Psychogeography in the curiosity cabinet: Angela Carter's poetics of space

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Topophilia as a narrative engine

Aᴺɢᴇʟᴀ Cᴀʀᴛᴇʀ'ꜱ ꜰɪᴄᴛɪᴏɴ ɪꜱ distinguished by a carnivalesque topography's liminal settings. Uncle Philip's run-down Magic Toyshop serves as a backdrop to young Melanie's psychosexual maturation; peep show worlds and illusory realities generated by Doctor Hoffman's desire machines are visited throughout Desiderio's picaresque journeys; Colonel Kearney's travelling circus takes on a Trans-Siberian Express tour its birdwoman aerialist falling for a journalist-turned-clown; the vaudeville theatre stages the burlesque performances of the Chance twin sisters; and in the labyrinthine enchanted woods the wolfish Red Riding Hood can meet the tender wolf. These loci all match the borderline conditions and the ahistorical temporal dislocations of Carter's grotesque, metamorphic characters, as well as her (mock) 'magical mannerist' (Haffenden, 1985: 79) style resisting generic categorizations. As Salman Rushdie noted, besides a fable-world turned topsy-turvy in her own iconoclast fashion, Carter's 'other country is the fairground, the world of the gimcrack showman, the hypnotist, the trickster, the puppeteer' (Rushdie, 1995: xi), spaces artistically reimagined on the margins of neatly ordered sites of bourgeois living.

Carter aimed at a daring disruption of demarcating lines: a multilayered transgression of physical corporeal frames, of existential, phenomenological and psychic states, of culturally prescribed social positionalities, as well as of ready-made identity scripts' and the discursive conventions of canonized literary modes. This agenda is encapsulated in her witty *ars poetica*, particularly the spatial subversion implied in her demythologizing project's intent 'to put new wine in

old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode' (Carter, 1983: 71).

This *bon mot* highlights how Carterian spaces metanarratively reflect upon creative authorship and textual productivity along the lines of a feminist psychogeographical poetics of spatiality. This chapter scrutinizes the individual affective charge fictive locations hold for the woman writer who composes herself into being within sites of her own mak(e-believ)ing. It starts out from a brief overview of geographical interpretations of Carter's fictional places which associate her trademark challenging of generic conventions and gender roles with spatial explorations which surface both on a thematic and stylistic level of her work. It proceeds with arguing that Carter's decentralization project resonates with the poststructuralist notion of an 'open text' that allows readers to meander in a labyrinthine narrative while tackling the ultimate metafictional dilemma: 'Where do stories come from?' After a brief analysis of the affective investment of spatial imagery on Carter's short fiction, a close reading of 'The Scarlet House' shows how the narrator protagonist's mental mapping of her traumatic past becomes a survival strategy when the stake of maintaining her sense of space is the preservation of her sense of self.

Critical approaches to Carter's demythologization of conventional cartography

Carter's dissatisfaction with conventional cartographical representations takes various forms. She renegotiates boundaries of otherness in search of 'elsewheres' which could fall beyond 'forced mappings' by prevailing ideological technologies, disciplinary regimes or established modes of knowledge formation; and she reconsiders spatiality in terms of the inhabitants' psychic, and imaginative interactions with their own locatedness. In Carter's writing, locatedness seems transitional and kaleidoscopic, no matter how permanent, because of the dynamics of the interpretive agency oscillating between uncertainty and epiphany while calling that specific location into consciousness, and hence into existence. Spaces' reality status is rendered dubious by a strategic destabilization of socio-culturally set signifying systems meant to make sense of the world surrounding us. A select catalogue of some paradigmatic geographical readings of Carter's fictional spaces can illustrate the multidimensionality of the issue.

Susannah Clapp's unconventional biography *A Card from Angela Carter* (2012) reinforced the portrait of the artist as an empathic wanderer and gifted travel writer with a unique feel of capturing the atmosphere of a place; by suggesting that the picture postcards Carter sent to her literary executor Clapp formed 'a paper trail' through her life (Clapp, 2012: 10). The words and images of the cities she visited – inventive, improvised sketches of local colour instead of panoramic tableaux or touristic clichés – mapped their friendship, illustrated her intent to share sightseeing impressions as bases of affective bonds, and documented the 'great swoops'[1] of her artistic imagination.

