



5-2022

## **Revolting Delight: Posthuman Subversion in the Work of Leonora Carrington**

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Jacob Breeding entitled "Revoltng Delight: Posthuman Subversion in the Work of Leonora Carrington." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Urmila Seshagiri, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Mary Papke, Alisa Schoenbach

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

Revolting Delight: Posthuman Subversion in the Work of Leonora Carrington

A Thesis Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Jacob Breeding

May 2022

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to Jamie H., for whose support and encouragement I am forever grateful.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to acknowledge and thank Dr. Urmila Seshagiri, Dr. Lisi Schoenbach, and Dr. Mary Papke for their insight and guidance in the development of this thesis. Any semblance of order or coherence in the text is due largely to their clear perspective.

## Abstract

This thesis explores the posthuman implications of Leonora Carrington's writing, painting, and other works. Carrington's is a remedial project, one that points to a healthier potential future beyond the conceptual limits of humanism. Her body of work disorders the projected/created order of human society (with its arrogant philosophies and systems of knowledge) and supplies a sublimely recombined "order" of its own—one that, in its very grotesquerie, defies human hubris and solipsism and celebrates *everything else* besides. In spite of the undermining inherent in her work, Carrington provides a positive alternative to some of the "-isms" that spring from humanism and Anthropocentric thinking. Carrington opposes any system that would create "definitive" definitions of "the human" or that would otherwise pretend to knowledge and authority beyond its limits.

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### List of Abbreviations

*DB* = Carrington, *Down Below*

“HCS” = Carrington, “The Happy Corpse Story”

*HT* = Carrington, *The Hearing Trumpet*

“LDE” = Rosi Braidotti, “Locating Deleuze’s Eco-Philosophy between *Bio/Zoe*-Power and  
Necro-Politics”

*SAA* = Susan L. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy, and Art*

## Introduction

Marina Warner, a folk and fairy tale scholar and late-in-life friend of Surrealist painter/author Leonora Carrington, described the artist thus: “although her imagination is sui generis, original, and personal, Leonora repudiated the notion of a unified, artistic personality that such praise assumes as its premise. This is the paradox of her personality as well as her oeuvre” (“Intro. to *Down Below*” xxxii). Carrington *is* a paradox. Superficially, she gives the impression of a “madwoman” making “mad” art; one might read her as a megalomaniac. The sheer uniqueness of her painting and writing could easily be attributed to an egotistical or isolationist artistic temperament. However, the more secondary material one reads, the more Carrington seems like a person without an ego or, at least, a person for whom the ego is a tool used to supra-human, collective ends. To quote the author herself: “I don’t think that anybody here...I don’t think we are one person, I don’t believe there is such a thing as a whole complete individual. I think we are many different people....The ego is a very practical thing, but relatively superficial. There are many egos within each person” (qtd. in Aridjis et al 239). For Carrington, there are no individuals, only multitudes contained within individual vessels.

In Carrington’s work, there is a great merging of *everything*: mysticism, class consciousness, plants and animals, humans, plant/animal/human hybrids, rancid meat. For Carrington, there is no hierarchy among living things; living things don't necessarily even preside over nonliving things. If there *is* hierarchy in Carrington’s universe, humans are not privileged within it. In fact, they are frequently the butt of the joke. Carrington is an arch posthumanist who undermines anthropocentrism by various means. In pointing out the violence inherent in *all* life, Carrington undercuts humanism’s pretensions to benevolence. In creating new hierarchies and destroying old ones, Carrington challenges the (human) notion of human

primacy. And, in exposing the potential charlatanry and self-deception inherent in human science and religion, Carrington looks gleefully to a posthuman world ungoverned by Reason.

The piles of details in Leonora Carrington's stories make the necessary formality of describing images with words seem utterly absurd. But Carrington is at home in the absurd; or, at the very least, she knows how to inhabit and navigate the land of the absurd—namely, with a sense of humor. Black humor pervades Carrington's stories and serves both to undermine serious subjects and to make silly subjects (and objects) more serious. Carrington was interested in hybridity and the breaking down or confounding of human-created concepts, particularly in matters of classification and hierarchy.<sup>1</sup> In Carrington, no *thing* is given primacy over any other *thing*. Carrington may be a “female human animal,”<sup>2</sup> but Virginia Fur, the feral woman in “As We Rode along the Edge,” might be more of a “female *human-animal*,” or some nuanced, alter-hyphenated variant thereof (Lyon 164).<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, there are wolf-men, horse-women, dressing gowns made of bats—coarse combination *and* fluid hybridity. Carrington's work disorders the projected/created order of human society (with its arrogant philosophies and systems of knowledge) and supplies a sublimely recombined “order” of its own—one that, in its very grotesquerie, defies human hubris and solipsism and celebrates *everything else* besides.

Carrington's polymorphous commitments are reflected in her eclectic approach to art. She created profusely, through a variety of media. Sculpture (in various materials), mask-making, tapestry, and set design are just a few examples. While my thesis focuses primarily on her literary works, it also addresses her paintings and drawings. There is a dizzying variety of

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<sup>1</sup> It might go without saying that *all* concepts are human-created. According to Janet Lyon, “violation through conceptualization was a source of lifelong indignation for Carrington, not only for the misogyny it naturalised [sic], but also for the anthropocenic [sic] ignorance it enforced” (164).

<sup>2</sup> Carrington, Leonora. “Female Human Animal.” *Leonora Carrington: What She Might Be*, curator and ed. Salomon Grimberg, Dallas Museum of Art, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> The three component words (“female,” “human,” and “animal”) need not constitute a scientific chain from specific to general or vice versa. They might be in any order.

subjects and objects within single paintings and stories, but the fact that Carrington skillfully branched into so many other forms of art only further demonstrates her recombinant powers. Carrington's writing and painting represent her most widely known and highly regarded work, and I will examine a few specimens to identify key themes and preoccupations that characterize her oeuvre. These themes include the troubling of classification and hierarchy, the undermining of authority and systems of thought, and the acknowledgement of the limits of knowledge, all of which fall under the broader umbrella of posthumanism. Her "program" or world-vision is distinctly posthuman, but happily so.

A brief summation of Carrington's life might be useful to those unfamiliar with the author. Leonora Carrington was born in 1917 in Lancashire, England to a "textile tycoon" father and an Irish mother (Aberth *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art* 11). Her upbringing was marked by both extreme wealth and privilege *and* intense isolation. From her nanny (Mary Kavanaugh), her mother, and her grandmother (Grandmother Moorhead), Carrington was introduced to Irish folk and fairy tales, the influence of which can be seen on many of her stories and paintings (*SAA* 12). Growing up, Carrington was expelled from several schools, finding it difficult to conform. Having bucked all of her parents' expectations, she attended the Ozenfant Academy (an art school) to learn painting technique. It was during this time that she first encountered the work of the Surrealists (*SAA* 23).

Thus begins the most storied section of her life, where she met and fell in love with the Surrealist painter Max Ernst, and they moved to Paris. Carrington was immediately accepted by the Surrealists and began finding her voice as a painter and author. Partly because they were avoiding Ernst's wife (Marie-Berthe Aurenche), Carrington and Ernst left Paris for the small

village of Saint-Martin-d'Ardèche (Warner "Intro. to *Down Below*" x). This period was idyllic but short-lived.

With the breakout of World War II, Ernst was arrested and interred at a camp, first by the French for being a German citizen, and then by the occupying German forces for being a creator of "degenerate" art. After attempting and failing to free Ernst, Carrington fled to Spain, where, having exhibited psychotic symptoms, she was hospitalized in an asylum. Her experiences in the asylum further traumatized her and later became the subject of her memoir, *Down Below* (1944). The whole sequence of events effectively ended her romantic relationship with Ernst and, arguably, helped her come into her own as an artist. She eventually managed to escape the asylum and fled to Mexico via New York. Carrington lived and worked primarily in Mexico (in a small community of other artists) for the rest of her life; the bulk of her artistic output was created during this period. She died in 2011 at the age of 96.

Mid/late twentieth century Feminist criticism of Surrealism brought much of Carrington's work out of obscurity. While still somewhat of an obscure artist, Carrington is now widely studied; her life and works are the subjects of articles, theses, and full-length books; and her status as one of the great Surrealist artists is firmly cemented. It is a shame that it took so long for Carrington's work to receive the praise and appraisal it deserves, though it is difficult to imagine Carrington caring much, one way or the other. As a lifelong outsider, she resisted fame, pretentiousness, the art world, and all the glittering tedium these things entailed. Or, rather, she simply said "no" to them.

