Step into My Parlour: Magical Realism and the Creation of a Feminist Space

She is an unbroken egg she is a sealed vessel;
she has inside her a magic space the
entrance to which is shut tight
with a plug of membrane;
she is a closed system [...].
- Angela Carter, "The Company of Wolves"

This is my home this thin edge of barbwire - Gloria Anzaldua, Borderlands/ La Frontera

Originally considered a "Latin American event" (Zamora and Paris 1995,1), magic realism has been-convincingly shown to be far more widespread; indeed, in recent decades it has been gaining in international popularity. Yet despite its immense success, it remains among the most challengingly diverse and ill-defined of the literary modes or genres. Abstract, intuitive notions about the nature of magic realism abound, the most common of which is that it blends the magical and the real, introducing fantastic elements in a real-world setting. This is also true of many other types of literature, however, and therefore the notion is too vague and imprecise to be helpful in establishing a definition. One critic who has attempted to articulate the exact relationship between the magic and the real is Amaryll Chanady, who argued that any antinomy between these worlds is resolved, because "in magic realism, the supernatural is not presented as problematic," but is instead "integrated within the norms of perception of the narrator and characters in the fictitious world" (1985, 23). Because they supposedly do not question the supernatural, she concludes that the magic does "not disconcert the reader" (24). In other words, the magic is not disturbing to the characters or narrator because it is

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depicted as a normal part of their everyday reality. Chanady adds that this natural presentation engenders in readers an equally natural response; they are not disconcerted by the supernatural because it is accepted as real within the fictional world. Many current theories of magic realism still focus on the compatibility of the two fictional worlds present in a text of this mode or genre.¹

However, if one accepts this definition, then one is led to the conclusion that much contemporary literature that has been almost unanimously considered magic realism cannot be. The particular example to which this paper is dedicated is Angela Carter's 1984 *Nights at the Circus*. In this novel, the presentation of the magic, and the characters' and narrator's response to it are hardly natural, and the tension, or antinomy, between the magical and the real is sustained throughout the entire narrative and in fact functions as an essential part of the author's feminist project. Nonetheless, most critics who have written about the novel agree that it is magic realist (Blodgett 1994, Lee 1997, Peach *1998*), even according to Haffenden (1985, 76) and Todd (1989, 385), a definitive example. Admittedly, this contention seems to rely more on intuition than any firm theoretical basis. Merja Makinen recognized this common intuitive approach when she observed that upon the arrival of South American magic realism in Britain in the mid-eighties, "Carter's readers could assign her anarchic fusion of fantasy and realism to an intelligible genre, and so feel more secure" (2000, 26).

There are two logical possibilities: either the novel has been misclassified and misinterpreted by both critics and readers, or something is amiss with Chanady's theory. As Chanady is no doubt aware, so-called "resolved antinomy" is by definition impossible, in that antinomies are inherently not resolvable. In this paper, I take the contrary position that the sustained antinomy foregrounded in *Nights at the Circus* is in fact a crucial feature of magic-realist narratives, including the best known prototype, Garcia Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. As Bortolussi illustrates in her paper, while the characters and narrator respond naturally, magic-realist texts nonetheless sustain antinomy by means of a variety of distancing techniques (e.g. the self-

¹ The issue of whether magic realism is a mode or genre is a complex one, and a discussion of this point is beyond the scope of this article. I therefore simply refer to it hereafter as a genre. 2 Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary actually defines antinomy as follows: "a fundamental and apparently unresolvable conflict or contradiction" (92).

reflexive nature of the narration, which exposes the fictionality of what is being narrated; the aggressive hyperbole; and the grounding of events in superstition, legend and myth, which creates a tall-tale, playful effect). My discussion of Carter's novel will demonstrate that it belongs to the category of magic realism because it deliberately sustains a tension between the magical and the real similarly to *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and other Latin-American predecessors, namely, through the relationship of the characters to the fictional world; the language of the narrator's discourse; the nature and the logic of the magical events depicted; and the configuration of a space in which the boundaries between the magical and the real are resolutely fluid.

