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Ambiguous Identities: The Subversion of Gender in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* and Cristina Peri Rossi's *La Nave de los Locos*

Andrés Ibarra Cordero¹

“The realities of power and authority —as well as the resistances offered by men, women, and social movements to institutions, authorities, and orthodoxies— are the realities that make texts possible, that deliver them to their readers, that solicit the attention of critics.”

Edward Said

The World, the Text, and the Critic

In the critical agenda of post-structuralism, gender has gained an outstanding position as a significant object of study. Consequently, feminist literary scholars have observed the discursive quality of gender when questioning traditionally constructed notions of masculinity and femininity. It is in this line that I aim to compare potentially subversive strategies of gender in two texts by two women writers from different socio-cultural and linguistic traditions: British Angela Carter, and Uruguayan Cristina Peri Rossi. The novels I have chosen share similar themes and narrative

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techniques but, most significantly, always point to the discursive quality of gender as a subversive arena to undermine normative categories.

Angela Carter's novel, *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) describes the "passion" in a gender-sensitive reinterpretation of the religious origin of the word. Namely, the novel depicts the "sexual passion" transsexual Eve has to experience to become a woman. Carter emphasizes— like Simone de Beauvoir postulates— that one is not born, but is rather forged into a woman by being ideologically framed by restricting and imposed representations of femininity.² On the other hand, Cristina Peri Rossi's novel, *La Nave de los Locos* (1984) describes the allegorical journey of "Equis", a political exiled and postmodern pilgrim. Peri Rossi presents "political exile" as a sexual and gendered condition. The reason for my comparison lays in my hypothesis that both, *The Passion of New Eve* and *La Nave de los Locos*, portray inner quests focused particularly on gendered identities, in which characters embrace "otherness" as part of the self.³ In this comparative analysis, I argue that both authors, Carter and Peri Rossi, explore the social construction and subversive deconstructions of femininity, by means of discursive strategies.

Feminist literary critics, from both linguistic traditions, have intermittently been interested in the works of Carter and Peri Rossi. Criticism on these two authors often stresses the writers' resistance to patriarchy as well as the controversially liberating nature of their fiction. However, what I miss in their critical corpus is the ideological significance and meaning in process that gender performance entails. I argue that the performance of gender is a key subversive strategy in both novels as it allows a self-fashioning female identity that leads to a liberating feminist empowerment. The significance I give to the study of gender is in line with the literary agenda of both women writers. First, the focus on non-normative representations of gender gives validity to alternative evaluations of otherness and blurry gender identities. Second, it enables our recognition of a common history of Western construction of sexual difference, while it outlines alternative models of identity based on a subversive gender performance.

² For further and detailed reference on this issue see: Monique Witting, "One is Not Born a Woman", in *Writing on the Body. Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*. Ed. by Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. 309-18.

³ For the process of othering see: Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.

The present gender-based comparison is inscribed in specific critical issues. It is predominantly feminist deconstructive as it attempts to reveal discursively repressed latent content through an analytical reading. Borrowing Adrienne Rich's words, I examine how Carter and Peri Rossi, "have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been a male prerogative. . ." (2044). Furthermore, I see these two novels as remarkable instances of women writers who explore how the gender-component can be creatively re-inscribed and re-interpreted in quite different literary, socio-cultural and linguistic contexts. In doing this, I approach a "gynocritical" perspective, described by Showalter as the study of "women as writers, the history, styles, themes, genres and structures of writing by women, the psychodynamics of female creativity, the trajectory of the individual and collective female career" (183).

1. Feminist Criticism on Carter and Peri Rossi

Feminist scholarship of the past decades has suggested that what patriarchal discourse attempts to naturalize is women's role and sexual relations: in other words, the sex/gender system. Most feminist scholars agree that what patriarchal sexual order most obscures is feminine sexual desire. Moreover, this criticism has constantly emphasized the way woman is projected as man's "other" within patriarchal discourse. Thus, woman has been portrayed as man's other: that is, everything he is not, cutting her off from any desire of her own.⁴ Together, this organization of sexuality and desire constitute what most feminist have called "the patriarchal sexual economy."

1.1. Angela Carter: Demythologizing the Other

Following French feminists, Carter irreverently deconstructs psychoanalytic models of sexual differentiation, while suggesting alternative means of employing patriarchal myths to reconstitute the subject's relationship to the other. Critics have generally observed Carter's attention to psychoanalysis, particularly with Freud's theory of castration, which situates the female as "lacking" in a fundamental relation to the male. This is further reinforced by Lacan, who asserts the phallus as a transcendent signifier, representative of the socio-symbolic order, upon which the formation of

⁴ The alienating effects of this mirroring process are further explained in: Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.

individual identity is dependant through one's entrance into language.⁵ These issues are questioned in Carter's fiction, who observes that "to be the object of desire is to be defined in the passive case. To exist in the passive case is to die in the passive case - that is, to be killed" (*The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* 76).

The corpus of the criticism on Carter highlights subversion of patriarchal myths in which women have been deprived of meaning and autonomy. When giving a name to her own fiction, Carter herself coined the phrase "demythologizing business" that she describes metaphorically as "putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode" ("Notes from the Front Line" 71). In other words, Carter aims to paraphrase the very patriarchal myths to invoke that fossilized ideology she aims to subvert. Carter's own use of myth is primarily concerned with deconstructing "the social fictions that regulate our lives" ("Notes from the Front Line" 72). Her fiction employs irony to subvert religious convictions and moral certainties that patriarchy has attempted to inscribe. Consequently, feminist critics observe in Carter complex narratives that lead to social transgression. Critic Lorna Sage maintains that "she [Carter] belongs among the fabulists and tale-spinners, the mockers and speculators and iconoclasts and utopians, she was born subversive" (3). *The Passion of New Eve*, in particular, is said to be an "in-between text" (Kérchy 95); a turning point in Carter's narrative. After its publication, Carter seems to turn decisively towards fantastic, joyously turbulent magical realism that becomes more and more overtly charged with irony and feminist issues.

1.1.2. Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*

The Passion of New Eve narrates the gender-quest of Eve, a former misogynist macho surgically transformed by vengeful militant feminists into an allegorical "antithesis of creation" (64). In this novel, Carter undermines the patriarchal biblical myth that situates woman as the dangerous other, threatening masculine self-control, and thus prompting a patriarchal order's urge towards repressing female desires as a means of protecting its own rationalisations. Furthermore, the novel emblemizes the paradoxical dilemma of how feminism had to "carve out its own identity from the

⁵ According to Lacanian analysis, the phallus, as a signifier of the "Law of the Father", is a linguistic concept that serves as a guarantee of authority and meaning. Thus, to have the phallus would mean to be at the centre of discourse, to generate meaning, and to control rather than conform to that which comes from outside, from the "other". For further and detailed reference on this issue see: Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

unisex mould of the 1960s radical politics and counterculture movements” (Sage 35). Carter’s novel criticizes how the Sixties’ social movements in general took “difference” as a symbol of the fight for equality, and thus, kept the idealized, homogenized, essential “other” within the frames of the violent hierarchy of binary oppositions. Consequently, the “different” became a signifier transcending above the same, as a propaganda of the universal struggle for the abolition of difference. As a result, *The Passion of New Eve* called critics’ attention as it explores several conflicts discussed by feminist politics.

Carter herself describes *The Passion of New Eve* as “an anti-mythic novel . . . conceived as a feminist track about the social creation of femininity” (“Notes from the Front Line” 71). In an interview she calls it: “a careful and elaborate discussion of femininity as a commodity, [as] an illusion” (Haffenden 83). In general terms, most criticism praises the novel for being the most effective of Carter’s feminist political attempts. Harriet Blodgett, for instance, praises it for being a “genuine revisionist fiction” (49), enhancing female power and countering the inscription of patriarchy. Alison Lee stresses its powerful critique of “feminine images” (Lee 23). Merja Makinen heralds female sexual and textual aggression represented “in a positive light” (Makinen 150). Lindsay Tucker with Susan Suleiman highlights the novel’s enabling postmodern “feminist fictional strategy” (Tucker 11), while Sarah Gamble underlines Carter’s successful transgression of the binary gender essentialism. From this perspective, *The Passion of New Eve* is a crucial point in Carter’s literary career that marks her transition from what she calls “a male impersonator” (“Notes from the Front Line” 70) into a gender-conscious woman writer.

1.2. Cristina Peri Rossi: Gender as Political Exile

The organic connection between the patriarchal sexual economy and authoritarian practices during dictatorships has become a determinant to Latin American women writers. Thus, most women’s movements in Latin American countries came to see authoritarianism as a natural outgrowth of patriarchal oppression. As Sonia Alvarez maintains, “mainstream analysts overlooked this gender-based dimension of the military authoritarian State . . . Latin American feminist scholars and activists, however, insisted that militarism and institutionalized violence rest on patriarchal foundations” (7). Consequently, just as many Latin American feminists working on social issues inevitably began to see gender issues and politics as interrelated, literature by women writing under dictatorship was often concerned with the politics of sexuality.