For biographical information, I have relied primarily on the following texts: *Down Below*, Carrington's account of her wartime escape from Europe via Spain to Mexico; Marina Warner's introduction to the New York Review of Books' edition of *Down Below*; and Susan L. Aberth's

biography, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy, and Art*. Other texts treating Carrington's life and art that were especially useful and insightful include *Leonora Carrington and the International Avant-Garde*, a collection of essays by various authors, edited by Jonathan P. Eburne and Catriona McAra.

From that collection, Janet Lyon's "Carrington's Sensorium" is, as far as I know, the most in-depth posthuman analysis of Carrington's work to date. According to Lyon, the genius of Carrington's oeuvre is that it is *pre-conceptual*. Nothing is precluded from her painting, writing, etc. based on a closed ideology. This is not to say that Carrington was apolitical or purposeless in her thought. Rather, she was intellectually unwilling to reduce experience to a trite formula—moral or otherwise—in her work. Lyon establishes that Carrington is not a humanist. Even to frame her *self* as human would be a drastic reduction of her individual complexity. "The questions that Carrington's work raises about life beyond humanism," writes Lyon, "are questions that animate contemporary posthumanist thinking" (166). Through her writing and painting, Carrington challenges restrictive and exclusionary elements of humanist thinking, notably, "the Western theoretical tradition[']s]...abiding tendency...to ignore the forms of knowledge that animated and continue to circulate through the indigenous pre-Christian and matriarchal cultures" (Lyon 168). Carrington is fascinated with these forms of knowledge, as anyone might note from glancing at her paintings, many of which detail ceremonies, sacraments, and magic ritual combined/conflated from various traditions (including those of the Celts and the Mayans). Carrington's work also frequently challenges "the unreflective assumption...that there are such things as 'right' and 'wrong' bodies" through depictions of "abnormal" bodies and hybrid figures (Lyon 168).

Lyon relies in part on the insight of Rosi Braidotti. Braidotti is a Deleuzian posthuman feminist whose work has consistently criticized humanism and the humanities for their limited conceptions of the human. While ostensibly inclusive, humanism has historically been highly exclusive; different groups of people have had to fight to be recognized as human and to receive human rights.<sup>4</sup> Posthumanism acknowledges the shortcomings of humanism and stands as an alternative. In that sense, it is particularly useful for discussing Carrington's art, as both challenge hegemonic "norms" of ability, race, gender, sexuality, etc. Braidotti's idea of "nomadism" (derived in part from Deleuze) is also applicable to Carrington, as it entails "the belief in the potency and relevance of the imagination, of myth-making, as a way to step out of...political and intellectual stasis" and "vertiginous progression toward deconstructing identity; molecularization of the self" (*Nomadic Subjects* 4, 16). Carrington recognized the "constructed" nature of personality. As noted earlier, Carrington believed that "we are many different people" and that "There are many egos within each person" (qtd. in Aridjis et al 239). To pretend to limit oneself to a finite set of characteristics—to a coherent personality—would be disingenuous. Having and sticking to a single persona is advantageous in a society that celebrates the individual, a society in which everyone is expected to market oneself as a unique product while reducing oneself to a bundle of skills and tastes. Carrington's work notes how this commodification compromises and reduces the potential multitudes contained in every being.

Gabriel Weisz's "Shadow Children: Leonora as Storyteller," also published in *Leonora Carrington and the International Avant-Garde*, looks at Carrington's children's stories and at

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<sup>4</sup> We can think of humanism as being akin to anthropocentrism, as these are both forms of narcissism, but the terms aren't synonymous. For more on this, see the work of Rosi Braidotti, particularly *The Posthuman*. For a brief introduction to secular humanism's origins as a resistance to the hegemony of things *besides* humanism (e.g., the Church), see Giulia Maria Chesi and Francesca Spiegel's introduction to their anthology, *Classical Literature and Posthumanism*.



ways of viewing morality in her work. Like Lyon, Weisz (Carrington's son) argues that Carrington's stories are not designed to convey morals in any conventional sense. This stems in part from her minimal concern with narrative and her innate revulsion toward the commercial side of art. Having been told many of Carrington's stories firsthand by the author herself, Weisz counts Carrington among the great storytellers in the oral tradition, a tradition he considers to be largely uncommercial. The publishing industry diminishes storytelling in the interest of selling more units.

Conceptual and figural recombination are key to understanding Carrington's art. Jonathan P. Eburne's "Poetic Wisdom: Leonora Carrington and the Esoteric Avant-Garde" (also from that collection of essays) gives an excellent introduction to Carrington's mystical propensities, noting her ability to incorporate esoteric knowledge into her thinking without letting any single narrative frame (Gurdjieff-ian, Jungian, etc.) define or dominate her. Carrington selects good ideas from these various frames and puts them in conversation with each other. She recognizes that to submit fully to any one frame would be to surrender her own powers of judgment.

Another text by Eburne, *Surrealism and the Art of Crime*, focuses on the Surrealists' fascination with, and sometimes celebration of, criminality. The book contains an analysis of Carrington's "persecution mania" in *Down Below* as well as that text's "narrative of madness and incarceration [that] addresses such questions of responsibility, agency, and historical causality as more than conscious acts of will" (SAC 218). "Mad" people and criminals represent, in the Surrealist or psychoanalytic sense, a manifestation of repressed desires. While Carrington might not have been overtly interested in depicting the repressed, her own experiences with madness placed her more definitively on the "outside" of humanist discourse and put her into direct

conflict with psychiatry and the hegemony of Reason, both of which, again, sought to undermine her subjective experience and judgment.

In the opening chapter of this thesis, I read some of Carrington's work (the painting, *Cabbage*; the short story, "The Oval Lady") through object-oriented ontology, examining the ways her work plays with the limits of knowledge. As a species, our ability to know is starkly limited. Carrington's work begins from this premise. In Chapter 2, I, like Lyon, bring in the writing of Rosi Braidotti. I use Braidotti's ideas about death (coupled with Julia Kristeva's idea of the abject) to discuss Carrington's "The Happy Corpse Story." In Chapter 3, I explore the violence and absurdity of human-created animal hierarchies in "The House of Fear" and "The Debutante" before segueing into the ways Carrington subverts human morality in her work, using "The Horrible Story of the Little Meats" and an illustration from her collection of children's stories, *The Milk of Dreams*, as examples. My analysis of her children's stories is heavily indebted to Gabriel Weisz's "Shadow Children," but my focus is on hierarchy and the absurdity of human-created order. In Chapter 4, I explore Carrington's involvement with mysticism and her ambivalence toward words—words being inaccurate, nonrepresentative, and potentially dissembling—followed by an examination of her depictions of witchcraft. It revisits some of the ontological critiques implicit in her work (explored in Chapter 1 of this thesis). I rely on the novel, *The Hearing Trumpet*; the short story, "The Neutral Man"; and the paintings, *Litany of the Philosophers* and *Temple of the Word*, for my analysis of Carrington's attitude regarding words. These examples simultaneously criticize and celebrate esoteric knowledge. The stories "Et in Bellicus Lunarum Medicalis" and "How to Start a Pharmaceuticals Business" lampoon the medical industry, implying a further critique of knowledge and power. I also look to the novel, *The Stone Door*, as a kind of codex for understanding Carrington's mysticism. The

Conclusion addresses Carrington's experience with madness in *Down Below* and the new perspective this experience granted her, both on her position within the universe and on the nature of knowledge.

## Chapter 1: The Mute Genius of Cabbage

Late in life, Carrington created one of her most subtly profound images: a three by two-foot acrylic portrait of a head of cabbage (Figure 1). The cabbage is rendered in vivid shades of red and purple and grows out of a dark background, evoking a rose in bloom. I choose this painting for analysis because it is uncharacteristically stark and spare. Many (if not most) of Carrington's paintings from her Surrealist period onward are tableaux of exotic characters in some form of ceremony or communion, generally in a richly detailed environment (see Figure 2: *Grandmother Moorhead's Aromatic Kitchen*). Usually, any "still life" depicted is, nevertheless, animate (i.e., figures with faces, potential mobility, and some form of agency). But a cabbage is (presumably) without these qualities. For a better understanding of how Carrington depicts nonhuman objects in her work, I will analyze this painting along with two of her short stories ("Uncle Sam Carrington" and "The Oval Lady") through the lens of object-oriented ontology, a school of philosophy that starkly delimits human understanding.

