

The Body as an Abode of Freedom: Redefining the Female Self through Angela Carter's *Nights  
at the Circus*

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## I. Introduction

Angela Carter describes Sophie Fevvers—the female protagonist of her eighth novel, *Nights at the Circus* (1984)—as a woman who breaks boundaries and redefines female empowerment: “What you have to do is to change the rules and make a new game, and that’s really what she’s [Fevvers’] about” (Katsavos). Like Fevvers, Carter engages in the art of rule-breaking to formulate new feminist narratives that celebrate the female body as a story in itself. *Nights at the Circus (Nights)* revolves around Fevvers’ unbelievable story as a Cockney woman hatched from an egg with bird wings, raised in a brothel, and eventually made into a circus spectacle. Fevvers recounts her story to American journalist Jack Walser, and although Walser questions the validity of her story, he ultimately gets swept away by her bravado and comically joins the circus as a clown. Absurd narrative shifts, such as Walser’s transformation and Fevvers’ larger-than-life persona, define *Nights* and speak to Carter’s constant rule changing. Underneath all the kitsch, irony, and eroticism, her work ultimately explores how female characters redefine and pervert the self to cope with past traumas and celebrate their bodies as a type of home structure. Fevvers best embodies this perversion; her physically distorted body is both made strange and naturalized, thus allowing her to maintain an ambiguous identity. In detaching herself from humanity, Fevvers finds freedom within her body, and her detachment from conventional social structures allows her to embrace uncanny, paradoxical, and existential truths. Throughout *Nights*, Carter asks the readers to suspend their disbelief and consider how Fevvers’ realistic, yet surrealistic story transcends fiction and redefines the human condition. Specifically, Carter interacts with these broad, complex ideas by subverting structures related to ecofeminism, spatial meaning, and female empowerment, thus creating a space for new narratives and truths to exist.

Angela Carter (b. 1940) has been celebrated as one of the most subversive and imaginative postmodern British writers. Throughout the 20th century, and particularly through the publication of her most popular collection of short stories, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), Carter gained popularity as an unconventional feminist icon. Her extensive body of fictional work addresses female desire and the oppressive patriarchy, and she utilizes magical realism, surrealist storytelling, and grotesque humor to deconstruct narrative structures. Despite Carter's influence amongst feminists, she has notoriously resisted identifying as a second-wave feminist, and her work often challenges or ironizes feminist themes. Scholars like Elizabet Gargano place Carter's work "on the dangerous divide between the potential essentialism of the feminist identity politics of the 1960s and 1970s and the sweeping appeal of gender performativity in the 1990s" (Gargano 58). In existing within this ideological chasm, Carter's novels, specifically *Nights*, explore the dichotomy between humor and truth. Carter's refusal to adhere to one school of thought or literary theory gives her work a transcendental and other-worldly aesthetic. In *Nights*, Fevvers embodies said aesthetic, for she observes: "I saw my future as criss-crossing the globe for then I knew nothing of the constraints the world imposes; I only know my body was the abode of limitless freedom" (41). Using a spectacular tone, Carter defines the female body as an extension of the natural world; rooted in a spatially-fluid environment, the body transforms into a suspended, home-like structure.

Feminists, philosophers, and academics commonly focus on Carter's engagement with Marxist and feminist theories, pulling apart her magical realist images and assigning social and political meaning to her narratives. However, these readings overlook Carter's interactions with nature, the body, and ecofeminism. In a 1994 interview with "The Review of Contemporary Fiction," Carter regards Fevvers as "a very literal creation. She's very literally a winged spirit.

She's very literally the winged victory, but very, very literally so. How inconvenient to have wings, and by extension, how very, very difficult to be born so out of key with the world" (Katsavos). In her essay "Return of the Century: Time, Modernity, and the End of History in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*," Rachel Carroll describes Carter's narrative as containing "moments of ecstasy, vertigo, or disorientation in which time is suspended," and many scholars agree that Carter's texts are overwhelming (200). Despite these fantastical and disorienting elements, Carter constantly grounds the reader in visceral and natural images inspired by ecofeminist conventions. According to feminist Patricia Waugh, Carter "has managed to employ metafictionality, illusionism, ironic parody, and deconstruction of gender binaries while sustaining a serious engagement with women's material conditions of existence" (Milosavljević 41). As the narrative in *Nights* physically moves from Fevvers' dressing room in London to the circus in Petersburg to the tundra in Siberia, Fevvers' very existence, specifically her body and voice—"with its warped, homely, Cockney vowels and random aspirates,"—contains and controls the story (Carter 43).

Throughout *Nights*, Carter abstracts reality in literal and physical ways, thus creating a tangible space for Fevvers' strange body to exist. In portraying Fevvers' body as a divine yet inconvenient thing, Carter restructures the ecofeminist framework—a framework that often romanticizes woman's interconnectedness with nature—and satirizes feminist sentimentality. I suggest that Carter's writing works in conversation with ecofeminist theory but does so in a subversive and revolutionary way, for her female characters embody a grotesque form of femininity. Throughout ecofeminist tradition, women and nature share experiences of exploitation and degradation facilitated by the patriarchy; however, in Fevvers' case, she represents how women and nature can become a combined entity to overthrow patriarchal norms.

Fevvers' physical connection to nature—being her literal bird wings—may give her an intrinsic understanding of the natural world, but she is also a self-made woman that profits from her abnormality. She navigates through a materialistic and capitalistic society by self-exploiting her fantastical body, thus allowing her to make money, gain fame, and ultimately control her self-image. She simultaneously performs an over-the-top spectacle, her flying circus act, and symbolizes a woman divinely connected with nature. I argue that Fevvers' body, and the vivid, metaphysical imagery Carter uses to depict it, shapes the narrative and serves three main purposes within the novel: as a home for Fevvers and other ostracized people, as an unconventional but still realist ecofeminist heroine, and as a literal symbol of female freedom and flight.

