Queer Illegible Communities in Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*

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Honors Thesis HON 495 
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17 May 2024
Abstract

Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* uses the hybrid subjectivity of Fevvers to lay groundwork of Fevvers’ ability to be illegible, meaning to be un categorizable, as Jack Halberstam describes. Fevvers illegible individual subjectivity allows her to illegibly exist in community, have relationships with people by means of their stories and emotional labor instead of through hegemonic categorizations. When American journalist, Jack Walser, attempts to interview her, she disorients him with the help of her friend and mother figure Lizzie and teaches him to unlearn hegemonic modes of understanding one another categorizations by letting him get to know her through her life stories. Lizzie also helps Fevvers by balancing out Fevvers greed with Lizzie’s own Marxist ideology. Through these differing ideologies, an interrelational gearshift feminism emerges, allowing people flexibility to change their mode of moving situationally. This mode of feminism is also used in the second plot in this novel about the panoptic prisoners. Interrelational gearshift feminism is enacted by Fevvers in her accepting of a transformed Walser, providing a hopeful message about the importance of small change to create big, global change. Carter also uses an interrelational gearshift feminism model in outlining what characters she is uninterested in transforming through excessive caricatures.

*Keywords:* *English Literature,* illegibility, categories, *Jack Halberstam, Angela Carter,* gearshift feminism, transformation.
I. **Theoretical Apparatus**

Society compulsively categorizes people, making them knowable, definable, and controllable. Within the carceral society we live in "Disciplines qualify and disqualify, legitimate and delegitimate, reward and punish; most important, they statically reproduce themselves and inhibit dissent” (Halberstam 10). Being understood and legible in dominant power structures makes one susceptible to their domination and the carceral system. Hegemony today, and in *Nights at the Circus*, is characterized disciplinarily by patriarchy, capitalism, artificial perfection, reason. So, if being legible to these power structures makes one susceptible to these different forms of oppression, what are people to do? Foucault says we must search for a new kind of anti-disciplinary power that is emancipated from sovereignty (Halberstam 11)

Halberstam’s ideas of illegibility does not mean unreadable, but but as a fluctuating mode of being known and unknown situationally. So sometimes one will identify with a category, but not singularly or finitely. This non-singularity moves beyond state-sanctioned categorizations. Orienting oneself in the position of producing and circulating subjugated knowledges, “we have to untrain ourselves so that we can read the struggles and debates back into questions that seem settled and resolved” (Halberstam 11). For Halberstam, untraining looks like learning how to be illegible to the state and its disciplinary powers. This is not proposed as a positivist fixed solution, but instead as a launching point from which many kinds of knowledge will emerge.

Illegibility is composed of three key pillars: first to resist mastery, second to privilege the naive and nonsensical, and third to suspect memorialization. Resisting mastery is to resist Hegelian notions of domination over ideas and people. Instead of searching for singularity or domination, illegibility is about multiplicity, unresolved contradictions, and co-existence: “Conversation rather than mastery indeed seems to offer one very concrete way of being in
relation to another form of being and knowing without seeking to measure that life modality by the standards that are external to it” (Halberstam 12). Privileging the nonsensical embraces silliness, stupidity, and forgetfulness as fruitful paths of knowledge, alternative to traditional linear paths of knowing, domination, and mastery. Grand narratives and mythologies tend to align themselves with singular truths and in turn erase variety and complexity. “Memorialization has a tendency to tidy up disorderly histories” (Halberstam 15), presenting a false mythology of history. Halberstam says illegibility “points to an argument for antidisiplinarity in the sense that knowledge practices that refuse both the form and the content of traditional canons may lead to unbounded forms of speculation, modes of thinking that ally not with rigor and order but with inspiration and unpredictability” (Halberstam 10).

Carter invokes/references the dominant ideological structures of patriarchy, capitalism, especially. These ideologies value ‘reason’, definition, and control. Carter shows the impact of these ideologies, rather than naming their harm directly. If Carter were to define these ideologies outright, there would be backlash and criticism, the book would be defining itself in direct opposition to these ideas, create a dialectic, and get trapped in existing in antithesis to these ideas. But, by not defining the structures she writes against, Carter allows for an elasticity of her critique. She does not need to commit to any one version of these ideologies as wrong. She does not need to define her stance, nor does she need to resolve the ambivalence she presents. In refusing to explicitly categorize the structures she writes against, Carter enacts illegibility in using an alternative form of knowledge— the system she critiques is one that privileges definition. Thus, by not outwardly defining the structures she opposes, Carter can simply gesture to the kinds of ideology/thinking she aims to destabilize. By not defining an enemy she avoids
falling into the same pitfalls of singularity and domination perpetuated by the ideologies she critiques.

Illegibility is defined around in this way for the definition to itself resist mastery and totalizing illegibility, so in the genre of Halberstam’s academic writing conceptions of illegibility are vague. Angela Carter’s fiction allows for a landscape for illegibility to be experienced more materially. Angela Carter uses an illegible form and illegible relationships that are knowable to people who know how to look. This engages with illegibility not as un-legible, but as a fluctuating mode of being known and unknown situationally to promote an interrelational feminism through community. Illegibility of Fevvers’ subjectivity locates herself as existing beyond normative ways of living. Fevvers’ relationship with Lizze demonstrates the ability to attentively, lovingly, recognize people who are illegible to categories by knowing one another through their stories more than their categories. Fevvers’ relationship to Walser allows Fevvers to show Walser how to look beyond categories and grand narratives to see the messy illegibility underneath every person. Walser’s transformation allows Carter to argue that every person is capable of existing as illegible to disciplinary powers, and that no person is beyond learning. This inclusive attitude extends to people who decide to live legibly and those who do not teach others to be illegible. Carter also does not [incriminate] the escaped prisoners for leaving Walser behind. The only people Carter allows conclusions of malice to be made about are the predatory violent men who are violent towards women. And even these violent men are allowed the possibility of transformation as Carter caricatures them, exaggerating their cruelty to insinuate her separatist gearshift in not attempting to transform everyone herself. By sustaining all of these different choices and their contradictions, Carter creates an interrelational gearshift feminism that aims to include every person in the transforming of hegemony in the ways they can.
II. Illegibility in Fevvers’ Subjectivity