As already noted, *Cabbage* (1987) is a straightforward portrait (relative to the rest of Carrington's oeuvre). This cabbage does not emerge out of the knotty context of some bizarre scenario; it is simply presented as is. Perhaps the painting is a reappraisal, a reframing. Simply taking a head of cabbage (rather than a head of state) as the subject/object of a painting makes *the idea of cabbage* seem that much more interesting. It also undermines the anthropocentric solemnity associated with typical portraiture. And why shouldn't a cabbage be taken seriously as an object? Can a cabbage be a *subject* in the same way that things (like humans) that *perceive* objects are subjects? In the story, "Uncle Sam Carrington" (1937), the narrator sets out through



*Figure 1: Cabbage*, by Leonora Carrington. 1987, Private Collection, from *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy, and Art*, by Susan L. Aberth, Lund Humphries, 2004, p. 135.



*Figure 2: Grandmother Moorhead's Aromatic Kitchen*, by Leonora Carrington. 1975, Charles B. Goddard Center for Visual Performing Arts, Ardmore, Oklahoma, from *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy, and Art*, by Susan L. Aberth, Lund Humphries, 2004, p. 123. This is a more "typical" Carrington ensemble.

the woods and comes across “two cabbages having a terrible fight” (Carrington 28). The cabbages take turns ripping each other’s leaves off. Eventually, nothing remains. A typical cabbage has a simple anatomy; it is a ball of leaves, each one wrapped tightly around the other—leaves all the way down. While it can look like a flower and does, in fact, flower, the form of cabbage that we find at the grocery store is the form that predominates in the popular mind. It can be peeled and peeled until nothing remains. One imagines one could peel off leaves infinitely, if one had deft enough fingers. It is as if there is no limit to the introversion of cabbages; one peels leaves and uncovers a smaller cabbage, and a smaller cabbage, etc. A cabbage can lose leaves while remaining, fundamentally, a cabbage. These leaves are technically made of cabbage materials—are, in fact, the substance of the cabbage—but each is not *a* cabbage; each is a leaf. There is something unknowable about a cabbage in toto; it is something besides the sum of its parts (a bundle of leaves).

A basic tenet of object-oriented ontology is that objects have *being* and internal meaning regardless of whether they are being observed by a conscious subject. The gaze of the subject (read: “human”) is only capable of comprehending two things about an object: what the object is made of and what it does (Harman 43). All other suppositions about an object are not a form of knowledge; they are speculation. Very often, we anthropomorphize nonhuman animals and materials, projecting our thoughts and feelings onto them. Language enables us to analogize things, to compare unlike objects. Metaphor *itself* stands as a metaphor for the inadequacy of language to “capture” the essence of things. Because to truly *know* any object in its fullness is impossible, we cannot even know whether two things are truly alike or whether they experience *being* in similar ways. This same inability applies to other human subjects as well. We cannot fully know the mind of another person. The subject’s mind cannot even fully know *itself*.

Because the subjective capacity for knowledge is so limited, we anthropomorphize as a sort of guess as to the experienced reality of objects. A rocking horse might have any number of thoughts or experiences, assuming the ability *to* experience is not solely the province of biological bodies or minds (human or otherwise). Tartar, a rocking horse in Carrington's short story, "The Oval Lady" (1937) rocks himself of his own accord and (supposedly) tells stories of his travels (11). At the end of the story, he is burned to cinders. Apparently, this is extremely painful, despite his status as a plaything cobbled together from dead matter.

Tartar's *being* is dramatized by animating him and giving him animalistic qualities. Rocking horses are already designed to evoke the biological horse (another inadequate metaphor!). Specifically, they reinforce the hierarchal idea of the horse-as-vehicle-for-human-beings—the rocking horse has a saddle already built into its back! Tartar belongs to Lucretia, who in turn "belongs" to her spiteful father. The burning of Tartar is carried out by the father in response to Lucretia's *horseplay*: her literal assumption of the form of a horse, which is so convincing that the narrator can hardly believe her senses. This transformation is something like an obscenity to Lucretia's father's ordering mind, a mind which applies a kind of black-and-white reasoning that is arbitrarily but decisively cruel. According to his judgment, Lucretia is simply too old for horseplay. She should be shaping up, like her father, who resembles "a geometric figure" (13). One imagines he would like her to take on a definite (but feminine) shape, like an oval—to become inert, a piece of furniture. While the father is essentially correct in identifying the rocking horse and his daughter as objects—he himself is an object—he foolishly believes that he *knows* how these objects *ought to behave*, and this pretense to knowledge is used to justify patriarchy and anthropocentrism, which manifest in "The Oval Lady" as violence against his daughter and her toy/animal/friend. While the behavior of

objects/things is often predictable, we cannot demand that objects adhere to patterns, any more than we can command them to go against said patterns or to obey any order projected onto them from without. Most beings who exist under power cannot reconcile their experienced realities to these crushing/distorting projections and so experience dysphoria, dysmorphia, or some other form of dissonance. One cannot truly conform to hegemonic “norms”; one can only *appear* to conform.



## Chapter 2: Confounding the Life/Death Binary

There is a morbidity to much of Carrington's work. Many of her stories prominently feature disease and death. One thinks of the rancid meat and the leprosy of the "The White Rabbit" (1941) or the dismemberment and food poisoning that run through her collection of children's stories, *The Milk of Dreams* (published 2013). In Carrington, life cannot escape death and decay, and there is little point in separating the two. Part of Carrington's genius is in her blurring of boundaries. Janet Lyon notes that, "liminality, in Carrington, is an *a priori* condition that is simply presented, rather than argued for or framed as futuristic or exceptional" ("Carrington's Sensorium" 163). This potentially puts off her more conservative readers and those who would demand a kind of "realism" from fiction—realism in this sense referring to the way human beings order and hierarchize the material world around them (not necessarily how reality *is*). According to Lyon, "[Carrington's] habitual refusal to operate through an exceptionalist logic—her abiding non-exceptionalism...—makes room for everything" (163). "In the Carringtonian milieu," Lyon explains, "[n]o living thing deserves, *a priori*, to live or die more than any other living thing" (169). In Carrington, no forms of life are privileged, and there is no such thing as disability—because there is no objective standard by which *ability* is measured. *Life* isn't even privileged, necessarily. In Carrington, death may be animate; it may even be another form of life. In this chapter, I examine death in Carrington's "The Happy Corpse Story" using Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject and Rosi Braidotti's definitions of life and death.

The Happy Corpse of "The Happy Corpse Story" (1971) tells of how her father died and went to Telephone Hell, a hell in which his phone is glued to his face for eons. Her mother, who committed suicide, is also in hell, but a different one. This Happy Corpse reveals to her young

travelling companion that she (the corpse) is, in fact, his (the travelling companion's) mother and that she died by committing suicide with a machine gun. However, though dead, she is not in any hell. Moreover, she has special abilities. She can assume the form of ashes and then resume corporeality. The "holes and dents" that riddle her decaying body can all be used as mouths for speaking (Carrington "The Happy Corpse Story" 164). She delivers her story through a hole in the back of her head, as if to call into question the human mouth's suitability for speech. To call such a fundamental assumption into question through the use of grotesque juxtaposition is a theme Carrington explored throughout her career. The hole in the Corpse's head is formed by rot; it represents the unmaking of a carefully constructed human figure, the passage from a state of ordered beauty into a state of abject decay.

Western society collectively abhors death; death is considered an abject state. Julia Kristeva treats the subject of abjection as it pertains to the human body in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*:

The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death.... [R]efuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—*cadere*, cadaver.<sup>5</sup> (3)

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<sup>5</sup> Emphasis original.

The abject is that which “normal,” healthy, *living* bodies reject. Living bodies resist death, and the corpse is the literal *embodiment* of death. But of course, Carrington’s Happy Corpse is not an abject being. The romantically distracted youth to whom she recounts her story is more abject than she. He understands less about life and is less suited to living. In short, the Happy Corpse is a magical dead being with greater abilities than her own *living* son. Her father “was a man so utterly and exactly like everybody else that he was forced to wear a large badge on his coat in case he was mistaken for anybody. Any body, if you see what I mean” (“HCS” 165). He worked as the executor of a firm, which, in Carrington’s absurd universe, means “that he actually executed persons” by burying them in their unpaid bills (“HCS” 166). While conventionally powerful and important, he died of a heart attack, the result of years of strict conformity. He lived an “honest” life, died miserable, and went to hell. The Corpse’s mother, alternatively, committed suicide out of boredom. She closed herself in the refrigerator and froze, suffocated, and ate herself to death. She is in something like refrigerator hell. Miraculously, the Happy Corpse has escaped many of the trappings of death and appears, in a sense, alive. Her body is putrid and decaying, but it can assume other forms, and it is absolved of all imposed responsibilities (including that of raising her son). In addition to retaining full memory of her life, she has knowledge, through her parents’ experience, of several potential afterlives. In other words, she has practically transcended death.