## **II. Ecofeminism and Heterotopias**

In *Nights*, reality and fantasy combine to construct a new set of rules for humanity; Fevvers' body perfectly symbolizes these new rules as she is part woman and part fantasy. Because Carter's work is interested in subverting reality and deconstructing stereotypes, it makes sense to analyze *Nights* with an ecofeminist lens. The intrinsic connection and tension between the female body and nature are at the heart of ecofeminism, and Fevvers' body hyperbolizes this relationship. In Val Plumwood's book, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (2003), Plumwood addresses the misconceived, negative connotations associated with ecofeminism:

The very idea of a feminine connection with nature seems to many to be regressive and insulting, summoning up images of women as earth mothers, as passive, reproductive animals, contented cows immersed in the body and in the unreflective experiencing of life. It is both tempting and common therefore for feminists to view the traditional connection between women and nature as no more than an instrument of oppression, a

relic of patriarchy which should simply be allowed to wither away now that its roots in an oppressive tradition are exposed (21).

Plumwood argues that the ecofeminist identity has been developing and changing over the past twenty years, but that “one essential feature of all ecological feminist positions is that they give positive value to a connection of women with nature” (9). While some feminists dismiss ecofeminism as a reductive way of viewing the female body—or that “there is something insulting or degrading about linking women and nature”—Plumwood proposes that ecofeminism acknowledges its oppressive roots and then reinvents the female relationship with nature (26). As a reluctant feminist figure, Carter subverts the stereotypical woman as a nature goddess trope to create her own version of an ecofeminist heroine in *Nights*. Plumwood writes that the “‘angel in the ecosystem’ is a simplistic version of the affirmation of feminine qualities,” and Fevvers literally subverts this trope or misconception of female identity (10). In response to the critique that ecofeminists are simply passive, earth-loving women, Carter transforms ecofeminism into a system that uproots patriarchal structures. While Fevvers possesses bird wings, she is anything but angelic: “it must be said that she looked more like a dray mare than an angel... not much of the divine about her unless there were gin palaces in heaven where she might preside behind the bar” (Carter 12). Fevvers embodies a new type of ecofeminist heroine, one that is unapologetically natural and human.

Although Fevvers’s abnormal body is exploited and fetishized by men, she eventually finds freedom and self-liberation within her body. With the help of her life-long friend and maternal figure, Lizzie, Fevvers becomes an international icon, dominating the commercial sphere and profiting off of her aerialist act. Importantly, Fevvers is very aware of the socioeconomic stereotypes she perpetuates. She manipulates these stereotypes to transform

herself into a spectacle while simultaneously making a profit, thereby making her career choice self-empowering. Through Fevvers, Carter embraces urbanized ecofeminism and dispels the stereotypes that the commodification of women and nature always serves the patriarchy. Seeing that *Nights* is set “at the fag-end, the smouldering cigar-butt, of a nineteenth century,” Fevvers’ transformative body “has all the éclat of a new era about to take off” (Carter 11). Though Fevvers’ newness is specifically grounded in the social change of the twentieth century, her story extends beyond societal constraints. I argue that Carter is more interested in redefining the self as a flexible, diverse, and paradoxical thing rather than making a political statement. I propose that Fevvers’ body provides her with the security and comfort that her physical environment—being the traveling circus and her chaotic childhood in London—lacked, thus transforming her body into an uncanny home. Her connection to nature is pivotal in this transformation. Karen Ya-Chu Yang best explains this connection in her paper “Angels and Feathers: Transcorporeal Morphing in Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*” when she defines the ecofeminist perspective as one that aims to “break down exclusive and static categorizations of binary thinking in favor of diversity, complexity, and infinite becomings,” and she argues that Fevvers is a representation of a new and dynamic ecofeminist icon (502). Carter takes from ecofeminist tradition to, as Gloria Feman Orenstein and Irene Diamond write in their book *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, “reweave new stores that acknowledge and value the biological and cultural diversity that sustains all life.” (qtd. Murphy 49). *Nights* deviates from the pastoral tradition of idealized, conclusive narratives to create a new narrative in which reality is flexible, the female body is perverted, and the story is dominated by corporeal contradictions.

In addition to analyzing *Nights* as an ecofeminist narrative, I will consider how Carter includes additional sub-settings or abstract spaces that challenge the conventional, linear

structures of storytelling. While the story physically moves from London to Petersburg to Siberia, Carter layers images, narratives, and surreal details to construct imperfect reflections of reality; these reflections are defined as heterotopias. Heterotopia is a concept best explored by Michel Foucault. His 1984 paper “Heterotopias of Other Spaces” outlines the six principles of heterotopias and defines them “as a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live” (4). Eliza Filimon applies Foucault’s concept to Carter’s fiction in her book, *Heterotopia in Angela Carter's Fiction: Worlds in Collision*. Filimon defines heterotopias as “ambiguous, non-totalisable contradictory spaces” that “are shaped by the antagonistic relations operating within these ambiguous spaces, by strategies of resistance, such as performance and telling story” (19, 7). *Nights* contains multiple heterotopias, and Carter uses Fevvers’ strange body to reveal alternative spaces in the narrative. Ultimately, Carter creates a dynamic story that explores themes of otherness, female trauma, and truth-making using a surrealist aesthetic that blurs the lines between reality and fantasy.

While Filimon argues that “the abandonment of temporality causes terror in Angela Carter’s work,” I believe that an abandonment of time does not create terror; rather, it makes the narrative reliant on the characters’ bodies. In moving away from a chronological narrative, Carter places a strong emphasis on the physical or corporeal spaces, and this paper will focus on the two major settings in *Nights*: London and Siberia. While the third setting, Petersburg, focuses more on the actual circus, London and Siberia best illustrate how strange spaces—like Fevvers’ small dressing room and the desolate tundra—are projected onto the self and shaped by her presence. In conjunction with ecofeminist theories, heterotopias, such as the dressing room and the tundra, contribute to developing Fevvers’ paradoxical identity. Throughout *Nights*, Fevvers interacts with and controls physical and surreal landscapes to construct a spatially-fluid self.



