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The Work of Leonora Carrington:

An Alchemical Transmutation of Gender through Magic, Animals, and Narrative

Theories of Art Seminar: Professor Kathleen Pyne

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Parameters: The purpose of this research paper was to analyze a work of art, or group of works, through a specific theoretical lens. I chose to investigate the work of surrealist artist Leonora Carrington using feminist theory, specifically Judith Butler's Gender Performance Theory.

“Am I that which I observe or that which observes me?”

Leonora Carrington, 1970

This poetic question acknowledges the unstable notion of identity, imbricated with past and present representations and implies that the culture we operate within defines us. Michel Foucault argues that, “juridical systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent (Gender Trouble 2).” Judith Butler adds that if we understand that these juridical structures engender, naturalize, and immobilize and that there is no stable notion of gender, only a parodic representation of a copy of a copy, then we are free to subvert and displace the illusion of identity anyway we see fit (Gender Trouble summary).

Although surrealist artist Leonora Carrington came before Butler, her work displays a desire to express a sense of an authentic gendered self but simultaneously seems keenly aware of the cultural forces that impose a gendered hierarchal system. Her feminine heroines are subversive, and their powers are great, but they never ignore patriarchal law. Unlike many feminist artists, who attempt to create a gynocentric world, Carrington instead understood that while “the female images circulating today are largely the invention of man” she could have the authority to use this language mixed with many other cultural traditions and histories to create her own image of a feminine self. Poet and surrealist patron, Edward James expresses beautifully, the paintings of Leonora Carrington are not merely painted, they are brewed (James 14).”

This paper will explore the ways in which Carrington challenges the notion of a shared conception of gender through Judith Butler’s Gender Performance theory. I will do

this by first situating Butler's theory by examining its historiography, followed by unpacking some gender performance theory, and finally by examining the work of Carrington through the lens of Judith Butler.

I will begin this investigation of Judith's Butler's theory by examining four theorists who are essential in understanding gender performance. First I will discuss one of the most influential philosophers of feminism and Carrington's contemporary, Simone de Beauvoir, followed by one of the prominent voices of second wave feminist theory, Monique Wittig, and finally the widely influential philosophy of post-structuralist Michel Foucault and deconstructionist Jacques Derrida.

French existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir made a significant impact in women's history and became a foundation for feminism through her writings, most significantly her book *The Second Sex*, where she stated that, "one is not born but becomes a woman (Beauvoir 267)." Feminist philosopher, Debra Bergoffen, explains that, "*The Second Sex* speaks of the specific ways in which the natural and social sciences and the European literary, social, political and religious traditions have created a mystified world where impossible and conflicting ideals of femininity produce an ideology of women's "natural" inferiority to justify patriarchal domination (Bergoffen)." In her theory, Beauvoir began the investigation of the gendered body as a socially constructed phenomenon. As an Existentialist, Beauvoir believed that although humans are free to act by choice, the awareness of other people produces the impulse, particularly in sexual encounters and relationships, to control others (Parker 36). Beauvoir's work introduces the awareness of the systematic difference in effect of this "choice" for men and women and how women come to internalize and live out feminine attributes – including passivity, submission, and

dependence on men and acceptance of the inferior status (Parker 36). For Beauvoir, one is compelled to become a woman through the internalization of cultural interpretations of gender; but what appears to be a choice is actually destiny. Later I will explain how Butler takes this theory further to say that we do have choice. Feminist theorist Sara Salih explains that Beauvoir believes, “to become a *woman* is the purposive and appropriative set of acts, the gradual acquisition of a skill, a “project” in Sartrean terms, to assume a culturally established corporeal style and significance (Salih 22).”

Another important aspect of Beauvoir’s work in relation to Butler is the concept of the other. Beauvoir believed that women, “are defined by a masculine perspective that seeks to safeguard its own disembodied status through identifying women generally in the bodily sphere (Salih 29).” Beauvoir points out that in culture, “men have traditionally been associated with the disembodied or transcendent feature of human existence and women with the bodily and immanent feature of human existence (Salih 27).” In other words, men are associated with the building of society versus the foundation or the beginning (the mother); this implies that women are not capable of intellectual thought.

French lesbian feminist philosopher, Monique Wittig builds upon Beauvoir’s theory that sex is a learned concept that is taught to us through masculine governed forces. Both theorists argue against feminist essentialist ideologies, instead, they see sex as a cultural engagement effected by social conventions. However Wittig believes that there is no such thing as ‘woman’ and that the notion of woman is constructed through a masculine language that describes and purports this notion. Beauvoir’s enduring quote, “One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one”, exemplifies her theory, and in response to this, Wittig’s article “One is Not Born a Woman” illustrates hers. This article was originally

presented at the Simon de Beauvoir conference in New York City in 1979 and takes its title from Beauvoir's stated formulation. By not including the rest of Beauvoir's statement, Wittig proposes that one is not born a woman nor does she become one because 'woman' only exists in conjunction with man.

