

**Reconceptualizing the Past: Exploring the Material Realities in
Angela Carter's *Black Venus***

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Literature at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Fall 2013

By *Chelsea Zappel*

Thesis Director
Deborah James

Thesis Advisor
Lorena Russell

British author and journalist Angela Carter published her second collection of short stories, *Black Venus*, in 1985. In this text, Carter reconceptualizes and, thus, deconstructs popular historical figures and events. For the author, received history too easily becomes myth and as she writes in her essay *Notes From the Front Line*, “myths are extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree” (38). In *Black Venus*, Carter challenges these myths by focusing on the material realities of unlikely, or rather, previously absent or largely controversial, “characters.” Two stories, “Black Venus” and “The Fall River Axe Murders” best demonstrate Carter’s ability to retell the past in new and provocative ways. By focusing on the lived experiences and material realities of Jeanne Duval, in “Black Venus,” and Lizzie Borden, in “The Fall River Axe Murders,” Carter’s revisions raise important issues concerned with gender, class, race, and colonization in the late nineteenth century. In my analysis of Carter, I draw from my own readings as well as from literary scholars, to inspire a deeper understanding of how history and the stories we learn affect our broader vision as well as our individual and cultural identities.

Carter affirms her position as a materialist feminist in her essay, *Notes from the Front Line*. Here, the author explains “that *this* world is all that there is and in order to question the nature of reality one must move from a strongly grounded base in what constitutes material reality” (38). Carter argues that only after people acknowledge and understand the material realities of themselves and others, will they be able to “question,” and perhaps change, their circumstances or reality. Editors Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham provide a detailed analysis of materialist feminism in their 1997 book, *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women’s Rights*. They inform readers that the term materialist feminist only came into circulation in the 1970s and was influenced by Marxism and feminism, as well as the many different subdivisions of both. Materialist feminists most prominent connection lies with

historical materialism—a term coined by Marx that stresses material development as the main indicator of how a society is organized (4). Considered “emancipatory knowledge” by many feminists, “historical materialism takes as its starting point real living individuals and what they need in order to produce their means of subsistence, that is, in order to survive” (4). Materialist feminists often cite capitalism and what they see as its counterpart, patriarchy, as the primary reasons why women have been consistently oppressed. By focusing on the material realities, materialist feminists hope to call attention to the lived experiences of women and, thus, highlight precisely how women have been marginalized and devalued throughout history. By “refus[ing] to separate the materiality of meaning, identity, the body, state, or nation from the requisite division of labor that undergirds the scramble for profits in capitalism’s global system,” materialist feminists ask readers to use these connections to create social change (1). A materialist feminist reading of Carter invites readers to consider not only Duval and Borden’s economic status but also their every day lives—from the clothes they work to the weather outside. By doing this, Carter asks readers to further consider these women as real women, not merely players in another’s story.

Materialist feminism also draws from postmodern and psychoanalytic theories of meaning and subjectivity (Hennessy 7). This is significant because in “Black Venus” and “The Fall River Axe Murders” Carter calls attention to familiar historical stories by completely distorting them; therefore, emphasizing the idea that history and meaning are subjective rather than objective realities. Derek Attridge’s theories regarding *how* one should read a postmodern text are helpful to consider on such occasions when readers are presented with new realities by an author. In his article, “Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other,” Attridge argues that for one to read “responsibly,” they must acknowledge and accept the “unexpected

reshapings of the familiar” (25). This is significant because he asks readers to abandon their own understandings of history, even morality, and give writers the chance to expand or “reshape” their understandings. I argue that this is precisely what Carter asks of readers in her revisions of Duval and Borden.

Notions derived from literary theorist Linda Hutcheon provides further insight for readers focusing on postmodern texts. Hutcheon has produced some of the most influential work regarding postmodern literature and the idea that history is neither objective or fixed—work that has greatly expanded the discussion surrounding *Black Venus*. Her two most prominent texts are titled *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) and *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989). In her *Politics*, Hutcheon asserts that postmodernism generally “takes the form of a self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement” (1). This consequently makes postmodern representation fundamentally self-reflexive and paradoxical. Hutcheon continues by stating that one characteristic form of the postmodern novel tends to highlight the paradox between history and fiction. Described by Hutcheon as “historiographic metafiction,” these novels tend to be *metafictional* in the sense that they are self-conscious or self-reflexive of their status as a novel. They also are *historiographic* because they highlight a sense of history as written, and therefore interpreted. According to Hutcheon, such novels invite readers to reconsider how we distinguish “fact” from “fiction.”