Fevver’s hybrid subjectivity and her non-normative family unit allows for herself and others to see normative categories (of human-ness, woman-ness, and family units) as constructed and naturalized but not truly natural. This also paves the way for seeing the construction of all forms of knowing— including science and ‘logic.’

A. Hybridity in her bird-woman-ness

Carter mocks hegemonic, binary notions of gender by making Fevvers half woman and half bird despite the ‘logical’ impossibility. Fevvers is both a bird and a woman. She knows this is an impossible positionality, and yet she embraces public disbelief to boost her popularity. Her “notorious and much debated wings” constituted her slogan: “Is she fact or is she fiction?” (Carter 7). Her bird-woman hybridity critiques hegemonic constructions of woman-ness. Fevvers describes her experiencing woman-ness imposed onto her in society when she “existed only as an object in men’s eyes [ . . . ] Such was my apprenticeship for life, since is it not to the mercies of the eyes of others that we commit ourselves on our voyage through the world?” (Carter 39). Fevvers talks about the way her experiencing life is predetermined by what acceptable forms of woman-ness look like to patriarchy. Except all of these patriarchal conceptions of woman-ness are impossible, failing to capture the fullness and realness of a woman. Knowing that she will not fit into the confining category of woman, her bird-woman identity allows her improper-woman-ly traits and behaviors to be more acceptable. Her hybrid identity creates an elasticity of the material ways of moving in the world. This quote about how she lives her life continues, and uses images of confinement and incubating in a shell to describe her experience: “I was as if closed up in a shell, for the wet white would harden on my face and torso like a death
mask that covered me all over, yet, inside this appearance of marble, nothing could have been more vibrant with potentiality than I! Sealed in this artificial egg, this sarcophagus of beauty” (Carter 39). The shell is hegemonic constraints of femininity and the social identity “woman.” This social identity hardened like a “death mask,” limiting the ways Fevvers could express herself despite the “vibrant potentiality” she has within her. To be a woman is to be sealed in the sarcophagus of beauty, reduced to image, reduced to the social marker of “woman.”

An American journalist, Jack Walser, comes to interview her hoping to uncover a hidden truth about her bird-ness. Walser is the stand-in for the everyman, tired of covering war stories and looking for a lively story. Astounded by her hybridity, Walser “reasons” with himself about her wings, tries to unveil a singular synthesis by looking at Fevvers through binaries: “So, if this lovely lady is indeed, as her publicity alleges, a fabulous bird-woman, then she, by all the laws of evolution and human reason, ought to possess no arms at all, for it’s her arms that ought to be her wings!” (Carter 15). Walser’s reliance on hegemonic ideas of reason becomes so clear that even this sentence’s syntax resembles a scientific hypothesis. Fevvers’ existence is not possible according to science and reason. And yet, there she is standing in front of Walser. Carter has Walser attempt and fail to understand Fevvers through binaries to emphasize the construction of categories as distinct and singular as false. If Fevvers should be a woman, that means she must be a human which is distinctly separate from the constructed understanding of animals. However, humans are animals as well, making the separation of these categories seem foolish. Carter emphasizes the science and reason Walser employs as constructed similarly. Science is not truly objective, for it must always be interpreted and communicated through humans, who are fatally biased. Additionally, reason is not the singular or ‘correct’ way of understanding the world. In
embracing Fevvers’ impossible hybridity, Carter advocates for multiple ways of understanding the world beyond just hegemonic notions of reason.

B. Found Family (instead of a nuclear family unit)

Fevver’s social identity is further non-normative in her position outside of tradition family units. Part of the hegemonic nuclear family unit is about reproduction. Carter defamiliarizes naturalized sex taxonomies through Fevvers’ being hatched instead of born. When Walser asks about her family, Fevvers responds that she was “Hatched; by whom, I do not know. Who laid me is as much a mystery to me, sir, as the nature of my conception, my father and mother both utterly unknown to me, and, some would say, unknown to nature” (Carter 21). This mode of conception is seemingly impossible, playing into the impossibility of her bird-woman hybridity, but it also places her outside of the prenatal ideological structures of the family. Althusser comments on the family unit as an ideological state apparatus that immediately, and prenatally, informs people of how they should act in the world. By not growing up within a nuclear family unity, Fevvers’ ability to see the world beyond binaries, as Walser does, makes more sense.

Additionally, being ‘hatched’ mocks hegemonic understandings of sex. In History of Sexuality, Foucault outlines the taxonomy for different types of sex. The most acceptable form of sex is heterosexual, cis-gendered sex has between a married couple for the purposes of child bearing. However, queer people, kinky sex, transgender people contradict this grand narrative. Additionally, discoveries about birth between two animals without sperm further complicates what reproduction looks like. Carter knows that what is presented as a grand narrative is just one way of thinking presented singularly, despite the many alternative modes possible. And so, Fevvers is hatched to throw hegemonic categorization a curve ball. Is it acceptable? Is it not?
Carter does not answer these questions—instead she leans into the ambiguity to emphasize hegemony’s impulse to categorize. Hatching may not coincide with hegemony’s notions of what is possible, but this is not Fevvers’ problem. By stating something seemingly impossible as fact, Fevvers seems to reveal a truth about herself as existing outside of traditional ways of living and expose the falseness of hierarchical and naturalized norms about sex and birth.

