

LIMINAL POSTHUMAN CORPOREALITY:
DECAYING ZOMBIE GHOSTS AND THE ‘LIVING IMPAIRED’
IN ANGELA CARTER’S “HEROES AND VILLAINS”

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Abstract: The representation of graphic sexual violence and corporeal brutality in Carter’s fiction has sparked harsh feminist criticism about the author’s demythologising project. I wish to expand the frames through which Carter’s engagement with patriarchal topos of the body are perceived, and critically assess the tension revolving around her feminist agenda. Liminality is a state of in-betweenness. Accordingly, a living organism, hanging between life and death, like a zombie, is the site where liminality is more than a mere metaphor; it transforms into a ‘corpo-reality’. Even though Carter’s novels cannot be said to feature zombies in the strictest sense of the term, this paper will explore how Carter’s *Heroes and Villains* epitomises a ‘zombified’ world where the collapse of civilisation exposes not only the fragility of the human body, but also the myth of patriarchal anthropocentrism. The novel portrays spectral figures, living in a fluid interzone between life and death, human and nonhuman. This paper will use the trope of the zombie as a theoretical tool to rethink what it means to be human. My concern is to show that these living-impaired, liminal figures are part of a posthuman world where phallogocentric hierarchies and rational disembodiment are challenged. In her attempt to foreground images of liminality, Carter succeeds in destabilising the dialectical model of Western thought—mind/body, culture/nature, self/other—and proposes an alternative ontology grounded in relational coexistence. I will expand the scope from which to perceive the image of the zombie as a monstrous Other, to include a novel reading, whereby zombification does not mean pessimistic decay, but a possibility of transgression. The theoretical perspectives of posthumanist and corporeal feminist philosophers, particularly Rosi Braidotti, Catherine Hayles and Donna Haraway, provide an appropriate frame for discussing Carter’s investment in reimagining decay not as a destructive process but as a transformative one. This paper hopes to offer a fresh perspective on how bodies are imagined in a post-nuclear age by adopting posthuman and

corporeal feminist theoretical insights as a lens through which to formulate my own interpretation of Carter's novel.

Keywords: liminality, posthumanism, zombification, Angela Carter, Heroes and Villains

INTRODUCTION

Angela Carter is a contentious British author. Feminist critics find in her depiction of violent sexual encounters and physical brutalities a betrayal of feminist ethics. Carter, it is argued, negates what it means to be a female feminist, portraying docile, objectified female characters, too weak to resist patriarchal hegemony. It is only in her later fiction that Carter starts to depict winged, freedom-aspiring female characters who are strong enough to show resistance through their bodies. While there is a growing corpus of studies on Carter's positive representation of the female body, the current scholarship tends to focus on her late fiction, while earlier fiction remains largely neglected. Recent critical scholarship has shed new light on Carter's posthuman spirit and her feminist symbolism in her later novels, overlooking the posthuman potential of her early fiction. In this paper, I will argue that Carter's early work might be read alongside posthuman and corporeal feminist philosophies in their attempts to question rational humanity and the fixity of the body. In her 1969 novel, *Heroes and Villains*, Carter imagines a liminal corporeality where decay, fragmentation, and monstrosity unsettle the humanist ideal of a coherent, autonomous body. Through her "living impaired", zombified characters, she reconfigures life as porous, interdependent, and posthuman, and uses liminality as a motif for rethinking embodiment. Carter continues to attract scholarly attention because her writing articulates issues that remain vital to the contemporary imagination. Critical analyses of her third novel, *Heroes and Villains*, revolve around criticism of how female embodiment is portrayed as either fragile or empowered and the deconstruction of the Cartesian Cogito, which hierarchises the mind