While the reader and Walser are left questioning her authenticity, Fevvers transcends the fictional world and permeates a more broad, existential space—one that challenges the complexities of truthmaking and champions the female body as an entryway into understanding how identity is shaped by corporeal and existential spaces.

### **III. Entering Fevvers' World: London**

*Nights* begins in London, Fevvers' native city, where she sits down in her dressing room after performing her famous flying act in Colonel Kearney's circus to retell her life story to American journalist, Jack Walser. The narrative structure appears straightforward: an omniscient third-person narrator frames Fevvers' story as her voice guides Walser through her past experiences; Walser and the reader both function as Fevvers' audience. As Walser tries to determine whether Fevvers' identity as a part-bird woman is true, both he and the reader get overwhelmed by her fantastical story. True to Carter's writing style, the narrative spirals into a series of surreal images, crude humor, and strange events; but between these moments, Carter reveals fragmented revelations about the human condition and female empowerment. To bridge this gap between kitsch entertainment and existential reflections, Carter grounds the reader in corporeal images, the most prominent one being Fevvers herself. Walser notes that "Fevvers' dressing-room was notable for its anonymity" and that "the only bits of herself she'd impressed on her surroundings were those few blonde hairs striating the cake of Pears transparent soap in the cracked saucer on the deal washstand" (13, 14). Using tangible imagery, like the stray blonde hairs, Carter brings the narrative back to earth to remind the reader and Walser of Fevvers' humanity. Ultimately, Carter creates many heterotopias—or alternative utopias—that dissolve structured meaning, and instead, Fevvers and Walser create their reality, thus urging the reader to reevaluate how multifaceted spaces create and transform the self.

Carter structures *Nights* in three distinct sections: London, Petersburg, and Siberia, and it is important to note that the entirety of the first section—London—takes place in Fevvers' dressing room. Although the characters are physically contained within the dressing room, Carter positions multiple metaphysical spaces within this one room. As Fevvers revisits past experiences, her retrospective narration reshapes the present moment. Time appears to stand still, and Walser notices that "Big Ben had once again struck midnight. The time outside still corresponded to that registered by the stopped gilt clock, inside, Inside and outside matched exactly, but both were badly wrong" (53). In a surreal way, Carter manipulates outside spaces and implies that the story of one woman, Fevvers, has the power to stop time or rewrite reality. Fevvers' narrative not only warps Walser's perception of time within the dressing room, but her story transforms the entirety of London, thus suggesting that she has control over how society perceives and consumes her extraordinary story. These notions of time, space, and identity are best explored in Andrew Hock Soon Ng's essay "Subjecting Spaces: Angela Carter's *Love*." Ng specifically investigates "Carter's fascination (albeit ambivalent) with space as a specifically surrealist canvas recording subjective distortions and oddities" (427). Ng's argument aids in analyzing *Nights* as a purposefully distorted narrative. The narrative spaces—like the dressing room and later the tundra—function more as heterotopias that present the characters with an inverted interpretation of themselves. Moreover, this first setting in *Nights* establishes the connection between space and self and illustrates how, like a mirror, Fevvers projects herself onto spaces and the spaces, in turn, reflect her perverted self.

Carter's critics frequently argue that Fevvers is objectified by society, subjected to the male gaze, and made to be a cliché, but I propose that Fevvers subverts gender norms and finds agency in her body's strangeness. Her body is innately paradoxical: she is both bird and woman,

natural and strange, vulgar and beautiful. Her connection with nature and uncanny ability to stop time give her supernatural qualities, but female bodies, in general, are famously characterized by their fantastic allure. Tatjana Milosavljević explores in detail how female bodies function as social subjects in her essay “‘The Body *Does* Matter’: Women as Embodied Social Subjects in Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*.” Like Ng, Milosavljević analyzes how the body interacts with space, and Milosavljević writes that the female body is “a metaphor for a pluralized world where there are no centres, only ex-centricity,” thus describing female bodies as tangible heterotopias (41). In *Nights*, female characters exist on the margins, or ex-centers, of life and are often ostracized or exploited for their physical abnormalities, but Fevvers thrives on the margin. Despite the chaotic energy in the dressing room—as Fevvers pours glass after glass of champagne—Walser vividly notices Fevvers’ eyes:

She turned her immense eyes upon him, those eyes ‘made for the stage’ whose message could be read from standing room in the gods. Night had darkened their colour; their irises were now purple, matching the Parma violets in front of her mirror, and the pupils had grown so fat on darkness that the entire dressing-room and all those within it could have vanished without trace inside those compelling voids. Walser felt the strangest sensation, as if these eyes of the *aerialist* were a pair of Chinese boxes, as if each one opened into a world into a world into a world, an infinite plurality of worlds. (29-30)

In using celestial imagery to describe Fevvers’ eyes, Carter masterfully enacts Milosavljević’s concept that women embody “an infinite plurality of worlds” (30). Fevvers’ eyes reflect her surroundings, such as the night sky and purple violets, yet they also consume “the entire dressing-room,” and this embodiment of space aligns with Ng’s concept that “the space that she is constantly defining defines her as well” (430).