Living outside of the nuclear family unit, Fevvers fulfills her community needs through the found family she finds in Ma Nelson’s house and the Museum of Women Monsters. Often referred to as Ma Nelson’s Academy, this is a place funded by sex work from the women living there. The academy’s curriculum teaches Fevvers and readers about deconstructing hegemonic ideas of ‘acceptable’ modes of sex through the homely environment in the sex-work house. The “work” of sex work gestures to the capitalism informing the exchange of the feminized body in exchange for capital. The harm in reducing bodies and sex to capital is expressed in Fevvers’ experiencing of the world. Like from the quote earlier, she is sealed up in a shell as society imposes norms onto her body and existence. Fevvers said she waited and waited, “Except, I assure you, I did not await the kiss of a magic prince, sir! With my two eyes, I nightly saw how such a kiss would seal me up in my appearance for ever!” (Carter 39). The “nightly” thing seen was how her friends would be reduced to capital as they did sex work. A kiss, allowing herself to be sexualized, would seal Fevvers up in her appearance, reducing her to her body and her body’s capital value. The way Fevvers critiques hegemonic gender norms is illegible. Fevvers does not say “fairy tales are embedded with patriarchal values that are normalized in hegemony”, but it is implied.

Fevvers also finds family in Lizzie through Ma Nelson’s. This paper will go more into depth about the relationship between these two, especially the ways that their illegibility allows
for flexible and multiplicitous ways of transforming hegemony. Walser wonders if Lizzie and Fevvers are sisters, or mother and daughter. When Fevvers tells the story about her learning to fly, Lizzie is part of the story. Lizzie gives Fevvers a supportive and literal push to get her to start flying. This push is described by Lizzie as Fevvers being within a “womb”, wanting to stay in the “dark” and “warm” place, and “pushing” (Carter 34). This language reflects birth imagery, insinuating their relationship has some mother-daughter qualities. The categories of mother and sister are normative hegemonic categories that reductively summarize relationships. By using some signification of birth and motherhood without explicitly defining their relationship, Lizzie and Fevvers find family without being defined and confined by a singular label. Fevvers and Lizzie’s relationship is illegible, it is complicated and deep, existing in ways beyond any singular category outlined by hegemony.

Fevvers’ time working in the Museum of Woman Monsters explores the found-family created in this space with the other employees. Under the cruel and frugal employment of Madame Schreck, Fevvers and other the women ‘exhibits’ develop meaningful relationships with one another. In her interview with Walser, Fevvers introduces her friends, like Fanny, Sleeping Beauty, Albert/Albertina, and Cobwebs. Part of Fevvers’ describing them is telling their stories. She tells cute attentive tidbits about these people, what they are like, are they smiling and sad like Fanny, or expressionless like Cobwebs (Carter 69). Fevvers knowing all of this information and relaying this to Walser demonstrates the intimate relationship and recognition she had with these people she worked alongside. Additionally, Fevvers demonstrates the depth of her relationship by how well she knows their stories, teaching Walser to see the enchantment of knowing other people’s stories more so than their categories. Fevvers is also placed in the explicit position of a protector in an exhibit: “With my bent wings and my sword, Death the
Protectress, you see. So if any of ‘em does try to get up to anything not on the tariff, I can rap ‘em over the knuckles” (Carter 70). Fevvers is limited in how she can protect these girls, because if the guy pays enough money, Fevvers has no grounds for stopping them. But, her presence does allow her to give limited support under the constraints of capitalism by acting as a familiar support figure and keeping the visitors in line.

Fevvers’ experience at the Museum of Woman Monsters also furthered her complex understanding of the world. She tells Walser that she could never get used to “the sight of their eyes, for there was no terror in the house our customers did not bring with them” (Carter 62). People came to the museum expecting to see “monsters” and this predisposition prevented them from seeing these people as human. Fevvers learns about the safety that comes with positioning oneself within a monstrous category to evade the constraints of the category of woman. Fevvers asks the Wiltshire Wonder why she works here, and she says “i’d rather show myself to one man at a time than to an entire theatre-full of the horrid, nasty, hairy things, and, here, I’m well protected from the dark foul throng of the world, in which I suffered so much. Amongst the monsters, I am well hidden; who looks for a leaf in a forest” (Carter 65). Among the monsters, Wonder and Fevvers find community with the other people who have been ostracized from society because of their deviations from the norm. In this way, intentionally aligning oneself with hybridity (woman-monster) displays benefits to Fevvers who embraces her own hybridity through her bird-woman identity and her fact-or-fiction disposition. By walking Walser through her own stories and thought processes, she teaches Walser how to question categorization, how to see illegibly, beyond categories.
III.  **Fevvers Teaches Walser to See Beyond Categories**

Fevvers uses a disorienting and overwhelming narrative technique to force Walser into a position of listening. Carter uses Fevvers’ narrative to put the reader in a similar position. Once in the position of listening, paying attention to Fevvers’ stories will reveal ways of existing in the world illegibly, as in beyond categories.