I believe that this revision to magic-realist theory accomplishes two important goals: a) it reconciles literary scholarship with popular intuitions about magic realism, and b) it provides a more functional tool for literary analysis and interpretation, which theories must be able to serve. As Linden Peach notes in his own discussion of whether Carter's work can or should be readily accepted as magical realism,

the term [...] has been applied slackly since the 1940s to Latin American writers and more recently to those from the Caribbean, Nigeria and India to emphasise their difference from mainstream Euro-American culture. It has not been rigorously defined or adequately distinguished from related literary concepts such as Tabulation, the fantastic and the uncanny. (8)

While I do not dispute the conclusions of those intuitive responses to *Nights at the Circus*, it is my belief that development of a more cogent generic theory will necessarily further our understanding of this and other magic-realist texts. With this latter goal in mind, I will address the inadequately explored issue of precisely how the magical and the real are brought together in Carter's novel, showing that their contradictory juxtaposition within the text establishes a tension between what is and what can be imagined, and that this tension serves to communicate a subversive, feminist level of signification.

Crafting an Antinomic Web

One of the textual strategies by which this tension is sustained involves the presence of the character Jack Walser. Initially identifying himself as firmly rational and skeptical, he is reluctantly drawn deeper and deeper into Fewer's magical sphere. The first two chapters of *Nights*, with the stubbornly real and "enlightened" Walser interviewing the just as stubbornly magic Fevvers, deal

metaphorically with tension between diametrically opposed points of view based, respectively, on reason and the supernatural. Walser here can be read as the rational, educated reader attempting to negotiate the magical-real text embodied by our heroine: inescapably corporeal and of this world, sitting in her dressing room piled high with dirty dishes and soiled undergarments that reek of "essence of Fevvers" (9), but also somehow just as inescapably ethereal and of another world, owing to the pair of wings she sports on her shoulders. As Alison Lee notes, "Fevvers is not just a character within the novel, [...] but also a clue as to how to read the novel" (1997, 93) — and, perhaps, how to read magic realism itself.

While to Feyvers, the supernatural (symbolized by her wings) is part of her everyday reality, neither her audiences nor Walser accept without demur what should logically be impossible. The reporter wages a desperately uphill battle between a desire to remain true to "reason" and the facts staring him in the face. Likewise, the various audiences for Fevvers' performance would prefer to uncover the "humbug" behind the magic, and it is their desire to figure out how the trick is carried off that keeps the aerialist in demand and allows her to make a living. Thus if magic does exist and is to be accepted, it must paradoxically enough be camouflaged as tawdry trickery: "do not think the revelation she is a hoax will finish her on the halls; far from it. If she isn't suspect, where's the controversy? What's the news?" (II). Let us note that even during Fewer's childhood, the reality of her intrinsic magic, far from being unproblematically accepted, had to disguise itself as not-real in order not to scare off the brothel's customers: "Nelson made it known that those shining golden wings of mine were stuck over a hump with a strong adhesive and did not belong to me at all" (32). (It is of interest to point out that the inhabitants of Macondo also have trouble dealing with the so-called "real," while conversely seeming to accept the "unreal," thus underscoring the fact that the existence of these two categories is specifically problematized rather than resolved in magic realism.)

Walser/the reader comes to this Fevvers-embodied text with "eyes the cool grey of scepticism" (8). Nevertheless, matter-of-factly confronted with what cannot be explained, he is occasionally forced "to grab tight hold of his scepticism just as it was about to blow over the ledge of the press box" (16). His world "is threatened by [an element] which does not fit into the logical