Mirroring authoritarian practices in Latin America, the relationship between gender and exile has been addressed by critics of Cristina Peri Rossi. During a period of violent military oppression, Peri Rossi left Uruguay in 1972 for Spain. As a consequence of this, critics have successfully tried to pin down the latent “exile experience” in Peri Rossi’s fiction. However, exile for this woman writer has to do not only with socio-political circumstances, but with sexuality. Peri Rossi identifies exile more distinctively as the space occupied by the Latin American woman writer. In an English interview, the author claims (feminizing the pronoun she uses for writer): “[s]he is an exile not only because she ‘suffers’ the time in which she has to live, but also because she has to create a space, a distance which will allow her to reflect the time in which she has to live” (Hughes 270).

Thus, as stated above, exile would be particularly related to the paradoxical position of the Latin American woman writer. In another interview, Peri Rossi affirms, “[e]s difícil para mí saber el lugar que ocupo dentro de la literatura Hispanoamericana porque soy una mujer, y aún hay pocas escritoras sudamericanas, tomando en cuenta sus problemas de distribución y sus prácticas de exilio interno” (Camps 44).⁶ Here, she refers to the condition of woman in the literary field. The fact that all the writers ever included in the ‘Boom’— perhaps the most productive and richest period of literary production in Latin America— were men, confirms one important feminist claim: women writers face an additional confrontation with the authority of a patriarchal order, an organization of the gender system whereby one gender undeniably has a privileged relationship to the production of meaning. Thus, the concept of exile as a consequence of gender could have various meanings for women, ranging from the way women have been cut off from access to desire of their own by the patriarchal sexual economy, or the way subjectivity has been appropriated as a masculine construct.⁷

1.2.1. Cristina Peri Rossi’s *La Nave de los Locos*

La Nave de los Locos utilizes the metaphor of “the ship of fools” as a significant symbol for conveying the alienating state of human exile, mirroring the experience of those “others” who have been marginalized by patriarchal Western societies.⁸ Conversely, the novel evokes a complex vision

⁶ See Appendix ii.

⁷ In need to conform to space limitations, I only provide a short account of Peri Rossi’s appropriation of the word “exile”. For further and detailed reference on this issue please see: Amy Kaminsky, “Gender and Exile in Cristina Peri Rossi”, in *Continental, Latin-American and Francophone Women Writers*. Ed. by Eunice Myers and Ginette Adamson. London: University Press of America, 1987. 149-59.

⁸ Attention has been drawn by the various critics who have analyzed Peri Rossi’s novel to the following list of (some of) the sources from which Peri Rossi drew: Sebastian Brant’s medieval satirical didactic poem, “Das

of Western patriarchal figures which runs the gamut from Adam, to Greek heroes, to Christ, to medieval kings and military dictators. By means of those, Peri Rossi offers a complex portrayal of modern Western culture that reveals itself as a site of convergent, overlapping past and present patriarchal discursive systems. *La Nave de los Locos* is a novel with a critical agenda, grappling with the alienation and social disintegration of contemporary society, as well as searching for a way to subvert the restrictive binary operations that act violently to exclude those ostracized “others.”

The critical corpus on Peri Rossi’s novel emphasizes the relationship between the construction and deconstruction of a “self” and the “other”, and how they negotiate their hierarchically imposed differences. Those marginalised “others” that populate the narrative include Equis and Vercingetorix (political exiles and perpetual travellers), Morris (an eccentric homosexual collector and writer who falls in love with nine-year-old Percival), Graciela (a young feminist who escaped from her bureaucratic and authoritarian father), and Gordon (an ex-astronaut “exiled” forever from the moon). Those socially dysfunctional characters are in a permanent gender-quest: an inner search for a space whereby their subjectivity and agency is not suppressed but recognized and respected.

1.3. The Problem of Essentialism in Gender

Feminist criticism, however, has undergone self-criticism due to its essentialist conception of woman. Thus, this brings up an important problem: if within patriarchal discourse woman is the marginalised other, in an essentialist feminist discourse the “other” could be the transvestite or the transgender. With respect to the academic feminist circle— and, more specifically, to the sphere of Latin American feminists— Amy Kaminsky, observes that a “heterosexual contract” or “pact” is often upheld within the arena of feminist criticism. Kaminsky contends that any literary criticism which works towards the transformation of repressive cultural practices should not continue taking

Narrenschiff”; Hieronymous Bosch’s “Garden of Delight” painting (which has been referred to as the pictorial depiction of the content of Brant’s poem, namely the transitory period of a degenerate Europe perched between the end of the Middle Ages and the inception of the Renaissance); Katherine Anne Porter’s novel, *The Ship of Fools* (published in 1963, but referring to another period of flux and transition, a chaotic Germany, rife with tension and the formation-consolidation of pre-war fascism between the economic crisis of 1931, and World War II); and Foucault’s treatment of the “ship of fools” concept in his *History of Madness and Civilization* (1965), which traces the history of madness beginning from the end of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

part in the propagation of heterosexist exclusionary norms and practices, as these norms concomitantly marginalize the area of queer criticism. According to Kaminsky, Latin American feminist criticism needs “to take into account that which is most forbidden”, and this would entail the “questioning of heterosexual relationships as the ‘natural expression of sexuality’” (25). In a similar vein to Kaminsky, Teresa De Lauretis maintains that, “to envision gender otherwise, and to (re)construct it in terms other than those dictated by the patriarchal contract, we must walk out of the male-centred frame of reference in which gender and sexuality are reproduced by the discourse of male sexuality” (17).

To subscribe to the binary opposition man/woman is, hence, to remain a prisoner of essentialism with its assumptions of stable meanings and identities. The persistent feminist dilemma centred on woman as a marginalized other serves to introduce the next section, in which I will briefly revise some important assumptions regarding the politics of difference that have affected the academic theorization around gender.

2. The Politics of Gender Difference

In this section I revise some theoretical assumptions regarding gender difference. However, it is impossible to introduce the following authors without acknowledging the immense influence that Michael Foucault has had on their critical principles. Foucault rejects the idea of the body as an invariant presence throughout history, which provides continuity across centuries. According to his postulates, our perceptions and interpretations would be mediated through language and surrounding culture. Hence, they are always subject to historical change, shifting in accordance with the differing ways in which the body is articulated and located within the intersecting discourses of each era. Foucault’s theories lead to the questioning of notions such as identity, sexuality and gender, which are subsequently echoed in feminist discourses.⁹

2.1. Judith Butler’s Gender Performance

In *Gender Trouble*, the resonances of Foucault’s theory are clearly noticeable. Butler reacts to Foucault’s notion of the body as “the inscribed surface of events” (2) implying that the body is passive and prior to “discourse”. Conversely, Butler argues that this merely material and naturalised

⁹ For further and detailed reference on this issue please see: Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, The Will to Knowledge: Vol. I*. Trans. Robert Hurley. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978.

notion of the body is itself an effect of taboos and anticipated transgressions imposed by culture. According to her, “the boundaries of the body become the limits of the social per se.” (131)

Feminist theory cannot articulate a specific concept of identity, because it would restrict the emergence of new or the expansion of existing concepts of identity. Carter and Peri Rossi are in line with Butler, when she argues that the category of “woman” is the effect of a system that produces gendered subjects along a differential axis of domination. For Butler, the concept of gender would be “an open assemblage that permits multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos or definitional closure” (16). Accordingly, Carter and Peri Rossi portray ambiguous gendered identities that do not obey the binary male/female. However, Butler admits that representational politics cannot be avoided, since a position outside the field is not possible.

Consequently, the binary opposition of gender is rather the result of a process which produces “the coherence of the subject” (Butler 78). The latter is constructed along asymmetrical positions between “the feminine” and “the masculine”, expressive attributes of “the female” and “the male”. Thus, a coherent subject is an intelligible gender: it maintains relations of coherence among sex, gender and sexual desire. However, the matrix of compulsory heterosexuality also produces unintelligible genders, in which gender does not follow from sex, and the practices of desire do not follow from either sex or gender. The novels of Carter and Peri Rossi portray precisely those unintelligible genders: homosexuals, transvestites and transgenders. According to Butler, gender is the discursive/cultural means by which “a natural sex” (3) is produced in order to hide the productive function of power.

The substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Gender identity is “a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self” (138). Because sexuality and power coexist, Butler resembles Carter and Peri Rossi, when she calls for, “rethink[ing] subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself.” (Butler 30)

Butler’s theorization distinguishes three dimensions of corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance. These three aspects are “normally” naturalised as a unity. If there is dissonance between them, they are revealed to be distinct. Gender parody is apt to deconstruct gender, because it openly indicates that an “original” identity itself is an imitation without an origin.

This is an important feature of both Carter's and Peri Rossi's novels, and I will show in my comparative analysis how, "the notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities." (Butler 137)

2.2. Teresa De Lauretis' Technologies of Gender

Teresa De Lauretis, contrary to Butler, does not dismiss the concept of gender as essentialist. De Lauretis envisions gender as one founded in materiality and as an ideological means for the aim of reproduction, in order to reject it completely. She reinforces the idea that gender, as a representation, is the product of various social technologies, institutional discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices. De Lauretis is useful for my analysis, due to the emphasis she puts on the productive force of gender, and how she envisions the body as already gendered along the matrix of a male norm and a female deviancy; issues which are hinted at in Carter and Peri Rossi.

It is precisely the working of the ideology of gender that leads to the deconstruction of the sex/gender system. Moreover, the subject is at the same time inside and "beyond" the ideology of gender and representation and is conscious of the "twofold pull, of that division, that doubled vision" (De Lauretis 10). Although Butler too questions the binary of sex and gender, De Lauretis does this with quite different aims. She maintains that:

A sex/gender system is always intimately interconnected with political and economic factors in each society. In this light, the cultural construction of sex into gender and the asymmetry that characterises all gender systems cross-culturally are understood as systematically linked to the organization of social inequality. (5)

De Lauretis criticises the discrepancy between the universally identified "Woman", represented within essential femininity, homogeneous subjection and ideological containment, and "a woman" who embodies a singular identity in its plural, heterogeneous corporeal reality that remains invisible, excrescent to representation. In doing this, she wants to stress the significance of our "recognition of misrecognition in the paradoxically feminized subject position that is simultaneously engendered, desexualized, and masculinised via disciplining ideological technologies of gender" (30). Sexuality, De Lauretis argues, is primarily a male construct since,

Most of the available theories of reading, writing, sexuality, ideology, or any other cultural production are built on male narratives of gender, whether oedipal or anti-oedipal, bound by the heterosexual contract; narratives which persistently tend to reproduce themselves in feminist theories. (25)

As a form of resistance, De Lauretis proposes to create new spaces of discourses, and to define the terms from another perspective. She invites women to have a “*view-from elsewhere*: to do critical revision, to gain insight to their alternative selves beyond the icons of femininity” (124). This should encourage the realization of the coexistence of “Woman” and “a woman” within oneself, the revelation of a double play of subjection and subversion, so that a “self-subverting coherence shall be reached” (125). De Lauretis defines this “view from elsewhere” as, “in the margins of hegemonic discourse, social spaces in the interstices of institutions and in the chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge apparatus” (25). Then, this is conceived as a feminist effort to create new spaces of discourses, to rewrite cultural narratives, and to define the terms of another precept. As I will show in my analysis, Carter and Peri Rossi make a subversive movement back and forth across the boundaries of sexual difference, between the “male” representation of “Woman” and what this representation leaves out. According to De Lauretis, this movement would be, “the tension of contradiction, multiplicity, and heteronomy” (26).

Therefore, by means of those “elsewhere”, De Lauretis fosters a critical revision of normative representations of femininity. Following the same revisionist purposes, Carter and Peri Rossi depict dystopian societies in their narratives to interrogate the same patriarchal representations of femininity.

2.3. Dystopias/Heterotopias: Enclaves of Discursive Orders

Novels involving dystopian societies are intrinsically subversive as they tend to interrogate the very foundations of oppressive systems. While utopias primarily attempt to imagine a time and place outside of, or beyond those systems, dystopian texts remain focused on interrogating how such systems might more effectively be challenged and possibly transformed in the present. By means of those dystopian worlds, Carter and Peri Rossi self-consciously undermine hierarchies, challenge hegemonic systems, ordered spaces and subjectivities.

Michel Foucault distinguishes between “utopias” and “heterotopias”. The latter constitutes a deviant space that opposes the norm and the moral. In heterotopias, worlds are juxtaposed which occupy different ontological plans embracing heterogeneity of places and multiplicity of senses. In these multiple-worlds, McHale suggests that, “the impossible space in which fragments of disparate discursive orders (sometimes actualised as disparate *micro-worlds*) are merely juxtaposed, without any attempt to reduce them to a common order” (248). According to McHale, “these extra-polated near-futures literalize a familiar metaphor in the sociology of knowledge, that of the multiple, competing enclaves of meaning into which complex postmodern societies have diverged” (249). These heterogeneous places are micro-worlds spaced out along a narrative itinerary. Similarly, Tom Siebers maintains that “by the use of heterotopias, postmodernism wants us to think the contradictions of human existence at the speed of light in order to find in the relativity of time a way to reconcile our differences” (29).

Carter and Peri Rossi have found in heterotopias powerful instances for subversive texts that construct illogical, speculative universes as political, narrative strategies. Moreover, by presenting both recognisably realistic and fantastic discursive orders at the same level, both women writers have been able to manifest a relentless dissatisfaction with the “here” and the “now” as well as bewilderment about the possibility of thinking “beyond” those. Regarding this, McHale affirms that the presentation of these heterogeneous realities, “serve not only to bring into view the worldliness of the world; it also offers opportunities for reflecting concretely on world-making itself.” (253)

In this theoretical overview, I have briefly presented two accounts of theories of radical sexual difference, which undermine essentialist notions of gender binaries. In addition, I have introduced the concept of “heterotopias” as a thematic strategy that women writers— like Carter and Peri Rossi— use to examine different power-systems in which gender differences are prescribed. Having revised some important critical assumptions, I will now move to my analysis, where I will retrieve these theoretical issues in *The Passion of New Eve* and *La Nave de los Locos*.

3. Comparative Analysis: The Subversion of Gender in *The Passion of New Eve* and *La Nave de los Locos*

In this comparative analysis I show how Carter and Peri Rossi explore gendered identities which are potentially subversive. Helped by the critical issues previously revised I will demonstrate that these novels share a decidedly critical view of past and current forms of gendering, and propose that

gender and sexuality are places of political contention. Furthermore, by deconstructing gender, these two women writers undermine those dominant discourses that would forever perpetuate the status quo. In these two novels, patriarchal ideologies are challenged and alternative identities are outlined and offered for those “others”— women, transsexuals, and transvestites— in subversive narratives that renegotiate marginality and foster gender hybridism.

3.1. Ambiguous Gendered Voices: Shifting Narrative Focalization

The Passion of New Eve and *La Nave de los Locos* foreground problems of gender identity by presenting shifting focalization and ambiguous narrative voices. Both novels explore the problems of appearance and essence, examining the process by which the characters learn to construct their gendered identity according to the different discursive orders. This constantly shifting and ambiguous focalization of the narrative voice reveals that gender is “an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts” (Butler 137).

In Carter’s novel, for instance, narrative identity is made as complex as Eve’s gender identity. When Evelyn becomes Eve, s/he has to learn to be a woman because she is seen by others as a woman. The process of becoming is complicated by the narrative voice because Eve tells her/his story both as a man and as a woman. The various permutations of the narrative voice are bewildering: Eve misrecognises her reflection immediately after her change of gender, as she notices,

. . . when I looked in the mirror, I saw Eve; I did not see myself. I saw a young woman who, though she was I, I could in no way acknowledge as myself, for this one was only a lyrical abstraction of femininity to me, a tined arrangement of curved lines. I touched the breasts and the mound that were not mine. I saw white hands in the mirror move; it was as though they were white gloves I put on to conduct the unfamiliar orchestra of myself. I looked again and saw I bore a strong family resemblance of myself. (72)

Having observed this ambivalence in Carter’s novel, Alison Lee identifies a specific feminist writing practice when encountering indeterminate narrative voices. Lee affirms that the female cultural practice of “breaking the sequence, the expected order” is feminist when it constructs oppositional strategies to the depiction of gender institutions in narrative and, by doing so questions “the traditional meaning producing process” (Lee 34). A quite similar practice is adopted by Peri Rossi in

La Nave de los Locos as a strategy to destabilize the masculine and hierarchical production of textual meaning.