Walser is a stand-in for the average man. He is an American journalist coming to “puff” and “explode” Fevvers, to uncover the truth, or some controversy to make interesting journalism (Carter 11). He does not anticipate the skillful narration with which he is met. Despite Walser being the journalist, he barely gets any words in as Fevvers derails the conversation through her engaging storytelling that seems to be relevant and true while also moving beyond categories. He asks: “‘About your name…’ Walser hinted, pencil at the ready” (Carter 12). One would expect Fevvers to speak about how she got her stage name “Fevvers.” Names are a conventional way of categorizing something—once something is named it becomes knowable, definable, and controllable. Walser is asking about Fevvers name because it is a normative ideological category he believes he can understand to learn about a person. But Fevvers will not give him information so easily. She starts talking about something related but not answering the question: ‘When I was a baby, you could have distinguished me in a crowd full of foundlings’” (Carter 12) and continues to go on and on and on with many extremely detailed stories from her life. Fevvers recognizes Walser’s wish to know more about her, and she sees an opportunity to show him how he can get to know people through their stories instead of their categories. So, Fevvers takes the reins of the dialogic space and tells her life stories that don't directly answer questions about her
name, but give information about the person she is. Fevvers talks around categories with her windy stories while still providing him an opportunity to get to know him.

The way Fevvers shares her information is all consuming. Fevvers' overwhelming narrative forces Walser into a position of listening-- thus while he is working hard to write down every detail, Fevvers is secretly training him to see beyond categories through storytelling. Walser develops a meaningful relationship with her because he is getting to know her through all these stories and contexts instead of through categories and labels. The consumption of Fevvers’ narrative is important for Walser because is not yet aware how storytelling is serving his connection with others. Fevvers notes how “[Walser] felt more and more like a kitten tangling up in a ball of wool it had never intended to unravel in the first place” (Carter 40). Walser is forced into a position of passivity, only able to try his best to soak up all of what shes saying and writing it down, misdirecting his attention away from his internal thought processes and the questions he asks internally. Fevvers overwhelms Walser with information, to the point where the sheer amount of detail becomes a shielding smokescreen for the questions Walser really wants to ask--like about her position in ideological state categorization, like bird-ness, her woman-ness, etc.

This disorientation lays the foundation for Fevvers’ narrative to consume Walser. From the beginning of their interview, Walser recognizes Fevvers as a girl turned into artifice, a “marvellous machine” “equipped” with her story-telling powers. The word ‘equipped’ recognizes how Fevvers wields her tangled narrative akin to a weapon. Fevvers’ dialogic sleight of hand enables her to avoid singularly defining her subjectivity, keeping her uncategorizable and illegible.
IV.  **Lizzie’s Feminism in Community with Fevvers’ Feminism**

A. Working together to Disorient Walser in Part 1

Fevvers seamlessly shifts from one anecdote to another, without giving Walser or readers a moment to catch up, but this work is not done on her own. The disorientation is magnified Fevvers and Lizzie strategically coax him into drunkenness and play with time, making it easier to bombard him with information to the point of exhaustion.

At the start of Walser interviewing Fevvers, Lizzie explicitly weaponizes the patriarchal standard of ‘macho’ masculinity by linking Walser’s consumption of alcohol with toxic masculine ideas. Lizzie tells Walser to “grow some hairs on his chest” and accept more alcohol. She weaponizes masculinity and drinking simultaneously to [lure/pressure] him into accepting another drink (and another… and another). This dynamic is further solidified in the speaker describing Lizzie as “holding a glass of wine like a weapon, eyeing Jack Walder as scrupulously as if she were attempting to assess the last farthing just how much money he had in his wallet” (Carter 13). Continually throughout this first half of the interview and the interview picking up from where they left off, Lizzie and Fevvers coax Walser into drinking more. The intense degree of his disorientation is seen in him thinking he saw a fish in a bucket (Carter 20). While it is possible Walser really did see a fish, the truth of it happening does not matter so much as his inability to trust his perception, solidifying his drunkenness. Lizzie and Fevvers get Walser drunk so they can more easily misdirect his attention.

Walser’s drunkenness makes him more vulnerable to [disorientation/trickery], as seen in his loss of time. Fevvers and Lizzie use Ma Nelson’s clock to further [disarm] Walser. Losing a sense of time contributes to a loss of reality, as time is a universal mode of orientation– even in the categories of morning, afternoon, evening, these are universal ways a person locates
themselves in time passage. Big Ben strikes midnight on page 37 after Fevvers finishes talking about Lizzie helping Fevvers learn how to fly. Then, the interview picks back up, proceeding to pull and tug at Walser’s ability to retain and write it all. Then the clock strikes midnight again, where “For the first time that night, Walser was seriously discomposed. ‘Hey, there! Didn’t that clock strike midnight just a while ago, after that watchman came round?’ ‘Did it, sir? How could it have, sir?’” (Carter 42). Fevvers pretends not to know that the chime is somehow happening again. And again, the interview resumes its fast darting pace. But then, Big Ben chimes twelve times again, making it the third time midnight struck (Carter 53). Time is a vital way of keeping oneself oriented. Even as simply as where the sun is in the sky orients people as to where in the day they stand. Knowing how much time has passed keeps one grounded. Fevvers and Lizzie manipulate the time Walser perceives it to be through Ma Nelson’s magical clock. Once time seems to correct itself, striking at 6 am, it was “As if the room that had, in some way, without [Walsers] knowledge, been plucked out of its everyday, temporal continuum, had been held for a while above the spinning world and was now – dropped back into place” (Carter 87). Only then could he receive the mercy of leaving Fevvers’ dressing room.