Carter frequently depicts women as possessing a reciprocal relationship with their environments, and this is highlighted through Fevvers' power over the space she inhabits and the story she tells. This complex process of developing the female self contrasts with male characters' perceived simplicity, thus suggesting that women have an inherent knowledge of their bodies and self-awareness that men lack. In this case, Fevvers' otherworldliness projects onto Walser, who is described as having never "felt so much as one single quiver of introspection;" as the interview with Fevvers progresses, Walser's observations become more introspective (10). His analytical mindset as a journalist vanishes inside "those compelling voids" and he relies on Fevvers' voice and body to ground him in reality (30). While some may interpret Walser's observational presence as the male gaze, Carter deconstructs this gaze in having Fevvers' story alter his state of mind. Rather than having Walser's gaze affect Fevvers' confidence, Fevvers' power calls into question Walser's own identity, for "it was almost as if he himself were an *object*" (10). Furthermore, Carter depicts the female self as subjective and the male self as objective, allowing Fevvers to inhabit multiple spaces and be self-defined. Within Fevvers' hypnotizing eyes, Walser sees endless possibilities and an infinitely changing self, and later in the story, his transformation into a circus clown proves that Fevvers' story affected his identity. Carter uses Fevvers' body as a canvas for portraying the female self as an embodied heterotopia capable of shaping others' perspectives on life and reality itself.

Within Fevvers' eyes, there are elements of both celestial beauty, such as how they consume the night sky, and performative nature, such as how Walser notes that her eyes are "made for the stage" (30). Herein lies the paradox of Fevvers' identity: she is a woman inherently connected to nature yet she participates in a highly performative circus act. Carter challenges the reader to consider Fevvers as an unconventional ecofeminist heroine that subverts

the “simplistic version” of the “angel in the ecosystem” trope in having Fevvers, a literal, winged woman, partake in over-the-top performances (Plumwood 10). Not only does Fevvers use her physical abnormality to make a profit, thus contradicting the ecofeminist idea that nature should not be commercialized or exploited, but she represents a type of natural beauty that is both divine and grotesque. Throughout her interview with Walser, her actions are “mostly on the lewd side,” and Walser notes that “it was impossible to imagine any gesture of hers that did not have that kind of grand, vulgar, careless generosity about it” (8, 12). The “essence of Fevvers” consists of “the hot, solid composite of perfume, sweat, greasepaint and raw, leaking gas” and during her circus performance, she is known to “show off the crack in her bum” as she slowly somersaults through the air (9, 8, 17). Carter defines the female self as an entity rooted in realism and surrealism, and scholar Magali Cornier Michael views Fevvers “as a challenge to the innate nature of femininity and the wielding of power through assuming the status of a female object” (qtd. in Holliday-Karre 278). Fevvers’ vulgarity contrasts with her angelic wings as she demystifies the angel trope and humanizes her unusual yet still feminine body.

In Michel Foucault’s essay, “Heterotopias of Other Spaces” (1984), he writes that heterotopias are spaces that disrupt or contradict other, existing spaces. Foucault famously uses the mirror metaphor to explain heterotopias: the mirror reflects a tangible image, but the reflected image exists in another, intangible space, thus creating an inverted reality. Within the dressing room, Fevvers transports Walser into “the inverted world of her mirror,” as she continues to break and reconstruct conventional spaces (51). Carter explicitly recalls Foucault’s mirror theory in having Fevvers interact with and through mirrors. For example, she writes that Fevvers “tipped the young reporter a huge wink in the ambiguity of the mirror and briskly stripped the other set of false eyelashes” (8). Here, Carter places Fevvers in the space between reality and distortion,

using the mirror as a transformative object. In this instance, the reader and Walser view Fevvers via the mirror, thus creating two images of her and allowing her to exist in multiple spaces simultaneously. Fevvers' duality speaks to how Carter portrays women throughout *Nights*: as ambiguous bodies capable of reshaping reality. Throughout *Nights*, Fevvers' validity is constantly questioned—her slogan being, “‘Is she fact or is she fiction?’”—and Carter addresses the mystery surrounding Fevvers' identity through symbolic actions and imagery. For example, her “huge wink” connotes secrecy, and the act of stripping off “the other set of false eyelashes” ironically hints at her performative persona (7, 8). Fevvers' body and narrative exist within an ambiguous space, for Walser and the reader constantly wonder if her performance is fact or fiction. Importantly, Fevvers is aware of Walser's doubt and manipulates the narrative in a way that satirizes the very space it exists. In being hyper-aware of the space that she takes up, Fevvers satirizes “spatial meaning” to create a paradoxical self that overpowers sensical reality (Ng 420).

#### **IV. Creating a Home Within the Body**

Part of Fevvers' autonomy and freedom comes from her lack of home and parentage, for with no physical or emotional ties to family, she is free to travel as she pleases. Carter uses Fevvers' abnormal origin story—of being “‘Hatched out of a bloody great egg’”—to reimagine what constitutes being a home (7). However, as a result of living in brothels and traveling with the circus, Fevvers' childhood and adulthood are defined by displacement and haunted by early traumas. In response to growing up in an unstable environment, she seeks comfort within her body. She finds a fluid home within her body, disconnecting herself from a physical space and subverting conventional home structures. Ng uses an architectural discourse to analyze how female bodies are affected by the spaces they inhabit; he notes that “for the gothic heroine, the

house is not a home but a prison, or worse, a crypt” (419). While Carter portrays Fevvers more as an ecofeminist heroine, her harrowing experiences in brothels and with strange men contain Gothic elements. Fevvers’ confident tone and extravagant persona seem to make light of these events, but there are undertones of trauma within her story. Walser briefly notices how Fevvers’ “hand shook slightly, as if with suppressed emotion” when she recounts how she was hatched like an egg and “put in that basket of broken shells and straw in Whitechapel at the door of a certain *house*,” that house being Ma Nelson’s brothel (21). With Lizzie, the housekeeper at Ma Nelson’s who is the only constant companion in Fevvers’ life, Fevvers must create her own sense of home despite her unstable surroundings. This moment of suppressed emotion in *Nights* is important because it is the first time the reader sees her performative voice falter; this moment opens the story up to a new space: one that illustrates how Fevvers copes with and compartmentalizes her trauma.