Carter's trademark generic subversion can easily be interpreted along the lines of rebellious bordercrossing and geographical exploration. From a feminist standpoint, Gina Wisker's essay tellingly entitled 'Behind locked doors' examines Carter's horror writing, to unveil how her language, imagery and topography revive E.A. Poe's major leitmotifs. Wondrously nightmarish Gothic settings, spatial symbols of the Unconscious (cracking mirrors, collapsing mansions, haunted forests), terrible consequences of domestic incarceration by male tyrants, and claustrophobic entrapment within cultural clichés of femininity result in the heroine's aggressive or farcical attempts to flee from the confinement of 'his' romantic fantasies and perverse wet dreams illegitimately suppressing her sexuality and power. Relying on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, Wisker explains the political stakes of the literary gambit concerned with exposing the boundaries, rejections and repressions of Western patriarchal-based horror. Refusing borderlines (clear-cut distinctions between inside and outside) entails recognizing the abject Other as part of ourselves and fulfilling an egalitarian mission by overcoming 'the need to find victims, scapegoats, and enemies' (2006: 193).

Sarah Gamble celebrates 'domestic deconstruction' as a major feminist leitmotif of Carter's oeuvre. In her view, 'a series of rewritings of narratives of homeliness and domesticity' simultaneously voice and disavow a nostalgia for a home traditionally conceived as a feminized cultural sphere. Carterian homes are no longer solitary, confined, private spaces. They are refashioned into 'open-ended, multitudinous, and polyphonous' territories, matching the 'inner landscapes' of increasingly empowered, self-reflective female inhabitants and their reinvented families – as in Ma Nelson's brothel and the solidarious sisterly community poking fun at the debilitating myth of the Angel

in the House. (Gamble, 2006: 279) In Gamble's complex reading, 'home' for Carter is both a place of an intimate encounter with an idealized maternal past, and also a point of origin from where daughters rebelliously break away to find paths of their own making. It is an object of fruitless, absurd nostalgia and from a pragmatic perspective, a 'mundane necessity' (295) of our enworlded embodiment, too.

Carter's woman-centred literary agenda was keen on exploring the voices of women inhabiting heterotopias – utterly neglected by Michel Foucault's original definition of ambiguous, non-totalizable, 'disordered' sites enigmatically falling beyond normative socio-political spheres and incongruous with conventional topographical assumptions (Foucault, 1984: 46). As Eliza Claudia Filimon demonstrates, the lived spatial experience of Carterian heroines transforms 'othered' places into empowering loci by evading patriarchal marginalization of feminized modes of being. Sites of resistance build on counter-discourses of feminist identities mapped in terms of 'empowering reciprocity, politics of boundaries, situatedness, and multivocality' (Filimon, 2014: 24). Heterotopian zones – 'inner depths of outer places' (38), scenes of dynamic performance, storytelling and places to reach towards alterity – can be tracked in Carter's catacombs, castles, prisons, deserts, forests and mazes in a rich fictional corpus organized by the leitmotif of 'worlds in collision', in Filimon's wording (10).

A corporeal narratological analysis provides adequate methodological tools for a literary land-survey that can map the body in/of the text to discover metamorphic corporealities as a major structuring device of Carter's self-decomposing narratives toying with readerly destabilization. As I have argued elsewhere (Kérchy, 2008), in *The Passion of New Eve* the fetishised fragments of surgically sex-changed, transgender Eve/lyn's dismembered body parts (the devouring *vagina dentata*, the sterile womb, the wounded breast, the crying eyes, and the regurgitating mouth) can be interpreted as emblematic stations of the hero/ine's picaresque journey during his/her passion of 'becoming (monstrous) woman' (22). This topography of pain not only maps out a ruthless parody of patriarchal myths of femininity, but also stages the forcibly feminized subject's cultural dis-ease. The pathological indices of the anxieties related to engendering, the psychosomatic symptoms of female body dysmorphia – a misconceived image of the self, resulting in body modifications – infect the novel's language via mutually abortive-castrating, antagonistically engendered, contradictory narra-

tive voices of a male impersonator, an ironic feminist, a post-operative transsexual and a bulimic patient. Using a kinetic, spatial metaphor for the act of writing, New Eve pushes herself forward in a rock cavity 'pressed as between pages of a gigantic book […] composed of silence: […] emphatically closed' (Carter, 1977: 180). This scene enacts metafictionally Carter's moving away from a 'ventriloquist' re-enactment of masculine discourse towards a free-flowing, 'cohesively fragmentary' self-reflective feminist voice of her own making (Peach, 1998: 111).