B. Lizze’s Marxism Balancing Fevvers’ Greed
Disorienting Walser in Part One is not the only way Lizzie helps Fevvers in constructing their communal ability illegibility. Lizzie also helps Fevvers continue learning about the world through her own stiff Marxist ideology. Living in a sex-work house, Fevvers saw others see her friends and family, sex workers, as objects with a price. When their friend and figure of guidance who ran the place, Ma Nelson, died, they were tight for money, and Fevvers eventually took sketchy employment for Madame Schreck at the Museum of Women Monsters. Through the stories Fevvers told Walser in Part One, readers know Fevvers has experienced harm and danger
from capitalism. And yet, she is still easily swayed by the shiny diamond bracelet. Fevvers’ illegibility allows for elasticity in her ideology and approaches. She is not a rigid steadfast bot, but a human being swayed by emotions, who sometimes makes mistakes. Fevvers’ is depicted as knowing capitalism is bad but still greedy, swayed by money, and not understanding it all. Her relationship to money is a major flaw in her character. Her lack of Marxism is a flaw of her feminism. This weakness in her character and feminism is checked by Lizzie’s firm Marxist beliefs. Because Fevvers has aligned herself with illegibility, she can deftly move around, shift gears and change her mind– she can know capital is bad and still have a weak spot for it. Because she is in community, her weakness can be supported through interdependence with Lizzie, who is less swayed by capital. Illegibility’s potential for flexibility and change is even more useful in community.

The book is concerned with underscoring Fevvers’ illegibility as constituted directly because of the community she is in, especially by her relationship with Lizzie. Fevvers really struggles with her greed, and Lizzie aids in her Marxist critiques, warnings, and support after Fevvers’ greed gets her into a life threatening situation. A Russian Grand Duke sends a package to Fevvers’ dressing room with her lucky flowers. Upon receiving it “Lizzie snatched the card that came with them, read it, compressed the corners of her mouth and tossed it into the fire but Fevvers greedily investigated the moist, ribbon-wrapped stalks of the flowers” (Carter 172). Fevvers finds a diamond bracelet, and imagining what luxurious gifts he has waiting for her, “Her pupils narrowed down to the shape of £ signs” (Carter 172). Fevvers is literally blinded by her desire for money.

In reaction to this gift Lizzie also shifts her perspective, explaining her Marxist critiques and suspicion to Fevvers and using care to support Fevvers choice to go anyways. Lizzie’s
reaction to the Grand Duke’s gift shifts her own illegibility in relation to Fevvers. The adamant Marxist she is, Lizzie immediately knows the invitation is untrustworthy. She knows they “can’t trust fucking aristos” (Carter 181) and refuses to help Fevvers get ready for the Duke. While Walser is speaking to Fevvers in Part One, there are many mentions of Lizzie mending clothes and other items for Fevvers instead of purchasing a replacement. She is characterized as hesitant to indulge, preferring to find non-monetary ways of solving problems, like making Fevvers’ wardrobe and avoiding luxuries, with some occasionally idealistic standards. This characterization makes her disapproval of Fevvers’ thinking make sense. Lizzie immediately says she refuses to help Fevvers get ready as she normally would: “If you think I’d lift a finger to help you, you’ve got another think coming, my girl. Sheer greed that's what it is” (Carter 181). The Marxist she is, Lizzie sees the danger in this Grand Duke’s bribe. However, Lizzie does help Fevvers get ready, and expresses genuine care and concern before letting Fevvers leave. But despite all of her high Marxist standards, “Lizzie groused towards the mirror but could not help herself depositing a kiss on her foster-daughter’s defenseless nape as she pinned up her curls” (Carter 181). And so Lizzie does help Fevvers get ready even though she disapproves.

Lizzie’s ability to maintain her own beliefs but still support the alternative approach Fevvers takes is a prime example of how interrelational gearshift feminism works. When in community with a person or people, it is not realistic nor desired for every person to think the same thing. Having a variety of viewpoints will generate something stronger. Like how group critiques of creating writing exist to get perspectives from different readers, highlight different interpretations, and let the writer understand how to get closer to creating a desired effect. By being illegible in community, people can evade disciplinary power structures with flexibility and
use many alternative, unbounded ways of existing in the world that aid in the dismantling of hegemony.

C. Interrelational Gearshift Feminism and Illegible Community

Being illegible in a community setting allows for radical flexibility and care, invoking an interrelational gearshift feminism. Interrelational gearshift feminism acknowledges that there are multiple ‘gears’ or ways of moving towards a goal. The gearshifts, as outlined by Chela Sandoval are equal rights/assimilationist, revolutionary, supremacist, and separatist. Equal rights gearshift looks like assimilation, getting more access through pre-existing systems. Revolutionary gearshift looks like disrupting and deconstructing systems. Supremacist gearshift says the people most affected by something are best informed to make decisions on them. Supremacy here is not meant as white supremacy, but the recognition of experiencing. For example, people experiencing the water crisis in Flint Michigan are better informed to decide what needs to change than some politicians who have constant access to safe water. Another example would be trans people knowing what they need more so than the politicians who are policing them. A separatist gearshift looks like removal from society or a system and starting over somewhere else. Sandoval talks about the differential consciousness as one that moves between all of these gears depending on their situation. I argue that illegible communities can use an interrelational gearshift feminism to dismantle hegemony in multiple ways through the illegible (non categorizable) constitution of them as individuals and a community. Fevvers and Lizzie use an interrelational gearshift feminism to work through hegemonic structures in their relationship and in relation to the world.

Lizzie’s ability to disagree with Fevvers approach but still respect it as her decision is enacting an interrelational gearshift model. Lizzie has her own Marxist beliefs, and tries to
balance out Fevvers’ thought process (revolutionary gearshift, trying to change her mind). However, Fevvers is steadfast in her decision, so Lizzie accepts the Supremacist gearshift. This means Lizzie accepts Fevvers’ autonomy in making a choice and how Fevvers will be the one going, so she can make this decision.