over the body. More recent scholarship approaches it from a posthuman perspective, interpreting the alignment between the female and the non-human body as a strategy to challenge rationalist definitions of the human as transcendent and superior to animal life. In fact, in her article “‘Now You Are at the Place of Annihilation’: Angela Carter’s Post-Human Politics”, published in the recent 2025 collection of essays, *Angela Carter’s Futures: Representations, Adaptations and Legacies*, Hope Jennings believes in the “transformative possibilities of renegotiating desire and agency in terms of reciprocity rather than an opposition between self and other” (Jennings 2005, 32). Plainly speaking, for Jennings, Carter’s fiction can be read from a posthuman lens inasmuch as it purposefully exposes the inadequacy of humanist rationalism in recognising diverse subject positions. This is done through an examination of the possible potential of desire for transformation through its interrelation with the Other. I wish to expand the frames through which we view Carter’s engagement with posthuman corporeal concerns by looking at the representation of Otherness-embodied in the figure of the living-impaired- and its ongoing relational becoming in *Heroes and Villains*.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Posthuman politics crystallise upon the idea that distinctions between reality and fiction, the organic and the mechanical, the immaterial and the embodied are rejected. Therefore, history and meaning no longer operate as a stable referent; they dissolve into a fluid network of signs, simulations, and polyphonic narratives. Halberstam and Livingston suggest that the posthuman body is “a body under the sign of AIDS, a contaminated body, a deadly body, a techno-body; it is [...] a queer body” (Halberstam and Livingston 1995, 3). It unites both the full spectrum of these attributes and their opposites. In other words, a malformed, sick body cannot be excluded since these bodies do not operate in isolation, but in a

dynamic relation with other bodies and the environment around them.

In *Posthuman Feminist Theory*, Rosi Braidotti opines that the posthuman body represents “an *and, and* approach rather than an *either-or* approach” (Braidotti 2016, 689). This is clearly detectable within a zombified corporeality, hovering between death and life, human and monster, living organism and mechanism. This liminal figure cannot be contained within pre-determined characteristics; The figure of the zombie represents a liminal posthuman body in which the Vitruvian perfect male model is contested. Juxtaposing unreconcilable corporealities, the zombified body is not necessarily an aberration, but another ‘normal’ version of a human body.

This paper demonstrates that the ‘zombified body’ can be re-read from a social metaphor for individuals who have lost their agency, autonomy, or humanity; that is, a representation of a society whose structures have collapsed, into a posthuman ‘corpo-reality’ where the boundaries between the self and the other, the animate and the inanimate have been redrawn. The decomposing flesh of the zombified body and its status as a boundary figure do not signify annihilation. Rather, decomposition is primordial for the ‘composition’ of new narratives. Braidotti’s nomadic becoming theory provides an appropriate framework within which to discuss zombification as a liminal space of posthuman composition. In *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, Braidotti states that:

Becoming woman/animal/insect is an affect that flows, like writing; it is a composition, a location that needs to be constructed together with, that is to say, in the encounter with others. They push the subject to his/her limits, in a constant encounter with external, different others. The nomadic subject as a nonunitary entity is simultaneously self-propelling and hetero-defined, i.e., outward bound.

According to Braidotti, constructing identity involves a dialogic engagement with the Other, whereby the subject transcends the humanist boundaries of independence and self-enclosure. When the

subject is urged to transgress the limits of fixed ontological and epistemological thresholds, it experiences transformative becomings with the Other. Braidotti's nomadic subject does not persist in isolation, but in a continual productive movement with an environment which is shaped by multiple subjectivities and relations. Braidotti's nomadic becoming theory insists upon the idea that bodies are not static nor are they autonomous. They are connected to other species and to the environment they inhabit. By foregrounding relationality and mobility, a nomadic ontology disrupts ideological constraints on the body and reshapes rational consciousness. Echoing Braidotti's nomadic theory, which underscores the embrace of otherness and difference, Alaimo employs the term "trans-corporeality" to articulate relational embodiment between human and other-than-human forms (Alaimo 2010, 2). Alaimo's concept closely parallels posthumanist interrogations of the Human as a distinct and superior form of rational subjectivity.

Posthuman philosophy celebrates Otherness and includes it within the construction of identity. Corporeal feminists and posthuman philosophers such as Rosi Braidotti, Catherine Hayles, Stacy Alaimo and Donna Haraway use figures such as the doll, the cyborg and the monster as representations of ontological becomings. Those figures that have conventionally represented monstrosity, alienation, and abjection now point to the transformative possibilities of interaction with alterity. Catherine Hayles, for example, theorises that "the Other is accepted as both different *and* enriching, valued precisely because it represents what cannot be controlled and predicted" (Hayles 1993, 188).