It is interesting to note that history has not always been perceived as objective. In her 2002 work on historical metafiction in British literature, Christina Knotte presents readers with a helpful analysis of historiography. Knotte elucidates that it was not until the end of the eighteenth century and the rise of Romanticism that history was ever conceived of as anything but another branch of literature. “The writing of history was conceived of as a literary,

specifically rhetorical exercise” and was “assessed as much in terms of literary finesse and elegance as factual accuracy” (Knotte 7). She continues when she describes literature in the second half of the nineteenth century:

The writing of history ceased to be considered an art [and instead came] to be considered as an objectively fixed, ordered totality, that could, with some effort, be fully grasped by the historian. The writing of history ostensibly mirrored past actuality accurately and authentically since the historian was seen to assume a standpoint that was regarded as truly neutral (10).

However, with the rise of postmodernism, the writer is no longer disinterested or objective; in fact, the writer almost always has a political agenda. Carter affirms this of herself in her essay, *Notes From the Front Line*, “To try to say something simple—do I ‘situate myself politically as a writer’? Well, yes; of course” (37). While I disagree with Knotte’s criticisms regarding Hutcheon’s work, her analysis provides helpful insights into historiography and the way we interpret the stories we learn.

Both “Black Venus” and “The Fall River Axe Murders” female protagonists share a similar history of being misrepresented by artists and scholars. Lizzie Borden, the subject of Carter’s “The Fall River Axe Murders” as well as the story “Lizzie’s Tiger,” found in Carter’s third collection of short fiction, *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders*, was about an American woman believed to have brutally murdered her parents with an axe in Fall River, Massachusetts in 1892. She was, however, not convicted of the crimes. Borden’s story has been retold an incredible amount of times. These include “two operas, a ballet, numerous novels, eight plays, a film, a television show, two short stories, four poems, various popular songs, and of course, the children’s nursery rhyme” (Schofield 95). Critic Ann Schofield makes an interesting

point in her essay, “Lizzie Borden Took an Axe: History, Feminism and American Culture,” stating that in all of these depictions, “Lizzie’s guilt or innocence is not at issue”—she is always the confirmed killer (92). What is an issue, however, is Borden’s sanity, motives, and gender. The point Carter seems to make is that throughout these representations, Borden has become somewhat of a fictionalized character; a figure that no longer has control or authority over her own story. What, then, makes Carter’s retelling different?

In part, what makes Carter’s revision different is how she highlights the constructed nature of character in her fictionalized retellings. Carter uses much the same technique in her portrait of Jeanne Duval in “Black Venus.” Born in Haiti, Duval, as well as working as a prostitute, was the longtime mistress of the French poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire. Their affair lasted an impressive twenty-five years. Duval is thought to have been the subject, or muse, of Baudelaire’s 1857 collection of poetry, *Les Fleurs du mal* or *The Flowers of Evil*, sometimes referred to as his “Black Venus cycle.” Besides Baudelaire’s pejorative illustrations of Duval transcribed in this collection, Duval is traditionally portrayed by artists and scholars under racist and colonialist assumptions (Matus 134). Jill Matus, author of “Blonde, Black and Hottentot Venus: Context and Critique in Angela Carter’s ‘Black Venus,’” states that “biographers of Baudelaire who write about Jeanne Duval concede her beauty, but in such a way as to suggest that she is an aesthetic object rather than a beautiful woman” (138). Matus cites one such biographer who wrote:

[Duval] had that enigmatic stylized black beauty which combines line and patina to produce an aesthetic effect, like a work of art in bronze or dark stone...but she was a common slut, totally uncultivated and extremely stupid; and like most whores she lied with a deliberate compulsive mendacity which is close to paranoia (138).

This harsh description seems anything but academic and extremely prejudiced. Sadly, however, most accounts of Duval are transcribed in similar ways, thus, yielding a very one-sided representation of her. But again, the question arises, how does Carter's representation present a new, and perhaps a more revealing, depiction of Duval?