Besides her curious domestic settings, urban territories also hold exciting pychogeographical implications for Carter. Simon Goulding tracks her description of City as a site of dislocation and reorientation. He argues that Carter recycles the classic trope of the displaced orphan with subtexts of cultural, social and sexual misplacement, so as to challenge canonized cartographies and cultural hegemony from the paradoxical position of a social realist fantasist. Her fictionalizations of the 1960s metropolitan landscapes already appeared in *Shadow Dance* and crystallized in *The Magic Toyshop*, which guides to less fashionable districts, 'the streets that did not appear on the maps of smart London' and constituted a counterpart to the stylish 'swinging' image by housing those who were 'not party to the "party"'. Hence urban space is circumscribed as an unmappable collection of marginalized, apparently insignificant smaller sites where the 'characters interact, develop, and simply live out their lives' while bringing into being the city at the intersection of individual, local spots and larger cognitive spaces (Goulding, 2012: 188).

Be it in imaginary public or private spheres, Carter definitely displays a penchant for conjuring 'affective space' in Henri Lefebvre's sense of the term: 'locations saturated with symbolic connotations, mnemonic vestiges and oneiric residues, and hence resonating with multiple levels of imagery – a fluid, dynamic, and concrete dimension' determined by the body's lived experience of emotionally charged social practices (Lefebvre, 1991: 42 in Cavallaro, 2011: 38). Her examples include a foster child's experience of her new family's home as a 'place replete with other people's unknown lives' (Carter, 1971: 59), or a pedestrian's feel of the metropolis as a malleable microcosm, a 'medium in which we execute our desires' shaped by hypnotically enthralling delusions engulfing the city (Carter 1972: 42). Dani Cavallaro agrees with critics like Vallorani (1998) and Dimovitz

(2016) that the unsettling of the Carterian space as a measurable ter-
ritory stages both the undoing of socially disciplined, homogenized
subjectivity and the postmodernist disruption of linear narrative. It
enables a spatial fusion of presences and absences, self and other,
inside and outside, retrospective nostalgia and futuristic planning,
poeticity and unspeakability. Carter's liminal sites gain their enchant-
ing quality on grounds of individual and collective psychological
investment. They become 'portals to an exploration of those special
points where perfectly ordinary situations somehow make us sense
the power of fantasy as a shadowing of reality by inscrutable forces:
energies that may be occasionally glimpsed but never conclusively
measured' (Cavallaro, 2011: 6).

The playable space of the open text and the psychogeographer reader

Carter's fictional places – be they associated with heterotopias, affec-
tive spaces, or any abjectified Outside constitutive of the normal-
ized Inside – are characterized by tactics of transgression such as the
destabilization of boundaries, the preference for haphazard openings,
clandestine passageways, sidetracks and detours to official main
entrances or obligatory paths. Her conscious project of decentraliza-
tion relativizes fixed focal points to embrace multi-directionality and
pluri-perspectivism in the name of ethical responsibility.

One cannot help noticing the similarity between the Carterian
topography and poststructuralist literary criticism's notion of the
open 'writerly text'. A 'narrative space' endowed with a 'plural-
ity of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages'
allows for an endless proliferation of meanings generated by a blissful
co-productivity of readers who are constantly challenged in their 'his-
torical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of tastes,
values, memories, [and their] relation with language'. The text never
ceases to self-reflectively acknowledge its own artifice, to defamil-
iarize its discourse, and to offer new exits and entries towards an
indefinite corpus of other texts with which it is intertextually related
(Barthes, 1977: 5).

As many critics – among them Benson (2008), Bacchilega (1999)
and Tiffin (2009) – convincingly argued, Carter's fiction lends itself to
be interpreted as a postmodernist 'open text' dense with pop and elite

cultural references, a rich web of intertextual allusions pointing in an impressive variety of directions (from Hollywood cinema to Sadeian philosophy, surrealist aesthetics, or the semiotics of fashion). Merging different fictional universes, it plays with crossover couplings of iconic figures (like an unlikely match between Wolf Alice and a descendant of Dracula). Characters move and metamorphose between different texts of the authorial corpus (most memorably in her sequence of wolf tales). Endings are ambiguous (resonating with innuendos like Fevvers' spiralling tornado of laughter). Unreliable narrators revel in the double-entendres of their oral performances or showy self-fictionalizations (Dora and Nora's self-stylizing cosmetic beautification matches the making-up of their seducing memoire). Carter's writing style is distinguished by 'a preference for cyclical rhythms and recurring patterns, loops, detours, digressions and veritable flights of fancy' (Cavallaro, 2011: 2). Her work '"writes its way" across the gap that has conventionally divided inside and outside, the public and the private spheres' (Gamble, 2006: 278). These multiple paths of poetic associativity opened up by metaphorical imagery and transverbal musicality correspond to the idea of literary text as a playground of polysemic meanings, as elaborated by critics such as Stanley Fish or Wolfgang Iser (Joosen, 2011: 104).

