

## THE SEARCH FOR AGENCY IN THE FICTION OF JANETTE TURNER HOSPITAL

*Sue Lovell - Griffith University*

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Much of Janette Turner Hospital's work relates to the processes by which a concept of the self fluctuates and reforms according to an individual's experience of the social. She is concerned, not only with the way in which people tell the many stories of their lives, but with the ways in which these stories are constructed and represented, by the self and by others, in often conflicting ways. It is this very specific tension in her work which lends itself so well to a feminist reading which suggests that the capacity to self narrativise, to tell one's own story because of a discontent with the narratives of others, is central to the conceptualisation of agency.

There are, of course, any number of suggestions about what constitutes agency but I want to limit this paper to an exploration of Joan Hartman's suggestion that agency is linked to the act of personal narration:

As we make our narratives our own, we apprehend ourselves as agents: we become conscious of ourselves as makers of our lives as well as makers of narratives about our lives (Hartman 1991:12).<sup>1</sup>

According to Hartman, then, it is not through the telling of stories alone that agency is defined. It includes a capacity to be 'makers' of our own lives. In this respect, agency relates to power, not to simply tell but to do, not to simply define but to enact definitions, not to simply desire but to acquire and not only to acquire but to do so without denying positions of difference, the rights of others to enact their own plots in their own ways. Little wonder, given this cocktail of power, desire, negotiation and recognition that Hartman goes on to say that 'the stories women knowers tell are almost uniformly emplotted in narratives of thwarted agency' (13).

What I want to do in this paper is think about agency in feminist texts and in doing that acquire a clearer idea of what a feminist text may be as well as what agency itself involves in the context of feminism. I will do this by selecting several characters across various texts to discover the ways in which they self represent, that is the way in which they exercise agency as Hartman defines it. Where this agency is 'thwarted' I shall be asking why this is so.

I want to begin with the character Charade, in the novel of similar name, because it most clearly makes a connection between the telling of stories and self creation<sup>2</sup>. Charade maps out different scenarios, challenging acknowledged histories and unearthing others to remodel the multiplicity of the past into potential answers to the riddle of a lost father and a consequently lost self. She makes a conscious distinction, however, between her living and her stories. The stories are clearly linguistic constructions with which she attempts to define the uncertainty

created by the interplay of memory, myth and History. They are told experimentally, given form and structure, offered up to Koenig for analysis. Like webs, they are spun and respun in the hope of capturing some morsel of flickering and multiple truths, some indicator to guide her in a search for her origins and identity. She is the creator of these stories and her capacity to be constructed through them makes it clear that we are, to a certain extent, what we tell ourselves we are. Nevertheless, there is a pervading sense that this is not enough — that our stories must somehow connect with the more official History in which we are embedded — a history dependent not on personal memory and experience but on positioning in relation to cultural representations. For this it seems, she must find her father, for in her relation to him, she suspects, lies the secret of her self.

The point which is relevant to this paper, is not how she does this and what she discovers, but the way in which she tells stories in order to claim a self. If, however, we recall Hartman's notion of agency as the capacity to do as well as to tell, clearly Charade has been caught up in the telling of the stories almost to the exclusion of living any of them. Telling has become her doing and what is most 'telling' about her telling is the way in which she has assumed that, as a daughter, she acquires identity only through the father and, by extension, through the discourses which embody the law of the father<sup>3</sup>.

So what is it that a character in feminist fiction, might possibly be 'doing' in order to further develop that aspect of Hartman's notion of agency? One answer is that a character might be seen to be 'doing' gender to a far greater degree, with a higher level of awareness, than Charade. This is precisely what happens in *The Last Magician* which, via Lucy's narration, vigorously explores representation and enables us to see how gender comes to have a strategic meaning for the character. By strategic I mean that the character Lucy, is able to claim gender as a conscious terrain of her own because of her awareness of gender as a representation of sexual difference. She is able, therefore, to manipulate it and use it, to effectively perform an essentialised representation of gender as though it alone is the only self<sup>4</sup>. In so doing, she draws attention to the multiplicity of the subject. This is aptly demonstrated in chapter three where Charlie and Lucy first meet in their roles as photographer and prostitute.