Salih writes, "for Wittig, the very discrimination of "sex" takes place within a political and linguistic network that presupposes, and hence requires that sex remain dyadic." ... So the discriminating between the sexes reinforces binary comparisons and the act of discrimination by definition always serves the purpose of hierarchy (Salih 29)." In her article *Continental Feminism*, Ann Cahill describes in Wittig's vision' "society must recognize that the categories of "man" and "woman" structurally parallel the categories of "master" and "slave" (Cahill)." And that not only do they define each other they can "only make sense within the context of hierarchy (Cahill)." This gender hierarchy imposes a set of norms that serve as behavioral codes and restrictive standards we attempt to live by. Wittig explains that, "we have been compelled in our bodies and our minds to correspond, feature by feature, with the idea of nature has been established" and that we experience ourselves as or others as "men and "women" are political categories and not natural facts (Salih 30)." Wittig points out that we immediately ask about a child's, "sexually differentiated anatomical traits because we assume that those traits will in some sense determine that child's social destiny, and that destiny, whatever else it is, is structured by a gender system predicated upon the alleged naturalness of binary oppositions and, consequently, heterosexuality (Salih 31)." This points out that at birth we are given a set of behavioral and ideological guidelines to live by according to our gender through binary comparison.

Wittig believes the lesbian exposes the naturalness of notions of gender as a farce. Masculine language can describe the relationships between woman and man and even man with other man but cannot explain woman with out man as in the case of women's sexual relationship with each other. Wittig's book *Lesbian Body* is an effort to rewrite the relevant distinctions constitutive of sexual identity (Salih 31). In the *Lesbian Body* Wittig, through reclamation of diverse bodily parts as sources for erotic pleasure, rewrites the binary codes for sexual pleasure (Salih 31). For Wittig, there is no language to describe the lesbian woman because what it means to be a woman is always in relation to man. Wittig wishes to eradicate the notion of sex as a binary comparison.

She argues that:

A new personal and subjective definition for all humankind can be found beyond the categories of sex (man and woman) and that the advent of individual subjects demands first destroying the category of sex, ending the use of them, and rejecting all sciences which still use these categories as their fundamentals (practically all social sciences) (qtd. in Salih 31).

Wittig's theory proves that the category of sex as a binary relationship between "men" and "women" is incomplete and excludes marginalized groups such as lesbians. Although this debunked the naturalness of gender as a binary comparison it did not eliminate the structure of the binary. The lesbian is still in binary opposition of "man" and "woman", thus purporting the hegemonic heterosexual masculine culture's hierarchal framework of the binary opposition. I will discuss Butler's explanation of this shortly.

Another important philosopher in Butler's historiography is post-structuralist Michel Foucault, whose philosophy influenced a wide range of humanistic and social

scientific disciplines. In the vein of post-structuralism, Foucault deconstructs the juridical systems of power we assume to be natural and correct in culture. An archeologist of our more recent past, Foucault excavates the historical structures we use to police society through discourse. He explains that we regulate the construction of sexuality through binary comparisons of norms and deviances or perversions. Notre Dame's own professor of philosophy Gary Gutting explains that, "on Foucault's account, modern control of sexuality parallels modern control of criminality by making sex (like crime) an object of allegedly scientific disciplines, which simultaneously offer knowledge and domination of the objects (Gutting)." But there is hope in Foucault's mind. He believes not only that there is control exercised via others' knowledge of individuals but there is also control via individual's knowledge of themselves (Gutting). For Foucault subversion can occur when the discourse on, "binary opposites become meaningless in a context where multiple differences, not restricted to binary differences, abound (Salih 33)."

Another influential philosopher for Butler was Foucault's contemporary, deconstructionist, Jacques Derrida. Like Foucault, Derrida's writings touch on many subjects, such as the social sciences, ethics, politics, aesthetics, psychoanalysis, and literature. The *Dictionary of Cultural Theorists* defines Deconstruction theory as, "the dismantling into their constituent features of all types of unities, including culture and cultural specificity: systems, theories etc. (Cashmore 120). In philosophy or, Derrida's term, 'metaphysics', Derrida seeks to question the validity of notions such as truth or reason. Using Saussurean semiotics, from which it draws much of its vocabulary, it demonstrates the impossibility of universal meaning, because in language, there are no absolute terms but only differences. Semiotics proves that signs can never capture meanings, only merely

refer to other signs. Like Foucault, Derrida believes that unity of identity (or sameness) is enforced through culture, in Derrida's opinion, through violence.