This textual structure is a literary equivalent of a contemporary design trend of urban planning, the Playable City that toys with temporary architectural experiments to interrupt the the metropolitan environment's cold anonymity, utilitarian efficiency, and void of meaning, by aiming at 'an affectionate re-appropriation of public places' and a collective ludic interaction with our spatial surrounding reinvested with new narratives' (Baggini, 2014). Descriptions of encounters with playable spaces are easily applicable to the experience of an open text. It may offer us new ways of tracing how the implied readers of Carterian fictional worlds turn 'feminist psychogeographer' flâneuses who explore 'a new way of walking [or meaning formation] that changes our city [or fictional] experience, a whole toy box full of playful, inventive strategies for exploring cities [or texts] … just about anything that takes pedestrians [or readers] off their predictable paths and jolts them into a new awareness of the urban [or literary] landscape' (Bucher and Finka, 2008: 37).

As a woman(writer) Carter acknowledges, besides the pleasures of trespassing the confines of the domestic sphere and 'hunting for the

vaguest traces of a storytelling opportunity' (Cavallaro, 2011: 73), the dangers and responsibilities that the exploration of an endlessly open space holds for the solitary female adventurer willing to get lost in the labyrinthine environs. For her, wanderlust is always combined with home-seeking. Instead of uncritically celebrating the endless possibilities of multiple pathways leading to the same spot experienced in a variety of different ways, her heroines testify – in line with Donna Haraway's feminist epistemology – the significance of a limited locatedness' partial perspectives which can yield 'knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organised by axes of domination' (Haraway, 1988: 583). Permeated by sisterly solidarity, these situated knowledges can be connected, shared to gain a politically self-conscious, ethically invested, more nuanced view of the world. Although the Carterian fiction urges readerly interaction, it also problematises the postmodernist notion of the 'death of the author' (Barthes, 1977: 142) by foregrounding the celebration of the birth of women writers who come into being in texts of their own making which metanarratively reflect upon limits and potentials of their own creative space. I contend that Carter embarks on a strategic mapping of the affective, sensorial, psychological components of both spatial and narrative experience driven by the writer's ultimate enquiry about the origin of stories.

Carter's curious rooms

The topophiliac tendency implied in Carter's fiction traces the affective bonds and environmental interaction between people and places. The emphasis falls on how the curiosity about our surroundings and positionality inspires literary creativity that associates its very own artistic medium, the game space of language with a simultaneously claustrophobic and liberating locatedness. Built environment, and especially the carefully confined space of the house, is particularly challenging to map because it both determines and reflects our consciousness and conduct. In Gaston Bachelard's words, 'the house images are in us as much as we are in them', they trace the topography of our intimate being, and allow for an analysis of the human soul (Bachelard, 1994: xxxvii). In Carter's case, the house is tied to the inner space of the author's mind and an emerging artistic self-awareness coupled with an inquisitiveness concerning sources of narratives.

Spatial imagery is of crucial importance in Carter's non-fiction writing in texts like 'The Mother Lode' or 'My Father's House', where she attempts to gather puzzle pieces of her autobiographical self and family history by tracing what she calls, with a Japanese phrase, 'landscapes of the heart'. This poetic figure of speech refers to 'the Romantic correlation between inside and outside that converts physical geography into part of the apparatus of the sensibility' (Carter, 1998a: 18). Aware of her family's penchant for mythologization and the inaccessible foreignness of past places, she dis/locates home as a 'moveable feast', always already fictionalized, a sequence of sites where the heart is. Her psychogeographical poetics is summed up in the lines 'You don't choose your own landscapes. They chose you' (Carter, 1998a: 19).

In 'The Bloody Chamber' the castle's library serves as the place of epiphany for the bookish narrator heroine, who recognizes her place within the story in which she has become engaged by wedding a Bluebeardish nobleman. The husband's murderous desires permeate both the eponymous secret chambers and the pages of his decadent pornographic book collection she leafs through to mature from passive reader entrapped by a myth into an author of her own destiny aided by a pragmatic maternal revolver on her way to freedom. Martine Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère locates the key to the text in the shifting meaning of the word 'cabinet'. Cabinet denotes just as much the storeroom of treasures where the dandy connoisseur kills his wives into art objects, the ogre's larder replete with fairy-tale lore, the theatre stage of perverted delights fuelled by fin-de-siècle misogyny, and a closet filled with skeletons, which encourage readers to develop an inquisitive mind, while 'rehabilitating female curiosity as a moral function through allusion and intertextual density' (2013: 110).