In the same line of thought, Donna Haraway uses the figure of the monstrous cyborg to deconstruct sexual binary oppositions, making possible, as a consequence, new configurations of subjectivity that are fluid, hybrid, and resistant to fixed classification. She also believes that the figure of the cyborg—as representation of Otherness—resists the static meanings that crystallise within humanist ideology, thereby nullifying the very idea of human

perfection or completion. As a posthuman monster, the cyborg is positioned in a liminal state, neither pertaining to the human nor the non-human. Alongside the human, the animal and the machine, it stands as a new category in itself, confusing all other existing taxonomies. Calling for multiplicity and relational subjectivities, she claims that “One is too few, and two is only one possibility” (Haraway 1987, 35).

THE ZOMBIE AS A POSTHUMAN CORPO-REALITY

The figure of the zombie best illustrates this idea since its liminality and difference showcase the “alien within us”, that is, a vision of a creature born not outside the bounds of the human, but a projection of our human self (Sigurdson 2013, 372). Lauro and Embry’s article, “A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism”, endeavours to redirect critical attention onto the liminal status of the zombie figure in order to redefine the parameters of human embodiment. They suggest that “while the human is incarcerated in mortal flesh, the zombie presents a grotesque image that resists this confinement—animating his body even beyond death” (Lauro and Embry 2008, 90). Not only does the figure of the zombie highlight human embodiment, but it also reconfigures it. Inhabiting a body that is both living and dead, the zombie disrupts stable subject–object boundaries by stimulating reflection about power relations and threatens to dismantle social dynamics that, though long critiqued and contested, continue to persist largely intact within the existing political and social superstructure.

The zombified body is an impossibility like a square circle (Delfino and Taylor 2012, 41). However, it is by no means uncategorisable; on the contrary, it asserts itself as a new category that challenges existing taxonomies. Pertaining neither to the ‘dead’ category nor the ‘alive’ category, it resists classification and confuses pre-established definitions. Through their immobility, the living-

impaired defy death, and because they are decaying corpses, they exist in a suspended state, defying, thus, the certainties of life. During the contemporary era, zombies and the living-impaired stand as a metaphor for the social, cultural, and political anxieties of the modern and post-nuclear era, notably, nuclear threats, genetic mutation, compulsive consumption, post-apocalyptic nihilism, etc. However, recent philosophers view these liminal, zombie ghost figures as embodiments of posthumanism. Jesse Stommel, for example, contends that:

The zombie body is a pedagogical body. It teaches us something about who we are. It is a polyvalent body. The zombie is more than just static flesh and sinews. It is raw material that authors and filmmakers draw upon to tell stories about what it is to be human—what it is to be a body in a world where those bodies are imminently threatened. (Stommel 2017, 183)

In other words, zombie figures create a discursive site for challenging phallogocentric authority and its investment in the coherence of the corporeal form. It no longer suggests horror, but teaches humans to reconfigure definitions of humanity, embodiment, mortality, and social structures. From a posthumanist perspective, these ghostly figures destabilise the humanist fantasy of the coherent self and open a space of relationality—where decay and monstrosity become sources of transformative transgression.

Robert G. Weiner moves beyond reading the zombie ghost as a mere metaphor of humanity's descent into chaos. He contends that the figure exposes the inhumanity inherent in human nature, thereby inviting a critical re-examination of the very concept of the human. (Weiner 2017, 195). To echo Kevin Boon's inquiry, the posthumanist framework is revealed in the question: "Are zombies becoming more human, or are humans becoming more like zombies?" (Boon 2011, 4). This ambiguity is examined in terms of an erosion of the boundaries between the subject and the object, the human and the Other, leading to the accommodation of a new liminal form that is neither human nor monstrous.