Equis, Peri Rossi's protagonist, is an eternal exile who moves from place to place, but is always observing the contemporary social context from different gendered perspectives. Peri Rossi chooses a male narrator for, as she maintains:

[e]l lector occidental está acostumbrado a la idea de que los temas íntimos o sentimentales tienen a una mujer como protagonista; temas metafísicos como complicaciones psicológicas son propiamente masculinos. Cualquiera que quiera utilizar a una mujer como protagonista con problemas existenciales o vacilaciones metafísicas tiene que inventarla de la nada, porque como personaje, ella no tiene suficiente bibliografía (Golano 49).¹⁰

This latter point echoes Lorna Sage, who claims that Carter's novel of the "woman born out of a man's body" symbolizes the woman-writer's hardships to find an authorial voice" (36). Similarly, Jean Franco observes that many Latin American women writers use masculine protagonists to question gender hierarchy as it is inscribed in social and literary relations:

Estas escritoras [Rosario Ferré y Cristina Peri Rossi] desenmascaran la hegemonía genérica que ubica al narrador masculino en la posición de autoridad y de productor. Las mujeres 'ventrílocuas' se instalan en la posición hegemónica desde la cual se ha pronunciado que la literatura es deicidio, la literatura es fuego, la literatura es revolución, la literatura es para cómplices, a fin de hacer evidente la jerarquía masculina/femenina (42).

Equis' constructed gendered identity, his position as a permanent exile and his growing awareness of how marginalization operates in society serve to destabilize rather than reinforce the dominant social structure. The protagonist's ambiguous name draws attention to gender identity as a social strategy or masquerade.¹¹ When Equis meets Lucía, for instance, he empathizes with her and situates himself on the "other" side of the gender hierarchy. The effect of this immersion in the

¹⁰ See Appendix iii.

¹¹ "Equis" in the English translation of the novel is "Ecks", suggesting, in both languages, ambivalence in terms of identity and gender. In doing this, Peri Rossi makes explicit use of letter 'X' and its ambiguous connotations.

other causes Equis to literally see himself reflected in her: “Como en los sueños, Equis la miraba y se veía a sí mismo mirarla y de lejos miraba a los dos” (177).¹² In this way, Equis becomes a vehicle of perception, a medium for making the reader perceive the hierarchies of gender.

As I have shown, Carter and Peri Rossi use ambiguous focalization in order to subvert the meaning production of normative gendered identities. However, this is just one of the strategies of subversion. These authors also see in the depiction of fictional micro-worlds, another instance for questioning discursively contained identities.

3.2. De/Gendered Places: Micro-Worlds of Discursive Orders

The Passion of New Eve and *La Nave de los Locos* present diverse micro-worlds obeying different discursive orders in which the marginalised characters frequently negotiate their gendered identities. The protagonists of both novels, Eve and Equis are drifting wanderers who foreground discursive orders in every place they visit. Ultimately, both women writers aim to create figurative gendered spaces in which the woman is no longer exiled from history but capable of entering it as a driving force of subversion.

Carter observes in the relation between gender and heterotopias an important aspect for her subversive purposes. *The Passion of New Eve* is said to blend “gothic tale, metropolitan fantasy, science fiction and mythology, and feminist pamphlet” all played against sexual ambiguity (Curtis 48). Similarly, M.C. Michael describes Carter’s fiction as “complex because it brings together more than one strand of feminism, an engaged Marxist feminism and a subversive utopian feminism” (492). Linden Peach, on the other hand, argues that Carter writes in a permanent search of a “third space” beyond binary thinking, “shifting our frames of reference” (114). Regardless of the variety of opinions, critics have frequently observed in Carter’s fiction a complex construction of spectacular, open spaces of a topsy-turvy world, reflecting on a subversive feminist topography.

In *The Passion of New Eve*, Carter portrays the United States as a blend of cultural sites, in which gendered identities become blurred. According to Gamble, Carter’s America is characterised by a condition in which “the real” is validated entirely through reference to fictions, copies and models, and which is labelled “Hyperreality” by Baudrillard (Gamble 118). Thus, by chronologically depicting England and America as two places visited by Evelyn, not only does Carter put the realist

¹² See Appendix v.

and the fantastic, but also traditional patriarchy and the postmodern world on the same level. Therefore, the novel seems to suggest that patriarchal power-systems are not the only alternative, and that it is possible to symbolically construct a “New Woman” located in new figurative spaces that embrace heterogeneity of female sexual desires.

New York, in particular, is an apocalyptic micro-world in which Western patriarchal ideology is deconstructed. Nicoletta Vallorani argues that the undecipherable, chaotic topography of the urban landscape of New York is a space of “primordial chaos” composed of “elements summed up in sequence with no understandable links” (180). However, Carter’s New York embodies the ambiguous gender discontinuities that the author aims to deconstruct. In an essay, she offers the somewhat curious observation: “Cities have sexes: London is a man, Paris a woman, and New York a well-adjusted transsexual . . .” (“Femmes Fatales” 129). This point confirms her attempt to deconstruct New York as a phallogocentric centre of masculine order. In *The Passion of New Eve*, New York is described as a place where “the age of reason is over” (13) and where people are looking for salvation; “a labyrinthine city, an arid world of ruins and abandoned construction sites, a megapolitan heart that does not beat anymore” (21). In the dystopian world of the novel, New York gradually submerges into “chaos, desolation, night” (16) as it is populated by women with fierce sexual appetite: “a special kind of crisp-edged girl with apple-crunching incisors and long, gleaming legs like lascivious scissors” (10).

If New York is portrayed as a sexually ambiguous space, Carter’s fictional city, Beulah is an essentially female place: a simulacrum of the womb. When Evelyn is captured, he slowly discovers a warm room, covered with a soft shiny substance, “lit only by a fringe of pinkish luminescence at the foot of the wall”, a never-ending refrain: “*Now you are at the place of birth*” (57). The surgically castrated Evelyn is forced to face “this focus of all darkness that had always been waiting for me in a room with just such close, red walls within me” (58) through discovering a “fructifying female space inside” (68). Blodgett describes this place as a “parody of female science-fiction-cumfertility myth, seasoned with a dash of Freudian Oedipal myth and Lacanian power symbols” (50). Beulah is ruled by the monstrous Mother, a self-created four-breasted fertility goddess. Mother, being self-proclaimed “Castratrix of the Phallogocentric Universe” (61) is concerned with “[making] a start on the feminization of father time” (67). Portraying Mother’s system, Carter seems to parody feminist gynocentric essentialism, by depicting women as tyrants and complicit with the same authoritarian

power-system they reject. In Beulah, Evelyn is surgically transformed into a woman who is impregnated by his own seed in order “to bring forth the Messiah of the Antithesis” (68).

Contrary to the essentialism embodied in Beulah, The transvestite film star Tristessa represents gender fluidity. Tristessa’s glass house is a space of gender performance and ambiguity. This is reinforced by the bodily images, which accentuate the theme of physical reconstitution. In spite of being a place of gender performance, Tristessa’s glass house does not foster subversion of patriarchal conceptions of femininity. As opposed to the desert in which Eve and Tristessa are free to consummate their ambiguous gender union, Tristessa’s house is filled with mirrors and sculptures of tears, imitating her spectacular performance of femininity based on reflectivity and passivity. In this place, she is turned into “an object as lucid as the objects she made from glass, and the object was in itself, an idea” (129). Thus, Tristessa’s glass house is significant as it represents her owner’s suffering femininity, mirroring the passive reflectivity and deceptive transparency of the glass.

While the different micro-worlds in Carter symbolize the complexity of various gendered identities, Peri Rossi presents a collage of contemporary patriarchal societies in which the marginalised characters have to persistently reinterpret their complex condition. This latter point gives the reader a special role in the production of textual meaning. Similarly, Lucía Invernizzi Santa Cruz indicates that Peri Rossi sketches a utopian project based on the participation demanded of the reader, who must construct and create meaning of the text. According to Invernizzi Santa Cruz, “[*La Nave de los Locos*] se establece como un efectivo proyecto de utopía a realizar: un lugar de encuentro y de relaciones auténticas entre sujetos” (52).¹³

Equis’ endless journey takes him through a series of micro-worlds representing different modern societies. The voyage includes real places (Toronto, Madrid, London), unnamed sites (“ciudad A”, “ciudad B”), symbolic and imaginary spaces (“La Isla”, “Pueblo de Dios”), and distorted references to recognizable cities (“Old York, Texaco, Ombu-Beach, Psycho-Aires, Asnapolis”). However, most of the narrative covers primarily urban landscapes plagued by totalitarian regimes mirroring the realities of the different dictatorships in Latin America. In addition, interspersed with these contemporary meanderings is a description of a medieval tapestry that illustrates “the Creation”, a biblical allegory that strives to represent the origin of man. Regarding the tapestry, Mabel Moraña affirms that, “. . . funciona como un contrapuesto temático a

¹³ See Appendix vi.

la novela, creando así una correspondencia entre microcosmos y macrocosmos particular a muchas construcciones alegóricas” (41).¹⁴