Despite Fevvers’ perceived confidence, she experiences a lifelong struggle of being othered and exoticized, both for having bird wings and growing up as a poor, Cockney girl. Raised amongst London’s lower-class and in a brothel, she is immediately exposed to the commodification of women and the horrors of sex work; she reflects that she “had known all these things from birth and grown accustomed to the monstrous ugliness of mankind” (67). Carter describes the physical houses that Fevvers inhabits—the two main ones being Ma Nelson’s brothel and Madame Schreck’s “museum of woman monsters”—as oppressive structures of her past (55). How Ma Nelson’s house imposes itself upon Fevvers’ identity reflects historian Mark Wigley’s idea that “architecture controls and manipulates bodies and sexuality” (qtd. in Ng 418). In addition to Wigley’s architectural discourse, Carter plays on Sigmund Freud’s ideas about the uncanny and the unconscious. Described by Anthony Vidler as “a

slippage between waking and dreaming,” the uncanny navigates how reality is a projection of the subconscious (qtd. in Ng 419). Carter builds uncanny houses to reflect Fevvers’ fears of being stuck in a space between reality and fantasy, thus inhibiting her from ever recognizing her authentic self. For Fevvers, finding authenticity proves to be a difficult thing, for the brothel distorts her perceptions of femininity and exposes her to a world of illusions. On top of suffering from “the great burden of my [her] unnaturalness,” she also grapples with her sexuality as a “Virgin Whore,” for her job in the brothel was to dress as an angel and guard the doors, never participating in sexual exchanges (30). Fevvers describes Ma Nelson’s as, “the luxury of that place had been nothing but illusion, created by the candles of midnight, and, in the dawn, all was sere, worn-out decay” (49). While the candles trick the eye into believing that the brothel contains pleasures, daylight breaks this illusion and reveals the reality of “worn-out decay” (49). Like the brothel, Fevvers embodies a paradoxical femininity since she is both beautiful and grotesque, and Carter continues to define her as such to portray a humanizing version of an ecofeminist heroine. Despite the confidence with which Fevvers retells her story, it is clear that the trauma associated with living in a home defined by illusions and cheap pleasures further confuses her identity as a woman born with wings. This confusion later translates into Fevvers’ circus act and the notorious question of whether her performance is legitimate or simply a cheap trick of the eye.

Before Fevvers can fully grow into her wings, Ma Nelson dies and the brothel burns down, displacing her once again. Out of desperation for money, she “voluntarily incarcerated myself [herself] among the damned” and arrives at Madame Schreck’s museum, where “the facade of her house was blackened by the London soot as if the very stucco were in mourning” (57, 59). The house’s Gothic exterior alludes to the horrors within and symbolically mourns



Fevvers' freedom. Fevvers' experience living in Madame Schreck's museum is her darkest moment, and Carter creates this low point to further develop the connection between place and identity. For Fevvers to break free from her oppressive environment, Carter must first confine her within physical dwellings that subvert expectations of what a home connotes. At Madame Schreck's, Fevvers encounters other women that, like her, are fetishized for their physical differences; there is Fanny-Four-Eyes who has eyes where her nipples should be, Sleeping Beauty who is stuck in a slumbering state, and the Wonder who is fairy-sized. Madame Schreck commodifies all these women and sells them as sex objects to men. When Fevvers speaks about her time at Madame Schreck's, she refers to the women, herself included, as "dispossessed creatures," robbed of a home and alienated by humankind (69). These women, or "prodigies of nature," are characterized as victims; their suffering is tied to Plumwood's idea that "people suffer because the environment is damaged, and also from the process which damages it, because the process has disregard for needs other than those of an elite built into it," (Carter 59, Plumwood 13). While Fevvers' time at Madame Schreck's is defined by confinement and oppression, this experience makes her wonder: "what is 'natural' and 'unnatural,'" how does one define the human form, and how can one escape the social constraints of an oppressive environment (61)?

Before Fevvers can attempt to escape Madame Schreck's on her own, she is sold to Mr. Rosencreutz—a gentleman with the horrific motive to rape and kill her. Displaced once again, Fevvers relies on her wings to escape; she remembers: "I soared up and away from that vile place" and flew back to Lizzie (83). Whereas Fevvers' body had previously marginalized her from society and led her to Madame Schreck's museum, her ability to fly away from Mr. Rosencreutz illustrates her body's innate power to carry her through difficult situations and

proves that her body is her home. While some critics argue that Carter creates unrealistic female characters that only escape danger because of their unnatural abilities, Fevvers' escape characterizes her as a woman capable of saving herself, and this speaks to the broader themes of female empowerment present in *Nights*. Using Fevvers' wings as a literal symbol of freedom, Carter implies that in embracing one's body, women can obtain self-liberation and create a home within their bodies to cope with constant displacement or trauma. Fevvers' moment of departure from Mr. Rosencreutz's mansion symbolizes her physical and emotional departure from oppressive structures as a whole. From this point on, Fevvers reclaims her body and chooses to become a performer. Feminist scholar, Magali Cornier Michael, explains how Fevvers gains power in her performances: "Fevvers exhibits herself as an object for an audience's gaze; yet, as the author of herself as an object, she is also a subject and thus has control over how much she will allow herself to be consumed by her viewers" (qtd. in Holliday-Karre 278). In response to critics who argue Fevvers never truly escapes oppressive environments—that the circus is just another structure of patriarchal power—Michael pointedly notes that Fevvers has power and complete autonomy when she is in the circus, for she controls how society views her. Rather than the environment shaping Fevvers' future, Fevvers shapes the environment; Carter writes that "now all London lies beneath her flying feet" and that "everywhere she went, rivers parted for her, wars were threatened, suns eclipsed," thus implying that Fevvers very presence physically transforms landscapes (11). She represents an ecofeminist heroine who participates in redefining natural landscapes and female narratives. Despite the fantastical elements in *Nights*, Carter weaves together a narrative that seeks to uplift female characters and provide alternative versions of reality. She presents a reality where the patriarchy fails to oppress women. Instead, women

control how society views them, and they have the power to create embodied homes that transcend physical spaces and become an extension of the self.

