agonizing; it is not until Schoolteacher’s arrival that Paul D becomes aware of his position as a slave.

In their relationship with Garner was true metal: they were believed and trusted, but most of all they were listened to. He thought what they said had merit, and what they felt was serious. Deferring to his slaves’ opinions did not deprive him of authority or power. It was Schoolteacher who taught them otherwise (147).

Schoolteacher didn’t take advice from Negroes. The information they offered he called backtalk and developed a variety of corrections (which he recorded in his notebook) to re-educate them (259).

Mr. Garner and Schoolteacher represent two quite different ways of ruling Sweet Home. However, in both their reigns the slaves at Sweet Home are subjected to follow the rules that are dictated by the white man and their ‘freedom’ only reaches as far as their owners are willing to permit. The difference between their reigns is that Mr. Garner creates the illusion that the slaves enjoy a certain kind of freedom and that they are men whose opinions count, while Schoolteacher explicitly denies the slaves such recognition. In fact, Mr. Garner’s reign is more successful in keeping the slaves unaware of their limited freedom and as a result his slaves are more loyal. Schoolteacher’s vicious treatment of the slaves, on the other hand, is counterproductive since the dramatic contrast between the two reigns makes Paul D conscious about the limitations of his present situation and as a consequence he attempts to escape. Georg W.F. Hegel’s Master and Slave

doctrine dictates that the Self depends on two things; *Being-for-self* which Hegel describes as the consciousness that I am a self and the *Being-for-others* which implies that my existence must be acknowledged by other human beings (Leitch 627). Twenty years after Sweet Home, Paul D questions whether Mr. Garner's rule at Sweet Home actually gave Paul D more freedom than Schoolteacher did. Paul D wonders whether he actually was, and is, a real man with his own agency, or if he is a mere construction of Mr. Garner.

Now, plagued by the contents of his tobacco tin, he wondered how much difference there really was between before Schoolteacher and after. Garner called and announced them men – but only on Sweet Home, and by his leave. Was he naming what he saw or creating what he did not? That was the wonder of Sixo, and even Halle; it was always clear to Paul D that those two were men whether Garner said so or not. It troubled him that, concerning his own manhood, he could not satisfy himself on that point. Oh, he did manly things, but was that Garner's gift or his own will (260)?

Echoing the Hegelian doctrine, Paul D understands that his identity was dependent on Mr. Garner's recognition of him as a thinking subject with a free will. At the same time, in order to gain this recognition, Paul D is in turn forced to recognize Mr. Garner's superiority and ability to take away this recognition, a recognition that is consciously, or unconsciously, shown through loyalty and hard labour. Schoolteacher was not willing to give the slaves the amount of recognition that Mr. Garner had done, but expected the same loyalty with even more commitment to labour. Schoolteacher seeks to justify his dominance through 'scientific' observations that prove the black slaves' animal traits. By writing down these observations in a book, and thus giving them the illusion of being facts, the slaves at Sweet Home become aware of their dehumanized slave status. Paul D

notices that Schoolteacher's degenerate treatment of him has turned him into a creature that enjoys less freedom and respect than the farm's rooster – 'Mister.'

Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub (86).

Sethe experiences the same treatment of dehumanization: "I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up" (193)." Schoolteacher's condescending comment followed up by the rape and milking of Sethe's breasts by his nephews make Sethe aware that life in slavery is worse than dying, something that she later proves when trying to free her children from slavery by killing her oldest daughter Beloved. The paradox that both Paul D and Sethe have to deal with twenty years later at 124 is that although they know that Schoolteacher was wrong the damage he has caused them is real and has left deep marks in their identity. Beloved comes back to force both Sethe and Paul D to recognize this paradox.

"His [Paul D's] strength had lain in knowing that Schoolteacher was wrong. Now he wondered... If Schoolteacher was right it explained how he had come to be a rag doll- picked up and put back down anywhere any time by a girl young enough to be his daughter (147-148)."

To overcome the damage that slavery has caused their identities, Paul D and Sethe are not only forced to individually remember previous painful memories evoked by Beloved, but are also forced to face them collectively in order to start a slow process to recover an identity that is free from the identity-construction of the slave owners. Hegel's master and slave doctrine recognizes that the master's victory is hollow since "recognition, like love, has value only when it is freely given, when it

comes from someone who 'is like me in status'. If the other acknowledges my existence only because forced to do so, how can that calm my lurking doubt about who I am (Leitch 627)?" Recognition, hence, must come from members of the same community. The 28 days of freedom that Sethe experiences between arriving to 124 and the reappearance of Schoolteacher is a time for Sethe to claim ownership of herself. Baby Suggs' ceremonies are instances for freed slaves to collectively learn to love themselves. "Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with the others, she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another (112)." Collective healing is also found in the exorcism carried out by the women in the community who themselves are forced to deal with the ghosts of their past. Morrison emphasises that recovering an identity for the African-American takes place on both the individual and the collective level. Another important condition for claiming ownership of the self is to allow oneself to engage full heartedly in a relationship. Paul D and Sethe's love relationship does not come without problems since it is interrupted by breakups; the process of healing is slow and requires patience, but it also promises a more hopeful future

As we have seen, the characters in both Morrison and Carter's novels address fundamental questions about the nature of identity. I have argued that both novels illustrate that identity is a paradox between free will and external and internal imposition and that the boundaries between them are blurry. Characters in these novels show evidence that they are aware of this paradox and consciously struggle to achieve an identity that they feel comfortable with while at the same time experiencing the anxiety of not having full control. This fact shows that identity is not static but has an ever-changing nature with is modifiable to a certain extent by the subject's free will but is also subjected to uncontrollable factors, both external and internal. Free will, thus, only plays a part in an individual's identity since the individual is formed by the expectations of society alongside with uncontrollable emotions such as fears and desires.

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