code expressed by the rest of the text" (Chanady 1985, 3).3 Both the winged giantess and her diminutive foster mother, Lizzie, defy him to accuse them of trickery, of being in any way more fantastic or less real than he is. The magic rather quickly wields a strange power over this representative of a patriarchal worldview. Before long he begins to wonder if a broader (pun intended) notion of reality is called for: "Curiouser and curiouser, thought Walser. [...] Shall I believe it? Shall I pretend to believe it?" (28) and "Surprised by his own confusion, he gave his mind a quick shake to refresh its pragmatism" (30). Neither hero nor reader are accorded the opportunity to recover and reestablish a clear, unproblematic distinction between real and unreal: "But he had no time to think about how his eyes were deceiving him because Fevvers now solemnly took up the interview shortly before the point where she left off (20). Whenever he is about to question what is being recounted, "Fevvers lassooe[s] him with her narrative and drag[s] him along with her before he [has] a chance to ask Lizzie if-" (60). As these disorienting elements multiply, Walser's worldview is gradually but ineluctably altered through the experience of reading the magical-realist text simultaneously personified by and recounted by the "fabulous bird-woman" (15). Likewise, the reader is disconcerted and made to hesitate, to re-evaluate, to consider what has happened and what it might mean.

Makinen has commented that "the focus [in both *Nights* and Carter's 1991 novel *Wise Children*} is on mocking and **exploding** [...] constrictive cultural stereotypes" (qtd. in Peach 1998, 131; emphasis added). The use of magic realism allows this novelist to open up and manipulate areas of identity that would normally remain bounded and closed. By constructing in and around Fevvers magico-real parameters within which the character can retreat and over which she is master — or mistress — , and which she is eventually able to expand, Angela Carter partially removes her protagonist from the sphere of the real, the "societal perspective from which identity is imposed" (Hardin 1994, 78). Walser has appeared on the scene precisely to assign her a (false) identity as humbug, whore, and/or freak of nature. He wants to write her story, to textualize her. Even more ominously, the reporter has explicitly set out to reveal her life and identity as a fraud, to make her fit his conception of the world by rejecting her existence in the identity she claims and puts forward. If, as Foucault has taught us, language is power, then the authority

3 While it should be pointed out that Chanady's reference here is to the fantastic, I find the statement applies more accurately to magic realism.

unilaterally to render someone else in language, to inscribe him/her on the pages of a newspaper published in a foreign land by persons unknown is an expression of a frightening level of domination. Accordingly, Carter gleefully frustrates this hegemony of masculine/real over the feminine/magical throughout the novel.

A second strategy for sustaining the antinomy between the magical and the real is the narrator's ambiguous stance towards the characters and the fictional world. In this respect too, Carter's novel resembles Garcia Marque2'. While Chanady claimed that the narrator of magic-realist texts never casts doubt on the veracity of the supernatural or strange events by "giv[ing] the reader information which invalidates the observations of the characters" (1985, 40), this claim is not born out in One Hundred Years of Solitude. At that novel's close, one discovers that the entire narrative has in fact been a prediction written down by the wizard character, Melquiades, and that another character, Aureliano, has been decoding what Melquiades had foretold, only to meet with death when he comes to the end of the text. This narratorial strategy on some level denies the very existence of the text that we are reading and of the world in which these two characters have been living, as both characters and world, figuratively speaking, finally disintegrate before our very eyes. A similar strategy is employed by Angela Carter. Just as One Hundred Years of Solitude ends with the revelation that the narrator is not the trustworthy one we expected, and readers realize they have been tricked, so too does Nights at the Circus end on a note of surprise. Carter explains that ending her story with the line "I fooled you" is not merely supposed to

make you realize the fictionality of what has gone before, it makes you start inventing other fictions, things that might have happened - as though the people were really real, with real lives. Things might have happened to them other than the things I have said happened to them. So that is really an illusion. It's inviting the reader to write lots of other novels for themselves, to continue taking these people as if they were real. (Haffenden 1985, 90-91)

So the real is exposed as fictional, and the fictional real. The codes and conventions by which we seek to make sense of things are consciously and radically undermined, leaving us to re-examine all of our assumptions. To Magali Cornier Michael, *Nights at the Circus* offers "a space where possibilities for change can be explored" (1994, 492). Fevvers herself states:

Believe it or not, all that I told you as real happenings were so, in fact; and as to questions of whether I am fact or fiction, you must answer that for yourself! (292)