Carter's title further aligns Duval with the African woman Saartjie Baartman, who, at the age of twenty-one, was "exhibited" across Europe during the later nineteenth century "not as an incidental freak in a cheap circus, but as a type—the essence of woman's low position of the evolutionary ladder and the irrefutable evidence of her bestial and degenerate associations" (Matus 136). Like Duval, Baartman's body and sexuality was characterized as "primitive and other, black and degenerate" (Matus 137). Even after her death, Baartman's image has been scrutinized and desecrated in various artistic and "scholarly" forms. Perhaps the most demeaning example provides itself in the writings of the French scientist and researcher, George Cuvier. After examining Baartman's cadaver, he wrote a paper that "drew attention to the similarity of woman and ape and noted the distortions and anomalies of her 'organ of generation,' or her reproductive organs (Matus 136). Considering these historical implications, Matus argues that "what informs and underscores Carter's story is a network of associations from nineteenth-century comparative anthropology, physiology and anatomy, as well as from art and literature, in which blackness, primitive sexuality, prostitution and disease are closely linked" (134-5). Almost unanimously, with the exception of critic Victoria Tillotson, scholars who analyze Carter's "Black Venus" agree that her revisionist tale presents one of the most successful attempts to "give Duval [and Baartman] the voice denied her by history and the history denied her by the voices that have sought to represent her" (Tonkin 303).

There are, perhaps, other more personal reasons that Carter chose to rewrite the story of Duval and by extension, Charles Baudelaire. In an interview with Anne Smith, Carter explains her fascination with Baudelaire's 1857 collection, "The 'Black Venus' poems are incredibly beautiful and also terribly offensive" (Tonkin 305). Many critics, such as Christina Britzolakis, Linda Hutcheon, Jill Matus, and Rebecca Munford, cite the writer's own attraction to the poet and more generally, to the style of French Decadence and Symbolism in their discussions about "Black Venus." "Black Venus," along with "The Fall River Axe Murders," is "saturated with sensuous detail" and illustrates femininity "in its most fetishized and spectacular forms" (Britzolakis 463). Decadence, a style that prized physical appearance and refined language, is found in both "Black Venus" and "The Fall River Axe Murders." Rebecca Munford argues in her article, "Re-presenting Charles Baudelaire/Re-presenting Jeanne Duval: Transformations of the Muse in Angela Carter's 'Black Venus'," that Carter both emulates and subverts Baudelaire's artistic style not only in 'Black Venus' but throughout her entire body of writing:

a commingling of emulation and subversion of Charles Baudelaire as a precursor of late-nineteenth century French decadence is figured throughout her work—from her early characterizations of the dandified Honeybuzzard in *Shadow Dance* (1966) and Joseph in *Several Perceptions* (1968) to the female prostitutes and performers in her later works, particularly Lilith in *The Passion of the New Eve*, Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus*, the Chance Sisters in *Wise Children* (1991) and, of course, Duval in 'Black Venus' (1-2).

Carter emulates Baudelaire's refined and elegant language as well as his physical subject matter through her "sensuous" illustrations of Duval and Borden's bodily forms while simultaneously subverting the poet's style by focusing on areas of "femininity" that have either been largely/intentionally ignored or considered "abject" or grotesque. Hutcheon goes into more depth

concerning these notions in the final chapter of her text *Politics of Postmodernism*, titled “Postmodernism and Feminisms.” In this chapter, Hutcheon explores the notion that postmodern feminist thought is inherently linked to discussions surrounding the (female) body and sexuality—especially regarding the artistic representations of each. Hutcheon suggests that in “Black Venus,” Carter “consistently contrasts the language of Baudelairean decadent male eroticism with the stark social reality of Jeanne Duval’s position as a colonial, a black, and a kept woman” in order to highlight and parody how she has been traditionally depicted (141). The same could be said of Carter’s depiction of Lizzie Borden.

Such “stark” and bodily realities can be demonstrated in the emphasis placed upon Borden’s menstrual cycle in “The Fall River Axe Murders.” For instance, on the morning of her parent’s murders, Carter details the particulars of Borden’s attire—ending her vivid illustrations by informing readers of the “heavy linen napkin” that was placed between Borden’s legs on account of her menses (301). During this “difficult time of the month,” Borden wears a “certain haggard, glazed look” upon her face and has trouble sleeping at night—and “this last, stifling night has been troubled, too, by vague nausea and the gripes of her female pain; her room is harsh with the metallic smell of menstrual blood” (310).