Butler builds upon all the above-mentioned theories while simultaneously tearing it all down. In her 1987 essay entitled *Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig, and Foucault*, Butler asks, "How can gender be both a matter of choice and cultural construction (qtd. in Davis)?" Butler seeks to challenge the notion that there is some shared conception of gender. She adds to Beauvoir's statement by exploring the possibility that even though our gender is chosen for us through cultural norms, we have agency to 'do' our own gender by recontextualizing language to express an individual perceived authenticity.

In her influential book *Gender Trouble*, Butler agrees with Foucault's accusation that the juridical systems of power *produce* the subjects they come to represent (Gender Trouble 2). She points out that juridical notions of power appear to regulate political life in purely negative, such as limitation, prohibition and even "protection" but the subjects regulated by these structures are in turn, "formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of them (Gender Trouble 2)." Under this structure, sex is "always already" and one cannot think outside its parameters. Just as Foucault studied history to prove the conception of gender has always been enforced through a political system, albeit in different forms, Butler analyzes past feminist structures and argues that they are problematic because they produce universal conceptions of gender using the same structures they claim to be against such as legitimating, privileging norms which in turn exclude, and naturalizing the category of "women" (Gender Trouble 2). Indeed, she explains, "the question of women as the subject of feminism raises the possibility that there may not be a subject who stands "before" ... perhaps the subject, as well as the invocation of a

temporal “before” is constituted by the law as the fictive foundation of its own claim to legitimacy (Gender Trouble 2-3).”

She explains that Wittig and Foucault claim the category of sex would disappear and dissipate, “through the disruption and displacement of heterosexual hegemony (Gender Trouble 18). “ But still both Wittig and Foucault explain that, “one is one’s gender to the extent that one is not the other gender, a formulation that presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair (Gender Trouble 22). “ Butler offers an alternative. Because we live in a world with an endless variety of subject positions, meaning our identity is composed of gender, class, race, and all other areas of human life, it would be impossible to assume only a few generalized types of people exist, thus there can be no hierarchy. There is no core gender, “no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results (Gender Trouble 25).” With the exposure of the factitive production, we are now free to construct our own identity however we choose, through whatever configuration of symbols we want. This agency bestowed upon us, Butler names ‘Gender Performance’.

Butler explains:

If there is no radical repudiation of culturally constructed sexuality, what is left is the question of how to acknowledge and “do” the construction one is invariably in. Are there forms of repetition that do not constitute a simple imitation, reproduction, and, hence, consolidation of the law (the anachronistic notion of “male identification” that ought to be discarded from a feminist vocabulary)? What possibilities of gender configurations exist among the various emergent and

occasionally convergent matrices of cultural intelligibility that govern gendered life (Gender Trouble 31)?

Although Carrington came before Butler, her works exhibit many effective inversions, subversions, and displacement within the supposed parameters of the identity of women during her time. Before I examine the strategies she used I will first briefly situate Carrington within the context of Surrealism and Feminism at that time.

Art historian, Whitney Chadwick argues that:

No artistic movement since Romanticism has elevated the image of woman to as significant a role in the creative life of man as Surrealism did... yet the actual role, or roles, played by women artists in the Surrealist movement has been more difficult to evaluate, for their own histories have often remained buried under those male Surrealists who have gained wider public recognition (Chadwick 7).

Contemporary to the emergence of Beauvoir and other early feminist theory, Surrealism claimed to show interest in the women's liberty, Surrealism struggled with what Chadwick expresses as a fragmented "polarized vision of women: one Romantic, the other revolutionary (Chadwick 13)." Male surrealist artists seemed enchanted and simultaneously haunted by the idea of woman and what they believed to be an almost malicious sexual power. They expressed this ambivalence by distorting the female anatomy in a hyper sexualized manner in works such as Salvador Dali's *The Great Masturbator*, 1929-32 (Fig. 1). Does the title refer to the woman as the great masturbator or Dali? Either way this painting exemplifies the supposed 'need' male surrealists had for women to complete their own sexuality and creative cycles. Carrington and other female surrealists

seemed to flourish within their own world. Through subversive reclamation of their own sexuality from their male counterparts and the ability to realize spaces within themselves, the female surrealists functioned much more independently.