While London continues to be Fevvers' hometown, she breaks ties with all physical representations of home and finds comfort within her body. After escaping Mr. Rosencruetz, Fevvers reconnects with Lizzie; together, they leave Madame Schreck's to embark on a journey defined by travel, performance, and the lack of a physical home. Many critics have written about how Carter creates heterotopias to subvert spatial meaning, but her ability to ground the narrative in Fevvers' body, thus creating stability for Fevvers and the reader despite physical displacement, has not been fully explored. As mentioned in Patrick Murphy's "Ecofeminism and Postmodernism: Agency, Transformation, and Future Possibilities," ecofeminism "does not stop short at the phase of dismantling the androcentric and anthropocentric biases of Western civilization...ecofeminism seeks to reweave new stories that acknowledge and value the biological and cultural diversity that sustains all life," and these new stories specifically champion women as history makers (49). Murphy also writes that ecofeminist narratives "break with the pastoral utopian traditions of constructing finished, static noplaces in which all struggles and all contradictions are resolved," and *Night* fits into this narrative structure for the plot is full of contradictions and unresolved conflicts (56). In Fevvers' case, her body represents a fluid, not static, space that subverts idealized and pastoral images of female goddesses in nature. Despite her angelic wings, Fevvers' past is defined by trauma and displacement, and in having her find freedom within her body, Carter speaks to the resiliency of the female body as a whole. The subversive and paradoxical narration in *Nights* mirrors Fevvers' bodily contradictions, but Fevvers' story builds a new, participatory form of ecofeminism that allows her to build a home both in her body and in nature.

Philosopher Walter Benjamin provides an important definition of home that, combined with Fevvers' corporeal interpretation, characterizes how Carter writes about the self. He writes that the "'home becomes 'not only the universe but also the etui of the private person,' a place where the inhabitant can *realize* herself ... and, more importantly, leave an impression to mark her having 'been' at all" (qtd. in Ng 437). Benjamin's idea that the home can become a space for self-discovery relates to the ecofeminist connection between self and place. He implies that a physical space can define the self and provide subjective proof of one's existence, but I propose that this physical space can be interpreted as Fevvers' body. Denied a traditional body and childhood, Fevvers learns to experience emotions associated with a conventional home via her connection with nature, and this ultimately allows her to "*realize herself*" (qtd. in Ng 437). She recounts the moment she learned how to fly, when "'the air had risen up beneath my adolescent wings and denied to me the downward pull of the great, round world, to which, hitherto, all human things had necessarily clung'" (Carter 31). In this moment of self-discovery, Fevvers realizes her otherness and experiences physical confirmation that her body is different, for she defies gravity. She says that "'the transparent arms of the wind received the virgin,'" and the wind becomes a supportive entity that receives her for the woman that she is (34). In addition to providing Fevvers with comfort, her "'marriage to the wind itself'" defines her very existence, as she insists that "'I must be the bride of that wild, sightless, fleshless rover, or else could not exist'" (33). Her connection to nature and her otherworldly body makes her feel alive, and although her body carries with it memories of trauma, it also provides her with the tools to escape oppression and embark on a journey of self-discovery.

## **V. Finding Freedom in Siberia: The Body and the Landscape**

While critics have written about Fevvers' socio-economic transformation from a poor Cockney girl to a famous aerialist, her relationship with natural environments and how they contribute to defining the self has not been deeply explored. *Nights* is not a traditional ecofeminist novel, but it contains elements and undertones that are in conversation with transcendental nature writing. Specifically, in the third and last section of *Nights*, "Siberia," Carter uses the natural landscape to reveal existential truths and force the characters into a meditative, transformative state. In contrast to the urbanized setting of London, the Siberian tundra is a stripped-down, essentially bare landscape, and its blankness exposes the characters' fears and desires. Whereas the first two sections of *Nights* are overwhelmed by travel, performance, and storytelling, the last section seems to "ground to a halt with an exhausted sigh" (198). The train that Fevvers and the other circus performers are aboard eventually breaks down and leaves them stranded in the tundra. Fevvers notes that "the train immediately ceased to be a train and turned into so many splinters of wood;" many critics have interpreted the train as a metaphor for Carter's overall narrative structure, for the novel's momentum abruptly stops once the train derails in Siberia. In projecting symbolic meaning onto the landscape, Carter creates a much-needed break in the narrative that allows both the reader and the characters to reflect upon "that unimaginable and deserted vastness" of an unfamiliar, snow-white landscape (197).

Although Fevvers' wings give her an inherent connection with nature, her experience in the tundra exposes her to a harsher, unforgiving landscape, and the tundra's immensity has an impact on her psyche. Cognitive of nature's power over mankind, Fevvers notes how "the puffing train which now seemed to me to have been a kind of gauntlet flung in the face of Nature—a grand gesture of defiance which Nature had picked up, then tossed disdainfully back upon the heaving earth, shattering it into fragments" (206). As Nature destroys the train, Fevvers begins to doubt

her unnaturalness and whether her fate will be the same as the train's; although she has created a deep sense of home rooted within her body, she recognizes her humanity and fears becoming lost in the tundra's vastness. Stripped of the train's material comforts, terror begins to set in, and Filimon argues that "the abandonment of temporality causes terror in Angela Carter's work;" however, this lack of temporality present throughout *Nights* usually does not affect Fevvers, rather it instills terror in Walser and the reader (101). The tundra presents Fevvers with a circumstance in which she does not have a clear relationship with space or time; she is lost in a snow-covered, foreign land. Fevvers notes that "as soon as we turned our back on the train, it ceased to exist; we were translated into another world, thrust into the hearts of limbo to which we had no map," thereby destroying their sense of spatial meaning (225).