'The Snow Pavilion' emerges as a fatally feminized space that takes revenge on a womanizer poet. The amateur artist, about to reluctantly return to the claustrophobic love-nest of his older mistress, is caught in a snow storm, and seeks refuge in an old mansion that he believes to have been designed for the indulgence of the flesh. He sexualizes the pavilion as a penetrable feminine space he intends to (ab)use for love-less seduction: he maps it with a poetic imagery, 'a vista like visible Debussy' (Carter, 1997: 431), and associates it with voluptuous caresses of cultured patronesses' pale naked arms. Although the male fantasist plays hide-and-seek with an invisible female entity, which can

be attributed to an erotic foreplay, eventually he must realize that he has been ensnared into the pavilion's game-space by a ghastly girl-child and/or an old crone – one not yet and the other no more a woman. Both elude his stereotypical view of femininity and eventually turn him into a doll, covering him with snow. The whiteness of a blank sheet of paper replaces his writing with stories of her silence, telling more than he could ever do.

In 'Alice in Prague *or* the Curious Room', Wonderland is compressed into the titular room, Emperor Rudolph II's late sixteenth-century Curiosity Cabinet. An alchemical homunculus girl child emerges from the crystal ball of court magician Doctor Dee, famed for his quest for the prelapsarian Adamic language, an unmediated means of truly naming reality, lost with the Babelian confusion of tongues. Carter's introduction describes the room as an 'ur-museum [of memories], a manifestation of an omnivorous curiosity, a gluttony for the world, but also a potent image of the unconscious […] the underworld in which language develops a life of its own' (Carter, 1990: 217). Alice's language games, logical conundrums and mathematical puzzles not only make a mechanical clockwork doll disintegrate into its organic constituents but also stupefy the learned men of the Renaissance, left speechless by her nonsensical reasoning and unanswerable questions. This enigmatically empowered *femme-enfant* storyteller, native of an elsewhere, is headed 'back through the mirror to "time will be", or, even better, to the book from which she had sprung' (Carter, 1997: 408).

This miraculous Alice perfectly fits the eccentric Archduke's collection of curiosities compiled of mandrakes dressed in nightgowns, bottled mermaids, and crystallized angels. Each item manifests the ambiguous meanings nascent from the epistemological crises stimulating the revolutionary cultural movements – mannerism, surrealism, postmodernism – at the root of the short story. The cabinet's chaotic contents represent how the bundle of hypotexts (Lewis Carroll's *Alice* tales, Jan Švankmajer's film *Alice*, *The Surrealist Manifesto*, Dr Dee's and Rudolph II's biographies) bear witness to Carter's perception of 'artistic creation as a true pleasure of confluence rather than an anxiety of influence' (Thomas, 2009: 35). The *Kunstkammer* stores a stuffed dodo, a fallen star and a mechanically anthropomorphized automaton-woman made of fruit: each an embodied intertextual homage – to Lewis Carroll nicknamed for his stutter Dodo-dodgson, to mannerist

John Donne's paradoxical love song about infidelity 'Catch a Falling Star', and to Rudolph's court painter Arcimboldo's fruit composition portraits, respectively; not to mention the numerous allusions to surrealism's emblematic items, including a realization of Lautrémont's beauty ideal of 'the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on the dissecting table'. The intertextual play with former artistic works and historical epistemes elicits an experience of *déjà lu*, whereby the multitude of source texts are all regarded (*déjà vu*) as the surrealists' found object composites defamiliarized from their banal use and reprocessed into artistic carriers of metaphorical meanings. This 'alchemy of the word' is defined in spatial terms as 'quotation, the strategy of a sensibility that sees reality slipping away along obscure and tortuous paths' (Carter, 1990: 217) exploring 'shimmering vistas of perhaps yet undiscovered worlds' and words (Frankova, 1999: 131). For Carter, the curious room hides the ultimate question of origins she finds at the kernel of any quest for knowledge: 'In the beginning was … what?' 'Where was I before I was born?' (1997: 401). The room crammed with customized wonders, now forbidden and impossible to remember, in retrospect a utopian place of blissful omniscience forever lost, gains a psychoanalytical significance, representing the maternal womb as much as the creative unconscious. The question of origins 'Where do babies come from?', a topic of kindergarten mischief and existential philosophy alike, is intimately connected to an erotic interest in the textual body constituting a literary theoretical dilemma condensed in the metafictional question about the origins of a story, 'Where do books come from?' and a general enquiry about how social meanings and discursively constituted subjects come into being.