While historians such as Whitney Chadwick and Mary Ann Caws, who I will refer to later, saw an ambivalent reaction and almost resistance to the women's movement within the work of the male surrealists, theorist, Rosalind Krauss saw something much more in line with feminism, a blurring of the distinction between genders. She describes the evolution of the blurring of these categorical boundaries in this statement:

First there was a fall from vertical to horizontal in a cancelation of the distinction between high and low, or between human and animal; then there was the opening of the physical envelope of bodies and objects to a fusion between the inside and the outside of form; or again, there was the enactment of a kind of fetishized vision in which the gender identities of bodies began to slip and the female form (or its proxy) was, for example, reinvested as "phallic" (Krauss 13).

She goes on to describe the doll legs in the work of Hans Bellmer as erectile, implying an invasion of body which serves as a metaphor for the developing war, or of the parallel between the literal blurring of gender in the compelling self-portraits of Claude Cahun (Fig. 2) and slightly comical photographs of Marcel Duchamp's female character Rose Selway (Fig. 3) or the mashing of genders in some of the works of Maurice Tabard (Fig. 4). In the same way Butler sees mimicry as subversion, Krauss believed the female surrealists used mimicry as a way of exposing the naturalization of gender roles. Krauss points out that Carrington and other female surrealists, such as Leonor Fini and Kay Sage, entered the movement towards the end. Their work could be, "most adequately described

through the notion of mimicry in which the woman 'repeats' the male – in this case the male Surrealist – version of 'woman', but does so in a self-conscious way that points up the citational, often ironic status of the repetition (Krauss 18)." This perfectly describes part of the way, through the lens of Butler, Carrington was able to use the language of her culture mixed with her fantastical imagination to parody certain gender roles to overthrow their oppressive nature. Some examples of these parodies, which I will explore in more depth later, include the negative association between woman and madness or women and girlhood [naivety]. I believe these correlations are often used to purport the notion that women are defenseless to these conditions and that they are unable to think beyond them.

Before I analyze some of the subversive play within Carrington's work, I would like illustrate this notion further with an example from within the surrealist circle. Some male surrealists seemed to fear the great power they saw in their female associates. In effort keep an underlying hierarchy between them, they created roles and negative characteristics for their female associates. Surrealist men such as founder, Andre Breton, envisioned women as muse, the image of man's inspiration and his salvation, there to complicate, complement, and complete man's creative vision (Chadwick 13). Breton wrote in 1929, "The problem of woman, is the most marvelous and disturbing problem in all the world (qtd. in Chadwick 7)." In his novel *Nadja*, a story about the relationship between a man and a mad woman, Breton explains that while men can adopt madness as a creative source for creativity, for women, no such distance can exist, instead the woman was passive, powerless, and at the mercy of the unconscious (Chadwick 74).

Chadwick states the woman surrealist with most direct experience of this dichotomy was Leonora Carrington, who spoke of her anger towards surrealist conceptions

of female madness, “seeing the misplaced humor and pretense very much at odds with the anguish and pain that accompany any loss of psychological connection with the external world (Chadwick 74).” Her body of paintings and writings reveal her voyage beginning with works fueled by the imaginative world of her childhood, to her experience with madness in an asylum for the insane at Santander on the Basque Coast, to the maturity of motherhood and old age later after her move to Mexico during the 1940’s, always with the underlying quest for understanding and magic.

Equipped with a rich imagination and a sensitive view of the world, Carrington serves as an excellent example of Butler’s notion that gender is performative. Carrington’s esoteric iconography comes from a lifetime of travel and curiosity and the keen ability to synthesize it into a mysterious body of work. Although Carrington draws from many sources, I will focus on the following traditions and languages she used to create her sense of an authentic feminine self. First I will discuss the influence of Irish fairy tales told to her as a child, then her subversive use of the gender codes within anthropomorphized animals, followed by magic and alchemy as conceptual transmutations of self, and lastly her depiction of the crone.

The first reed in her beautiful woven basket stems from her childhood. Carrington was born in Lancashire, England in 1917 to an Irish mother and an English father. She was related to the celebrated early 19th century writer, Maria Edgeworth, known as the Jane Austen of Ireland for her output of novels and celebrated for mysterious children’s books. This heritage lived on through Carrington’s mother and nanny who provided her with stories dense with leprechauns and giants, unicorns and almost human horses, legendary Gaelic kings, improbably rock-perched castelations and sweeping queens and white cranes,

winged salmon mounted by princesses who were at the time sorceresses (James 14). Many of the characters in her paintings and writings take their names from the ancient Celtic gods of Britain (Chadwick in Schlieker 30). It is unclear whether or not she ever visited Ireland but the magical aura of Irish fairy tales and Celtic legends underscores all her work. Carrington later read the Robert Graves *The White Goddess* shortly after its publication in 1948, and felt greatly influenced by it calling it, “the greatest revelation of my life (The Mexican Years 23).” The book was a mythic study of the ancient Celtic goddess who reigned over poetic creation, confirmed Carrington’s belief in the necessary and subversive nature of the female goddess.