And, when Fevvers realizes Lizzie’s suspicion was justified, Fevvers and Lizzie both change this positionality to meet one another where they are at. When Fevvers does go to the Grand Duke’s house, he discovers the sword Fevvers was hiding and disarms her (Carter 191). He threatens to cage her, “Fevvers did not shrink; but was at once aware of the hideous possibility she might do so” (Carter 192). Fevvers is scared, unarmed, and in danger. She barely escapes, returns to Lizzie and “The weeping girl threw herself into the woman’s arms” (Carter 192). Fevvers changes her mind, realizes Lizzie was right. And Lizzie is not mad or disappointed in Fevvers– quite the contrary, she is just glad Fevvers is okay now. Their relationship is less concerned with singularity, whomever was ‘right,’

The success these two have with one another throughout the book demonstrates how a multiplicitous and illegible community of feminists makes change possible. Uses of an interrelational gearshift feminism are further explored in the novels panoptic prison scenes.

V. The Escaped Prisoners
   A. Revolutionary Gearshift

In addition to the initial plot following Fevvers, Lizzie, and Walser, there is a story about an all female panoptic prison In this storyline, the prisoners were incarcerated because of how they legibly identified within society, and use illegible modes of existence through a revolutionary gearshift approach to escape the prison and move towards a better way of living.
The prison, the House of Corrections, is built panoptically with the center tower being run by Countess P, who is also imprisoned. All of these women are incarcerated because they killed their husbands, including the Countess (Carter 210). These women all existed in the world with the category “wife” in relation to their husband. The husband and wife unit is a normative marker that is naturalized despite the systemic overlooking of violent patriarchy and women being used as capital in traditional marriages. Part of wifely duties is the annihilation of the self to better serve your husband. The standards for wife-ness are similarly unrealistic to the standards for woman-ness. Marriage encased these women in categories and expectations that legally bound them to men who were violent to them. They labeled themselves, categorized themselves as ‘wife’, and became knowable and controllable to the systems of law and patriarchy more intimately than when they were not wives.

Countess P creates a panoptic prison for women who killed their husbands like her, but less economically privileged. Countess P gets the role of watch tower, and the privilege of not being constantly surveilled, as the prisoners are (Carter 211). The panoptic structure she creates is one perpetuating dominance, surveillance, and isolation—this structure is not a community oriented or feminist structure. It is a repressive form of carceral punishment that strips away any components of identity, including the ability to visually see one another or speak to one another. This does not make the House of Corrections illegible. The forcible removal of identification is not illegibility— it is just another way power structures control, dominate, and punish. The prisoner’s wardens are concealed in cloaks and prohibited from speaking. Without the ability to speak or recognize one another through sight, these prisoners must find alternative ways of understanding each other to escape the domination and stripping of individual and communal identity.
The uprising starts when Olga Alexandrova touches the wardress that serves her, and the wardress, “with a courage far beyond Olga Alexandrovna’s imaginings” (Carter 216) meets her gaze. After the wardress meets Olga’s gaze, her name is revealed, Vera Andreyevna. This invokes a Lacanian formulation of subjectivity, where the self is understood through the recognition of others. Despite the seeming impossibility, these two find ways to connect with one another, illegible to the prison system which forbids this, and they then begin to exchange “love words” and slip notes to one another. Part of this recognition is understanding that they are both oppressed by the same system, despite their different positions of powers and privilege. After Olga and Vera “lept across the great divide between the guards and the guarded” (Carter 216), across the House of Correction “seeds of love from cell to cell” began to bloom. and other inmates began to caress their guards and undergo similar processes of touch, recognition, love.

Many women found ways to bridge gaps of communication through privileging the nonsensical in their using what is available. If some one in the guard-guarded relationship was illiterate, they communication feelings through drawings. This would often create “crude graffiti” (Carter 217), a silly absurd tid-bit. Usually, this would not be a great way to impress a Tinder date, but this works here because they are all on the same page about their need to privilege the nonsensical in order to connect. These women drop all formalities; they are no longer conditioned by heteronormativity, and they can embrace their desire for connection beyond what hegemony tells them about what acceptable connection look like.If paper was not available, they would inscribe on rags. Without ink, they would use “blood, both menstrual and veinous, even in excrement, for none of the juices of the bodies that had been so long denied were alien to them in their extremity” (Carter 217). Their bodies and their processes have been so abjected by society, that in their survival state (something also about love though), they shed
all of the harmful categories imposed by hegemony to see these all as simply natural—as natural as their love. These women removed the shame associated with their bodies and their processes.

Eventually, all of these illegible, nonsensical, genuine moves towards connection culminates in the overthrowing of Countess P and the House of Corrections. The illegibility used interpersonally displayed radical trust and parts of an equal rights gearshift are foundational to the overarching story’s revolutionary gearshift model. Using the lens of illegibility and interrelational gearshift feminism, the panoptic prisoners display the value of shifting gears and working collectively to transform how they exist in the world.

B. Separatist Gearshift: Leaving Walser Behind

Once the women overthrow the Countess, they escape into the Siberian wilderness. Simultaneously happening in this location, the Imperial Circus’s train was recently demolished and the members kidnapped. Except the newly-clown version of Walser who escaped capture because he was covered in the train’s rubble (Carter 209). However, the newly freed women from the House of Corrections come across Walser, and use a separatist gearshift in deciding to leave him behind. Their decision to leave Walser behind is not negatively portrayed by Carter, emphasizing the many different ways people can move towards transforming hegemony.