The poetics of the Scarlet House: from unhomely hole of oblivion to self-made sanctuary of stories

'The Scarlet House' is the secret hideout of a sadistic Count obsessed with the chaos he cherishes in its crystallised form in the 'entropic rhetoric of the scream' provoked in his torture chambers (Carter, 1997: 419). He keeps captive young women to perform an occult experiment directed by the chance movement of Tarot cards throughout which prisoners are systematically deprived of their communicational capacities, their memories, identities and eventually their lives. The anonymous female narrator, one of his captives, struggles to keep

her sanity, humanity and autonomy by clinging on to memory morsels of her long-lost home. She tries to recapitulate the true story of her origins, and write herself into freedom, into a place of well-being beyond the Scarlet Room designed to be the site of her annihilation.

Despite its suffocating, claustrophobic atmosphere, extradiegetically speaking, the short story invites readers to an open narrative space in so far as the Count ruling over the Scarlet House is intertextually affiliated with many Carterian master villains distinguished by a 'psychic vampirism' (Botelho, 2015: 296) feeding on female victims' bodies and minds emptied of agency. The Count is the evil twin-brother of the anarchist, misogynist poet Zero, who allows mutilated members of his harem to speak only animals grunts, cackles and cries. Another such villain is Christian Rosencreutz, who yearns to sacrifice a winged 'virgo intacta' in order to procure his immortality. Similarly, Doctor Hoffman, who usurps feminized mirages, a glass-woman and a beautiful somnambulists to expand spatial and temporal dimensions and infect the world with simulacra; plus another Count of the same novel is a libertine dedicated to debauchery, self-deprivation and evil.

Like any of the archetypal Bluebeard figures of which Carter was so fond, the Count of the Scarlet House is also strongly connected to the space he dwells in: the ghastly castle, the dark dungeon, the torture chamber. A perverted incarnation of the original genius loci, he functions as an emblem and a 'protective guardian' of a site of gruesome terror and trauma. His pathologically twisted psyche seems to emanate to grant the very ominous spirit of a labyrinthine, unmappable place from which there is no escape. The underground cellar is, of course, a commonplace used by psychoanalysis's spatial modelling of the human mind to represent the unconscious hosting those 'lowly' instinctive, animalistic urges, sexual and aggressive impulses which are meant to be kept hidden by our socialization but which come to light throughout fictionalizations of that bestial otherness lurking deep within ourselves. The Scarlet House is the home of the Count, madness personified as the uncanny double of rational thought.

However, what makes the story truly captivating is not the predictably unpredictable architecture of the Count's demented psyche but the meandering thoughts and imaginative mental mappings of the protagonist, who struggles against her captor's confusion of her sensations and memories. She tries to locate herself in this 'house' – in

the literal prison, as well as in his demented fantasies, and her own nightmares – willing to find her way out of it, back to what she has been before descending underground into forgetfulness. Through the focalizer's perspective, the Scarlet House emerges as a patchwork of fleeting impressions. First, its white concrete walls recall a hospital or a large terminal ward, then it is described as a 'rambling, brick-built, red-tiled place, half farmhouse, half country mansion' (421). It evokes mundane institutionalized spaces like an all-girls boarding school along with locales of social deviance and corruption, like an odd combination of brothel and freak-show (featuring in *Nights at the Circus* governed by the same Madame Schreck and her mouthless manservant who appear in the short story too), as well as supernatural sites like a haunted house, the lair of a Gothic monster, an earthly Hell burying people alive.