Despite the presence of the camera, with all its implications, courtesy of Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, of the powerful phallus, the relationship of photographer and his subject is not one of domination and submission. Although he has his camera and Lucy knows that without it 'he seems different...he is naked' (Turner Hospital, 1992:32), she is unafraid of it. It cannot touch her despite the fact that it has the potential to be an instrument by which he can silence her into a very specific representation of Woman. What it calls forth from her, however, is a performance. The standard fetishised images of feet in high heels, of fishnet stockings and buttocks are caught by his camera but the verbal interchange makes it quite clear that there is a boundary between this representation and Lucy. A gendered role, a costume and a flexible name go together to create a specific representation which is not all that Lucy is, yet gives her a freedom she enjoys because she is

capable, unlike others in the text, of manipulating that representation, creating a boundary between it and other aspects of her self (29)<sup>5</sup>.

This boundary is explored throughout the scene as the camera, whilst capturing her performance also seeks to get behind it. The power of the camera is feminist rather than phallic. The camera is not an instrument by which representations are merely created or consolidated but is instead a means of questioning any singular representation so that the narrative works to undermine phallic authority. Charlie is very specific about this as he collapses the terms fallacy and phallic in such a way that the power of the imagined photograph to represent is undercut at the very second of its conception:

He sees flesh hooks branching out of her; like rainforest vines, he sees empty coats, fitted around the shapes of ghostly men, swimming like exotic fish through wet green air toward the hook. He considers lighting and shutter speeds. He calls these things photofallacies; or sometimes, singular (and his sense of the absurd is certainly singular), a photophallus (32/3).

This ambivalence creates a space for questioning the singularity of the phallic representation and introduces the notion of multiple fallacies and it is this which alters the role of photography so that it opens up rather than closes down the potentiality of representation. In this way, Charlie's claim that Lucy has a voice and that 'what she says makes a difference to the pictures'(25) creates a space for her story through his representations. Photography is not simply functioning as Susan Sontag may suggest, to help Charlie define Lucy by taking 'possession of a space in which (he is) insecure' (Sontag 1977:9) but to reveal things which neither of them know they know. He is not interested in perpetuating the status quo but in understanding how it is constructed, how it is based on the suppression of the invisible. He is preoccupied with how the underworld or the quarry supports the walled gardens of the respectable. What he seeks to unravel through his own 'doing', through his performance as photographer, is the way representations fall away. He describes his work as 'photographic decompositions' or the 'declensions of an image' (52) so that what is taken as essence, or evidence by the police later in the novel, is in fact only another representation.

Just as Charlie uses photography to open up spaces and sites for subjectivity through the multiplicity of photographic representation, so the narrative deploys the several selves of the narrating 'I' to push home the fact that the self as a unified subject is also only a singular (phallic) representation based on fallacies. 'I myself' the narrator mocks "What a riddle that is. Where, in the grab bag of costumes and masks does the self hide out?' (56). Amongst the many lived personas, that is all materially reading real books, fucking real men or making real documentaries, the idea of any one self being The Self becomes unacceptable. The narrative tracks the narrator's declensions of the self alongside Charlie's declensions of an image.

In this initial encounter, then, Charlie and Lucy recognise a mutual capacity for multiplicity. Their relationship is not contained within singular roles. Like her

he 'is never sure' (32) and questions himself, his directions and experience (30) so that they find an affinity in their uncertainty. Yet others, such as her clients, men of the law, never recognise this in themselves. Their singularity, along with the notion that 'what the law decides is truth'(266), is challenged. Lucy and Charlie exist beyond a gendered representation based on an essentialised sexual difference or essence of any kind because essence, which must be recognised as underpinning stereotyped roles as though they are naturally the only roles to inhabit, is seen as capable of being used strategically as a representation<sup>6</sup>. Both characters, I would suggest, illustrate what Diana Fuss would describe as a 'deployment of essentialism' (Fuss 1989:30).

Given Lucy's apparent ability to take representations and use them to variously self construct, to tell and make her own life, why then does this not work towards resolution in the text, why does it not make her happy? Part of the answer to this must be that it does — well, it does for as long as she remains unattached. As she begins to define herself in relation to the presence or absence of either Charlie or her lover, Gabriel, she becomes enmeshed in their narratives, in seeking the answers to their questions and to the riddle of their disappearance. Their disappearance, in turn, is a result of their mutual obsession with an absent woman. At no point in the novel is Lucy able to negotiate with Charlie or her lover so that they relate to her more significantly. Lucy's agency is thwarted by the desire of the male characters for the absent and inarticulate other.

