

TRACING THE TRAVESTY

Constructing the Female Subject in Susan Swan's "The Biggest Modern Woman of the World"

Teresa Heffernan

FOR THE FEMINIST WRITER, aspects of postmodernism, including the dissolution of the subject, the formulation of identity as a linguistic construct, and the fragmentation of cohesive narratives, are problematic — she has no coherent sense of self to dissolve, no present to make absent, no history to write herself out of, no story to fragment, and although she would acknowledge that realities and identities are experienced through representation, she is also concerned with physicality, particularly, the un/silencing of the female body.

In *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern*, Patricia Waugh writes of the point of divergence between feminism and postmodernism:

At the moment when postmodernism is forging its identity through articulating the exhaustion of the existential belief in self-presence and self-fulfilment and through the dispersal of the universal subject of liberalism, feminism (ostensibly, at any rate) is assembling its cultural identity in what appears to be the opposite direction. . . . As male writers lament its [the character/subject's] demise, women writers have not yet experienced that subjectivity which will give them a sense of personal autonomy, continuous identity, a history and agency in the world.¹

Susan Swan, as a feminist writing a postmodern work, foregrounds this point of contention in her biographical, genealogical, historical, and fictional text *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*. She plays with the peculiar ironies that emerge from the tensions between a particularly masculine postmodernist obsession with unforging an identity (that the male writer was busy forging from the Romantic through to the Modernist period) and the feminist concern with recovering and constructing female subjects. Her work generates questions about the relationship between the author and her subject, about the production of history, about the importance of private versus public documentation, about the function of intertextuality, and about the relationship between narratives and reality.

In an essay entitled, "Nietzsche, Genealogy and History," Michel Foucault argues that it is the genealogist's task to "disturb what was previously considered

immobile,” “to fragment what was thought unified,” to show “the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself.”²² However, his approach presupposes that the genealogist is confronting a history that is written, cohesive, and continuous, a presumption which poses a dilemma if the genealogist is female. Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* attempts to write a history of women and fiction, and instead must write a history which foregrounds the silence of women: “For all the dinners are cooked; the plates and cups are washed; the children sent to school and gone out into the world. Nothing remains of it all. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it.”²³ Unlike Foucault, Woolf and Swan have no sustaining female narrative that they can call into question.

When Swan writes in the preface of her novel that the Nova Scotia giantess is “curiously” not as well known as her male friend Angus, and Anna Swan has been billed as “the biggest modern woman of the world,” the irony is readily apparent — even the biggest modern woman of the world is absent from history’s master narrative. Swan must write Anna into history and so, ostensibly, she employs the conventions that have governed the traditional recording of history — the narrative is continuous, it locates an origin, it is concerned with connections (not fissures), and it involves a chronology of facts borrowed from the real Anna Swan’s life (date and place of birth, employment, marriage).

Similarly, Susan Swan problematizes the masculine postmodernist approach to the subject in literature. Robert Kroetsch’s translation of a Foucauldian sense of history into literary terms encourages him to employ an archaeological model in his poetry and theory; he supplies the reader with artifacts and puts the reader in the position of choosing the story: “you have simply unearthed something and the reader has the task of fitting this into whatever scheme he wants to fit it into . . . you’re giving him that task you’re not going to do that for him you’re not going to rule out one (reading) against another.”²⁴ Kroetsch assumes that the reader has a number, perhaps an infinite number, of stories to draw upon; but as Swan suggests in her juxtaposition of references to literature’s male giants (Gulliver, Bunyan, Goliath, the Cyclops, Gargantua, Pantagruel) with the absence of references to Anna’s female counterparts, the reader is dependent on stories to make new stories, and stories of female giants do not immediately leap to mind. As Woolf establishes in *A Room of One's Own*, stories about women often remain obscure and unrecorded. There is no context for a female giant; hence, Swan must rely on the conventions of the realistic novel (even as she parodies them) to develop her character: she begins with the birth of Anna, records, chronologically, her adventures, and concludes with her death.

Thus, Swan writes Anna’s large female frame with its seventeen inch vaginal tract into history and literature and in capital letters. Gayatri Spivak in her preface to *Of Grammatology* comments on Derrida’s practice of writing “sous rature” or “under erasure” or the practice of crossing out words and then printing the crossed

out word — a practice which serves to denaturalize language and which forces us to confront our assumptions about presence.⁵ Parodying this practice, Swan writes about her character in capitals, like Derrida to defamiliarize language, but, unlike Derrida, to emphasize the presence of her GIANTESS.