They find Walser sleeping, a wound on his head, and suffering memory loss. Olga wakes Walser up with a kiss on the forehead after Vera ironically mentions how kisses wake princes in fairy tales (Carter 222). Here, Olga transforms a harmful narrative of heterosexual love as outlined by hegemony through fairy tales, turning it into a narrative about maternal care. Walser’s first word is “Mama,” placing him in the maternal relationship explicitly, and Olga complies, helping him walk and getting him milk (Carter 223). Both Olga and Vera feel bad about leaving him. Vera solidified her positionality of leaving him in saying “He is a man, even
if he has lost his wits [. . . ] We can do without him” (Carter 223). This implies that Vera does not wish to transform Walser or any man. Olga ultimately agrees with Vera that he would have no use. Their thinking is somewhat flawed, as they are thinking about the ‘use’ someone can bring them, which reinforced hegemonic domination, particularly ideas about capital. This is especially sticky because the same ideology has been used to evaluate women and their bodies—like the sex workers at Ma Nelson’s Academy and the people in the Museum of Women Monsters. Their thinking is not perfect, but Carter recognizes the autonomy in their choice to separate themselves from Walser and men generally.

Carter does not ridicule or critique the women for making this decision. In fact, they are humanized as the emotional difficulty of this choice is highlighted. When Olga “kissed Walser goodbye, she kissed goodbye to her own son and all the past. The women vanished” (Carter 223). And they are never seen again. This emotional pang emphasizes the pain the women feel in not being able to take Walser, or their sons, or any other man with them. It was not an easy choice, but they recognize not having the capacity to transform Walser. They do help Walser by waking him up and giving him some care, but the two women just simply cannot guide him through transformation at this time. This self-reflection of capacity is part of the interrelational gearshift. Just because everyone must be transformed and involved in the transformation of hegemony does not mean individuals are responsible for doing this all of the time.
VI. Nobody is Beyond Transformation

Carter uses

A. Fevvers’ Aiding Walser’s Transformation

After Olga and Vera leave Walser, he wanders around the landscape, eventually running into a Shaman. Walser is having a hard time using language due to his head injury, and this gibberish is interpreted as magical by the Shaman and he takes Walser on as his apprentice. Walser lives with the Shaman’s native community. He eventually sees Fevvers in the wilderness, but they are not yet reunited. However, after seeing Walser Fevvers’ interest in him reignites. Lizzie disapproves of Fevvers’ interest, warning that she is “half the girl” (Carter 280) she was before meeting him, and that “True lovers’ reunions always end in a marriage” (Carter 280). Fevvers protests, that the “essence of [herself] may not be given or taken” (Carter 281). When Lizzie’s protests continue, warning Fevvers about the dangers of marriage, Fevvers decides she can simply transform him. She decides she will “hatch him out, I’ll make a new man out of him. I’ll make him into the New Man, in fact, fitting mate for the New Woman, and onward we’ll march hand in hand into the New Century” (Carter 281). This story Fevvers constructs about Walser still continues to perpetuate hegemonic notions of women as care-takers and the need to give oneself away in order for change to happen. However, Walser does transform because of his own attitude and efforts.

Following Fevvers and Lizzie’s argument, they stumble upon a mother and child trying to survive in the wilderness. The mother is described as frail and bare, with little clothing or warmth to her. Lizzie notes how this might be a sign for Fevvers “to make you think twice about turning from a freak into a woman” (Carter 283). This encounter does act as a reflection of previous forms of marriage and love. However, there is so much emphasis on the New-ness
coming, with the new transformed versions of people and time, the new year, the new century approaching. The new-ness is explicitly used as an opportunity for transformation of hegemony. As Fevvers tries to sway Lizzie into accepting Walser, she says he can act as the scribe, as a blank canvas for which all women's history can be remembered, and the launching point for a generation of women with wings (Carter 285). Fevvers is using an equal rights and revolutionary gearshift simultaneously. Similarly to how Olga understood her wardress to be oppressed by the same systems, Fevvers is aware Walser too must be aware of how hegemony harms them both differently because of their genders. Fevvers argues for an assimilationist, accepting disposition to include Walser, and in turn all men, in the revolutionary overthrowing of patriarchy.

When Fevvers does reunite with Walser, there is a looming danger of Fevvers occupying the same lesser position of women in relation to men, “she felt herself turning [. . . ] from a woman into an idea” (Carter 289). A similar dangerous situation was created with the Grand Duke when he threatened to cage her. Her confidence waivers. The same ambiguities which she harnesses and ravels up others in become pointed at her sense of self, as she begins to wonder if she is fact or fiction or just what Walser thinks she is (Carter 290). But she (literally) spreads her wings, and her confidence is restored. She sees her audience looking at her in awe, and these are “the eyes that told her whos he was” (Carter 290). Like with her constructed artifice, Fevvers uses the gaze of others to fuel confidence in her illegibility. Gaze is often something a man does to a woman, to shrink her, to categorize her. But, Carter demonstrated how gaze was used by Olga and Vera to ignite their tender relationship. Here, the gaze of onlookers is something similarly loving, though these eyes do not understand her so much as wonder about her. Her hybridity and illegibility reminds her of her subject positionality, of her power. By means of her illegible identification, Fevvers can avoid the traditional pitfalls of how society constructs
woman-ness and constructs women in relation to men, like the reduction to image. Fevvers does not let herself shrink before him.

In fact, Walser seems to have undergone his own transformations that allow him to look beyond binary categorizations. Losing his memory and having to re-learn language, Walser unlearns hegemony and gets a new chance at seeing the world. This transformation would not be possible without Fevvers. Fevvers has already been training him to unsee hegemony and categories through her disorienting mode of storytelling. And Walser would not have gotten this injury if he was not on that train to follow Fevvers as she performs in hopes of getting to know her better. Now, instead of asking about her family or how she got her name, Walser asks Fevvers questions that seek to better understand her. He asks “What is your name? Have you a soul? Can you love?” (Carter 291), questions Fevvers praises. These questions aim at better understanding Fevvers, seeking to know her stories, instead of evaluating which categories she may fall into and how successfully she performs them. Through Fevvers’ accepting equal rights gearshift and revolutionary gearshift, Walser has radically transformed into a man who can see the world beyond the legible categories laid out before him.