The reader is in no way asked to "suspend [...] his judgment of what is rational and what is irrational in the fictitious world" (Chanady 1985,26), nor is "the fantastic element [...] treated by the narrative voice with the banal tone of acceptance characteristic of writing in the vein of magical realism" (Johnson 2000,131). On the contrary, as already stated, Carter's heavily ironic narrative voice and explicitly emancipatory project are intended precisely to lead her readership to a fundamental questioning of such dichotomies as rational/irrational, natural/unnatural, masculine/feminine, and realistic/ magical. As postmodern, post-colonial critics have explained elsewhere, magic realism by definition leads us to question these and other polarities (see Bortolussi, this issue). Carter challenges our normal perceptions by highlighting elements that cannot be integrated unproblematically. Lee characterizes our author as follows: "Angela Carter is the child who sees that the emperor has no clothes. She has a heretical imagination, and she leaves not a single emperor in any doubt as to his nakedness" (1997, 6), and Harriet Blodgett (1994, 49) rightly describes her as "a writer of genuinely revisionist fiction who aims at enhancing female power and countering the inscription of patriarchy." There can be no doubt that Nights at the Circus is a prime example of magic realism, and that this genre has afforded our novelist the necessary scope to accomplish just those objectives. Paradoxically, it is the spinning of a magic-realist web that allows "reality [to be] untangle[d]" (Leal 1995, 121) and "creates a more complete picture of the world" (Chanady 1985, 27). A vital distancing effect is created as the emphasis is displaced from the magic to the act of narration itself, underscoring the incontrovertible, albeit occasionally ignored, fact that none of what takes place within a fictional world is in fact "natural," although certain elements may be realistically rendered.

As a third strategy, just as the act of narrating is foregrounded in order to highlight its self-reflexive nature, so too is the very language of the text employed subversively. Michael points out that *Nights at the Circus* "weaves together elements of the carnivalesque and fantastic with those of harsh material realism as vehicles for feminist aims" (1994,492). Other papers in this volume, such as Danow's, elaborate on the role of excess (linguistic and otherwise) as a generic feature of magic realism. Hyperbole appears to be characteristic of Angela Carter as well, given that she enthusiastically bursts the

bounds of what is possible. Fevvers' dressing room is described as an exaggeratedly uber-feminine space, so much so that it becomes oddly threatening: with a "writhing snakes' nest of silk stockings, green, yellow, pink, scarlet, black [, and] the other elaborately intimate garments, wormy with ribbons, carious with lace, redolent of use" (9) strewn about, it "resembles the aftermath of an explosion in a corsetiere's" (13). During her interview with Walser in this room, she somehow manages to consume an entire case of champagne, a greasy bacon sandwich, and several mugs of sweet black tea, figuratively drinking and eating him under the table.

A fourth strategy for sustaining antinomy is the very nature of the magical events themselves. The fictional world of *Nights at the Circus* includes such disparate magical events as winged women, omniscient pigs, and dancing tigers, set against elements of such in-your-face realism as flatulence, soiled laundry, and broken bones. Without ever allowing her readers to lose sight of the material world, Carter offers us fabulous scenes such as when a snowstorm is conjured up by the dancing of a troupe of clowns. Another specific example occurs when our heroine, fleeing the decidedly priapic Duke, escapes on a model train:

She dropped the toy train on the Isfahan runner — mercifully, it landed on its wheels — as, with a grunt and whistle of expelled breath, the Grand Duke ejaculated.

In those few seconds of his lapse of consciousness, Fevvers ran helter-skelter down the platform, opened the door of the first-class compartment and clambered aboard. (192)

Such a wide panoply of magical occurrences is impossible to accept as natural, and rather seems to engender an acknowledgment of impossibility in the reader. For another example, consider the stream of Jose Arcadio's blood winding its way under the door, across the room and the street, down steps and over curbs, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. While neither the narrator nor the characters express any surprise or disbelief, surely the reader is not expected to take these descriptions as unproblematic, or to believe that their acceptance is truly part of anyone's worldview. On the contrary, passages such as these stop the reader in his/her tracks, drawing attention to the inherently unreal nature of the story and of literature in general, no matter how realistically rendered.