The narrator's assumption that the entry to the Scarlet House leads through the hole of Madame Schreck, the master-mistress of cer-emonies, reflects an atavistic fear of and fascination with the idea of returning to the maternal uterus, constituting the ultimate kernel, the primordial point of origin that equally protects from the outside and entraps within. Magna Mater, mother earth, the womb-tomb is frequently associated in Carterian fiction with houses that symbolize mothers but remain within the property of patriarchal reality, and hence become an arena of fundamentally ambiguous meanings, as Lorna Sage suggests (Sage, 2007: 25). The Scarlet House is a maternal space in so far as the narrator heroine can only survive her tortures provided she can 'birth' (or rather resurrect) herself into being via a narrative reconstruction of her authentic identity the Count aims to shatter. By means of an antidote to the unhomeliness of the Scarlet House bombarding her with amnesia, inducing false-memories, she seeks shelter in her real home she strives to rebuild from memory frag-ments throughout a creative bricolage of her mnemonic imagination. Aware of the unreliability of her own point-of-view, she also considers the Scarlet House as a product of her own phantasmatic agency – hence an odd empowerment at the heart of complete annihilation. The anatomical catachresis describing the 'subterranean torture-chamber deep at the heart of the maze of my brain' (423) evokes the physical stakes of re-membering. What is an abstract experiment, a stylistic exercise, a cartomantic Tarot game for the Count, a 'Morpholytic Kid who presides over the death of forms' (421) holds fleshly stakes for the

narrator for whom it is a matter of life and death to imagine herself into being in the right place.

   She desperately tries to reconstruct the moment of her abduction that sealed her fate, as if that adequately captured freeze-frame could reverse time, undo the torture and heal the trauma tormenting her in the Scarlet House. 'If only I could remember everything perfectly, just as it happened, then loaded with the ambivalent burden of my past, I should be free' she says (424). However, all she has are *versions* of reality, with equal un/likelihood of belonging to a possible past, a pseudo-memory artificially implanted in her mind, or a replica of a pain experienced in reality by a fellow sufferer. In one version, she was collecting samples of desolate flora amidst some ruins, and while absorbed in the sight of a hawk plummeting down to capture his prey, was trapped by a leather-clad gang of bikers, the Count's bodyguards. In the second version, she arrived voluntarily on the board of a train, timid but determined to fill a job vacancy advertised in the personal column of *The Times* looking for a governess. According to the third scenario, she was dragged away from the safe shelter of her own home, an afternoon tea enjoyed in the company of her beloved father in a neatly decorated bourgeois sitting-room before he was shot dead and she was raped and kidnapped. Yet these memory-versions all seem suspicious, illusory, fictional, spoilt with an 'inky, overwritten smell' (421). The first stages a post-apocalyptic urban fantasy, the second 'echoes books I might have read', like a nineteenth-century novelette authored by one of the Brontë sisters, while the third 'recapitulates a Middle-European nightmare, an episode from Prague or Vienna seen in a movie, perhaps, or told me by a complete stranger' (424).

   These (pseudo)memories share a remarkably spatial quality. They serve to liberate the heroine from the sterile, arid 'wasteland' of the Scarlet House by locating her amidst deserted ruins, on a crowded train, in a stylish parlour. Each place is endowed with private mean-ings and affective charge because of belonging to a possible past of hers, alternately emerging as a feral-child-like nomad, a Brontëan orphan or a favourite daughter, all identifiable with someone she might have been. She decides to settle with the third memory, the mental image of the bourgeois home, where she can most easily build an imaginative shelter for the self she wants to defend from complete disidentification, from being in a void, and becoming an empty 'void itself' (426). The bourgeois salon represents a clean

and well regulated social-space that stands in sharp contrast with the anarchic, taboo-breaking, filthy violence of the Scarlet House and hence becomes ultimately desirable in retrospect. Its sophisti-cated interior design is rich in subtle sense impression – the scent of carefully arranged potpourri, slices of lemon on a china plate, and geraniums on the balcony, soft summer light flowing through the slatted blinds, birds cheeping audible from the streets, the tactile and visual delights of the slippery horsehair sofa with a paisley shawl thrown over its piles of soft cushions embroidered with flowers and butterflies. These contradict the anti-aesthetics of pain permeating her present dwelling, the Scarlet House. The meticulous description of the decor's details serve to support the veracity of this vision. In this fading memory of home, silence results from cosy intimacy instead of dehumanizing degradation by unspeakable torture. '[E]verything is loved because it is familiar' (422), all the objects of this long-lost homely microcosm constitute extensions of the inhabit-ants' personality, in a place customized to perfectly fit her, multi-sensually satisfying to match her taste, unlike the 'sensory deprivation unit', the 'hole of oblivion' she crawls in now, alternately suffering from its tightness and vastness, claustrophobic and agoraphobic alike.