The idea of the living-impaired and the figure of the zombie ghost are extensively elaborated in Carter's *Heroes and Villains*, a dystopian novel which depicts the aftermath of the apocalypse. Society is divided into three strata: The Soldiers, ruling over farmers and Professors in barricaded villages. The Barbarians, depicted as ruthless scavengers, living at the outskirts of the Professors' villages; and the Out people, those "subhuman mutants [...] skulking zombie-like at the edges of the contaminated ruined cities" (Coover 2001, ix). As an alternative way of entering the novel, I propose a reading which focuses on these three groups as liminal zombie ghosts, creatures that hover between life and death, remaining ambulatory yet lacking consciousness or human agency. Reading the novel through the image repertoire of 'the living impaired' provides some alternative moves through which to revisit questions pertaining to the transcendence of mind over matter and of the human over the non-human or the part-human.

HEROES AND VILLAINS AND TRANSCENDENT ZOMBIFIED EMBODIMENT

The setting of the novel evokes a zombified landscape haunted by wandering zombies. The author presents mansions of "rotten stone", devoured by a "web of creeper fur of moss and fungoid growth of rot" (31). The Barbarians prowl around decaying, cobwebbed houses, pervaded by the stench of smoke, rotting flesh, vomit and "their abominable refuse" (35). Marianne, the heroine of the novel, experiencing all this with revulsion, feels transplanted into another planet where the air has a different texture, unlike the lighter air she uses to breathe. All around, there is "a smell of earth, of rotting food and of all-pervading excrement" (42).

The Outpeople, unlike the Barbarians, are wandering sub-species physically mutilated by the Atomic Bomb. Zombie-like, they live in holes under the ground, "poison[ing] their arrows by dipping the heads in their sores" (45). Their bodies, human yet monstrous,

suggest a liminal corporeality that blurs the distinction between life and death, the human and the inhuman. In one passage, the writer depicts one of them as having inhuman limbs:

His arms were very short because they lacked elbows and were unnaturally hinged too low down on a body curiously warped and out of true. His face was marked with a gigantic cicatrice, and the nose has been omitted; his nostrils were twin pits between his eyes. His canine teeth had grown into fangs. (109)

In another passage, the Out people's dystopian corporeality suggests an unconventional human body, whereby ears become shrivelled like decaying tissue, hands and feet become webbed, and limbs are either too long or too short for a natural human being (110). This display of fantastic, out of norms bodies establishes a paradigm for the posthuman body, a body which transgresses the boundaries of normative corporeality to include other non-human traits. The Outpeople invite readings that challenge anthropocentric definitions of the body, suggesting a liminal space where hybridity and monstrosity not only redefine what it means to be human but also offer alternative possibilities. Donally, the Shaman of the tribe summarises it all when stating that:

(...) necessity suggests we adopt a standard pattern [...]. We abhor variations, though it may be a short-sighted measure, at that, if we are to adapt to survive. Perhaps we should seriously reconsider as to whether form makes the man. (110)

To that, Jewel, the hero and Barbarian of the tribe, suggests webbed feet for human and non-human species. Though this is meant to be a joke, Carter is persistently invested in establishing a paradigm for the posthuman liminal body, a body which challenges anatomical, anthropocentric norms, such as the body massacred later in the novel, a liminal-sexed body which is equipped with both female and male organs (111).

The representation of decaying zombie ghosts in *Heroes and Villains* is not limited to the lowest strata of society, embodied in the

Outpeople; the soldiers, too, are depicted as living-impaired. With their “glass faces” (19), they evoke the lifeless, vacant quality of the zombie, caught between the living and the dead. The Soldiers, guarding the Professors’ villages securely against any Barbarian attacks, evoke the image of the universal numb, unaffectionate soldier. However, if read according to a posthuman logic, presenting the Soldiers -traditionally seen as embodiments of rational, disciplined human authority- as “all dark inside”, to borrow Gordon Hawkes’s terms, undermines normative, supremacist notions of the human, showing that even those who uphold societal structures can be reduced to moral and corporeal ambiguity. Neither fully alive nor truly psychologically dead, they inhabit a space of liminality where all values are reconsidered.