Most of the urban places Equis encounters in his voyage are metaphors of the alienation experienced by contemporary urban societies. El Gran Ombligo, for instance, where the loud noise of machinery, “. . . los enferman de incomunicación y deben ir al psicoanalista” (123)¹⁵ and where “[e]l animal preferido de los ombliguistas es el automóvil, a quien aprecian más y mejor que a los miembros de su familia” (124)¹⁶ is a place of social isolation and marginalization. In this dystopia par excellence, a nationalist mentality is rampant and taken to its most satirical limits as a metropolitan chauvinism, an excessive and ridiculous devotion to its own navel. As Morris reports in his journal, “contemplándose todo el día los ombligos, los habitantes de la ciudad se preocupan por muchísimas cosas y no tiene nunca tiempo para preocuparse de las cosas del resto del mundo” (120).¹⁷

Socio-political violence and persecution based on a patriarchal binary logic are common place in Equis’ gender-quest journey. In the chapter “La fábrica de cemento”, for instance, he recounts the sudden disappearance of Vercingetorix, alluding to the political situation of many Latin American dictatorships. Vercingetorix disappeared such that, “[d]esaparecer deja entonces de ser un acto voluntario y se convierte en una actitud pasiva; nos desaparecen, decía Vercingetórix, las pocas veces que se refería al hecho” (55).¹⁸ After his release from the concentration camp, he goes into exile where he feels unable to stand the idea of the binary split between two worlds coexisting simultaneously: “dos mundos perfectamente paralelos, distantes y desconocidos entre sí, dos mundos que existían con independencia y autonomía . . .” (59).¹⁹

Whereas in Carter, society is divided into different anarchic gender-based clans (the Feminist Guerrilla or the Children’s Crusade), in Peri Rossi the power is concentrated in patriarchal totalitarian regimes. In a conversation with Morris, Equis maintains that, “todos los tiempos han sido de desconcierto y de penuria para los que no fueron tocados por el privilegio del poder y que nuestros días no se diferencian de los anteriores más que por el número de perseguidores, la

¹⁴ See Appendix vii.

¹⁵ See Appendix viii.

¹⁶ See Appendix ix.

¹⁷ See Appendix x.

¹⁸ See Appendix xi.

¹⁹ See Appendix xii.

sistematización de sus métodos y la fría lógica que aplican” (101).²⁰ When Morris suggests designating the sea as an oppression free zone, Equis reminds him of the cruel reality of the ocean’s cemeteries: “en el litoral de de los océanos y en las playas alejadas, aparecen con frecuencia numerosos cadáveres mutilados; cuerpos que después de haber padecido el tormento han sido lanzados al agua, y se encadenan a los bancos, a las plataformas marinas, como algas” (101).²¹ Thus, political persecution is encoded in Peri Rossi’s novel as something particular to Latin America and, at the same time, common to patriarchal societies.

London as a phallogocentric metropolis heightens awareness of the crucial role played by arbitrariness in the stigmatization of particular groups in patriarchal discourse. Peri Rossi’s London resembles Carter’s as the very centre of phallogocentrism. When working as a bus driver for a company that carries women to an abortion clinic in this city, Equis becomes aware of his own contribution to the execution of an oppressive dominant societal operation. These pregnant women are victimized by their circumstances and by state policies that restrict their access to birth control. Equis associates the bus with myriad forms of social marginalization: “Hospitales especiales para heridos de Guerra. Hospitales militares, para prisioneros políticos. Selvas apropiadas para arrojar opositores incómodos. Nave de locos. La nave sustituida por el manicomio. Cárceles hediondas donde encerrar a los transgresores” (176).²² Equis groups these spaces together as all spaces of stigma and isolation, created specially to receive those exiled from the realm of patriarchal reason. In doing this, he observes that these women who, “reunidas por una condición tan accidental como la que suele imperar en todos los ghettos” have as a result much in common with other marginalized groups (166).²³

When Equis meets Lucía in one of those journeys to the abortion clinic, he begins to realize that his gender and functional role have transformed him into an accomplice of social exclusion and exercise of power over those “others”— who are, in this case, pregnant women. Equis, in fact, calls direct attention to his own complicity with the hegemonic discourse as he helps to carry out a process of “purification”: “Curiosa carga la que transportamos— reflexiona Equis, en voz alta, para sí mismo—. No hay traslados inocentes. Mi madre debió bautizarme con el nombre de Caronte”

²⁰ See Appendix xiii.

²¹ See Appendix xiv.

²² See Appendix xv.

²³ See Appendix xvi.

(176).²⁴ However, after Equis listens to Lucía's testimony of marginalisation, he notices how suddenly the landscape of the city begins to change as, "entraban a la parte de la ciudad sin árboles, como hombres sin falo" (176).²⁵ This symbolises a figurative place where Lucía makes a conscious decision to abort the result of her former sexual liaison with men, and therefore patriarchal discourse. Thus, the phallic connotation of the "treeless city" as such signifies a symbolic space of female liberation, which is later sustained and reinforced in the transvestite club, where Lucía will perform a subversive gender parody.

The Passion of New Eve and *La Nave de los Locos* portray the coexistence of diverse heterotopias— representing different discursive orders— but always in search of utopian ideals. In these novels Carter and Peri Rossi examine the chaotic signs of modern societies and, using them as point of departure, propose subversive spaces for female liberation, divorced from any kind of gender essentialism.

3.3. Reproducing Gender: Simulating Models of Femininity

Carter and Peri Rossi promote women's recognition of normative prefabricated, restrained feminine models. In both novels, the recurrence of social technologies and mythical representations are responsible for the cultural perpetuation of fixed models of femininity, revealing the artificial construction of gender. This, however, enables women to scrutinize their internalization of those de-familiarized engendering images. Thus, Carter and Peri Rossi encourage us to do a critical reading, gaining insight to alternative identities beyond denaturalized icons of femininity.

Carter's heroines parody contemporary Western society's aim to discipline, contain and repress otherness by making it even more visible, within the limits of the dominant discourse. However, Carter also warns us of the sexual violence inflicted on those prescribed models of essential femininity, which are objects of male desire. One of those models of femininity is incarnated by Leilah, a black woman Evelyn seduces in New York. At the beginning of the novel, for instance, Evelyn is described as a cruel oppressor commenting on Leilah's reaction whilst the object of his sadistic sex games:

²⁴ See Appendix xvii.

²⁵ See Appendix xviii.

If she had fouled the bed, I would untie her and use my belt to beat her. And she would foul the bed again, or bite my hand . . . She seemed to me a born victim and, if she submitted to the beatings and the degradations with a curious, ironic laugh that no longer tinkled-for I'd beaten the wind-bells out of her, I'd done that much-then isn't irony the victim's only weapon? (28)

Before the surgical operation, Evelyn takes "some girl or other" to the cinema to watch his favourite film star Tristessa de St. Ange, "the most beautiful woman in the world" (5). Evelyn informs us, "when she perceived how Tristessa's crucifixion by brain fever moved me, the girl who was with me got to her knees in the dark on the dirty floor of the cinema . . . and sucked me off" (9). What is displayed here is a system of compulsory heterosexuality with its unavoidably hierarchical gender binary, which is expressed through Evelyn's male gaze onto Tristessa. Furthermore, emphasis is put on the fact that Evelyn had learned to like Tristessa, since his nanny had taken him to the cinemas when he was a child:

I always liked that particular quality in a woman for my nanny, although sentimental, had had a marked sadistic streak and I suppose I must have acquired an ambivalent attitude towards women from her. Sometimes I'd amuse myself by tying a girl to the bed before I copulated with her. (9)

The underlying assumption is that Evelyn's behaviour does not obey an innate sexual drive, but is a result of how he has been culturally taught to view femininity.

Interestingly, Carter emphasizes how gender, as an artificial construct, is a product of various social technologies such as the cinema. Eve learns to be a "Woman" by means of a psycho-programme: she is forced to watch films of abused women, of "every single Virgin and Child that had ever been painted in the entire history of Western European art . . . ; There was also a video-tape intended, I think to subliminally instil the maternal instinct itself" (71). It is worth noticing here that psycho-programming is a concentrated symbol of the process which human beings undergo to assume a gender. The idea of teaching Eve the nature of an essential feminine behaviour by enforced viewings of films implies that there is no authenticity to be found outside the culture of simulations.