Similar to how Carter confines Fevvers within strange, physical dwellings, like Ma Nelson's and Madame Schreck's, the tundra acts as a heterotopic space defined by the uncanny. While her body does conquer the landscape in the end, Carter once again challenges Fevvers to find comfort and meaning in an unstable environment. Arasturma Makalesi's essay, "The Hybrid Other in Angela Carter's novel *Nights at the Circus*," defines the tundra as "both culturally and environmentally important, it is a testing site, a hallucinatory site, a heterotopia," thus describing how landscapes test one's mental state (373). Fevvers observes, "nothing but streaks of snow standing out unnaturally white against the purple horizon... 'Nowhere', one of those words, like 'nothing', that opens itself inside you like a void. And were we not progressing through the vastness of nothing to the extremities of nowhere?" (198). Her observations illustrate how physical spaces project onto her metaphysical experiences, as she internalizes the nothingness around her. Ultimately, the tundra elicits feelings of meaninglessness and isolation, thus pushing Fevvers into a meditative mindset that contrasts with the narrative's previously performative and

quick-paced narration. In addition to slowing down the narrative speed, the third-person omniscient narrator disappears in the tundra section and Fevvers' narrative voice takes over. This narrative change reflects the shift from action to meditation as Fevvers' internal thoughts and fears characterize the last section of *Nights*. Like Fevvers' body, the tundra acts as a heterotopia that transcends time and space to control and direct the story's structure. Carter often reimagines "nature, human, and nonhuman relationships by interactively balancing material elements with social constructions," and this is evident in the way the tundra disintegrates material conventions such as the circus, the train car, and Fevvers' confidence (Yang 502).

Carter drops Fevvers into the tundra to illustrate that to reach a state of self-realization, one must first completely lose or dissociate from the self and reality, and the tundra provides Fevvers with the blank slate to do so. At the heart of ecofeminism is an understanding of the innate connection and tension between the female body and nature, and Fevvers physically experiences this tension when the train crash breaks her right wing. At this moment, Fevvers' body fails her; the home that she has built within her body becomes broken, and she notices that "God, it hurts" (205). With one wing broken, Fevvers looks like a "lopsided angel" or like "a poor freak down on her luck;" as a result, her body's magical allure disappears (290). Whereas in the past, her body has acted as an ideal home—one that she has complete control over—the tundra robs her of this control and presents her with an alternative version of her body. Stuck in "the infinite melancholy of these empty spaces," the world in which Fevvers created becomes disillusioned, for "amongst the ruins of the 'wagon salon,'" there lay "pile upon pile of broken shards of mirror" (228). The broken mirror recalls the mirror in Fevvers' London dressing room, and Carter utilizes this motif to deconstruct Fevvers' original narrative. The mirror not only symbolizes a shattered identity and dissolved heterotopia, but it shows how the tundra is a new

environment devoid of the material and social constructions that Fevvers is used to controlling. In this way, the tundra acts as a foil for Fevvers' dressing room, for her performative persona falters in the tundra and "for one moment, just one moment, Fevvers suffered the worst crisis of her life: 'Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he [Walser] thinks I am?'" (290). Carter utilizes this transcendental landscape, which is disconnected from society, to thrust the narrative into a blank space that challenges Fevvers to maintain a stable sense of self despite the tumultuous circumstances.

As soon as the train crashes, Fevvers and Walser are separated and embark on two, individual journeys through the tundra. Walser's experience differs from Fevvers' in the sense that, "like the landscape, he was a perfect blank;" he completely loses any sense of self (222). Whereas Fevvers finds self-reflection in the tundra and has control over her narrative voice, Walser becomes "buried alive in a profound sleep" where "he is all sensibility, without a grain of sense," thus losing any ability to think critically (209, 236). Robbed of his autonomy, Walser ironically transforms into a wild, bird-like creature, for "there are feathers of the snowy owl, the goldeneye the raven, stuck in its hair" and he cries "'Cock-a-doodle-doo'" (236). Not only is he reduced to an absurd, animalistic man, but he loses his ability to form coherent speech, and as Milosavljević writes, "the loss of language is the ultimate loss of the self" (50). Throughout *Nights*, Carter characterizes Walser by his mundanity and lack of introspection, and in the tundra, he quickly succumbs to the tundra's psychological and physiological effects. Walser eventually happens upon the Shaman, who views the tundra "as if it were an instructional manual of universal knowledge," and he helps Walser tap into his metaphysical self through ritualistic dances and dream interpretations (252). While Walser eventually regains some nonspecific recollections of his past life, something remains missing from his identity. Images and dreams of bird-women



and feathers torment him as he continuously feels like ““a bird in a gilded cage!”” (266). Using the tundra’s landscape as a means to unmake Walser’s self, Carter separates Walser from Fevvers to depict his reliance on Fevvers. In this way, Carter deconstructs patriarchal norms and infers that Fevvers alone is the key to solving Walser’s identity crisis: in addition to being her own home, Fevvers is also Walser’s home.

In response to Walser’s crisis, Carter proposes that Fevvers is the solution, and when the two finally reunite in the tundra, they embrace like lovers. Despite Fevvers' existential anxieties, her reunion with Walser reestablishes her identity and reorients her back into her body, for “her plumage rippled in the wind of wonder” and she dreams of a future “when she would soar up on her mended wing above the village, above the forest, above the mountains and the frozen seas” (290). As Makalesi writes, “via Fevvers, Angela Carter opens up a plane for real freedom, that is only possible by self-realization and self-knowledge,” and this newfound freedom defines the new ecofeminist woman (382). Not only does Fevvers rediscover herself, but she aids in reconstructing Walser’s self, thus implying that women possess a natural intellect and self-knowledge that men lack. When Fevvers and Walser experience stress in the tundra, the landscape becomes an in-between space defined by dreams, Shamans, and broken mirrors, but in the end, Carter guides the narrative back towards Fevvers' body. Her great plumage brings Walser back to his senses as her body essentially becomes the landscape, for she “rose up from the wilderness in a spiral and began to twist and shudder across Siberia;” her body subverts and twists the very continent (95). In becoming a landscape, Fevvers reestablishes her body as a home and fills the tundra’s vastness with endless possibilities.