The specific representation of magical events in *Nights at the Circus* leads us directly to the issue of space in the novel and how it is employed for

political ends. Carter's novel represents a conscious and defiant attempt to craft a personal and definitively female landscape via the techniques of magic realism. In *Nights*, she constructs magical spaces, both physical/actual and metaphorical/imaginary, within otherwise realistic fictional parameters — what Jeanne Delbaere-Garant has termed "open[ing] a fracture in the real" (1995,250). The resultant fictional space, which is simultaneously realistic and unrealistic, allows a web of new, previously unimagined, subversive possibilities to be spun and subsequently explored.

Biology Is Destiny

One of the most interesting spaces in the novel is that of the female body, and the degree to which it is allowed agency is worthy of attention. Several critics (see Chanady 1985, 19-20 for citations from Ray Verzasconi, Floyd Merrel, and Lucila-Ines Mena, for example) have chosen to comment on South American examples of magic realism as representations of a primitive, magical Indian mentality co-existing alongside European rationality. Latin American authors' use of magic realism rejects the view that the native myths and worldview are somehow homogeneous and unchanging, revealing that they are in fact only constructed that way in the Western mind. Carter's use of the genre also invalidates such condescending attitudes, replacing the Indian/European dichotomy with a binary opposition of female/male, which she then proceeds to undermine.

In many societies and cultural traditions, women have been associated with the mystical, as more intimately connected to the mysterious forces of nature than is the male half of the species. What Angela Carter does throughout her work is explore the mythologizing of woman, and in this particular novel she subverts such myths through the creation of a special corporeal space: a female body that refuses to be contained within either real or magical parameters. What better way to reject mythological distortions of woman's essence than to indicate unambiguously to the reader that the magic is to be taken with a grain of salt? The strategies of magic realism as employed by Carter encourage readers to participate in the deconstruction, rather than validation, of established worldviews that constrict or malign women. One critic writes that "from the start her fictions have been designed to enhance, not corrupt, the nature and quality of female life, and they do so in distinctively original ways" (Blodgett 1994, 54), and our feathered Cockney aerialist is a case in point.

Fevvers — whom Carter has so aptly characterized as "Mae West with wings" (Haffenden 1985, 88), highlighting her irreverent and over-the-top persona — is constantly evading those who would possess/contain/define her. To this end, she posits an alternate version of reality with her corporeal self and a "fluid identity [that] destabilizes the rigid boundary between subject and object" (Michael 1994, 509). Fevvers is larger than life in more ways than one: Carter's heroine acts as an explicit reference to the othering of women as freaks of nature, figures of deviance, and turns these damaging perceptions on their head. To borrow Paris' phrasing, this character "repeatedly call[s] attention to [herself] as metaphor" (1995, 168), a metaphor made literal. Clearly the wings bulging from her shoulder blades symbolize freedom, a refusal to be held to the ground, to be subjected to the daily indignities of a patriarchal world. *Nights at the Circus* is a transgressive fantasy of womanhood that underscores the inequity inherent to the dominant paradigm, and it does so by exploiting the antinomy inherent to magic realism.

This female body is simultaneously real and magical. To survive and prosper professionally in a hostile, would-be exploitive world, however (to exploit them before they exploit her, in other words), Fevvers and countless women before and after her must pretend to be other than they are, in this case magical masquerading as real (again, the tension between incongruous versions of reality is omnipresent). In the words of Sarah Bannock, "Despite her obvious impossibility, her emphatic implausibility, Fevvers has a curious — if ironic — ring of authenticity" (1997, 213). It is of particular interest to note that our heroine pretends virginity as well — "her inaccessibility was [...] legendary" (19) —, claiming her body as inviolate, even though she is in fact sexually experienced. Defending the right to define such terms as they apply to herself, she assertively queries: "Wherein does a woman's honour reside, old chap? In her vagina or in her spirit?" (230). Within the boundaries of the autonomous magical space(s) she inhabits, this woman seizes the power of naming.