Another notable aspect of her childhood is class. Her father was a prosperous textile industrialist and ran a strict Catholic household outside of London, where she was later presented as a debutante. She was expelled several times from school and had a habit of writing backward in the mirror. In her book *Women Artists and Surrealism*, Whitney Chadwick tells a story from a family friend of Carrington’s that at age fourteen, introduced to the local priest, she scandalized the group by pulling up her dress (wearing nothing underneath) and demanding, “ Well, what do you think of that? (Chadwick 67)” Carrington’s personal rebellion to Catholicism grew into desire to explore many different religions later and, similar to Butler’s notion that you can redescribe within the reified framework of cultural configurations of gender, Carrington approached religion, picking and choosing to create her own spirituality (Gender Trouble 31). Carrington later explains that, “ all religions are real but you have go through your own channels—you might meet the Egyptians, you might meet the with the Voodoos, but in order to keep some kind of equilibrium it has to feel authentic to you (Chadwick in Schlieker 19).”

This environment initiated a fundamental rebellious attitude embedded in her work. An example of her love for myth and rebellion are combined in one of her early stories, *The Debutante*, in which the heroine sends her friend a hyena in her place to her coming-out ball. In this fantastic scenario with a matter-of-fact tone and full of humor, the hyena, insulted by a guest who has complained about the [her] odor, rips off the mask she made out of a dead nurse and disappears through an open window.

The combined despise of her father and love for Irish fairy tales lead Carrington back into the ancient world of Goddess worship and matriarchy and further into the prehuman world of animals, “the original confusion between man and animal species”, into her own prelinguistic infancy to the nursery world of toys and pets (Chenieux-Gendorn qtd. in Caws 161). In her book *Surrealism and Women*, Mary Ann Caws states that Carrington sought to abolish the difference between humans and animals even in love (Caws 162). In an interview with Chadwick, Carrington explained that, “In l’amour passion, it is the loved one the other who gives the key. Now the question is: who can the loved one be? Its can be a man or a horse or another woman (Interview. Chadwick qtd. in Caws 163).”

Carrington’s menagerie consisted of many symbolic creatures. One reoccurring character was her white horse. The source of this horse lay not in the Freudian symbol for man but in the Celtic legends that nourished her childhood (Chadwick 79). The horse is sacred to the ancient tribe of the Tuatha de Danaan, of which many references occur throughout Carrington’s work, and is described as “faster than wind can fly through that air (Chadwick 79).” As a whole, Carrington considered animal transformation to be a blessing, a site of transcendence, and she chose the horse as her imagined avatar (Chadwick in Schlieker 13). Carrington drew from ancient depictions of the horse as a powerful goddess

during a time when the [Freudian] horse meant surging masculinity. Through this subversive reclamation of the gendered horse, Carrington successfully broke down gender codes. This anthropomorphic use of animals and upsetting of gender codes exposes gender as self-naturalized, a mask we put on in that same way Carrington uses the horse as her feminine avatar, gender is chosen and worn. Butler explains that, “*gender* is not a noun, but neither is a set of free floating attributes, for we have seen the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence (Gender Trouble 24).” Carrington seemed to seek a way to define identity beyond the given language of culture. She saw animals as a way to ‘perform’ her own construction of a gendered self.

Another horse form frequently represented by Carrington is a rocking horse, considered to be her most personal symbol (Chadwick 78). In her nursery, the young lonely child created a relationship with a rocking horse, the image appears throughout her paintings and as the love interest of the protagonist in her play, *Penelope* (Chadwick 78). The rocking horse and stick horse or hobbyhorse is also a relic of Celtic horse worship (Chadwick 79).

For Carrington, animals represent the instinctual life with the forces of nature. The Hyena, mentioned above in her story *The Debutante*, embodies the fertile world of the night and “the horse becomes an image of rebirth into the light of day and the world beyond the looking glass (Chadwick 79).” This symbolic liaison between the unconscious and the natural world replaces the male surrealists’ reliance on the image of woman as a link between man and the ‘marvelous’ (Chadwick 79).