Rosi Braidotti writes extensively on death in “Locating Deleuze’s Eco-Philosophy between *Bio/Zoe*-Power and Necro-Politics”: “Death is a conceptual excess, both the unrepresentable, the unthinkable, the unproductive black hole that we all fear, and also a creative synthesis of flows, energies, and perpetual becomings” (109). There is a fecundity to death. “To become other or something else” through death is “the extreme form of [human] power” (“LDE”

109).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, “Because life is desire which essentially aims at expressing and hence extinguishing itself, by reaching its aim and then dissolving,” Braidotti posits, “the wish to die can consequently be seen as another way to express the desire to live intensely” (“LDE” 110). To commit suicide from boredom or tedium is an attempt to satisfy a thwarted desire to live. Braidotti goes as far as to claim that Eros (life drive) and Thanatos (death drive) form “one life-force that aims to reach its own fulfillment” (“LDE” 110).<sup>7</sup>

I quote Braidotti neither to make an argument for suicide nor to claim that Carrington advocated the practice. But Braidotti’s Deleuzian interpretation of death, like Carrington’s *Happy Corpse*, treats death partially as a positive experience, as an extension of life. Carrington had endured enough of life and witnessed enough of death to see their kinship; the atrocities of WWII made the border between life and death somehow more permeable, and the largescale torture and mass murder of the War challenged notions of the innate dignity and goodness of (living) human beings. Through genocide, the War illustrated the oppressive and destructive power of narratives of supremacy. Historically, humanism has, again and again, neglected or outright excluded groups of human beings from the category of “human.” This is the floating blind spot of humanism (as an entrenched Enlightenment idea): that it cannot (or, at least, has repeatedly failed to) fully acknowledge the humanity of all human beings. Whoever is in power decides what constitutes “the human.”<sup>8</sup> In personifying the dead, Carrington symbolically

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<sup>6</sup> For Braidotti, life can be categorized into two different conceptual forces: “bios” and “zoe” (“LDE” 97-98). Zoe is “vitalistic, pre-human, and generative life,” whereas bios is “a discursive and political discourse about social and political life” (“LDE” 98). Zoe exists prior to, above, and/or apart from humanist hegemony, while bios more or less *is* that hegemony.

<sup>7</sup> This idea is derived from Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where the twin drives are ideally in balanced tension, forcing the subject to die of old age (natural death) rather than to seek alternative paths (shortcuts) to death (78).

<sup>8</sup> This is also true within academia and extends to literary criticism and theory: “High theory, especially philosophy, posits its values through the exclusion of many—nonmen, nonwhites, nonlearned, etc. The structural necessity of these pejorative figurations of otherness, makes me doubt the theoretical capacity, let alone the moral and political

reclaims and empowers lives extinguished by the insane callousness of war and the hateful ideologies that enable it.

At least, her project *suggests* a reclamation. According to Gloria Feman Orenstein in *The Reflowering of the Goddess*:

Carrington's philosophical quest is to redefine the relationship between life and death in ways that are postulated by all of the ancient traditions of myth, religion, and lore....For her, to die is to be reborn to a higher state of consciousness, and the task of life is to awaken from a transient state of forgetfulness and somnolence to states of ever-increasing awareness. (59)

To identify the death-state as a form of higher consciousness is perhaps a presumption on Carrington's part, but again, this is a crucial undermining of the primacy of *life*. Life is not the only thing, or even the *main* thing. An opposite point of view is taken by critic Walter Benjamin, for whom death stood as "the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell," the essential endcap to life that gives temporal sense to all stories, an ineluctable black spot on which to anchor meaning (94). Though Orenstein might be presuming too much about Carrington's beliefs, it is doubtful that Carrington would have agreed with Benjamin *at all*. Carrington was nothing if not a fluid, shapeshifting consciousness. If death did not represent a full rebirth, it might have at least been another fruitful transformation.

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willingness, of theoretical discourse to act in a nonhegemonic, nonexclusionary manner" (Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* 33).

### Chapter 3: Anti-Stories with Anti-Morals

In the short story, “The House of Fear” (1937),<sup>9</sup> the narrator is invited to a house party by a talking horse. This party takes place at the “Castle of Fear” and is presided over by Fear herself. Carrington describes the embodiment of Fear as an ugly horse whose “dressing gown was made of live bats sewn together by their wings,” adding that, “the way they fluttered, one would have thought they didn’t much like it” (37). One detail is especially appalling: the bats are *alive*. Carrington was not afraid to be repulsive in both her fiction and her painting, as the above quote illustrates. But this particular passage reads almost like a setup and punchline. *Of course* the bats don’t *like* being sewn together. They are the living subjects of a grotesque fashion experiment. They are one species coldly exploited and manipulated by another. This is a mutually detrimental relationship.

Fear has designed a game for the guests (all of whom, save the narrator, are also horses): You must all count backward from a hundred and ten to five as quickly as possible while thinking of your own fate and weeping for those who have gone before you. You must simultaneously beat time to the tune of ‘The Volga Boatmen’ with your left foreleg, ‘The Marseillaise’ with your right foreleg, and ‘Where Have You Gone, My Last Rose of Summer’ with your two back legs. I had some further details, but I’ve left them out to simplify the game. (37-38).

No rationale whatsoever is given for this game or its rules, but the horses all begin enthusiastically stamping their hooves. The story ends shortly thereafter, mid-sentence. The effect is perplexing. What on earth is the point?

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<sup>9</sup> “The Debutante,” “The Oval Lady,” “The Royal Summons,” “A Man in Love,” “Uncle Sam Carrington,” and “The House of Fear” were all published in Carrington’s first collection of stories, *The House of Fear*.

The literal answer would be that Fear makes us behave absurdly. Going deeper, we could say that power creates and maintains an arbitrary set of rules which, even in their absurdity, reinforce said power by creating fear. But that sounds more like a projection from without than something inherent in the text. This is part of the challenge, and one of the great joys, of reading Carrington's work: her stories and paintings, in their absurdity, tend to resist any kind of moralizing frame. They defy the reader's attempts to come to tidy conclusions about "the point." Sometimes, "the point" is that there is no point. In this chapter, I read Carrington's "The Debutante" and "The Horrible Story of the Little Meats" to dissect how, in foregoing the trope of the "moral of the story," she creates "anti-morals."

A widely anthologized example of Carrington's absurd fiction is "The Debutante" (1937), wherein a hyena kills and eats a woman for the purpose of using her face for a mask. The joke of "The Debutante" is that the narrator enables this mutilation so that she won't have to attend her own coming-out ball. Like the coat of bats from "The House of Fear," this is an example of inter-species violence wherein one species (hyena) adorns itself with the pelt of another (human), without qualms. If we overlook the violence, the situation is absurd. If we look past the absurdity, the situation is hideous.

Much has been made of the fact that Carrington herself was made to attend a debutante ball. She experienced firsthand the bizarre pageantry of being paraded as a piece of meat for male devourment. One could posit that Carrington did not so much love violence as she believed in absurdity. In its jarring of expectations, absurdity always verges on violence. Absurdity "in the wild" (that is, absurdity arising out of absurd situations rather than out of conscious deliberation) is an anti-ideology; it exposes the wrongheadedness of belief systems by demonstrating how

often said systems do not apply.<sup>10</sup> Whenever a human being attempts to impose (ideologically) or construct (materially) order, said order is inevitably undone. Ideologies are abstract; they are projections, mental constructions, and when they are not fully manifested in the physical world, their absence is felt as a kind of dissonance. Similarly, tangible institutions and buildings are temporary on a grand scale; before they are even finished, gravity, entropy, and the weather begin to break them down. When it comes to human effort, pretense is given the lie by reality. Noticing this, we either laugh or cry, depending on whether we have faith in absurdity or human striving, respectively. Carrington's stance is clear: human striving is based out of a gross arrogance, as is the notion of human primacy. There are many animals on earth that could easily kill and/or eat us; our supposed position at the top of the food chain is, like the idea of a food chain itself, manufactured (and ripe for supplantation).

In Franz Kafka's "Investigations of a Dog," we find a familiarly self-important outlook in the story's protagonist, who happens to be a dog: "all that I cared for was the race of dogs, that and nothing else. For what is there actually except our own species? To whom but it can one appeal in the wide and empty world? All knowledge, the totality of all questions and all answers, is contained in the dog" (289-90). Carrington might have pointed to this story as an allegory of human arrogance. The fact that all stories with animal protagonists are actually about people (because they are written *by* people) would support her case. It might be that each and every animal species (not just ours) assumes itself to be the keeper of a knowledge exceeding that of all earth's other creatures combined. It might also be the case that every kind of creature—not just *primates*, whose very name suggests self-importance—assumes primacy of place in the animal kingdom (and, by extension, dominion over all other kingdoms). In the case of humanity, at

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<sup>10</sup> Absurdism and other comparable -isms (like dadaism), on the other hand, are systems of thought premised on absurdity (i.e., they are still systems).



least, our speciesist solipsism is particularly noxious, and we see it reflected in the subjugation of other species and in the destruction of the earth.