The narrator's spatial fantasies about this room echo Gaston Bachelard's insights about the image of the house that emblematizes in the collective cultural unconscious the dream of protected intimacy. They especially resonate with the metaphysical concept of home as an integrating power for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind, as a site where one's shattered self can be ordered into a coherent subjectivity. In Sarah Gamble's Bachelardian reading, this is a space that can provide 'a second skin' (Gamble, 2006: 277) for wounded egos like that of the narrator. In *The Poetics of Space* (1994), Bachelard's topoanalytical study of humans' experience of intimate places poses the problem of the 'poetics of the house', arguing that the house is the first universe of any child growing up in a home, the first cosmos that shapes all subsequent knowledge of other spaces, of any larger cosmos. The house is a nest for dreaming, a shelter for imagining. It provides the atavistic consolation of a cave, its secret rooms become abodes for an unforgettable past, so influential that we measure all inhabited spaces in terms of their homeliness or unhomeliness. We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection, daydreaming of former dwelling places which allowed us to daydream in peace, in

the cradle-like maternal environment of places we chose to call our home.

In the Carterian heroine's hallucinatory reminiscence, the primary comfort zone is associated with an all-embracing 'fleshly' maternal presence, metonymically marked by the eyes of a portrait 'watching over' the parlour. The deceased mother, even in her absence, becomes a ghastly benevolent counterpart of the Scarlet House's evil earthly matriarch, Madame Schreck. For the narrator, the image of the mother's eyes acts as a mnemonic device to recall the room, the locus of origins, and one's authentic self-identity attested by the line 'I have my mother's eyes!' that she keeps endlessly repeating despite punishments from the Count irritated by this relentless commemoration of her affiliation with a matrilinear heritage, and the notion of a traceable past. Via a marvellous spatial metaphor, the mnemonics which assist her in identifying her ego, are compared to odds and ends refugees carry with them, and refuse to leave behind, 'although they're quite insignificant – a spoon with a bent handle, say; or a tram ticket issued by a city that no longer exists. Small items, meaningless in themselves, and yet keys to an entire system of meanings, if only I could remember' (426). In the complex system of mnemonics, a triad of mental images – a hunting hawk, the mother's eyes, and a mouthless face – undergo curious metamorphosis. The preying hawk, first believed to have been seen during her capture amongst the ruins, gradually transforms into a figure of the bird pattern decorating the Persian rug on which she was raped, and eventually gets reinterpreted as the iconic marker of her abduction, as well as a metaphor of her own hunt for words trying to express the inexpressible, fighting forgetfulness, using 'memory [as] the lasso with which capture the past' (419). The watchful maternal gaze she recognizes in her own look represents on the level of iconicity the metanarrative act of 'looking at another looking'. It evokes a relational model of identity defining the self in terms of its interpersonal and communal ties serving as grounds for an empathic solidarity – already emerging in the entanglement of her own and other women's memories 'precipitated into a fugue' (419) resonating the Scarlet House. But it also refers to the possibility of mothering oneself amidst the harshest circumstances by nurturing the idea of a home of one's liking, where one can find refuge via the creative art of storytelling.

The story culminates in the narrator's epiphanic recognition: the puppet can turn against the puppeteer. The rules of the game can be twisted from the inside and turned against themselves. Despite her victimized status she can reach empowerment simply by reinterpreting memory – her only weapon against annihilation by amnesia – as a 'self-spun web' feeding from her own inner core, independent of outside control. Memory is defined again in terms of spatial metaphors, identified as the 'origin of narrative', a 'barrier against oblivion', a 'repository of one's being', and a reservoir of stories where 'delicate filaments of myself I weave, in time into a spider's web to catch as much world in it as I can' (419). The universe is accessible through one's own microcosm mappable by self-narratives embracing forgetfulness, misremembering, and fictionalization within recollections of who one is.

The last lines are both ominous and optimistic: 'I know all that I need to know to enable me to endure […] This world's a vile oubliette. Yet in its refuse I will find the key to free me' (428). The Scarlet House becomes a dark topographical emblem of existence. The world is pictured as a secret dungeon consigned to oblivion and decay, abandoned by providence. But beyond its ceiling trapdoor, by means of a vague ray of hope shimmering above, reality awaits to be released in words. The detritus of words down-below promises to grant a fragile shelter from forgetfulness and an infinite platform for liberation, too.

'The Scarlet House' encapsulates the essence of Carter's spatial poetics and politics. The fictional explorations of space allow the intradiegetic narrator heroine to escape the abuse and objectification patriarchally assigned to her gender role. Her imaginative re-mappings of a traumatic past facilitate her maturation into a creative storyteller who can invent a narrative space where victims of inequality can coexist together in a space that acknowledges the embodied experience of their pains, affects and voices.

Note

1 Quoted from the inside cover of Susanna Clapp, *A Card from Angela Carter* (London: Bloombsbury, 2012).

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