What I want to do now, in a necessarily schematic way, is think about why masculine desire is directed towards the absent woman rather than the woman who is present and has the potential for agency. In other words, I am asking why this agency is thwarted and I will do this by looking at how absence functions in *Borderline* (Turner Hospital 1987). I am suggesting here that Jean-Marc's search for the truth of what he calls his own 'dark corners and secret desires' (25) or 'messy, unrepresentable fantasies' (26), is the key to an understanding of how absence functions in this text. It is also an indicator of how a text can, as I shall illustrate, explain *and* exercise the agency of reader and writer.

This story, ostensibly of the search for Felicity and Felicity's own search for both her father and the missing La Magdalena, comes to the reader through the consciousness of Jean-Marc, son of Seymour, an artist who was Felicity's lover. Unlike Charade or Lucy, both of whom are narrating characters, Felicity is nothing *but* narrated. From the very beginning, Jean-Marc writes possessively about Felicity, feeling that only he is 'qualified' to tell her story. He most particularly resents 'the presumption of those who think they have located her in the Old Volcano's acrylics' (16) rather than where he has located her himself, within his narrative. What lies at the heart of *Borderline*, is Jean-Marc's struggle to wrest from his artist father, the power to represent Felicity. It is what he calls his father's 'God-itch', that is, the power to 'think the whole world is his canvas'(286), to believe 'that his paintings are the borders of reality' (287) which most threatens Jean-Marc's equilibrium. It destroys his ability to believe in his own independent existence, to have an identity of his own and claim for himself the power to both possess and to create. This fear of lack, is transferred to his

representation of Felicity so that he portrays her as fearing the very same thing<sup>7</sup>. The reader, at the mercy of Jean-Marc's narrative, is informed that Felicity has nightmares about being trapped in a painting (19) or that Seymour, in a perfect illustration of Gilbert and Gubar's (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979) notion of women being killed into art, literally paints her:

Her body itself was the canvas, she could feel each brushstroke like a scourge, her skin choking and unable to breathe beneath the caked layers of pigment. Seymour daubed her navel with red. The altar lamp, he said (251).

This is a powerful image of Felicity made timeless, becoming enshrined, an object to be consumed through the voyeuristic gaze of the male artist. Seymour, unlike Jean-Marc, is transparently desperate to 'fix' (52) Felicity in one place, to 'pin her down' acknowledging through his art a 'frenzy of possessive desire' (255). His paintings become increasingly abstract as he seeks to compensate for her absence, her lack, by fetishising her, painting only her eyes, which, like flowers, are a symbol of female genitalia. Looking at a fetishised representation of Felicity becomes synonymous with looking at the image of woman as sexual difference, framed and contained in a manageable space to reduce the threat implied by that difference (Pollock 1988:134). Felicity recognises this process which deprives her of the capacity to act for herself and confides in Jean-Marc:

I shouldn't let it rattle me Jean-Marc...But still...when I'm right there, in flesh and blood, in front of his paintings...I get this queasy feeling that it's vulgar of me to insist on being literal (18).

Seymour's art is a lustful celebration of sexual difference. His inscription of Felicity defines him as man and as artist and therefore as having power. It is Jean-Marc, however, who makes explicit the foundation on which this process rests. Identifying himself as 'official biographer, the final authority', he insists towards the end of the novel that 'anyone who looks at Felicity for long thinks "otherness", or "untouched" or "essence"' (256). His desire for her which he describes as 'a muddle of desire and murderous rage towards his father' (95) is repressed into his narrative, threatening, like Felicity herself, always to return. A combination of anxiety and anticipation fuels Jean-Marc's narrative creating a tension between giving Felicity the voice that Seymour paints out of her and telling her story himself. Ultimately, his own equally compelling need to represent Felicity in order to define his own masculinity equates her with other women in the text, Hester and La Magdalena, who are represented through absence and silence.

Jean-Marc creates the virtual reader and places this reader in the narrative, too, so that he can more explicitly address the way in which his identity is bound up in that of the other:

All right, Mr Piano Tuner, you say. Enough of red herrings...We will not be fobbed off, we will not be deceived. Do you think we cannot see through...the games, the false trails, the elaborate smokescreens, the entire

futile hunt to find out what happened to Dolores (Hester, Felicity?) Confess now. The whole truth. Let us hear you say it: *Felicity herself, c'est moi* (192).