The novel also reinforces cinema as a powerful contemporary technology to prescribe specific models of femininity. Before being surgically changed, Evelyn is sexually obsessed with Hollywood figures of feminine seduction. As a result, the novel becomes an intertextual collage of Western representations of feminine glamour: the transvestite Tristessa personifies Juliette, Dido, Scarlet O'Hara, Cathy Earnshaw, Madame Bovary, Madeline Usher, and Marlene Dietrich among others. Tristessa's act of self-creation hints at the multiplicity of potential gender identities. However, the being she chooses to perform is created from an essentialist notion of "Woman". As Sarah Gamble maintains, in all her cinematic roles, "Tristessa legitimises the spectacle of female suffering, creating a stereotype of masochistic femininity to which real women are educated to aspire and men to desire" (24). In other words, Tristessa represents a masculine ideal of femininity, made by and for men, as Eve herself comes to realise: "That was why he [Tristessa] had been the perfect man's woman! He had made himself the shrine of his own desires; he had made of himself the only woman he could have loved!" (129)

Peri Rossi also draws attention to the sexual violence to which women are subjected: from the pornographic images of the rape of a woman on the movie screen to the beaten and disfigured face of a prostitute, Equis encounters violence against women at almost every turn of his journey. Like Tristessa's self-created identity, Equis' conception of "Woman" coincides with the patriarchal ideal of female suffering and object of masculine desires reinforced by modern technologies. The moment that best describes Equis' attraction for female suffering takes place while he is viewing a film, in which the object of his desire, Julie Christie, is about to be raped by a "monstrous phallic machine":

Solo y anhelante a la espera (una espera que se prolonga demasiado, multiplicando morbosamente los detalles, con un regodeo oscuro que invita a la complacencia) de la maquina implacable que se lanzara sobre la bella Julie Christie. . . Solo y anhelante, escuchando su propia respiración amplificada por el resuello de la maquina excitada: solo con el temor de que sus propias fantasías aparezcan ahora en la pantalla. . . (23).²⁶

²⁶ See Appendix xix.

Therefore, by means of cinematic representations of the feminine— embodied in the characters Tristessa and July Christie— Carter and Peri Rossi aim to interrogate the construction of femininity as passivity which finds sadistic pleasure in the male gaze.

Like cinema, traditional Western myths have also contributed to fossilise iconic representation of a universal female. The chapter entitled “Eva” provides a blatant critique of how “Woman” has been represented in patriarchal societies, the ways she is contained by various discourses from ancient biblical myths to the present. Here, Graciela surveys a group of schoolchildren, asking them to describe the biblical myth of paradise. Their responses provide evidence of how attitudes about gender and power structures are assimilated by children, at a very early age, by means of those patriarchal mythologies:

Adán era muy responsable y muy serio pero Adán no sabía que mientras él andaba por los campos de Dios, ella se dedicaba a charlar con la serpiente que la engañó porque era muy astuta y ese fue un lío de mujeres. . . Entonces Adán le dijo: Si quieres estudiar las ciencias del bien y del mal estúdialas, a mi no me importa, pero seguirás limpiando la casa y planchando, que es tu deber (160).²⁷

Graciela’s survey demonstrates how patriarchal ideology is perpetuated, emphasized by traditional Western mythologies and contemporary constructions of femininity. All this reinforces how patriarchal economy organizes gender, distributes power and fixes negative values upon women. This is done with an ideological purpose, as a mechanism of control. Similarly, in Carter’s novel, *Zero*, a patriarchal dictator, exerts permanent power over the women of his clan. However, Eve lays bare the fundamentals of Zero’s patriarchal power-system: “He regulated our understanding of him and also our understanding of ourselves in relation to him” (97). However, as she notices, “his myth depended on their conviction; a god-head, however shabby, needs believers to maintain his credibility” (99). The previous statements reinforce the artificial construction of gender, revealing that female sexuality is less a natural than a historical construct and a circumstance for exerting power. Carter and Peri Rossi address the recognition and misrecognition of a paradoxically positioned feminine subject by means of social technologies and mythical representations of an

²⁷ See Appendix xx.

essential “Woman”. These are subversive strategies that point out how identities are always political: how they are constructed and ultimately deployed within systems of power relations.

3.4. Subversive Gender Performance

I have shown how Carter and Peri Rossi display essentialist representations of “the feminine.” However, not only do these authors expose a social phenomenon, they also propose subversive strategies to deconstruct its foundations. In order to achieve this, Carter and Peri embrace gender parody. In both authors, transvestism is used as a subversive strategy aiming to denaturalize normative categories of gender, since, “[i]n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself— as well as its contingency” (Butler 137).

Carter subverts the binary system of sexual difference by presenting Eve and Tristessa, two characters who constantly perform their ambiguous gender. Eve and Tristessa are unattached to any specific micro-world, while simultaneously inhabiting multiple discursive spaces. Therefore, they exceed normative gender categories: to Eve and Tristessa, gender is an ongoing discursive practice and they consider themselves as “beings composed of echoes” (136). In contrast to Zero’s and Mother’s gender fundamentalism, these ambiguous characters envision gender identity as a temporal notion. Consequently, transvestite and transgender perform a parody of an intelligible gender as there is dissonance between their anatomical sex and their gendered identity.

After having escaped from Beulah, Eve experiences a lack of gender identity. While she dwells in the desert and thinks: “I am a tabula rasa, a blank sheet of paper, an unhatched egg. I have not yet become a woman, although I possess a woman’s shape” (83). However, this condition does not last long. When she is picked up by Zero and his women, Eve enters a new power-system in which she is initiated into a degrading feminine role. Under Zero’s surveillance, Eve works hard at performing an essential femininity:

This intensive study of feminine manners, as well as my everyday work about the homestead, kept me in a state of permanent exhaustion. I was tense and preoccupied; although I was a woman, I was now also passing for a woman, but, then, many women born spend their whole lives in just such imitations (101).

The fluidity of gender-models in these two characters proves to be an effective strategy when confronting normative power. Eve and Tristessa construct their own fictional biographies in view of their “new gender”. When Eve lives in Zero’s tribe, she tells us: “. . . to gratify them, I fabricated an autobiography, a cruel mother who kept me locked in the coal-shed, a lustful stepfather . . .” (87) and, when Tristessa asks Eve about her past, the latter ponders, “How could I reply? . . . I gave him only an uncommunicative grunt and he soon forgot he’d spoken” (143). The double-drag wedding, in which Tristessa plays the bride and Eve the groom, symbolizes a culmination of gender blurriness and performative images. In this parody of a wedding ceremony, Evelyn— surgically transformed into Eve— is cross-dressed as a bridegroom, and thus becomes “a boy disguised as a girl and now disguised as a boy again” (132). While transgressing these gender boundaries, Eve comments, “but this masquerade was more than skin deep. Under the mask of maleness I wore another mask of femaleness but a mask that now I never would be able to remove, no matter how hard I tried, although I was a boy disguised as a girl and now a boy again” (132).

However, the previous episode is not voluntary as it is supervised by Zero’s commands, and thus, under a masculine gaze. Conversely, the passage in which Eve and Tristessa clearly enjoy their subversive gender performances takes place when they have sexual intercourse in the desert. It is in this precise scene when transvestite and transgender indulge in a celebration of their ambiguous identity:

[m]asculine and feminine are correlatives which involve one another. I’m sure of that— the quality and its negotiation are locked in necessity. But what the nature of masculine and the nature of feminine might be, whether they involve male and female . . . that I do not know (149).

Regarding this particular scene, Paulina Palmer maintains that, “it is a meeting— on both sides of a threshold— between two new identities, one female in which the male trace is ever present, the other a perfectly ambivalent icon, in which femininity triumphs through the constant recollection of an underlying male element” (46). Thus, this episode is important as it situates gender performance as a powerful ideological instrument that undermines normative categories and endorses gender ambiguity.

Peri Rossi, like Carter, also stresses how gender is used as a strategy in a hierarchically based society, in which the female is always the negative. In “el Gran Ombligo”, Morris attempts to fill out

a form about a book he wants to publish. When doing this, he maintains a funny dialogue with the dualistically minded secretary. The form question, “¿Que ingrediente predomina en su obra?” provokes a lengthy discussion of politics and gender (128).²⁸ Morris observes the binary opposition at work in political systems and identities. What he denounces is the workings of a binary logic that obliterates difference and eventually reduces everything to that logic. On the sexuality of his text, Morris first wants to know: “En cuanto al sexo . . . , ¿el formulario tiene preferencias? ¿Hay un sexo, digamos, privilegiado?” (128).²⁹ The secretary gives an eloquent speech endorsing the dominant ideology regarding gender and literary production:

De un modo general. . . le puedo decir que una obra de sexo femenino tiene pocas posibilidades de éxito, salvo, claro está, que sea directamente sentimental. Publicamos pocas obras de sexo femenino, pero no se nota, porque hay pocas escritas en el. El público siempre espera obras masculinas, y los críticos también. Las mujeres que leen prefieren las obras masculinas, es la tendencia de nuestra civilización (128).³⁰

However, Morris declares the gender of his book as outside of the strict binary opposition: “Creo que mi libro es andrógino” (129).³¹ The secretary, in a practical mood advises him, “. . . puede poner que su obra es de sexo masculino. Así por lo menos la examinarán” (129).³² After suggesting this masculine masquerade, Morris claims that this would be dishonest as it would be betraying the deep essence of the work, attributing to it a sex it does not have. Then, the secretary, in her knowledge about the binarism that operates in society suggests that gender identity is a matter of performance:

Todo el mundo se atribuye un sexo, ¿no es cierto? Nos pasamos la vida afirmándolo. ¿Se da cuenta? Gastarla así. La vida entera procurando convencer a los demás y a nosotros mismos de que poseemos un sexo, con identidad propia, y de que lo usamos, lo mimamos, lo blandimos con propiedad.