Fevvers' ability to fly can be viewed as a nod to Helene Cixous, in that the French verb *voler* can mean either to fly or to steal. This heroine refuses to accept a "feminine' role and behaviours, preferring to appropriate various "masculine" freedoms: to speak, act, consume, enjoy a hefty profit, and control her own life. Walser is even led to wonder if perhaps this astonishingly self-confident and assertive creature is actually a cross-dresser: "It flickered through his mind: Is she really a man?" (35). Magic realism prompts readers to ask what kind of literary world they are exploring, and readers *of Nights at*

the Circus are simultaneously prompted to ask what kind of woman they are being urged to consider here. Fevvers challenges males and anyone else who might disapprove to accept her as she is, and mocks everyone with the motto "Is she fact or is she fiction?" (7). Her very existence is a defiant response to the pervasive fiction(s) about women and the "real," and it is a role into which she enters wholeheartedly. The magical wings with which she is blessed function to lift, figuratively speaking, her corporeal female self out of confining reality: "my body was the abode of limitless freedom" (41). Fevvers dares to behave contrary to and to exist outside of societal expectations and, through her, Carter urges readers as well to question those expectations.

Tempus Fevversque Fugiunt

Another interesting magical space in Nights at the Circus is that defined by the various parameters that Fevvers controls. To critic Wayne Ude, magic realism is in effect the most recent development of the American romance novel. He discusses frontier literature as a sub-genre of romance, representing the new North American continent as "pure wilderness, a place where the familiar rules and laws of the European past did not apply [...]" (1989, 50). Women have not played a significant role in writing novels of the frontier, whereas they have responded to the lure of magical realism. Perhaps women employ this genre to seek a space where phallogocentric laws do not apply. To the "army of lovers" (217) introduced in the last third of Nights, who escape from the panopticon prison and set out to found a Utopian woman's community, "the white world around them looked newly made, a blank sheet of fresh paper on which they could inscribe whatever future they wished" (218). This passage is clearly intended to be read ironically, however. To feminist authors such as Angela Carter, magic realism may well function not as yet another stage in the history of the romance novel, but rather as a deliberately crafted anti-romance. Her female characters are provided the opportunity to step outside the romance paradigms on which much of reality and realist fiction is based in order to find a novel territory where they are allowed agency, to be the hero in their own story. (As an aside, let us bear in mind that Fevvers at one point actually refers to Walser as her "quest.")

Patriarchal worlds, fictional or otherwise, typically employ rigid sex roles and masculine hegemony to deny women mastery over the three dimensions of space, and thus Fevvers looks beyond the spatial with a view to attaining autonomy. By manipulating the fourth dimension of time, she and other

female characters manage to create a magical temporal space and thereby to exert a level of control over their lives. An obvious early example is Shahrazad and the frame story of The Thousand and One Nights, which describes the deliberate suspension of regularly successive time in a bid to withstand the demands of the romance genre. A death sentence is endlessly deferred as that teller of tales in essence lives and relives her wedding night in an act of resistance to malevolent male forces. ⁴ Altering the flow of time is an available and effective literary strategy for both the feminist and the magic-realist project. It is of interest to note that in both Fevvers' dressing room and the Siberian territory of the shaman's tribe, time no longer obeys normal physical laws: it is able to pass either more quickly or more slowly than usual. This situation occurs in a number of magic-realist texts: the room occupied by Melquiades in One Hundred Years of Solitude, for example, does not suffer the effects of time.⁵ A case could likely be made for temporal manipulation as a fairly common magic-realist technique — after all, Flores once wrote that "Time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity and the unreal happens as part of reality" (1985, 115) in this genre. In any event, regardless of whether the suspension or acceleration of time is a magical-realist element per se or merely a magical element, the fact remains that Carter makes specific, subversive use of the exploitation of temporal bounds in this novel.

Like Shahrazad, Fevvers halts the clock while she tells her tale in the opening chapters, weaving a spell around a would-be despot who seeks to possess, expose, and then discard her. Creating an unreal dimension where Big Ben can strike midnight three hours in a row, she stalls time in a bid to tell her story and control her own fate. London's great (phallic) clock tower is outmanoeuvred by Ma Nelson's magical timepiece that has been passed from woman to woman, and that has served as one of Lizzie and Fevvers' most treasured possessions. With her foster mother's invaluable assistance, Fevvers has in fact managed to co-opt time itself into a highly purposeful female empowerment scheme:

For the things my foster mother can pull off when she sets her mind to it, you'd not believe! Shrinkings and swellings and clocks running ahead or behind you

- 4 For an in-depth discussion of temporal suspension by a heroine in need of refuge, see my recent article entitled "Seeking Refuge in Prepubescent Space: The Strategy of Resistance Employed by *The Tale of Genji's* Third Princess."
- 5 See Paris (1995, 173-74) for a discussion of how our sense of time is eroded in this and other novels.

like frisky dogs; but there's a logic to it, some logic of scale and dimension that won't be meddled with, which she alone keeps the key of, like she keeps the key of Nelson's timepiece stowed away in her handbag [...]. (199)

When this clock is lost and temporal control thus relinquished, all hell begins to break loose: "we'll soon lose track of time, and then what will become of us" (226). The two women are no longer able to maintain control over the magical sphere they have created around themselves — at this juncture lacking even "elementary household magic" (271), such as hair colour. Fevvers suffers a fracture of one of her celestial wings, is now without either work or a platform to exhibit herself, and experiences a rapid decline of her overall physical appearance and emotional state.

Other, untamed, external spaces intersect with Fevver's personal space in a magically real context. Walser's brief visit with the nomadic tribe in Siberia — where, we are told, "there existed no difference between fact and fiction; instead a sort of magic realism" (260) — is somehow strangely long enough for him to grow a full beard, despite the fact that "it's not a week since we all parted company!" (272). The mysterious innocents who took him in "inhabited a temporal dimension which did not take history into account. They were a-historic. Time meant nothing to them" (265). Yet so-called progress is looming mercilessly on the horizon. As *Lizzie* notes: "time has passed — or else is passing — swiftly for these woodland folk" (272). This land out of time, whose inhabitants are on the verge of being colonized by an unsympathetic outside world, is represented as having somehow parallel concerns to those of the female wishing to escape patriarchal colonization and its related restrictions, which fact is made explicit in the following lines:

Freed from the confines of her corset, her [Fevvers'] once-startling shape sagged, as if the sand were seeping out of the hour-glass and *that was* why time, in these parts, could not control itself." (276-77)

One Is not Born, but Rather Hatches into a Woman?

In an interview with Anna Katsavos, Carter commented that "It's not very pleasant for women to find out how they are represented in the world" (1994, 16). Fevvers recognizes that overt resistance to male representation of the female under these circumstances is doomed to failure, and therefore covertly sets out to control how she will be inscribed by employing the supernatural. She seductively entices Walser into her magical version of reality and traps him

there, not permitting him to escape until she has succeeded in undermining all of his preconceptions. It is important to note that she accomplishes this goal by forcing him to step within the boundaries she has established and controls. Fevvers, by in effect confining him momentarily within her magical space (physical, temporal, and discursive) — "It seemed he must not leave the room until she and her familiar were done with him" (52) —, refuses to allow the male this power to determine and fix her self by measuring her against patriarchal conventions. Instead, she forces him to question those very conventions and the underlying paradigm by which he had assumed the right to name and define her. Delbaere-Garant explains that in this genre, "The interpenetration of the magic and the real is no longer metaphorical but literal; the landscape is no longer passive but active — invading, trapping, dragging away, etc." (1995, 252). Fevvers' feminist, magic-realist space does indeed act assertively and irrevocably on the masculine element, manipulating and altering him to suit her own needs and desires.

The magical-realist aspect of *Nights at the Circus* does not consist of merely one or two inexplicable events, which could be dismissed as aberrant flights of fantasy within an otherwise completely realistic representation, but rather comprises many events and the very existence of Fevvers. In The Sadeian Woman (1979, 27). Carter writes that "a free woman in an unfree society will be a monster." and the heroine of the novel under discussion here functions as the embodiment of this idea. The incongruous Fevvers is resolutely unbounded by external definitions of self: she is at once (in a paradoxical and disorienting way) female and not-female, human and bird, virgin and whore, angel and Cockney commoner. Her refusal to subscribe to societal expectations of woman — a refusal to step within a predefined and restrictive social space — makes of her a freak, and it is her status as a curiosity that has attracted Walser in the first place. Along with the positive allure, however, comes fear and discomfort (such negative emotions being in fact a frequent response to anything that challenges normative patterns of behaviour). Michael Hardin, in his discussion of another of this author's novels (Wise Children), astutely comments as follows:

Through the rupturing of the strict definition of woman, Carter opens up a surplus of space in which women can find and create new definitions of self, and, at the same time, through her excessive use of otherness, she exposes as fraudulent the idea that the penis is an originary or ultimate signifier. (1994, 77)

A few pages later, he concludes: "The signifying chain is dependent upon the individual's adherence to the socially constructed external appearances for male and female" (79). This heroine refuses to subscribe to such constructs and, by her very transgressive presence comprising disparate and apparently contradictory elements, denies the authority of arbitrary signifiers.

Walser expresses disbelief in the reality of Fevvers' wings, and sets out to expose the fraud she supposedly embodies. In fact, Carter seems to be mockingly underscoring how, if convention did not lead us to accept him as a "real" character, Jack Walser himself would be as "unreal" as they come. The ridiculous description of this young man's life and career — which has him, at 25 and without benefit of formal education, being lucratively employed to "travel wherever he pleased" (9) — is, by readerly conventions, customarily to be regarded as completely believable. Conversely, as Paris comments, in magic realism, "the real as we know it may be made to seem amazing or even ridiculous" (1995, 168). Walser's "realness" is mocked, while the heroine's existence as unreal Other is absolutely true. By literalizing this otherness in the form of Fevvers, the writer draws attention to a society and worldview that establishes a false hierarchy of real and unreal, subject and object. Angela Carter's point would seem to be that no such hierarchy should exist (natural, supernatural, or otherwise), that neither Fevvers nor Walser should be perceived as more believable or more of an authoritative signifier than the other. The so-called "real" is at bottom a discursive construct, which I argue is the very point to magic-realist literature.

Nights at the Circus is set at the turn of the 20th century, with Fevvers as the "New Woman" (273) ironically waxing rhapsodic about the marvellous possibilities:

"then, ah then! All the women will have wings, the same as I. This young woman [...] will tear off her mind-forg'd manacles, will rise up and fly away. The dolls' house doors will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed -" (285)

Throughout her writing career, prematurely terminated by cancer in 1992, Carter constantly sought what she once termed "the creation of a means of expression for an infinitely greater variety of experience than has been possible heretofore, to say things for which no language previously existed" (qtd. in Blodgett 1994, 49). Magic realism would seem an obvious choice for such a project, and this author takes full advantage of its emancipatory possibilities.

Conclusion

This article has set out to demonstrate that Nights at the Circus is a magic-realist novel, by comparing its features and techniques to the existing theory and other examples within the genre. It has also sought to explore why magic realism is ideally suited to Carter's objectives. The encryption of protest against patriarchal paradigms, as she overtly and covertly describes and denounces existing gender power imbalances through the construction and inhabiting of real and yet unreal magical spaces, is a logical employment of the subversive and inherently self-reflexive nature of magic realism. If women's experience of reality is of a world where agency is denied them, a space, time, and discourse in which they are rarely accorded access to the structures of power, it should come as no surprise for a feminist author to privilege an alternate sphere that opens up a wider range of possibilities. It has been said that "successful political struggles always depend on their ability to connect with Utopias — with the belief and hope that things might be better" (Terry Lovell, qtd. in Palmer 1987, 181). The magical-realist dimension is indeed partially Utopian, offering an unreal, magical space wherein a subversive political message can be conveyed. Nonetheless, it steadfastly refuses to offer readers an uncomplicated, escapist fictional reality, principally by means of the depiction of an undeniable tension, or antinomy, between the magical and the real. Luis Leal once wrote that magic realists do not "distort reality or create imagined worlds, as writers of fantastic literature or science fiction do; [...] the principal thing is not the creation of imaginary beings or worlds but the discovery of the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances" (1995, 121-22). Feminist authors such as Angela Carter similarly heighten reality, and accordingly the relationship between woman and her circumstances, by virtue of the powerful and insistent real/not-real juxtaposition made possible through magic-realist techniques.

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