Quite clearly, in claiming to be Felicity, his narrative about her becomes a narrative about himself and *his* struggle to self represent. What he calls his 'attempt to set things down' (25) is not the attempt to locate Felicity at all, but is a record of the process of negotiating masculinity as a sexual position — that is, as the positive side of a the Man Woman binary which is defined by sexual difference<sup>8</sup>. It is the negotiation of masculinity as textual presence, with all the power to represent, and woman as absent from the text, as non-phallic, non-powerful, not able to self represent. Through his narrating of Felicity, Jean Marc becomes the creator, he claims power from his father to possess the (step)mother, to move beyond the androgyny of identifying with her in her powerlessness and into a confirmation of his heterosexuality expressed as his power to represent. If Felicity returned, if women were present and articulate, telling their own stories rather than allowing themselves to be continuously narrated, then Jean-Marc's position, according to this psychoanalytic construction, would be threatened. His phallic power, his very masculinity, would be at risk. Whilst desiring Felicity, the constant anxiety in the text is as much a sign of his fear of the phallic woman as it is concern for her whereabouts. A few pages from the end, then, we find Jean-Marc recognising and claiming his ability to represent:

Oh the last laugh is definitely on the Old Volcano. And the very last word is with me. Someone else is dreaming you, old man, I'll say. I've caught the virus, your very own disease. I've got you down on paper. You're just a shadow of my words, your paintings only live in my chapters, you cease to exist once my reader puts you on a shelf, you have to reach past me to touch the world (287).

What is interesting in Turner Hospital's work, however, is the way in which in the final page which follows this quote, Felicity's absence rather than Jean-Marc's triumph crystallises as the primary experience. The loss experienced by both Seymour and Jean-Marc converges and dominates characters and reader. Despite the fact that both Seymour and Jean-Marc exercise their power creatively to locate themselves as specifically masculine, both in relation to one another and in relation to Felicity, it is precisely through the cultural artefacts which they produce, that is Seymour's art and Jean-Marc's narrative, that Felicity's resistance to this power is made most conspicuous. Her continued and defiant absence, her refusal to pander to their sense of deprivation and loss, can be read as her own commitment to a story which lives beyond the borders of the text written about her, beyond the frame of the art which would define her.

I would suggest that in her complex rendering of woman as sign of sexual difference, Turner Hospital is taking the presence/absence binary which is central to the formulation of sexual difference and deconstructing it to place the absent Felicity, in fact absence itself, as the primary term. *Borderline*, then, is not only a rigorous examination of sexual difference but also sexual difference, that is the

absent other as the primary term in a binary<sup>9</sup>. Felicity is continuously both absent and present, her return both imminent and, since this is not actually her story impossible, she is both inside this narrative but clearly preoccupied, as it were, with her own. Without her, there is no absence by which the presence of Seymour and Jean-Marc can be defined and made significant, no compensation through Art or Narrative for her loss. They are constructed by her absence. The very name Felicity comes to represent all silenced, absent and damaged women and can be read as a Derridian 'hinge word' simultaneously present and absent, both agent and icon, tantalisingly constructed yet in excess of that construction, simultaneously desirable and threatening.

But where does all this leave us in relation to agency when an absent, apparently inarticulate character can be read, as I have just shown, as central to a narrative? She is not telling the story or weaving her own multiple stories as Charade did; she is not enacting various possibilities of the self as Lucy did; we do not know her story except through Jean-Marc; we can make no claims with respect to her agency, except to invest in an insistence that she is refusing to return because she has other, perhaps better, things to do than pander to the insecurities Jean-Marc (alias Freud) reveals. How might we salvage the idea of agency in feminist texts when it has been shown by this reading that telling and enacting one's own narratives is in fact, only a part of what agency is about and that reading the unreadable who remain absent is a necessity?<sup>10</sup>

What is required is an extension of the site of analysis so that we may explore agency through the production and reception of the text as well as within the text itself. Agency in feminist fiction is not located in a singular textual space where it is represented by the characters, but in a doubled and trebled space which incorporates the creator of the text and, quite clearly, the feminist reader/critic who has a stated political investment in desiring agency. The feminism adhering to a feminist text lies as much in its contextualisation, in other words, as it does in the content.