—Sí -dijo Morris-. Es una preocupación neurótica. Al fin, ¿qué más da?

²⁸ See Appendix xxi.

²⁹ See Appendix xxii.

³⁰ See Appendix xxiii.

³¹ See Appendix xxiv.

³² See Appendix xxv.

—Eso mismo. La ambición de un sexo es neurótica. Nos pasamos la vida en esa compulsión. Pero en fin, dado que ésas son las reglas del juego, dejémoslo así. Su obra, desde este momento, es de sexo masculino (129-30).³³

The conferring of a particular gender on Morris's work effectively shows gender as an arbitrarily imposed and ultimately unstable identity. Although, the secretary rejects an essential view about gender, she obeys the rigid binarism of sexual identities. Then, for the habitants of "el Gran Ombligo", "having a gender" is revealed to be a social convenience and an effective strategy when facing normative requirements.

Echoing Carter, Peri Rossi also displays transvestism as a subversive strategy to destabilize gender categories. Because of the common violence imposed upon women by the patriarchal sexual order, both authors find in the transvestite performance a useful strategy to overcome gender essentialism. As a victim of this imposed patriarchal hierarchy, Lucía makes an oath never to sleep with a man again, she tells Equis:

La humillación no es solo este autobús, el viaje silencioso, la clínica con su rápida intervención. La humillación es saberse víctima del azar, otra opresión. Jamás, jamás volveré a acostarme con un hombre. A través de ellos el azar entra a nuestras vidas, sometiéndonos. Venenosa intromisión. Jamás, jamás. A través de ellos la esclavitud se propaga, se difunde, nos encadena (176).³⁴

After their previous encounter, Equis stumbles upon Lucía dressed up like a man in a drag porno-show. On the stage, Equis sees a lesbian pantomime, in which Lucía is with a partner, "un hombre disfrazado de mujer, o una mujer, un travesti, uno que había cambiado sus señas de identidad para asumir la de sus fantasías, alguien que se había decidido a ser quien quería ser y no quien estaba determinado a ser" (191).³⁵ The drag performance has a double function. While it is explicitly endorsed for the amusement of the male spectators, it parodies the gender identities and compulsory heterosexuality of the patriarchal sexual economy. At the show, where "en un ruedo lleno de polvo y de arena donde le hubiera gustado escribir a Hemingway, eyacular a Henry Miller o viceversa," (192)

³³ See Appendix xxvi.

³⁴ See Appendix xxvii.

³⁵ See Appendix xxviii.

³⁶ where all men present, “oían chistes, burlas, réplicas, bolsas llenas de aire que estallaban, largos eructos, silbidos, aplausos y pataleos” (190) ³⁷, the effect of the parody of gender identities is not the same for other men in the audience as it is for Equis. Hence, Peri Rossi puts Equis as an observer of this subversive act, since he is able to make sense of it.

In the drag performance, through masquerade and parody, agency becomes possible, offering a model of social subjectivity whereby the individual would be a subject of his own cultural production. The stage is the enactment of a blurring of the field of sexuality and gender signification. Furthermore, Elia Kantaris affirms that the transvestite club,

is the perfect metaphor for a utopian attempt to escape from power relations through the use of ambiguity. Solidly and sordidly set within the phallogentric sexual order – a pornographic spectacle for men– the act nevertheless escapes that order and moves into a space (imaginary, ideal) where the signifier of sexual identity is free to play, to move and change, untied to any predetermined notion of identity (Kantaris 261).

Interestingly, gender ambiguity is addressed by both authors as an identity in itself. In the next section I argue that by means of gender performance, Carter and Peri Rossi propose androgyny as a utopian model of identity that would replace binary gender categories.

3.5. Androgyny: Towards a Sexual Utopia

Carter and Peri Rossi envision a continuous re-invention of gender categories. Through gender performance and parody, both novels portray ambiguous subjects that embrace the self and the other, and echo Virginia Woolf’s famous statement that “one must be woman-manly or man-womanly” (94). Consequently, both novels propose androgyny as a sexual utopia, indicating gender differences as restrictive categories that inevitably inflict hierarchies. Their position is aligned with that of certain feminists, like Luce Irigaray who envisions a utopian search with a “harmonious coexistence of men and women in the fertile conjunction of two sexual economies” (20).

In Carter’s novel, the two main characters symbolically reach an androgynous self in coitus. The sexual intercourse between transvestite and transgender indicates a chimerical unification of opposites into a coherent self. While lying with Tristessa in the desert, Eve experiences a

³⁶ See Appendix xxix.

³⁷ See Appendix xxx.

transcendental union as they “made the great platonic hermaphrodite together, the whole and perfect being . . . we brought into being the being who stops time in the self-created eternity of lovers” (145). This symbolic union between the two figures is a climatic dissolution of normative gendered identities. In the sexual act, Eve and Tristessa overcome repression, transgress normative gender categories and celebrate the conflation of genders.

The end of *The Passion of New Eve* has been frequently discussed by critics without reaching a unique interpretation. The final scene in which Eve launches herself into the sea seems to suggest a voluntary sexual exile and the rejection of the patriarchal system. According to Gamble, the open-ending of the narrative leaves Eve “hesitating between the risks offered by the acquisition of the new knowledge and the dubious security of the obedience to the old” (129). This tension between the “new” and the “old” would represent the conflict between this sexual utopia reached in androgyny and the obedience to the patriarchal sexual economy. Other critics like Ricarda Schmidt observe that the end symbolises “the beginning of a new species” (75) or an androgynous species, as Eve claims, certain that she has been impregnated by Tristessa: “I myself will produce a tribute to evolution” (186).

In the drag performance, Peri Rossi not only proposes a method of resistance to the normative binary oppositions, but also embodies the androgynous as an ideal. By means of Lucía’s act, gender is presented as heterogeneous, or the harmonious coexistence of both masculine and feminine identities. It is her subversive gender performance what virtually makes Equis’ gender-quest suddenly comes into view. The initial enigma that a medieval king poses to Equis in a dream, “¿Cuál es el mayor tributo, el homenaje que un hombre puede ofrecer a la mujer que ama?” is finally resolved in the transvestite club (183).³⁸ Stunned by Lucía’s performance, Equis rises up against the patriarchal king and announces the answer to the riddle: “El tributo mayor, el homenaje que un hombre puede hacer a la mujer que ama, es su virilidad” (196).³⁹ Equis’ solution to the riddle suggests that what man can best grant woman is her virility: her own capacity to have access to a power ordinarily reserved for males. The full impact of this realization hits Equis when he sees Lucía after the show, dressed as a man, ambiguously feminine and masculine:

³⁸ See Appendix xxxi.

³⁹ See Appendix xxxii.

Descubría y se desarrollaban para él, en todo su esplendor, dos mundos simultáneos, dos llamadas distintas, dos mensajes, dos indumentarias, dos percepciones, dos discursos, pero indisolublemente ligados, de modo que el predominio de una hubiera provocado la extinción de los dos. Más aún: era consciente de que la belleza de uno aumentaba la del otro, fuera el que fuera (195).⁴⁰

Therefore, Lucía's drag performance implies a double discourse in which, borrowing Kantaris' words, both the male and the female can "commune in a harmonious, shifting and complementary relation of equality" (262). Similar to Carter, Peri Rossi provides an open ending that resists a final interpretation. This somehow obscures the outcome of this chimerical gender-quest. However, the very final lines: "faltan enero, noviembre, diciembre y, por lo menos, dos ríos del Paraíso" confirms the author's symbolic extirpation of a Judeo-Christian framework, and thus, a patriarchal sexual economy (198).⁴¹

As I have tried to show, Carter and Peri Rossi propose androgyny as a positive way of imagining a sexual utopia without the hierarchies of gender categories. Both women writers flirt with androgyny as a means to erase normative gender/sexuality lines between masculinity and femininity. In Carter and Peri Rossi, "difference" is presented as "plurality", or the harmonious conjoining of both "masculine" and "feminine". However, the final fate of the gender difference is left in both novels without a final solution, and thus for the reader to confer meaning.