Undoubtedly, Carter goes against convention by including such graphic material realities. According to Stephanie Miller, who wrote “Intersection Axes: Narrative and Culture in Versions of the Lizzie Borden Story (A Performative Approach),” Lizzie was in fact, on her period at the time of the murders. Apart from one question from the prosecution inquiring about the origin of a spot of blood on one of Borden’s skirts (to which Borden blamed on “flea bites” rather than “broach the embarrassing subject of menstruation”), the details relating to Borden’s period were largely avoided at the trial (204). This sense of refined propriety extending to the prosecution’s

lack of scrutiny when it came to the questionable pail of bloody rags that was found in the cellar on the evening of the murders. Miller suggests that rather than delving deeper into the “embarrassing” topic of menstruation, and perhaps finding evidence of conviction, the blood found on Borden’s skirt (as well as the pail of bloody rags) was blindly accepted as her own and not her parents’ at the trial. In this way, the jury glossed over a potentially life-changing detail of Borden’s case.

But in Carter’s revisionist tale, Borden’s period makes numerous appearances. Unlike the jury in the trial, Carter’s repetition demands the reader’s engagement with the body and all of its messiness. This functions in the text by creating a realistic portrayal of Borden before the murders of her parents and also, by calling attention to such a graphic material reality, readers are lead to wonder why such a fundamental aspect of femininity is largely ignored and/or considered grotesque by most audiences.

Whereas the above quote details a specific bodily experience, Carter goes on to detail a number of other material realities that Borden suffered. In her thirties, Lizzie Borden and her older sister Emma, are described by an omniscient narrator as still living at home with their father Andrew Borden and their stepmother, Abby Borden. Due to their status as older, unmarried, unemployed, however, wealthy, women, the sister’s lives are described as tedious and unsatisfying. Day after day the sisters “[stay] at home in their rooms, [nap] on their beds or [repair] ripped hems or [sew] loose buttons more securely or [write] letters or [contemplate] acts of charity among the deserving poor or [stare] vacantly into space” (304). The narrator continues by stating, “I can’t imagine what else they might do”—rhetorically causing readers to consider a plethora of other possibilities (304). Because this has been the reality of the sister’s existence, they have “[remained] in a fictive, protracted childhood,” unable to expand or grow

economically, socially, or sexually (304). Borden does not even have a choice of the clothes *her* body will wear. She is illustrated as constantly suffering under layers upon layers of heavy frocks, petticoats, drawers, stockings, a chemise and of course, a corset. Borden is expected to wear this garb despite the “dementing” August heat, for the people of Fall River “think it so virtuous to be uncomfortable” (300-1).

The heat serves as another vividly described material reality in Carter’s story. It is so hot that the “inhabitants have never come to terms with [the] hot, humid summers” and during “summers like these,” “the weather clings like a low fever you cannot shake off,” making the townspeople “intolerable” and “[slowing] everything down” (300). This lethargic and stifling environment makes Borden’s dull life even more miserable. The heat, which Miller confirms was a record high on August 4th 1892, and the clothes Borden is expected to wear, are literally suffocating in their oppression (203). Such illustrations not only accurately convey Borden’s New England environment but because they are so meticulously described, readers are able to realistically imagine how that environment must have felt.

While Borden is an upper class, Victorian woman, her life is anything but luxurious. The Borden’s home is described as a prison and its inhabitants as “inmates” (304). As the head of the house, Mr. Borden owns all the women who live in it either by “marriage, birth, or contract” (307). The house “is full of locked doors that open only into other rooms with other locked doors, for, upstairs and downstairs, all the rooms lead in and out of one another like a maze in a bad dream” (304). There is no community room; it “is a house of privacies sealed as close as if they had been sealed with wax” (304). This notion of secrecy and isolation presents itself in another illustration. The speaker states that Mr. Borden has his own dressing room, “through that door, on the left...” (304). This elusive passage leaves readers wondering what Carter is *not*

disclosing. While Carter does a magnificent job recreating the life and anxieties of Lizzie Borden, the things she leaves elusive (such as what is behind Old Borden's dressing room, why every door in the house stays locked or why there is no community room) are perhaps just as important. Reflective of its historiographic metafictional genre, Carter acknowledges that she cannot know the *entire* story and, thus, recognizes herself as a creative author, not an objective biographer. Regardless, Carter accurately portrays the oppressive atmosphere of Victorian culture. In her exploration of "The Fall River Axe Murders," Anne Schofield confirms this notion by stating, "Lizzie...is a prisoner of Victorian values, of Victorian material culture and of a particular Victorian patriarch, her father" (95).