Among those supervised by the Soldiers is Marriane, the protagonist of the novel. The daughter of a professor of History, Marianne displays traits of a determined, uninhibited and outspoken personality. With her hair cropped short, she is mistaken for a boy. However, for the purpose of my analysis, I will consider Marianne as the embodiment of a liminal corporeality by highlighting how she is portrayed as a living impaired character. Significantly, Marianne’s eyes are cold and sharp, like those of a roaming zombie. Following her father’s murder by her nurse, the shadow of death comes to dominate her inner world. She depicts her surroundings as a grave and perceives herself as the living dead, unburied and unrested. Speaking about her nurse, she states that: “she loved us when we were alive [...] I mean, when I was young” (15), betraying, thus, her feelings of lifelessness and blurring the line between life and death.

Jewel, as well as the rest of the tribe, often doubts her human nature and mistakes her for an ethereal ghost-like figure. Jewel doubtfully touches her face to make sure she is a being of fleshly reality (26), while one of his cousins is ordered to kiss her to make sure she is in effect real, not a zombie ghost (43). Later in the novel, Jewel instructs Marianne to kiss one Barbarian woman “to show her [she is] made of flesh and blood” (103). The kiss becomes more than a test of reality; it symbolises the fragile threshold between the living

and the spectral, foregrounding the posthuman concern with bodies that challenge fixed definitions and resist normative categorisation. From a posthuman corporeal feminist perspective, the female protagonist exemplifies liminality and the collapse of ontological boundaries; she is unable to be situated as either living or dead, which in turn produces a persistent sense of unease, apprehension and confusion. Accordingly, Angela Carter is intent on exploring the porous and mutable nature of embodiment, together with the social and relational anxieties provoked by female bodies that do not conform to normative anthropocentric expectations. Marianne's liminal 'corpo-reality' makes others question their understanding of reality. They are forced to recognise that the boundaries between life and death, human and nonhuman, or male and female, are not as stable as they presume. As conveyed by Marianne, different bodily possibilities are defined through relational negotiations.

Apart from Marianne, other characters refuse the reader's search for permanent identities. The Barbarians, uncivilised tribes living at the outskirts of the Soldiers' villages, are often depicted as zombie-ghosts and living impaired not only due to the absence of any cognitive skills (38), but also through the recurring motifs of death, used in their characterisation. Indeed, the whole tribe shuffles forward in a slow, relentless procession "in the silence of near exhaustion" (14). With ageless faces and slack mouths, they exhale a stench of decay. Each step seems guided by some mindless instinct, a rhythm of death that spreads unease among any living observer:

Movement itself progressed so slowly that distance, like time, no longer had a practical application; motion became another aspect of the road. Now the travellers were in their element, a steady, persevering progression from nowhere to nowhere, in featureless, colourless weather. (100)

In one passage, the characterisation of the barbarian brothers is reminiscent of the living impaired whose vacant eyes gleam with a hollow light, as if haunted by the memory of life rather than life itself. Their eyes "reflected nothing, and the faces themselves,

deformed or leaden, blanched or ablaze, were riven by vile, twisted mouths from which issued harsh screeches or foul abuse, faces stained with blood or fire and then blotted out by shadow” (46). It is worth noting that the brothers’ linguistic impairment is highly significant as it situates them within a liminal space where the boundary between human speech and animal growl becomes blurred. Rasping through decayed throats, language itself has rotted away. Speech is no longer believed to carry meaning but is simply an echo of what communication once was, an evocative remainder of what once was human. If read from a posthuman logic, the Barbarians’ inability to use language properly suggests the breakdown of the human as a rational, speaking subject.

Not only do the brothers defy linguistic faculties, they also deconstruct the boundary between the animate and the inanimate, the living and the dead. In the passage where Marianne is confronted by their attack and cornered during their attempt to rape her, she catches the unmistakable stench of the grave on them. Like the living impaired, they “smelled of the grave” (48). This mingling of decay and motion blurs the distinction between what belongs to life and what should remain buried. The living-impaired’s very existence becomes the representation of a posthuman condition in which the body persists beyond its biological limits, dissolving the certainties of both mortality and identity.