Through Fevvers, the female self transforms into an extension of the landscape, and Fevvers’ ability to overcome the tundra’s harsh terrain proves her body’s transcendent nature. Part of the

tundra's purpose in *Nights* is to ground the characters in an unfamiliar and strange physical landscape, and consequently, the landscape reveals their fears, desires, and insecurities. On a surface level, Fevvers discovers that she loves Walser, and Walser discovers that Fevvers enlivens his soul and self; however, the tundra reveals much more than the nature of their relationship. Her Siberian experience ultimately helps her connect her past, present, and future in a freeing and transcendental way. Whereas London and St. Petersburg, the other two settings in *Nights*, are filled with material and social constructions, the tundra is devoid of these conventions, and as a result forces Fevvers to find meaning in the land's blankness. With a sudden burst of energy and enthusiasm, Fevvers promises that women will no longer suffer: "And once the old world has turned on its axle so that the new dawn can dawn, then, ah, then! all women will have wings, the same as I" (285). Fevvers recognizes her role as the New Woman and seeks to grab a hold of the future, thus extending her narrative to all of humanity. Carter ends *Nights* with Fevvers and Walser lying in bed while Fevvers begins to retell her story, thus circling back to how the novel begins, a specifically postmodern literary technique. As critic Rachel Carroll writes, "the novel ends not with closure but on a threshold," and as "the spiraling tornado of Fevvers' laughter began to twist and shudder across the entire globe," Carter suspends time and overwhelms present and future narratives with Fevvers' existence, signifying that her body defines spatial and existential meaning (Carroll 200, Carter 295).

## **VI. Discussion**

Carter's general resistance to align herself with one school of thought, be it feminism, ecofeminism, or magical realism, adds complexity and nuance to her work; this refusal to abide by a certain set of literary rules defines *Nights*. While some critics say that Carter's writing style is chaotic and oversaturated with contradictions, they fail to recognize the subtle and masterful

ways in which she balances absurd concepts with corporeal images. Throughout her writing, Carter transports the reader to surrealist and metaphysical places, and she emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between the body and these intangible spaces, implying that they define one another. In *Nights*, Fevvers constructs her identity around an imperfect reality, one defined by an abnormal body and traumatic childhood. Her unbelievable narrative transforms her into a natural phenomenon, and she embraces her fantastical body as a symbol of female empowerment. Through Fevvers, Carter contends with feminist and ecofeminist themes, such as escaping the male gaze, subverting patriarchal structures, and acknowledging the feminine connection with nature; however, *Nights* breaks the boundaries of these theoretical mindsets. As Filimon writes, “Angela Carter’s work is a bewildering welter of discourses that work towards changing our perception regarding such issues as identity constructs, marginality, myth as foundation of ideology, fluidity of boundaries” (7). Much of Carter’s work interacts with the margins, or the in-between spaces, that exist outside of conventional storytelling, and it is within this dynamic space that her stories transform and redefine reality.

Because *Nights* is a complex novel that manipulates time and space in surreal ways, it is helpful to track the narrative by using Fevvers’ body as a grounding point. Her body establishes the connection between space and self, and throughout *Nights*, this spatial awareness is constantly being constructed and deconstructed. It is through the creation and the breaking of the self that Carter reveals “a larger-than-life, grotesque female protagonist who is presented as a triumphant woman” (Martin 193). In Fevvers’ London dressing room, Carter uses Foucault’s concept of heterotopias to create new realities that disrupt outside, conventional realities. For example, the clock inside Fevvers’ dressing room constantly strikes midnight and this manipulation of time projects onto London’s Big Ben, changing the outside world to match the

dressing room's strangeness. As Walser notices the otherworldliness held within Fevvers' eyes, Carter characterizes Fevvers herself as a heterotopia. Whereas heterotopias are typically intangible, conceptual spaces, Carter provides a physical manifestation of these spaces in Fevvers' body.

Similar to how Fevvers embodies a heterotopia, she also becomes a representation of home. Once again, Carter takes a highly abstract structure—for what truly constitutes a home?—and materializes it in Fevvers' body. In response to childhood trauma, Fevvers introspectively finds security within her body, specifically in her winged form. In inhabiting herself like a home, Fevvers detaches herself from physical dwellings and creates a fluid, mobile identity. In the Siberian tundra, Carter tests Fevvers' sense of self and challenges her to reorient herself in a foreign landscape. The tundra combines concepts of heterotopia, ecofeminism, and an embodied home to best illustrate how Fevvers, and the female body in general, endures trauma and overcomes oppression. In the end, Fevvers' revelations in the tundra and discovery of Walser characterize her as a shaman-like, spiritual goddess; Carter writes that “She batted her lashes at him, beaming, exuberant, newly armed. Now she looked big enough to crack the roof of the god-hut, all wild hair and feather and triumphant breasts and blue eyes the size of dinner places” (291). Armed with her body, wings, and confidence, Fevvers overtakes the narrative, and as her body transcends the Siberian landscape, her entire persona extends across the continent and permeates an existential space. Her departure from physical spaces and into an otherworldly realm—where women have wings and find comfort in their bodies—guides the reader to the threshold of possibilities. The “essence of her abused and withered femaleness,” of being both “symbol and woman,” allows the narrative to be subversive and revolutionary (96).

Truths about home, trauma, and the female body are therefore absorbed by Fevvers' persona as her body acts as a catalyst for a future where "the cages, gilded or otherwise...will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed..." (285). Carter creates a fictional world where Fevvers' body transforms into an extension of the landscape, the female self, and the home. Although a winged woman seems fantastical or illogical, this imaginative narrative asks us to break out of our conventional mindsets and slip into an extraordinary space where our incredibly human bodies carry and tell our stories.

I abide by the Washington College Honor Code: Nicole Hatfield, 4/2/21

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