Considering that Borden must have been perceived by her peers as mild, good-hearted, and "passionless" woman (Schofield notes that she "played this role to the hilt every day of the trial"), it is fathomable that the jury truly believed her innocence; despite the overwhelming evidence against her (99). Schofield summarizes these notions in stating, "In a strangely ironic way the constraints of her role as a nineteenth-century lady may have pushed Lizzie Borden to her crime but that same role saved her from the gallows" (99). In her article "Lizzie Borden Took an Axe: History, Feminism and American Culture," Schofield informs readers that a jury of twelve middle-aged, middle-class gentlemen returned within an hour after the trial with a verdict of not guilty. She claims that this was because the jury was "unable to envision the possibility that if Lizzie Borden could commit parricide might not their own wives and daughters be capable of the same act?" (99). And, furthermore, the murders of Andrew and Abby Borden were, "as one can tell from the description of the bodies, a crime of great passion, and *ladies* in Fall River in 1892 were known to be 'passionless'" (99). Carter addresses Borden's "role as a lady" in her revisions by focusing on the material realities of her home, dress, and daily obligations. By doing

this, Carter asks readers to consider the lived experience, not just the received story, of Borden's life as a Victorian woman and this, thereby, enables readers to consider and possibly even absolve, Borden's actions.

The work of philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler may help to explain why Borden's body did and simultaneously did not matter to her peers. In her 1993 book *Bodies That Matter*, Butler delineates her notions of "abject bodies." She defines these as "all kinds of bodies whose lives are not considered to be 'lives' and whose materiality is understood not to 'matter'" (Meijer 281). In an interview conducted in 1998, Butler acknowledges the paradoxical nature of bodies that exist but simultaneously do not "matter." She notes that they "are contradictory on purpose: pronounced as performative formulas, they are meant to *enforce* or *invoke* this 'impossible' existence" (276). This paradoxical explanation, or "existence," further reflects Hutcheon's notions concerning historiographic metafiction and it could be argued that both Borden and Duval represent "abject bodies" that did not matter before Carter's rewriting of them.

In "Black Venus," Duval's body is described in unconventional ways that cause her to possess an "abject" body, or one that traditionally would not "matter." Most apparently, Duval is a prostitute. Already, this shows Carter's irregular subject matter—prostitutes, and Duval in particular, are rarely the tellers of their stories. This subject/object reversal is another way Carter both emulates and subverts Baudelaire's poetry. As Christina Britzolakis states in her article "Angela Carter's Fetishism," Carter's stylistic mimicry "turns Baudelaire into décor"—he has become the object as authored by Duval and it is she who makes a "muse" out of him (463).

Jill Matus provides the historical context necessary to understand how prostitutes, and specifically black prostitutes, were viewed the nineteenth century Europe. Associated with

“disease” and “corruption,” these women were thought to differ “physiologically from ordinary women” (Matus 136). They were also considered to be sexually primitive (Matus 136).

Construed by artists and historians in this way, Duval and Baartman have become ideal symbols of abjection. But besides what Duval *does* with her body, Carter subverts notions of beauty and calls attentions to Duval’s materiality in other ways, such as in her descriptions of Duval’s physical stature. The speaker of “Black Venus” describes Duval as a woman “of immense height, the type of those beautiful giantesses who, a hundred years later, would grace the stages of the Crazy Horse or the Casino de Paris in sequin cache-sexe and tinsel pasties, divinely tall, the color and texture of suede” (233). By presenting Duval as larger than life, Carter contests the traditional views of beauty. Duval, as a black prostitute, was not considered beautiful or virtuous by anyone, before or after her death, and, therefore, she did not matter. Through Carter’s description, however, Duval’s presence is “beautiful” and her body demands attention. Although Butler is reluctant to provide concrete examples of what could be considered an abject body, she does state that such bodies “[live] within discourse as the radically uninterrogated and as the shadowy contentless figure for something that is not yet made real” (281). Never before have readers been able to “interrogate” Duval or Borden on their own terms. This has caused them to appear as “fictive” or unreal people but it is through Carter’s illustrations that these women are presented as real characters participating in their lives.