All three of these loaded creatures (white horse, rocking horse, and hyena) are depicted in an early self-portrait, *The Inn of the Dawn Horse [Self-Portrait]*, 1936-37 (Fig. 5). In the painting, Carrington sits with [horse] mane-like hair and an arm outreached mimicking the horse-like posture of the hyena by her side as if about to touch hooves. To the left of the hyena, who has an almost human-like smirk and is equipped with three pendulous breasts, is a patch of ectoplasm indicating the animal's sudden materialization (Chadwick 78). Behind, yet touching, the figure's wild mane, her beloved rocking horse flies through the air towards an open window, adorned with gold drapery representative of her interest in alchemy. Through the window, the viewer can see a bold white horse galloping into a deep forest. The hyena never reappears in her work and seems to represent a childhood fantasy possible associated with Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (Caws 164). The Hyena's ravenous character in *The Debutant*, adds a touch of malicious humor: still in nursery, the girl has grown up and is undergoing perverse transformation (Caws 164). An antiestablishment creature, the hyena has already been depicted as a "dirty brute" for its apparent androgyny in early medieval bestiary (Freedman in Caws 164). It is likely that Carrington knew this and celebrated its androgyny as an "expression" of her own sexuality, one not confined within the parameters of the binary comparison.

In the self-portrait, Carrington's depiction of herself draws all of the symbolism together. The rocking horse alludes to the nursery but Carrington is no longer a child, instead all grown up and free to imagine her world as perversely and wildly and as she wants. She has taken all her main players from girlhood, a world of desexualized, passive, submissive creatures and put them into a realm full of authority and female sexuality, such as the hyena's fertile body and seductive stare. The figure and her companions directly

address the viewer with a smirky welcome to their world fun. The figure herself is portrayed in masculine riding clothes and wild mane-like hair, which creates an androgynous, almost animalistic persona. As illustrated above, this painting parodies the notion of women and girlhood being associated with naivety and passivity, but by including this intensely confrontational woman, instead overthrows any preconceived negative connotation. Another feminine construct Carrington managed to reclaim was the notion of woman and madness as detrimental and limiting to women.

At only 23 years old, Carrington's lover Max Ernst was forced to leave her upon imprisonment in a concentration camp with Hans Bellmer. Attempting to cope with her loss, Carrington spent three weeks alternately fasting and engaging in physical labor in her vineyards as an act of purification (Chadwick 84). Convinced by a friend, she then left her home in Paris for Madrid where, through the intervention of her family, she was incarcerated in a Spanish mental institution where she suffered greatly and, after being diagnosed as marginally psychotic, underwent three doses of the drug Cardiazol, chemically induced spasms similar to electric shock therapy (Alberth 46). After escaping the asylum, Carrington married Renato le Duc and fled to New York (Caws 230). A few years later, after moving to Mexico City, Carrington met surgeon and Surrealist intimate, Pierre Mabile, who gave her a copy of his book *Mirror of the Marvelous*, a compilation of numerous folk traditions that focused on magic (Alberth 48). Already accustomed to thinking in the realm of magical symbology, Carrington found many of the images in the book to be part of her own experience with insanity (Alberth 48). Inspired by the book, Carrington began to write her own story in *Down Below*. Inspired by the symbolism in the alchemical laboratory, she attempted to understand psychic reality using the language of

alchemical lore and told her story of a quest for self-knowledge (Chadwick 85). Carrington had never shared Surrealism's interest in Freud's language of dreams and the unconscious; her earliest paintings relied on autobiographical detail, Celtic legend, and personal symbolism (Chadwick 85). Accompanying her book, Carrington created a painting by the same title (Fig. 6) In the painting, four hybrid figures, part human, part animal, and part unknown lounge below a dark sky, just outside or with a gate crested with a white Pegasus. To the right of the group a woman with an ornate headdress stands in front of another white horse, possibly the guardian of the group.

Whether or not the figures are representations of Carrington, they certainly play a feminine 'role', in Butler sense of the word. These amalgam creatures create an incoherent disruption of once gendered icons such as the horse, the woman, the bird, and the Pegasus. The icons tear down the binary framework and heterosexist oppression that are its affect.

Butler explains that:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being ... no longer believable as an interior "truth" of dispositions and identity, sex will be shown to be a performatively enacted signification (and hence not "to be"), on that, released from its naturalized interiority and surface, can occasion the parodic proliferation and subversive play of gendered meanings (Gender Trouble 33).