Hierarchies, as constructed rankings, have the potential to be shuffled based on fluctuations in power. The hyena in “The Debutante,” for example, successfully passes for human for a period of time, while the narrator remains effectively “encaged” in her room. The hyena’s smell is the only thing, finally, that gives her away; otherwise, she might have been married off overnight. “The Debutante” suggests that humanity is ultimately no more than a pageant of manners and materials. One need only decorate oneself and behave “like a human” in order to be accepted *as* a human. The trouble is, the standard for what constitutes “the human” is wielded by an elite cadre of powerful people, and said standard can fluctuate arbitrarily in the service of that power. Circuitously, one could read “The Debutante” as a dig at hyenas—the story essentially equates debutantes with dolled-up hyenas. But this particular hyena is sophisticated and better suited to human company than the titular debutante. The ball she attends is a farcical ceremony; neither debutante nor hyena could participate in it comfortably without severe compromises to their personal integrity: the former would have to accept her sexual objectification; the latter has to resist objectifying the other attendees as food. Both would have to selectively repress and accentuate their animality in order for the event to be considered a “success.”

In *Surrealism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Natalya Lusty claims that hyenas are “symbolic of sexual transgression and hybridity. Once thought to be hermaphroditic...—the female having both testicles and an enlarged clitoris—the hyena has endured a reputation for profanity and sexual deviancy, including homosexuality” (40). In some cultures, hyenas were associated with witches and “the devil’s dark wisdom,” due in part to their “human-like mocking

laughter” (Lusty 40). This “dark wisdom” might be akin to the Surrealist/psychoanalytic unconscious, where our least acceptable thoughts and impulses follow a kind of libertine logic anathema to conventional morality and politeness. Given that humans as a species tend to associate hyenas with types of deviation (from human-constructed gender and sexual “norms”), the pairing of human and hyena in anything beyond an adversarial relationship is a distinctly subversive act. Carrington carries it out matter-of-factly, and humanism’s carefully segregated animal kingdom is scandalized.

In Carrington’s stories, the morals are defined by the rules of a nonsense universe. Gabriel Weisz examines Carrington’s collection of children’s stories, *Leche del Sueño* (*Dream Milk* or *The Milk of Dreams*), in his essay, “Shadow Children: Leonora as Storyteller.” He thinks of Carrington as a teller of “anti-stories,” stories without grounding in either reality or conventional morality. “If there is a moral, practical advice and a conclusion in the conventional story,” writes Weisz,

the anti-story will display a moral, will offer practical advice and include a proverb, except that these elements exist in a world only available as a supernatural domain governed by its own supernatural demands, where wisdom is not applicable to the real, rather all these elements are redefined by an ironic twist.<sup>11</sup> (Weisz 130-31)

Though Carrington virtually never explicitly states a moral in her “children’s stories” or elsewhere—that would be too pedantic, even if done ironically—we can extrapolate one if we so choose. Take, for example, “The Horrible Story of the Little Meats.” On its surface, this is a simple tale designed to teach children a lesson. But what *is* that lesson? When examined in all of its detail, we can deduce several absurd morals, like: “Never accept food from strangers, unless

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<sup>11</sup> Weisz is relying heavily on Walter Benjamin’s definition of storytelling as laid out in “The Storyteller.”

you are forced to do so, in which case you should then depend on the kindness of bandits to save you,” or the more generally applicable, “Never discuss plans out loud,” which, if absurd, is practical. However, any moral one might care to apply is complicated by the fact that the story ends with the children happy “in spite of” having their severed heads reattached to their bodies in “funny places” (Carrington 30). The playfulness of this dis-order brings them joy. In that sense, they are anarchists.

The drawing in Figure 3 appears at the end of “The Horrible Story” in the 2013 edition of *Milk of Dreams* (though it is seemingly unrelated to the action). It depicts a three-headed, three-bodied being. The hybrid creature is arranged vertically and seems arbitrarily welded together. We are spared body horror by the hybrid’s adorable, smiling faces. The uppermost aspect of the creature is wielding a pitchfork that pierces the rear end of a green man in a sombrero. He is either sleeping or dead, but he appears to be peacefully unconscious.

Because of the drawing’s vertical arrangement, it evokes a hierarchy, of a kind. Though the green man is at the top, this is because he is being held up as a trophy; he is nondominant. The established order of things is upturned (similar to the way it is in “The Debutante”). Again, the untroubled smiles of the hybrid figure indicate that there is equality and happy collaboration among its components. There is power in their combination. Like the children in “The Horrible Story,” they have altered the normal order of things, and it has made life better.

Weisz laments the professionalization of storytelling and how the marketplace almost rewards a lack of imagination:



Figure 3: Detail from *The Milk of Dreams*, by Leonora Carrington (*Untitled Drawing*). *New York Review of Books*, 2013, p. 31.

Writing is taught in academic forums; it has become a professional endeavour, where inspiration and creativity are turned into inoffensive bourgeois clichés, a place to annihilate spontaneity. Such writers learn to sell by catering to a uniform taste; they are careful not to offend, not to trespass, to comply with a culture of obedience. (Weisz 128)

While this sounds more than a little cynical, Weisz's point is difficult to challenge. Even after the many innovations of modernist and postmodernist writers, fiction writing (and writing, more generally) remains a conservative craft. Publishers want a return on their investment, and the public reliably wants and consumes certain types of writing, so it is in the publishers' best interest to publish books that a reading public will readily consume, sometimes to the exclusion of potentially more rewarding texts.

In Carrington's short work and children's stories, we see an inventiveness and energy that are hallmarks of good storytelling (at least in the oral tradition). It discredits Weisz's argument a little to look at the resurgence of interest in Carrington's writing; but, then again, he was talking about a certain kind of writing for a certain kind of audience.<sup>12</sup> For Carrington (and, presumably, her readership), fantastical detail and nonsense situations are more important than character development and plot. Effectively, "human interest" is deemphasized. This is a decidedly nonprofessional approach to writing, as humans are the only beings that pay to read stories, and most prefer to read stories that reflect their own experience in some way. Carrington's stories, it could be argued, speak to "anti-moral" readers: not immoral or amoral readers, but readers who would rather see pedantry and entrenched ways of thinking fall away. In short, her writing speaks to posthuman readers.

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<sup>12</sup> Moreover, it has taken a *long* time for the larger body of Carrington's work to be appreciated. This is not an uncommon trajectory for inventive (even canonical) literature.

Carrington's characters are often better described as actants: they may act or be acted upon without motive and without the grounding influence of human thought or affect (Lyon 164). Moral ends, in any conventional sense, are never achieved. Where "normal" structures of power are inverted (as they are in Figure 3), this is primarily to critique the structures themselves and the idea of order. At least, that is one of the primary effects of these inversions, which are anarchic rather than moral.

Weisz finds biographical readings of Carrington (for instance, ones that focus on her experiences with madness or on her interest in certain mystical authors) problematic. He notes their potential for devolving into "ethnography," into a colonization or appropriation of the artist for the benefit of a third party (the critic) (132). As much as Weisz lionizes Carrington's individuality, and in spite of his literal kinship with her, he does not pretend to understand the full underpinning of any one of her works. Such interpretation would be a fiction, a prosaic palimpsest written over something ineffable. Commodification of this kind serves only the interpreter, not the object of study. In this light, words really *do* fail us; or, at least, they fail to truly penetrate the mystery of a work of art. It is enough to give one pause while writing a longform analysis of an artist...

#### Chapter 4: Mysticism, Medicalization, and Snake Oil Salesmanship

Spirituality and magic are potentially liberating forces if they aren't imposed from without as totalizing systems. The same goes for all kinds of esoteric knowledge. One senses the pedantry of many male Surrealists: that what they were trying to depict in their paintings were no more than lavishly illustrated Freudian truisms. Consciously or unconsciously, they sought to reinforce the hegemony of psychoanalysis. Whether this is in opposition to other repressive hegemonies is beside the point; one replaces the other, which is in turn replaced by another, ad infinitum.