Other material and perhaps, grotesque, images of Duval of transcribed throughout “Black Venus.” For example, the speaker narrates a story of a time when Duval, along with Baudelaire and a group of Bohemians, “urinated in the street” (241). Duval did not “announce it” to anyone or “go off into an alley to do it on her own, she did not even leave go of his arm but straddled the gutter, legs apart and pissed as if it was the most natural thing in the world” (241). This scene

exemplifies the material and often, unacknowledged, qualities of reality. This is one of the few occasions that we are privy to Baudelaire's thoughts—the speaker states that it was as if now Duval “walked beside him like an ambulant fetish, savage, obscene, terrifying” (241). Baudelaire is clearly horrified at the public display of bodily functions that Duval has performed. “Duval's act of public urination strips away the veil of culture from Woman and exposes the leaking, grotesque female body” (Tonkin 319). Such an “unruly” body causes Baudelaire to wear “pink kid gloves that fitted as tenderly close as the rubber gloves that gynecologists will wear” (241). Maggie Tonkin, author of “Musing on Baudelaire” states:

“[the] image of the gloves conjures up the related binarisms of purity/defilement, intimacy/detachment, and proximity/distance that underpin the power differential between physician and patient. The metaphor produces an image of Woman opened up, available to the investigations of the male gaze and the probing male finger, which will subsequently inform the poetry” (319).

By including Baudelaire's “pink gloves,” Carter asks readers to consider how male scholars have traditionally depicted Duval and consider how her own revisions transforms that understanding.

Critic Lorena Russell develops the notion of abject or grotesque bodies further in her article “Dog-Women and She-Devils: The Queering Field of Monstrous Women.” Russell maintains that it is through Carter's illustrations of “troubled materiality” that the author is “able to demythologize the over-determined category of ‘Woman’” (180). She explains that by characterizing Duval as “grotesque, fragmented, and excessive,” Carter places her within the sphere of “troubled materiality” (180). By illustrating Duval and even Borden as such, Carter takes them out of the social scripts that history and myth have placed upon the title “Woman,” and allows readers to see them in a new light. In this way, Duval is no longer the fictionalized

dark mistress of Baudelaire, she is a real woman whose body and actions do not always perform in ways that conform to societies expectations.

In the same essay in which Carter identifies herself as a materialist feminist, *Notes from the Frontline*, the author also affirms that she is “in the demythologizing business” (38). “All myths,” according to Carter, “are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice” (38). Because most “myths” are authored by men who more often than not, have their own agendas, their writing only reflects one version of another’s material, lived, reality. This is why Carter emphasizes the need for “women to write fiction *as* women” (42). By doing this, the author believes that the “slow process of decolonializing our language and our basic habits of thought” will begin (42). Carter’s goal of reshaping our language by focusing on the material realities and lived experiences of others is fundamental in understanding the author’s narrative techniques found in both “Black Venus” and “The Fall River Axe Murders.” In proposing that Carter does write from a materialist feminist perspective, Russell notes that the author also utilizes a poststructuralist materialist stance, “one like Butler’s, implicitly questions divisions of language and the material” (179). Citing Butler’s *Bodies That Matter*, Russell quotes:

“Language and materiality are fully embedded in each other, chiasmic in their interdependency, but never fully collapsed into one another, i.e., reduced to one another, and yet neither fully ever exceeds the other. Always already implicated in each other, always already exceeding one another, language and materiality are never fully identical nor fully different” (69).

This paradoxical description highlights how in “Black Venus” and “The Fall River Axe Murders” Carter uses language that emphasizes feminine materiality in order to denaturalize

familiar notions about ‘Woman.’ In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter addresses this issue specifically by stating, that “myths” were “invented” to “[obscure] the real conditions of life” and that “all the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsenses” (5). Thus, is it up to the “re-writer” to change how we, and future persons, perceive the world.

Carter’s work as a “demythologizer” owes much to the writings of Roland Barthes. In his book titled, *Mythologies*, Barthes states his purpose, “I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there” (11). Here, Barthes acknowledges the “hidden” functions of myths that Carter also warns against. Barthes calls myths “a system of communication” or a “language,” that reinforces whatever ideology is useful for the dominant power or group at the time of its creation (11). Whatever dominant power in place disguises their “lie” as a natural or fixed phenomenon in order to persuade others of its authority. “The very principle of myth,” Barthes affirms, is that it “transforms history into nature” (129). As has been demonstrated through the received histories of Duval, Baartman, and Borden, the histories we learn are often misleading, if not blatantly incorrect.