4. Conclusion

Carter and Peri Rossi present a variety of micro-worlds, which correlate with the different subject positions that women occupy in those discursive orders. I have pointed how social technologies, mythical representations and discursive practices have endorsed an essential representation of "Woman" and how, by means of those representations, these novels give evidence of the artificial construction of gender. Carter and Peri Rossi make use of wanderers who do not subscribe to any specific power-system or discursive order, thus, showing that gender is a fluid ongoing practice. By means of gender performance, these characters adopt ambiguous gendered identities and provide a subject position outside the normative binaries of sexual difference. Consequently, the discursive strategies of gender in these novels are concerned with how to produce new meanings; how to

⁴⁰ See Appendix xxxiii.

⁴¹ See Appendix xxxiv.

subvert normative gender patterns as well as other oppressive structures. In casting gender as a place of political contention, Carter and Peri Rossi attempt to envision changes in the way gender and power have been organized, and the way gender relations have been imagined and practiced.

In these novels, Carter and Peri Rossi negotiate a trajectory between the post-structuralist recognition that identity and sexuality are discursive, as well as socially and culturally constructed. These novels propose strategies of subversion not as a break with tradition, but as a deconstructive and reconstructive interaction with it. The discursive quality of gender cannot be isolated from its socio-political context. It is precisely moments of historical and socio-cultural conflict that have availed Carter and Peri Rossi the opportunity to give voice to their respective subversive texts. As a result, these authors reject the patriarchal assumption of women's literature as personal rather than political. Finally, the subversion of gender, envisioned by these novels, proposes issues of social and sexual change. These women writers allegorically propose a collective project towards a different order: a utopian place of heterogeneous gendered identities, in which coexistence of sexual differences would be desirable, accepted and celebrated.

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Appendix

Transcriptions:

All translations from Spanish into English are my own, with the exception of, Cristina Peri Rossi, *The Ship of Fools*. Trans. Psiche Hughes. London: Readers International, 1989.

- i. “I believe profoundly in the woman who, in transgressing atavistic rules, creates fields of knowledge and of opening for herself and others . . . I believe that the democratic woman is the one who in transgressing produces true transformations and sustains the processes of change that she unleashes.” (my translation)
- ii. “[i]t’s difficult for me to know the place I occupy in Hispanic American Literature because I’m a woman, and there are still few South American women writers, taking into account their problems of distribution for political reasons and their practice of internal exile.” (my translation)
- iii. “[t]he Western reader is accustomed to the idea that intimate and sentimental themes have a woman as a protagonist; metaphysical themes as psychological complications are masculine. Anyone who wants to utilize a feminine protagonist with metaphysical vacillations or existential problems has to invent them from scratch because as a character, she doesn’t have sufficient bibliography.” (my translation)
- iv. “These women writers [Rosario Ferré and Cristina Peri Rossi] unmask the gender hegemony that places the masculine in the position of authority and producer. The women ‘ventriloquists’ install themselves in the hegemonic position from which it has been pronounced that literature is deicide, literature is fire, literature is revolution, literature is for accomplices, in order to make evident the masculine/feminine hierarchy.” (my translation)

- v. “As if in a dream, Ecks looked at her, saw himself looking at her and, from afar, saw them both.” (*The Ship of Fools* 181)
- vi. “[*La Nave de los Locos*] is established as an effectively realized utopian project: a place of encounter and authentic relation between subjects.” (my translation)
- vii. “it works like a backdrop and thematic counterpoint in the novel, creating that correspondence between micro-cosmos and macro-cosmos peculiar to many allegorical constructions.” (my translation)
- viii. “. . . lead to a lack of communication and the need for psychoanalysis.” (*The Ship of Fools* 125)
- ix. “[t]he favourite animal among Navelists is the car which they value above any family member.” (*The Ship of Fools* 125)
- x. “[b]y contemplating their navels all day, the city’s inhabitants are kept fully occupied and have no time left to worry about what may happen in the world outside.” (*The Ship of Fools* 121)
- xi. “to disappear is no longer voluntary but acquires a passive form: ‘we are being disappeared’, Vercingetorix had said on those few occasions when he referred to these things.” (*The Ship of Fools* 51)
- xii. “two distinct worlds, parallel yet unknown to each other, remote and independent . . .” (*The Ship of Fools* 56)
- xiii. “all periods have been periods of poverty and uncertainly for those who have no power: our days are no different from the past, except in the number of tyrants, their systematic methods and the cold logic with which they lead the world to madness.” (*The Ship of Fools* 100)
- xiv. “their beaches, riverbeds and remoter shores yield mutilated bodies with some frequency nowadays; bodies which, tortured and thrown into the water, have become entangled like weeds among the reefs and sandbanks . . .” (*The Ship of Fools* 101)

- xv. “Field hospitals for the war-wounded. Military hospitals housing political prisoners. Woods where troublesome opponents disappeared. Ships of fools, the ship as a substitute for the madhouse. Evil-smelling prisons to lock up transgressors.” (*The Ship of Fools* 181)
- xvi. “accidentally and briefly thrown together in this ghetto-like situation.” (*The Ship of Fools* 169)
- xvii. “What a strange load we carry,’ he thought aloud. “There are no innocent passages. My mother should have named me Charon.” (*The Ship of Fools* 178)
- xviii. “They were now entering a part of the city without trees, like men without phalluses” (*The Ship of Fools* 169)
- xix. “Alone, Ecks admires the woman’s face, larger than life, above him. He is waiting (every minute multiplies the details and prolongs that perverse pleasure) for the machine, irresistible in its pitiless, mechanical fury, to assault the beautiful Julie Christie . . . Panting, alone, Ecks hears his own breathing amplified in the whirring and grinding of that monster out of control. He is afraid lest his own fantasies will be projected on the screen . . .’ (*The Ship of Fools* 17)
- xx. “Adam was very serious and full of responsibilities and didn’t know that while he was walking through God’s countryside she has started chatting to the serpent who was very cunning and deceived her. It was all a woman’s plot.”
“And so Adam told her: If you want to acquire knowledge of good and evil go on, I don’t mind, but you must keep on cleaning the house and doing the ironing— that’s your job.”
(*The Ship of Fools* 160; 163)
- xxi. “What predominates in your work?” (*The Ship of Fools* 129)
- xxii. “As for sex . . . the form does not specify. Is there a privileged sex?” (*The Ship of Fools*, 130)
- xxiii. “Generally speaking . . . I can tell you that a work of a female sex has very little chance of success, unless it is purely and clearly a sentimental story. We publish very few works of female

sex, which is not surprising, since there aren't that many written. The public demands masculine works, as do the critics. Women readers also prefer masculine works; such is the trend of our civilization." (*The Ship of Fools* 130)

xxiv. "I think my book is androgynous." (*The Ship of Fools* 130)

xxv. "Why don't you put down that your book is of masculine sex? Then at least they'll look at it." (*The Ship of Fools* 131)

xxvi. "Don't we all attribute ourselves a sex? And spend our lives proving it? Do you realize, we waste our lives trying to convince others — and ourselves — that we have a sex, with its specific identity, which we use and suitably embellish and display."

"Yes," Morris said. "It seems a neurotic preoccupation. What does it matter in the end?"

"That's it; the end of sex is neurosis. It drives our lives. But since those are the rules of the game, let's accept them; from now on your book is of masculine sex." (*The Ship of Fools* 131)

xxvii. "The humiliation is not so much this bus, the silent journey, the clinic with its assembly-line service. The real humiliation is to know that you are the victim of chance, one more form of oppression. I'll never sleep with a man again. Never, never again. Men bring about our slavery, forge the chains." (*The Ship of Fools* 180)

xxviii. "a man dressed up as a woman, or a woman disguised, someone who had changed identity to assume the identity of a fantasy, someone who had decided to be what s/he wanted to be and not what s/he was programmed to be" (*The Ship of Fools* 198)

xxix. "ring of blood and sand, in which Hemingway would have liked to write, Henry Miller to ejaculate (or vice versa)" (*The Ship of Fools* 198)

xxx. "they jeered and taunted, burst inflated paper bags, belched, whistled, applauded, stamped their feet" (*The Ship of Fools* 197)

- xxxi. “What is the greatest tribute and homage a man can give to the woman he loves?” (*The Ship of Fools* 166)
- xxxii. “The greatest tribute and homage a man can give to the woman he loves is virility” (*The Ship of Fools* 204)
- xxxiii. “He saw the unfolding of two parallel worlds in all their splendour; two different calls, two messages, two appearances, two perceptions, two languages, yet inseparably connected in such a way that the triumph of one would cause the death of both. He was aware that the beauty of one increased the beauty of the other.” (*The Ship of Fools* 202-3)
- xxxiv. “The tapestry is missing January, November, December, and at least two of the rivers of Paradise.” (*The Ship of Fools* 205)
- xxxv. “eradication of the Judeo-Christian framework” (my translation)