There is a more economical tendency in nonsense writing to create brief, obvious (anti-) moral lessons through absurd humor. No one would argue that the Surrealists were without a sense of humor—their comparative silliness is one of the main traits distinguishing them from other “high” modernists. But, due largely to a few domineering personalities, Surrealism was still a self-serious school that earnestly believed in its own importance. While Carrington trafficked in both the more esoteric pretensions of Surrealism *and* its penchant for humor, she did not ultimately subscribe to it as a belief system. Carrington's writing and paintings, like those of her Surrealist peers, are rife with symbolic imagery—the main difference being that she was drawing inspiration from a less psychological, more mystical, *iconographic well*, and she was doing so to different subversive *ends*.

In her satirical “artist's statement,” “Jezamathatics or Introduction to the Wonderful Process of Painting” (1965), Carrington lays out a brief autobiography composed of almost completely fabricated nonsense. In it, she alludes to nonexistent mathematical terms: She was born in an “Eneahexagram”; she “was decubing the root of a Hyporbolick Symposium in order to calculate the outer Denominator of a fig tree into equal Xextopodic chloriomorfacious

sections”; etc. (Carrington 149). All of this amounts to nothing and is meant to mock the measured pretentiousness of the “artist type” and the galleries in which his work is typically exhibited.<sup>13</sup>

We see similarly meaningless esoteric ideas in the rationale of Dr. Gambit, the keeper of the hospice/asylum known as Lightsome Hall in Carrington’s novel, *The Hearing Trumpet* (1974). Dr. Gambit explains the principles of the Well of Light Brotherhood and Lightsome Hall for the benefit of new inmate and protagonist Marian Leatherby:

We seek to follow the inner Meaning of Christianity and comprehend the Original Teaching of the Master....Before we begin to get even a faint glimmer of Truth we must strive for many years and lose hope time and time again before the first recompense is awarded us....These apparently simple, though infinitely difficult, principles are the core of Our Teaching....There are two little words which will ever supply the Key to the understanding of Inner Christianity. Self Remembering, my friends, are the words which we must strive to keep present through all our daily activities. (Carrington, *The Hearing Trumpet* 36)

This all smacks of mindfulness, a practice in which one observes one’s mind, while it is thinking, for the purpose of recognizing and ultimately correcting negative thought patterns. This meditative technique operates on the assumption that human beings have a “soul” or “true self” that exists prior to, above, or beyond the brain and its thoughts and that is capable of observing them impartially. With “*cogito ergo sum*” as its starting point, it essentially means, “I am aware of my own thinking, and so an *I* exists above/beyond my thinking mind.” Ideally, this practice

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<sup>13</sup> Jonathan P. Eburne, whose knowledge of Carrington far exceeds my own, would contest that “Jezmathatics” is more or less a description of her artistic process, “a portrait of the artist as pataphysician” (“Leonora Carrington and the Esoteric Avant-Garde” 145).



helps a person disidentify from her thoughts in order to change the way she approaches recurring situations in daily life. To be fair, it is an ancient form of meditation with proven mental health benefits. The Carringtonian twist, however, is that she combines New Age, for-profit mindfulness with Catholic self-abnegation, so that “self-love” is not a part of “Self Remembering,” but “a disease of the soul” for which one can pay to be cured (*HT* 50). “Dr. Gambit is a kind of Sanctified Psychologist,” resident Georgina Sykes explains,

The result is Holy Reason, like Freudian table turning. Quite frightful and as phoney [sic] as Hell. If one could only get out of this dump he would cease to be important, being the only male around, you know. It is really too crashingly awful all these women. The place creeps with ovaries until one wants to scream. We might as well be living in a bee hive. (*HT* 42)

Though infected with a degree of misogyny, Georgina sums up Dr. Gambit tidily. He might be quasi-mystical to the superficial observer, and he can potentially hypnotize those under his care into subscribing to his theories, but his claims to esoteric knowledge reside only in his relative position of power. He has invented a system that doesn’t work, but he can insist that his inmates don’t attain Holiness because they don’t follow the system closely enough. His authority is entirely manufactured; his method, a catch-22. “Personality is a Vampire,” Gambit explains to Marian, “and True Self can never emerge as long as Personality is dominant” (*HT* 58).

Personhood, at least in a linguistic sense, is bound up in personality. Ergo, Marian paradoxically cannot (according to Gambit) actualize her “True Self” without first giving up her personhood. This, to Carrington’s thinking, is a trap of all modern spirituality and organized religion (alias: “Holy Reason”). Moreover, self-abnegation is used especially in the subjugation of women and other “others” of patriarchy, colonialism, etc.

In the short story, “The Neutral Man” (early 1950s) the title character (also known as D) claims to be “an instructor in spiritual matters, an initiate if you like” (Carrington 132). Tellingly, he advises the narrator, also a guest at the party, “to confine [herself] to [her] charming female nonsense and to forget everything of a superior order” (Carrington 133). The host of the party, Mr. MacFrolick, warns that D is a “grey magician,” more evil than a practitioner of black or white magic, and that he is a “vampire of velvet words” bent on stealing the “vital essence” of the dinner guests (Carrington 135). The narrator actually lives with a vampire and is perfectly capable of dealing with such creatures, but MacFrolick (a Catholic) banishes her from the premises after she confesses to not being a Christian. MacFrolick hopes that she is at least a Protestant and that she will assassinate D to spare himself from committing the sin of murder. But she is not that kind of initiate, nor does she wish to be. Both MacFrolick and the neutral man represent esoteric spirituality at its most paranoid and manipulative.

Figure 4, *Litany of the Philosophers* (1959) is among Carrington’s darkest paintings. In a shadowy room, black-clad, pallid figures look on while a man divines secrets from a grouping of glass balls and three white animals. Every figure in the room has red eyes (including the animals) which gives the whole scene a demonic quality. If we take the title of the painting literally, these figures are all philosophers, but they are trying to garner understanding from a nonrational source: ritual magic. The solemnity and secrecy of the proceedings makes the scene that much more sinister. What are they doing, and why must it be kept hidden from the public? These supposedly learned men and women are relying on magic for their wisdom. Should the broader public ever learn as much, these philosophers would be discredited. If their grand Truths come from anything besides pure Reason, they are charlatans. Such has been the lasting effect of the Enlightenment on philosophy.



Figure 4: *Litany of the Philosophers*, by Leonora Carrington. 1959, Private Collection, from *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy, and Art*, by Susan L. Aberth, Lund Humphries, 2004, p. 111.

Carrington does not spare professional psychology, either. Apart from her scathing portrait of mental institutions in *Down Below*, she makes a mockery of psychoanalysis in the short story, “Et in Bellicus Lunarum Medicalis” (early 1960s). After a doctors’ strike breaks out in England, Russia makes a gift of medically trained rats for the duration of the strike. Dr. Monopus finds no use for the rats and attempts to pass them on to various other agencies and countries before deciding to give them to the Psychoanalytical Association. The head psychoanalyst, Dr. Laftnalger, determines that his cohort cannot use rats “in dealing with recalcitrant neuroses,” though there is speculation on how they might affect hourly therapy rates (Carrington 152). To revenge himself for the insulting gift, Laftnalger kidnaps Monopus. Monopus, in turn, amusingly stuffs the company toilet with “the complete works of Erich Fromm” (Carrington 154). After both the rats and Monopus escape, Laftnalger has a revelation about his chosen profession: “In spite of everything, psychology lives in the flesh. And without flesh we would have no patients. Thus, even a bone that talks is worth more than a rat that thinks” (Carrington 156). Psychiatry, Carrington seems to notice, is an extension of the medical industry, and the medical industry wants patients to whom it can prescribe and sell drugs. Moreover, hospitals and doctors’ offices are still cabals of learned people who supposedly know what to do to/with every “standard” *body* and who are, in some ways, incentivized to administer drugs.

Relatedly, in the story, “How to Start a Pharmaceuticals Business” (early 1960s), the characters discuss potential cures for rheumatism, including monkey-skin pants and “antirheumatoid collars” (Carrington 173). The efficacy of both is doubtful. Later, a strange man dressed in white gives Carrington (the protagonist of this story!) the shrunken corpse of Joseph Stalin. The man in white claims the corpse can be used to treat “Depression No. 20,” a made-up

pathology (Carrington 177). “It is also useful,” he claims, “in certain exercises of light levitation,” tellingly adding that, “Western medicine includes a branch of benign poisons” (Carrington 177). Carrington uses the corpse to create the drug “Apostalin,” which purportedly treats “Whooping cough, Syphilis, Grippe, Childbearing, and other convulsions” (Carrington 178). Apostalin is sought worldwide, and Carrington’s pharmaceutical business is a success (particularly in its combined dig at Stalin’s cult of personality and the pharmaceuticals industry).