Although critic Margaret Atwood is primarily concerned with Carter’s first collection of stories, *The Bloody Chamber*, her article “Running with the Tigers,” provides further insight into the author as a “demythologizing” and feminist force. The conclusions Atwood draws about Carter’s intentions as a rewriter of fairy tales can easily be understood in respect to the author’s depictions of Duval and Borden. Atwood argues that “in order to escapes victimization,” Carter’s female characters must, “divest themselves of the trappings of conventional womanhood; they have to *denature* themselves” (119). This means that “Woman” must get back to who they are,

what they value, and separate themselves from who society says they should be. Atwood continues by stating, “It is Carter’s contention that a certain amount of tigerishness,” or rather, taking on a more of predatory/aggressive role, “may be necessary if women are to achieve an independent as opposed to a dependent existence; if they are to avoid—at the extreme end of passivity—becoming meat” (121). Such “tigerishness” is demonstrated in Carter’s depictions of both Duval and Borden.

After Baudelaire’s death, Duval finally discovers “how much she was worth” (243). Duval does not digress back into her old profession; rather, she becomes the mistress of her own brothel. Duval saves the money the poet gave her before his death, and along with the “sale of a manuscript or two...some books...cuff-links and drawerful upon drawerful of pink kid gloves,” Duval purchases a ticket to sail back to Martinique, just “like a respectable widow” (243). And while Duval may physically appear a bit battered, the narrator informs readers that she can buy new teeth and new hair if she pleases and that Duval “[walks] perfectly well” with the aid of her ivory cane (243). “Seeing [Duval], now, in her declining years, every morning in decent black, leaning a little on her stick but stately as only one who has snatched herself from the lion’s mouth can be” (243). “Black Venus” does not conclude with Duval as a victim. She has had her hardships undoubtedly, but readers see Duval moving on to what seems to be a more promising future in Carter’s revision.

Borden, more overtly, also takes on the role of the “tiger” or aggressor. Never does Carter suggest that someone other than Lizzie Borden murdered Andrew and Abby Borden in her retelling. The speaker leaves little room for contention on this question by providing definite statements such as, “On this morning, when, after breakfast and the performance of a few household duties, Lizzie Borden will murder her parents” (300). Such assertions confirm Borden

as the killer, or rather as the “tiger” or aggressor in this situation. Critic Aji Muller-Wood takes this notion further in her article “Disconcerting Mirrors: Angela Carter’s Lizzie Borden Stories.” She proposes that while Carter clearly portrays Borden to be the murderess in the story, the writer also depicts Borden as a master manipulator. Muller-Wood maintains that Carter presents readers with the “logic of madness” as the reason behind Borden’s actions (as exemplified in the scenes in which Borden wakes from a stupor, unaware of how or why she is where she is), but in a way that proposes that Borden is playing this role in order to escape conviction, rather than being truly “mad” (286). For some, the “logic of madness” may prove a more appealing reason for the murders of the Borden parents rather than pure hatred or as a means of escape. The fact that Carter presents this option, while arguably dismissing it, forces readers to consider the author’s intention. Atwood proposes that in order “to combat traditional myths about the nature of woman,” Carter “constructs other, more subversive ones” (122). In “The Fall River Axe Murders,” Borden is in charge of her own actions, which is perhaps more frightening than if she were mad.

As previously stated, most critics agree that because of Carter’s revisions, Borden, Duval and Baartman, have a better attempt at being heard and understood. This depiction would be lacking, however, if we were not to mention the criticisms of Victoria Tillotson, who is among the few critics who find fault with Carter’s depictions of particularly, Jeanne Duval. Like Butler, Carter, and Russell, Tillotson draws from a material feminist perspective—hers, however, is grounded in economics and labor value.

In her article titled, “A Materialist Feminist Reading of Jeanne Duval: Prostitution and Sexual Imperialism from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present Day,” Tillotson analyzes Jeanne Duval as well as the various artistic depictions of her. Tillotson is, perhaps, most critical

of Carter's illustration of Duval in "Black Venus." She argues that Carter not only "perpetuates the circumscription of Baudelaire's relations with Duval within a colonial or eroticist fantasy" but she also suggests that Carter's story is lacking "crucial economic parameters" (299). While I disagree with both of these assertions, it is important to note that some critics have taken a more suspicious view of Carter's revisions.