So because gender is now exposed as a parodic repetition, a copy of a copy, we are now free to create a gendered self in whatever configuration we want. Although Carrington created this work long before Butler, the question of gender as a socially constructed idea

is subversively answered in this work. All the characters wear masks, some literally, and metaphorically displaying the volition to 'do' their own biology. The character in the middle wears long red socks or boots, is scantily dressed in a black corset and wears one mask on her face [horned pagan-like deity] and another [jester]. Her confident and sexy posture seems different from the rest and might represent someone from Carrington's experience in the asylum but nevertheless, this character draws from a sensuality often associated with low-brow culture, but here she is no longer an object of man's hungry gaze but part of a group of Carrington's gendered identity. She leans comfortably on a bearded yet feminine creature that might be armless or adorned with many arms folded resting along her body. Behind her rests a curvy figure covered in white feathers with long curly golden hair and a beak, who gazes at the fourth ghoulish creature. These beautifully constructed beasts displace the notion of male surrealist ideal [submissive] woman and, who in turn, subvert the power relations between them. Carrington seems to have understood the body, in some respect, in a similar way Butler does in that, "it is not a ready surface awaiting signification, but is a set of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and maintained (Gender Trouble 33)." Carrington experienced the social limits of her female body and choose to create bodies that fused these restrictive codes with animals, ancient ideologies in an alchemical way that transmuted these base constructions into precious, mystical and complex expressions of identity.

Chadwick explains that Carrington's, "female heroines are subversive, and their powers are great, but they are never immune from patriarchal law... instead, following alchemical models, they are locked into dialectical relationships with dominate systems of belief (Chadwick in Schlieker 28)." So instead of rejecting or ignoring the masculine

hegemonic culture she found herself in, Carrington manipulated the language of her culture along with older cultures that illustrate her perception of a gendered self. She took the political state of woman into consideration and by privileging certain depictions of women, historically and current, was able to subvert the norm. With her carefully selected iconography, partly taken from culture and part invention, Carrington overthrew the oppressive feminine reality given to her. This agency was never done with an oblivious notion of complete freedom but always with a knowing nod to the state of both masculine and feminine culture, albeit with a feminist perspective. Although Carrington's work has been read as gynocentric, she herself is quick to point out that, "the goddess worship of today's eco-feminists offers no more definitive answers to the questions which perplex us than does chaos theory or the new geometry (Chadwick in Schlieker 28)." Her reading of Robert Graves *The White Goddess* confirmed her search to recover a universal feminine archetype as a source of inspiration and creativity, albeit still a culturally constructed phenomenon, and she remains convinced that the current female images are largely the invention of man (Chadwick in Schlieker 28).

The last section of her work can be categorized as focusing on old age, particularly the crone, whom Carrington believed, represented a female who has passed beyond the conventional exceptions and models of femininity (Chadwick in Schlieker 33). The Crone dates back to the earliest goddesses, the spinners, and the furies, which exude strength and mystery (Chadwick in Schlieker 33). For Carrington, the crone represented a feminine self that had risen above the confines of patriarchal hegemonic conditions. The iconography of the crone represents, "a fictional process of transforming the female body into one in which psychic and spiritual powers replace patriarchal constructions of femininity around

physical beauty and sexual desirability as an important one (Chadwick in Bee 420).” This [transformation] seemed possible to Carrington because of the lack of positive representations of old women, especially with a positive connotation rather negative, for example, the witch. This freed Carrington to create her crones without much of an already existing language. Chadwick believes that the crones became an integral part of, “Carrington’s belief that psychic and spiritual development require flexing the boundaries of material reality, an inevitable part of the physical deterioration of aging, and which underlies all of her work—whether painting or writing (Chadwick in Bee 420).”

Her paintings *The Magdalens* (Fig. 7) and *Kron Flower* (Fig. 8) are examples of ways Carrington depicted the crone. Almost like chess pieces, her crones were short stubby people whose only exposed features were their hands, feet, and head, which emerged out of either a cloak of fabric (*Kron Flower*) or hair (*Magdalens*). Like all her work, these paintings are rich with an esoteric narrative that draws from her interest in magic, animals, story telling traditions, and, as she aged, witchcraft and alchemy. All of her interests are synthesized beautifully in *Cornelia and Cornelius* (Fig. 9). Here the crone is almost no longer human, instead a stylized goddess, similar to the Mayans gods she observed in Mexico, adorned with alchemical metals, jewels, and designs possibly representative of her own language. The other figure wears a cloak of creatures, some engaged with the others and some addressing the viewer holding symbols. Above the two most prominent figures, a blue face looks into the black space through a half-circle shaped window in a landscape, where in one side a man chases a woman and on the other a hunter hunts a gazelle, possibly a comedic nostalgic musing on her experience with love. All of the central figures water a bowl in between them. On one side bobs a red masculine head, which faces another

head, this one white and feminine. The painting 's rich symbology includes: fish morphing into more human-like creatures, celestial maps, botanical references, alchemical designs, shadow creatures, and a tiny being crocheting a fish.