In looking at *Charades* the agency of Charade was questioned and found to be limited because it restricted itself to the telling of stories. In *The Last Magician*, Hartman's notion of making or doing was explored in relation to the doing of gender and this called into focus the importance of recognising essentialised representations as constructed so that they could be used strategically. It also highlighted the necessity to be capable of narration and enactment *in relation*. Lucy's agency remained unrecognised and therefore limited despite her telling and doing. She remained unable to dislodge the discourse which constructs sexual difference through women's lack of agency, their silence and absence despite her own defiance of it.

*Borderline*, however, redeploys agency splintering it so that it may be recognised inside and outside the text, as intrinsic to plots as well as an effect brought about by the writer and articulated in tandem with feminist critics. It was not only the characters in *Borderline* who revealed that women exist in excess of their representations in art and literature. The ultimate representation was

controlled and shaped by Turner Hospital herself and in this lies the agency of the feminist writer — in the ability to be cultural producer undermining the process of identity acquisition portrayed in her male characters. Turner Hospital's preoccupation with absence illustrates how literature can be used to problematise the psychoanalytic process of gender acquisition, showing that there exists a female subjectivity with its own desires, that remains unexplained by a discourse which masquerades as normative. Part of the process of doing this, a part usually assumed by feminist literary critics, is to recognise how some narratives told by and about women, alone or in relation, can be seen to challenge the construction of sexual difference itself so that masculinity and femininity may be seen as constructed positions rather than as naturally given. Feminist literary critics, it can be argued, exercise their agency, that is their capacity to tell and do and enable recognition of that telling and doing, by demonstrating how fiction is a powerful site for feminist theorising.

The text itself, however, remains the pivotal point. Whether we look, in spatial terms, inwards towards the content and characters or backwards to the shaping and crafting of the text or forwards to the terms of its reception and dissemination, agency in a feminist text incorporates at many levels a challenge to normative definitions of the self bound up with phallogocentrism<sup>11</sup>. In other words, feminist texts must do more than tell, do more than enact, they must negotiate a wider recognition of the forces that construct all of us so they cannot be ignored. In order to achieve this, agency cannot simply be restricted to the telling and doing of the characters but must be extended to creators and consumers and to an understanding of the place of feminist fiction in negotiating recognition and acceptance of a need for change.

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#### Endnotes

1. Hartman does go on to suggest that our narratives need to 'secure the assent of others' and this paper extends on that notion of recognition in order to suggest that this recognition is an important aspect of agency which must be linked to our telling and doing.
2. See, for example, Linda Ruth Williams exploration of the subject as creation of the story (Williams, 1995:17).
3. Ultimately, of course, she is forced to accept that this is not necessarily so — but that is another paper.
4. I deliberately use the word strategic to suggest that Lucy has identified herself as having what de Certeau would call will and power — that is she does not see herself as without agency, as only the other, and does not therefore resort to tactics, she already claims the terrain as her own rather than as imposed. See de Certeau, Michel 1984:36/7 and Ashcroft, B 1995 for an application of this.
5. There is interesting scope here for an analysis in Turner Hospital's work of the significance of names, their interchangeability, their capacity to represent and/or misrepresent or to act as signatures for identities, their involvement in agency as an act of self naming and therefore their relationship to texts. See Grosz, E 1995:9-25.
6. Lucy uses it strategically as a defence, a barrier between her private self and her publicly owned persona whilst Charlie uses essentialism against itself as a strategy of offence — possible perhaps because as a member of a marginalised group himself, that is a man of colour, Charlie is aware that he, too, exceeds his representation.
7. See Silverman, 1988:348 for discussion of the dynamics of transference.
8. I have used Griselda Pollock's framework for the acquisition of masculinity as a sexual position (1988) as a template for this work, demonstrating how this occurs not simply in art but also in narrative, a notion that could be explored much more fully in relation to *Borderline* as

a whole since the novel itself is concerned, quite obviously, with these two forms of representation.

9. These comments are based on Elizabeth Grosz's summary of difference and difference in 'Contemporary Theories of Power and Subjectivity'. See Gunew Sneja 1990:95-96.
10. I am thinking here of Felman's explanation of Lacan's idea that 'What calls for analysis is the insistence of the unreadable in the text' quoted in Linda Ruth Williams, 1995: 85.
11. For a wider exploration of this, see Grosz, 1995: 22-24.