Jewel, the leader of the tribe, vividly exemplifies the characteristics of the living-impaired. At the second Barbarian raid, Marianne finds him “as good as dead” loitering in the garage. On several occasions, he is depicted as a “spectre” and an “angel of death” (19). Upon his return to the village, with Marianne as his booty, he is welcomed by the Barbarians with apprehension, thinking he has returned from the dead. Having ensured he is not a zombie, first by noting the footprints he leaves on the ground and confirming that his female cousin suffers no harm from the kiss, the tribe tentatively acknowledges his corporeal presence (32). Even Jewel believes in his resurrection from the dead and affirms: “It’s not every day you rise from the dead” (33). On several occasions,

his wife Marianne notices the vacant look in his hollow, corpse-like eyes, eyes “entirely blasted of life and parred to the appalling integrity of bare bone” (105). In one particular passage, she has to taste his blood to make sure its human blood (135).

Later in the novel, partially buried or evocatively improperly buried in the sand and unnervingly motionless, Marianne compares Jewel to a picture of the dead made by Ancient Egyptians who used to paint the dead with “their eyes open so they could see the way to the next world” (141). Similarly, he is depicted as a “dead pile of rags, bone and hair” when Marianne comes back from the river and finds him motionless on his face (117). This moment highlights the fragility of the boundary between the living and the undead, emphasising Jewel’s position within a liminal space where human and posthuman, life and spectrality, intersect and unsettle conventional perceptions of embodiment. Marianne summarises this idea by stating that Jewel and the rest of the Barbarians are “a perfect illustration of the breakdown of social interaction and the death of social systems” (24). Ultimately, social relationships are no longer confined to human-to-human interactions but trans-corporeally extend to connections between human and beast, as well as animate and inanimate. In this way, Carter pointedly draws attention to the porous boundaries through which embodiment is experienced and highlights how identity and agency exist in a posthuman, in-between space.

Here, the living-impaired motif functions not merely symbolically but as a corporeal reality, a liminal state made tangible through Donally’s claim to his mastery of necromantic practices. In fact, Jewel’s mentor and the shaman of the tribe offers to teach Marianne necromancy. He thinks that he is able to raise the dead and consequently believes in the existence of the living impaired (94). He also believes in cannibalism, a feature reminiscent of the living impaired in modern zombie films. In one instance, he asks Jewel to “swallow up” and “incorporate” Marianne by marrying her (56). The latter thought that Jewel is going to: “kill me, cut me up, fry me and distribute me in ritual gobbets to the tribe” on her

wedding ceremony (76). The human body, in *Heroes and Villains*, is presented as food to be consumed. Through Marianne's attempt to "drink down" Jewel (119) and the latter's accusation that Donally may have eaten his father (125), the text evokes an underlying logic of cannibalism — one that blurs distinctions between self and other, desire and destruction, and reflects Carter's posthuman fascination with bodies that ingest and transform one another.

Indeed, Carter's novel lends itself to being read through a posthuman corporeal feminist framework concerned with the destruction of binaries between self and other. The cannibal body deconstructs the boundaries between savagery and civilisation, between beastliness and humanity. It is a liminal body and should not be read as an act of transgression or destruction, but of relational interdependence. The theories of Rosi Braidotti provide an appropriate frame for discussing cannibalism in the novel since cannibalism dramatises not only relational ontology and entanglement, but also material porosity; that is, corporeal continuity and fusion with the Other. Reading cannibalism as a positive intercorporeal representation of posthumanist aesthetics places the author's views within a different conceptual frame. In *Heroes and Villains*, cannibalism and the living impaired converge in an emancipating posthumanist vision that is concentrated on ontological interconnectedness.

CONCLUSION

In *Heroes and Villains*, monstrous bodies intersect with human bodies; life and death continually overlap, blurring distinctions between decay and regeneration. By juxtaposing characters with the spectral figures of the zombie ghosts and the cannibal living impaired, Carter sheds light on the permeability of corporeal boundaries and, as a consequence, debunks the anthropocentric fantasy of bodily integrity. The author's posthumanist inclinations ultimately serve to underscore her conviction that decay is not an

end in itself, but a process of transformation. In this sense, the novel's zombified and cannibalistic bodies refuse the reader's search for wholeness and enact a radical ontology of interdependence — one that understands consumption as communion rather than destruction. Ultimately, Carter invites the reader to see embodiment as a radically open, profoundly shared, and endlessly unfolding way of being, urging us to reconsider the human not as an isolated, sovereign self but as part of a living, breathing continuum of growth, decay, and renewal.

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