In these two stories, we see criticisms of both the medical industry and folk (or pseudoscientific) medicine. But while the former is frighteningly callous, the latter, in its magical thinking, can be fun. Carrington seems to prefer folk medicine because of its imaginative possibilities, its psychosomatic potential. Though this is purely speculative, I imagine the real-life Carrington would consider sampling the ashen remains of Joseph Stalin, either to treat an ailment or just to see what would happen. Though Carrington was not wholly opposed to using western medicine when necessary (apparently, she would take half a Xanax every night to help her sleep), one assumes she might have reached for Apostalin before she reached for aspirin, knowing that belief in a drug’s efficacy is half of what makes it effective (Aridjis 19).

It would be disingenuous to depict a wholly negative picture of mysticism and esotericism in Carrington’s work. She was incredibly interested in esoteric knowledge—so much so that many of her paintings require an education in the occult to understand their symbolism—but she was mistrustful of the people who handed such knowledge down or pretended to be experts. In the opening of Carrington’s novel, *The Stone Door* (1977), three male astronomers discuss the necessity of keeping secret wisdom from women. However, one astronomer dissents, daydreaming of the “Sweet chaos” that equality between the sexes would induce, out of which “a new chaotic order never before dreamed by man” could emerge (*SD* 3). Of Carrington’s two

novels, *The Stone Door* is not as widely studied as *The Hearing Trumpet*, possibly because it is an even more opaque text. Passages of it read like obscure mystical non sequiturs, and the plot is, by any measure, a knotted mess.

Similarly, readers might agree that Carrington's short stories, however obtuse, nonsensical, or complicated, make for less tedious reading than either of her novels. But one could read the novels as collections of stories, as each contains dreams, histories, fables: in short, tangents and framed tales. For instance, in *The Stone Door*, the character Amagoya reads the diary of another character who recounts a dream in which she invents a story about meeting King Solomon. In only a few pages, Carrington brings us through four doors: the story itself (frame), the diary of another, nameless character (a story within a story), a dream recorded in that diary (story within story within story), and a story told within that dream (story within story within story within story). King Solomon apparently endorses this nesting doll structure. "It is a great thing to be errant in time and space," Solomon says to the bewildered intruder:

The frontiers onto the unknown are constructed in layers. One layer opens into a fan of other layers which open new worlds in their turn. It is true that there is an infinite empty space somewhere beyond the Universe. It is equally true that that space is as richly peopled and inhabited as this very Earth. The space is dark, with no beginning and no end. The space is light, it begins, ends and continues like life. (*SD* 21-22)

Moving through layers of meaning, Solomon illumines a paradox of the universe: that it is both material and immaterial, that it is expanding and multiplying infinitely while at the same time remaining encased by a vast emptiness.

Though himself eloquent and prophetic, Solomon expresses weariness with words: "Words are more useless than the dust of the desert because language has also died, and dead

things have movements that are difficult for an eye to perceive” (*SD* 22). Words are potentially noxious to life. They are an interruption of flows of energy for the purpose of asserting the importance of human ideas; they halt the living of life by calling attention to symbols, which are, at best, once-removed representations of actual lived experience. Painting, music, sculpture—wordless articulations of beauty and form—are not nearly as hateful to life as the written word.<sup>14</sup>

Hence (perhaps) Carrington’s gradual abandoning of verbal storytelling in favor of painting. Though most of her paintings have titles, their narratives are tenuous. Janet Lyon describes Carrington’s writing and painting as, “scenario [setting + scene + milieu + actants]...in the absence of exposition,” adding that, “When scenario carries the weight of the narrative, plot is inconsequential at best” (170). Take, for example, Carrington’s *Temple of the Word* (Figure 5).<sup>15</sup> While the painting depicts a temple (or ceremonial structure of some kind) and numerous figures, including three central figures who are performing some kind of dance or ritual, there are no words in the actual painting. Even the glyphs on the temple columns seem to be purely aesthetic. The title is not mere irony; the painting seems too solemn for that. “Painting after painting stages a scenario without exposition,” Lyon muses, “To what do they allude? We wring meaning out of titles, strain after mythic antecedents, for we are in the habit of searching for referents. Carrington, however, is in the habit of *détournement*” (Lyon 170). Perhaps Carrington is refuting all meaning, all interpretation. Words misrepresent, underrepresent, exclude; they never quite match their referents—referents, as objects, being unknowable. “[Carrington’s] approach to knowledge was...an orphic one,” writes Jonathan P. Eburne, “[I]n its lyrical, even whimsical approach to beauty, myth and death, her work confronts great mysteries but refuses

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<sup>14</sup> Carrington: “There are things that are not sayable. That’s why we have art” (qtd. in Aridjis et al 223).

<sup>15</sup> See also *Grandmother Moorhead’s Aromatic Kitchen* (Figure 2).



*Figure 5: Temple of the Word, by Leonora Carrington. 1954, Private Collection, from Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy, and Art, by Susan L. Aberth, Lund Humphries, 2004, p. 99.*



their total assimilation or systematic comprehension” (“Leonora Carrington and the Esoteric Avant-Garde” 142). “Assimilation” would imply a compromising of mystery for the artist’s convenience. Carrington would never have taken such an easy path.

After its publication, Carrington became obsessed with a book called *The White Goddess* by historian Robert Graves. In the text, Graves writes about how the patriarchal, monotheistic religions and cultures systematically usurped the power of matriarchal, pluralistic cultures throughout the world:

[A]s soon as religion in its primitive sense is interpreted as social obligation and defined by tabulated laws—as soon as Apollo the Organizer, God of Science, usurps the power of his Mother the Goddess of inspired truth, wisdom and poetry, and tries to bind her devotees by laws—inspired magic goes, and what remains is theology, ecclesiastical ritual, and negatively ethical behaviour. (Graves 479).

In *The Hearing Trumpet*, Marian Leatherby has a similar view. “Strange how the bible always seems to end up in misery and cataclysm,” she muses, “I often wondered how their angry and vicious God became so popular. Humanity is very strange and I don’t pretend to understand anything, however why worship something that only sends you plagues and massacres? and why was Eve blamed for everything?” (*HT* 25-26). Leatherby touches on the “negatively ethical behavior” conditioned by a constant fear of punishment that seems to be present in the absence of a Mother Goddess. Moreover, her last claim about the misogyny implicit in the creation myth of the Abrahamic religions is not a new one. According to Graves, “The concept of a creative goddess was banned by Christian theologians almost two thousand years ago, and by Jewish theologians long before that,” further empowering men and disempowering women (490). Graves adds that “Most scientists [operating within modern cultures wherein one of the

monotheistic religions predominates], for social convenience, are God-worshippers” (490). Ergo, most scientists, consciously or unconsciously, have sought to prove the validity of, and have tacitly endorsed, patriarchy. And so, religion and science have conspired together over the course of millennia to otherize and control women.

There is a more genuine, less exacting, less totalizing kind of esoteric wisdom beyond science and religion that Carrington loves and respects: witchcraft. Witchcraft does not depend on ego-death *or* submission to authority figures. The witch can work independently with texts ancient and modern to perform magic for her own ends. Carrington’s “allergy to collaboration” is not merely a contrarian tendency; she is terrified of systems of thought and their tendency to restrict (Aberth, “‘An Allergy to Collaboration’: The Early Formation of Leonora Carrington’s Artistic Vision” 20). Individual growth and the discovery of one’s “True Self” might be important to Carrington, after all. In *The Hearing Trumpet*, Marian Leatherby encounters a stronger version of herself in the basement of Lightsome Hall’s tower. Her *other self* cooks and eats her. This strong Marian is yet stronger and is now free to go above ground; the weaker Marian who originally descended has been subsumed. Witchcraft has empowered her against forces which would otherwise have dominated her.

Within the same novel, we are treated to the story of Doña Rosalinda Alvarez Cruz della Cueva, the “Winking Nun” who uses Church funds to practice witchcraft and engage in orgies (91). Her story is an enormous tangent (pages 91-128), but it contains a subversive, alternative account of the Holy Grail myth that decouples the Grail from its Christian connotations and attributes its healing powers to certain Roman gods. The Grail was kept for millenia by a

hermaphrodite Goddess named Barbarus (or Barbara, Epona, or Hekate) until it was eventually stolen by Christians, leading to a global imbalance.<sup>16</sup>

At the end of the novel, an inversion of the Earth's polarity, triggered by the evacuation of the Goddess from the planet, causes a mass extinction of human beings. At the dawn of this new ice age, Dr. and Mrs. Gambit die, leaving the women of Lightsome Hall to their own devices. With the conceited Natacha Gonzalez and her crony, Vera Van Tocht, also out of the way, the remaining women work together to survive. To do so, they must find the Holy Grail and return it to the Goddess (manifested as a swarm of bees). Suffice to say, the group succeeds. Presumably, they will live out the remainder of their lives, and then humanity will be extinct. Leatherby and her fellow survivors composedly look forward to a world without humans—or, at least, a world in which humans are not the de facto “rulers” of everything and in which their sophistry no longer holds sway.