By utilizing a materialist feminist lenses, "Black Venus" and "The Fall River Axe Murders," provide a vastly different reading than those of the past. Carter's focus on the lived experiences of Jeanne Duval and Lizzie Borden (and, perhaps, by extension, Saartjie Baartman), allows readers a more embodied, and thus, realistic, depiction of their lives. "She opens an old story of us, like an egg and finds the new story, the now-story we want to hear, within" (Rushdie xiv). These new understandings provide readers with a broader perspective of the larger implications of colonialism, racism and sexism, in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century as well as a critical look at the histories we have been told. In her revisions, Carter illustrates that these women were more than a contemptible sex-worker or a murderer; they are, as Carter reminds readers through her carefully drawn characterizations, first and foremost human beings.

List of Works Cited

- Attridge, Derek. "Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other." *PMLA*. 114. 1 (1999): 20-31. *JSTOR*. Web. 7 October 2013.
- Atwood, Margret. "Running with Tigers". *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*. Ed. Lorna Sage. London: Virago, 1994. 117-136. Print.
- Barthes, Roland, and Annette Lavers. *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. Print.
- Britzolakis, Christina. "Angela Carter's Fetishism." *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. 9.3 (1995): 459-475. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 7 Oct. 2013.
- Carter, Angela. *Burning Your Boats: The Collected Short Stories*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1995. Print.
- , "Notes from the Front Line". *Shaking a Leg: Collected Writings*. Ed. Jennifer S. Uglow. New York: Penguin, 1997. 36- 43. Print.
- , *The Sadeian Woman: And the Ideology of Pornography*. New York: Pantheon, 1978. Print.
- Hennessy, Rosemary, and Chrys Ingraham. Introduction: Reclaiming Anitcapitalist Feminism. *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women's Lives*. New York: Routledge, 1997. 1-17. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1989. Print.
- Knotte, Christina. "Ethical dimensions in British Historiographic Metafiction: Julian Barnes, Graham Swift, Penelope Lively." Trier: WVT, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2001. Print.
- Matus, Jill. "Blonde, Black and Hottentot Venus: Context and Critique in Angela Carter's 'Black Venus'." *Critical Essays on Angela Carter*. Ed. Lindsey Tucker. New York: G.K. Hall, 1998. 134-142. Print.

- Meijer, Irene Costera and Baukje Prins. "How Bodies Come to Matter: An Interview with Judith Butler." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. 23.2 (1998): 275-286. *JSTOR*. Web. 6 October 2013.
- Miller, Stephanie. "Intersection Axes: Narrative and Culture in Versions of the Lizzie Borden Story (A Performative Approach)". *White Rose eThesis Online*. (2010): 192-211. Web 12 October 2013.
- Muller-Wood, Anja. "Disconcerting Mirrors: Angela Carter's Lizzie Borden Stories." *Literature Interpretation Theory* 15 (2004): 277-297. *ILLiad*. Web. 20 September 2013.
- Munford, Rebecca. "Re-presenting Charles Baudelaire/Re-presenting Jeanne Duval: Transformations of the Muse in Angela Carters' 'Black Venus'." *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 40.1 (2004): 1-13. *Oxford Journals*. Web 28 September 2013.
- Rushdie, Salman. Introduction. *Burning Your Boats: The Collected Short Stories*. London: Vintage, 1995. ix-3. Print.
- Russell, Lorena. "Dog-Women and She-Devils." *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*. 5.2 (2000): 177-193. *ILLiad*. Web 22 September 2013.
- Schofield, Ann. "Lizzie Borden Took an Axe: History, Feminism and American Culture." *American Studies* 34.1 (1993): 91-103. *JSTOR*. Web 23 September 2013.
- Tillotson, Victoria. "A Materialist Feminist Reading of Jeanne Duval: Prostitution and Sexual Imperialism from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present Day." *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women's Lives*. Ed. Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham. New York: Routledge,

Tonkin, Maggie. "Musing on Baudelaire: Angela Carter's 'Black Venus' and the Poet as Dead Beloved". *Literature Interpretation Theory* 17 (2006): 301-323. *ILLiad*. Web. 20 August 2013.