Butler explains that once you can understand 'gender' to "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts," that naturalize a face notion of a gendered core, then you are free create to play with notions of gender and practice it in any style you want (Gender Trouble 33). Carrington's crones often seem androgynous or at least an ambiguous combination of the binary gender codes she lived in. One code she plays with is hair. Some crones' bodies are covered in long feminine hair, some have long beards, which [in Cornelia and Cornelius] seem to morph into streams of water, and some simply have an androgynous cotton ball atop their withered mask-like heads. Her crones seem to be elevated beyond gender into a spirit world that can be reached through her iconography, animals, and narratives. Carrington often parodies gender roles within her work. For example, the abovementioned scene of the hunter and huntress or domestics scenes like the creature knitting the fish. In a culture where art and feminism often collided into a gynocentric utopia, Carrington saw beyond the binary framework and used her given language to subvert gendered categories and mix the codes to create composite creatures that served as metaphor for the self.

Butler's theory invites us to:

Think through the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power, to make gender trouble, not through strategies that figure a utopian beyond, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those

constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusion of identity (Gender Trouble 34).

Carrington's work seems keenly aware of the oppressive gender binary that became so popular during her time through Beauvoir and other feminists. Following Wittig's notion that 'woman' only has meaning with the heterosexual systems some feminist artists tried to create a woman-centric utopia that attempted to exclude the masculine. Butler argues that this notion only purports the binary structure and thus confines us under the masculine hegemonic power regimes and that when we understand gender to be felicitously self-naturalizing we can subvert these notions of gender and create a more authentic sense of self. In her own poetic way, Carrington seemed to yearn for identity knowing simultaneously that it is not a singular notion but one that is and has always been influx.

Figures:



Figure 1:
Salvador Dali
The Great Masturbator
1929



Figure 2:
Claude Cahun
Self-Portrait
1927



Figure 3:
Man Ray
| *Rose Selavy (Marcel Duchamp)*



Figure 4:
Maurice Tabard

Untitled
ca. 1930



Figure 5:
Leonora Carrington
The Inn of the Dawn Horse [Self Portrait]
1936-37

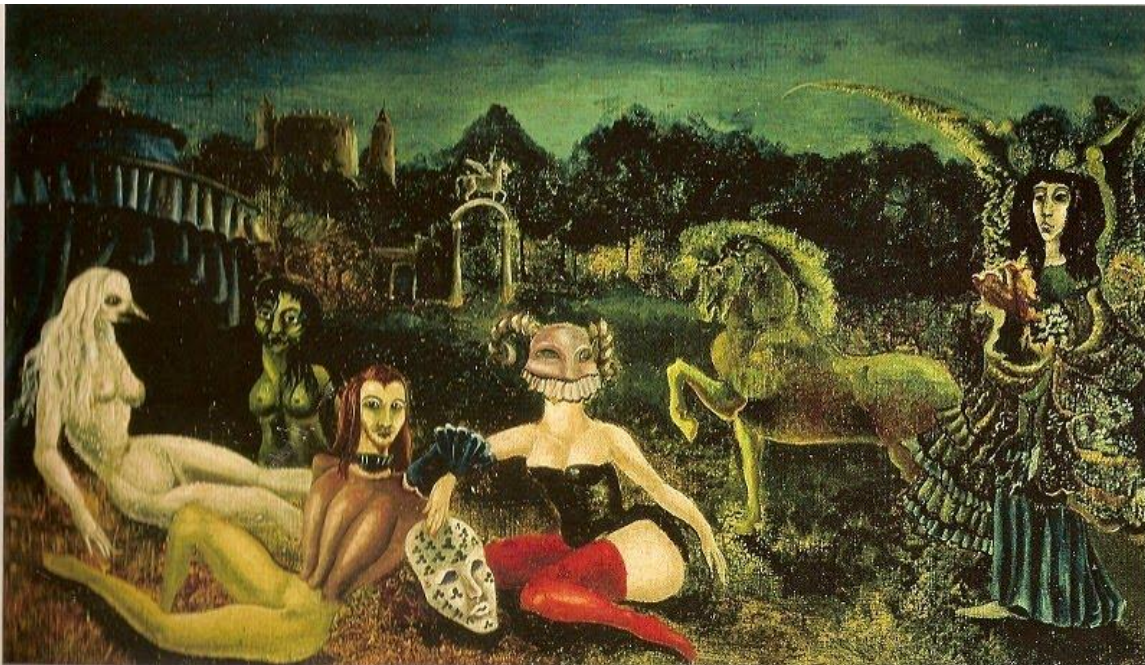


Figure 6:
Leonora Carrington
Down Below
1942



Figure 7:
Leonora Carrington
The Magdalens
1986



Figure 8:
Leonora Carrington
Kron Flower

1987



Figure 9:
Leonora Carrington
Cornelia and Cornelius
1973

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