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<sup>16</sup> When Carrington writes her capital “G” Goddess, we can assume she is referring to the Gravesian, feminine/feminist alternative to the capital “G,” masculine God.

## Conclusion

Carrington was an artist without boundaries. She was interested in breaking from traditional forms of thinking and in undermining certain unquestioned hegemonies (including those of patriarchy, speciesism, and capitalism). Her writing and painting reflect a dissatisfaction with humanity and its various constructions (material and conceptual). She did not fully extract herself from human society, despite her best efforts to disassociate (and her occasional dissociations), but she created art that challenged human(ist) dominance and the tyranny of human narratives.

In spite of her position of privilege relative to some of the aforementioned hegemonies, Carrington's life did not escape violence. Marina Warner regards Carrington's memoir, *Down Below*, "As a testament to the horrors of psychosis" and as a milestone text in "Surrealism's cult of madness" ("Intro. to *The House of Fear*" 17-18). In recounting details from her paranoid breakdown and subsequent internment, Carrington reminisces:

As I looked into eyes, I knew the masters and the slaves and the (few) free men. I worshipped myself in such moments. I worshipped myself because I saw myself complete—I was all, all was in me; I rejoiced at seeing my eyes become miraculously solar systems, kindled by their own light; my movements, a vast and free dance, in which everything was ideally mirrored by every gesture, a limpid and faithful dance; my intestines, which vibrated in accord with Madrid's painful digestion, satisfied me just as much.<sup>17</sup> (*DB* 20)

Such moments are moments of mania, a heightened mental state characterized by grandiosity and an ecstatic sense of wellbeing. Mania itself is neither true nor untrue; it is simply a feeling: a

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<sup>17</sup> For a colorful account of food and eating in Carrington's stories and *Down Below*, see "Gardens of Delight or, What's Cookin'?" Leonora Carrington in the Kitchen," by Sonia Assa.

change in affect if not in external reality. But who could deny that a person's *experience* of reality—how they perceive and react to the tangible world—constitutes that individual's reality? Carrington's mania marks an experience of unity. Her bodily order mirrors the order of the heavens; or, perhaps more accurately, her body, mind, and ego *merge with* the universe in "a limpid and faithful dance". Carrington's mania, though it breaks with normative psychology and human society, brings an awareness of her connection to *everything*.

The other side of Carrington's manic experience was acute paranoia. According to Jonathan P. Eburne:

*Down Below* is as much a memoir of self-punishment as it is a narrative of Carrington's wartime descent into madness. This self-punishment is discursive: the text frames her mental breakdown in terms of an understanding of paranoia derived from surrealist and early Lacanian theories of the illness as a delusional system of self-punishment through which the paranoid subject strikes out at her ego-ideal in misrecognizing her own identificatory desire as a persecution from without. (*Surrealism and the Art of Crime* 218)

In this view, paranoia is preemptive punishment. In spite of her convictions (artistic and otherwise), Carrington likely felt some guilt about defying her parents and her own aristocratic status in pursuit of a life in the arts. When World War II moved increasingly closer to Carrington personally, she seemed to correlate her guilt feelings with what must have appeared to have been, through war and genocide, a literal ending of the world. Consequently, she felt at times that she was simultaneously the cause of the war and the only agent able to stop it. "*Down Below* is as much a work of paranoid theory as a memoir of Carrington's nervous illness," writes Eburne; "its paranoia is characterized not only by its unconscious production of symptoms (interpretive

delirium, persecution mania) but also by its auto-analysis and its self-conscious ties to surrealist discourse” (SAC 218).

In lieu of actual therapy, Carrington, like many Surrealists, analyzed herself. While “madness” in the abstract can be liberatory as an idea opposing the hegemony of Reason—Carrington even invokes capital R “Reason” in *Down Below* as a limited faculty of perception—it can also be genuinely painful (even dangerous) for an individual to construct and live in a discrete reality. All of this is to say that the violence that precipitated Carrington’s breakdown could not fully be transmogrified into a positive alternate reality via dissociation; her dissociation was a psychic defense against trauma. Had she escaped her suffering in any *real* sense, the violence inflicted upon her and upon the world would have been nullified, would have itself been a delusion. Alas, it was not.

In addition to being the narrative of a breakdown, *Down Below* is a narrative of displacement and dispossession, the story of Carrington’s becoming a woman without a country. After fleeing France (which was not even her home country), Carrington travels to Santander, Spain; escapes from Spain to America (New York); and then finally settles in Mexico City. Her first collection of stories (*The House of Fear*) was written in clipped French, and *The Hearing Trumpet* was originally written in French and later translated to English by Carrington herself. Many of her stories that she wrote while living in Mexico were originally written in Spanish. Carrington, in addition to being an artist of no fixed nationality, was a multilingual author, comfortably writing stories in several languages. She was also a *multimedia* artist. If she specialized in painting and writing throughout her career, she would also become comfortable working in other media as she got older, including mask-making (Figure 6), weaving and tapestry (Figure 7), and sculpting in various substances (Figure 8). Carrington epitomized Rosi



Figure 6: *Red Mask*, by Leonora Carrington. c. 1950s, Private Collection, from *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy, and Art*, by Susan L. Aberth, Lund Humphries, 2004, p. 80.



Figure 7: *The Snakes*, by Leonora Carrington. 1961, from *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy, and Art*, by Susan L. Aberth, Lund Humphries, 2004, p. 100.

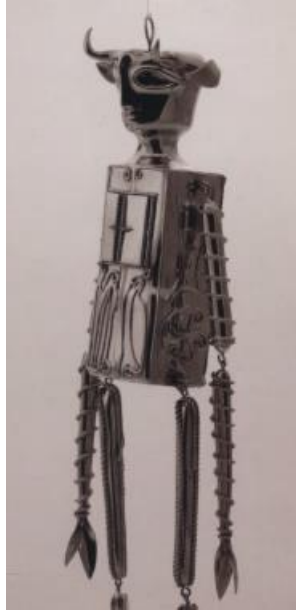


Figure 8: *La Vaca*, by Leonora Carrington. 1975, Tane's Collection, from *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy, and Art*, by Susan L. Aberth, Lund Humphries, 2004, p. 130.



Braidotti's idea of the nomad: "The nomad does not stand for homelessness, or compulsive displacement; it is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity" (*Nomadic Subjects* 22). Though she technically settled in a particular area of the world and accepted it as home, Carrington's artistic inspiration was peripatetic, without a "home base."

Carrington's literal nomadism (begun by fleeing war-torn France) combined with her egoic yet humbling experiences in the Spanish asylum, taught her, "the necessity that others be with me that we may feed each other with our knowledge and thus constitute the Whole" (*DB* 3). This is not a hermetic, myopic, or self-absorbed knowledge, but an open knowledge produced by and through exchange. "To possess a telescope without its other essential half—the microscope," Carrington muses, with remarkable remove, "seems to me a symbol of the darkest incomprehension. The task of the right eye is to peer into the telescope, while the left eye peers into the microscope" (*DB* 19). Carrington sought a clear vantage on herself and on humanity. In doing so, she detached herself as much as possible from the ordinary human world, that she might live more fully in a posthuman world. This explains the otherworldly virtuosity of her oeuvre and why, in spite of its running counter to so many -isms, her program remained a profusely positive one.

A posthuman world need not be anti-human, though a reduction of humanity's world-dominating hubris would have to take place in order for such a world to come about. So much violence proceeds from this hubris and from the more biased premises of humanism. Humanism has the potential to destroy bodies and minds. It has the power to encage or enfranchise, to exclude or include. This dichotomizing proclivity, this binary pattern of human(ist) order-

making, could be opposed; but wouldn't opposition imply another binary? Is there a form of resistance that isn't simply one of two possibilities: complicity or opposition? Perhaps this is Carrington's way: no narrative thread to prescribe or proscribe anything, just the new and unified image produced by looking through telescope and microscope simultaneously.

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### **Vita**

Jacob grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee. He attended Middle Tennessee State University (2012-2016) and received his Bachelor of Science in Audio Production. He worked in television production for several years before deciding to return to graduate school to study English. In fall of 2020, he enrolled in the graduate program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He will receive his Master of Arts in Literature, Criticism, and Textual Studies in May of 2022. His major areas of interest include modern and postmodern literature. After graduation, he hopes to continue studying English in a doctoral program.