The Epilogue ends with Fevvers and Walser laughing together in bed. Walser asks Fevvers about

B. Carter’s Cartoonish Caricatures: You Can’t Transform Everyone

Part of moving towards transforming the world is understanding individual capacity. Sometimes it is more radical for one to privilege themselves over spoon-feeding revolutionary ideas to others. This mindset is part of why Carter does not judge the prison escapees for leaving Walser behind. Just as Olga and Vera did not wish to transform Walser, Carter does not wish to
transform every man in her novel. The slick, grimey, violent men of the novel are humanized but not redeemed, and certainly not transformed like Walser.

It is impossible to expect Fevvers to directly transform every man around her. Some of them are violent and unsafe. Additionally, many of them are not seeking transformation. Walser was backed into a position of passivity and listening that allowed him to begin learning how to see the world beyond categories, but that did not directly lead to his transformation. He had to actively pursue learning on his own. Only then could he truly undergo transformation. Like how it is unreasonable to expect Fevvers to transform every man in her life, it would be unreasonable for readers to expect Carter to transform every man in her novel. Doing all of that work for everyone simultaneously is not just logistically very unlikely, but also a nightmare for her writing. So she chooses to leave some characters behind, like Mr. Rosencruetz, Ma Nelson’s husband, Colonel Kearny, the members of the Brotherhood of Freemen and so on.

Carter draws a boundary between what she aims to accomplish by caricaturing these unredeemable male characters. Colonel Kearny sports the drag-iest American clothing as he performs such intense nationalism. Part of his caricature is the aforementioned drag–he wears clothing with iconography of America and capitalism. He is introduced “sport[ing] his ‘trademark’ costume–a pair of tightly tailored trousers striped in red and white and a blue waistcoat ornamented with stars” (Carter 99). The colors and patterns of his clothing are the different colors and patterns on the American flag. Additionally he wears “A gun-metal buckle, in the shape of a dollar sign, fastened [to] the leather belt just below his pot belly” (Carter 99). The dollar-sign belt keeps all the clothing on, including capital in the visual representations of America. Additionally, he is overweight, as indicative of his gluttony and greed. The whole outfit is screaming “USA” in an ignorant, capitalist tone. The belt being made from gun-metal is a
subtle indicator of how wealth is accumulated for the rich—through violence. The Colonel is exploiting his workers in the circus similarly to how billionaires exploit their workers, often resulting into essentially un-waged, forced labor.

Even his name, the Colonel, gestures to the militarized state of America. The “Imperial Circus” even furthers this idea, gesturing to the ways violence is used through American imperialism to colonize lands and peoples in the pursuit of accumulating capital. His motivations are similarly aligned, as there is “no end to the marvels the Colonel intended to transport about the globe, joined together in amity at the sight of the dollar bill” (Carter 99). The globalization of capital is intrinsically linked to the violent colonialism upon which America and its supposed greatness is founded. The Colonel’s actions continue to reflect the extreme representation of America, as he is often depicted as drinking heavily, stuffing his face, and whinging (all three occur on page 227). All of these things point to the disgusting greed rampant in American hegemony. This man is absurdly representative of America in his appearance, motivations, and actions.

It is with this absurd cartoonizing of the character that Carter expresses a boundary in who she is and isn’t interested in transforming. The Colonel is so deeply entrenched in American ideology that no person would be able to change his mind until he understands that there are other ways of seeing the world beyond hegemony and capitalism. His character is created to be so absurd precisely to make his existence feel unrealistic, making it harder for characters to see possibilities of his transformation. This is not to say the Colonel could never transform. Perhaps his experiences in the Siberian wilderness will expose him to ways of living beyond hegemony and capital. However, this transformation will not be facilitated by Fevvers or Carter.
One could interpret this lack of transformation as hopeless. Perhaps one could say what is the point of one transformation if it won’t lead to the transformation of all people? But, Carter thinks the transformation of one person does make a difference, even if it is not represented in the immediate transformation of all others. Carter presents that just transforming one Walser is enough. This is enough because of the hopeful, zoom-ing out epilogue that projects the ripple effect Fevvers’ laughter will have on the world around her (Carter 295). The laughter is won after a long journey of learning, unlearning, and learning again, culminating in a story that changes all the characters involved. Fevvers laughter is described as a “spiraling tornado [. . . ] that began to twist and shudder across the entire globe [. . . ] until everything that lived and breathed, everywhere, was laughing” (Carter 295). This beautiful representation insists that change, however small, has a ripple effect that can change the entire globe. Perhaps this global laughter is the first step to recognizing the humanity in our adversaries. A step towards understanding the same systems of oppression, power, and categories harm everyone. A step towards the New Century, towards a world where women have wings. A world where mothers do not need to leave behind their sons. A world in which illegibility, knowing people for their stories and compassion instead of their labels is normalized. All of these macro-changes could not have been done without the first micro-changes. And these micro-changes were created through an interrelational gearshift feminism, which is constituted by illegible, non-categorizable ways of existing in the world. Through Nights at the Circus, Carter encourages readers to transform the Walsers who are listening, and to shift gears away from those unwilling to learn. Carter draws us towards communities, towards existing in ways un-knowable to structures of categorization, oppression, and power, with her novel as one of the micro-changes towards making global change.
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