But even as Susan Swan makes use of literary and historical traditions to write Anna Swan into our consciousness, the text is self-conscious about the process. At the opening of *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, the preverbal infant Anna recounts her experiences (complete with literary, social, and cultural references) in the present tense:

My mouth is sucking a table leg as if it's a wooden nipple and my eyes are glued to the floor, mesmerized by the sight of my parents' feet. My mother's foot, a dainty Queen Mab appendage rolls back and forth, grinding clean and sharp, a tarnished needle on a sandy board. My father, Oberon, rests his backwoods clodhoppers, sole to sole, next to those of his queen.⁶

As Linda Hutcheon points out in *The Canadian Postmodern*, Swan, like Fielding in *Shamela*, parodies Richardson's *Pamela*.⁷ Swan mimics Richardson's faith in the transparency of language, and mocks Richardson's attempt to convince his audience of the sincerity of Pamela through the use of the diary. Like Pamela, Anna records her seduction in a diary at the very moment of the seduction. Sitting at her desk, Anna writes: "In the glow of the wall candle, I can see Martin's face moving closer to mine" (Swan 208). The effect of these scenes, unlike the intended effect in *Pamela*, is to highlight the process of writing/recording events and underscore the inevitable gap between the act and the representation of the act.

Furthermore, at the opening of her work, Swan presents three spiels (Spiel is defined by Webster's as: "a speech or story, usually delivered volubly and with the intent to persuade" / in German spielen is to play and spiel is a game)⁸ or three possible interpretations of Anna's life to suggest further that the author of each spiel is necessarily biased in her/his choice and ordering of events. The presentation of spieling as a commodity — "No performer should expend energy for groups that offer neither pay nor applause" (Swan 50) — at once signals a dismissal of the modernist notion of "high art" as the "transcendent" work of a disinterested creator and acknowledges the inescapable motive of "self-interest" in any exchange/dialogue/creation. Anna's art (and by way of implication Swan's novel) is not "true" or "pure" but contaminated by interest.

IN A LETTER TO the editor of *Maclean's*, an irate relative of Anna Swan writes: "My purpose in attending [Susan Swan's reading] was to express the regret and disappointment I felt, both as a direct descendent of Anna Swan and as a Nova Scotian, that the author felt that the true story of the giantess's

life was not worthy of writing and thus making many more people aware of this part of our Nova Scotian heritage.”⁹ However, in keeping with the tenets of post-modernism, Swan’s novel contests this notion of Anna’s “true” story. Even as Swan writes about her huge female subject in a chronological narrative, the possibility of a continuous, coherent, autonomous agent or a consistent, objective, historical account recedes as the author acknowledges the artifice and the inevitable biases inherent in generating narratives. Nevertheless, Swan is sensitive to the potential conflict between her acknowledged desire to recover the history of women and tell stories about women (or freaks or Nova Scotians) and her awareness of the impossibility of recovering a true history or a definitive story. In *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, Swan considers this tension in light of the process by which women and men represent their histories and how the stories of women, Canadians, freaks, have been/are written out of history by “normals.”

History, Foucault asserts, is a record of the transfer of power, of the seizure of a system of rules, and of “the endlessly repeated play of dominations.”¹⁰ However, history’s “others” have never played, nor, as Anna Swan suggests, are they necessarily interested in participating in this drama of dominations. She writes to her mother that in contrast to Americans, Canadians: “possess no fantasies of conquest and domination. Indeed, to be from the Canadas is to feel as women feel — cut off from the base of power” (Swan 274). Ambivalence about power and domination provoke Anna to employ innovative tactics in her struggle to be heard. Anna, instead of seizing the system of rules and entering into the play of dominations as a means of achieving volume for her female Canadian voice, parodies the game. Hence in Anna’s spiel on “Yankee ignorance” she describes a cough syrup which causes the user to “exhibit an agreeable tendency to avoid confrontation and seek consensus instead” (Swan 69) — a formula which threatens the very foundations of American ideology and causes the aggressive, entrepreneurial Barnum to ask nervously (worried about having to ingest the “cure”) “Are Canadians infectious?” To which Anna responds: “The cold mummifies agents of disease, rendering the majority of people in Canada harmless” (Swan 69). Of course, Anna’s ironical commentary is also self-directed, for she has travelled to New York (in keeping with the artistic drain from Canada to the United States) precisely to seek the fame and fortune which she cannot attain amid the “harmless” Canadians. Anna’s employment of irony disrupts the dominant/other dichotomy. In this exchange with Barnum, she provokes and challenges the American while acknowledging her own frailties. This impure intersection between two oppositional ideologies allows for the possibility of a critical tolerance or a negotiated space instead of alienation of or domination over what is perceived or constructed as “other.”

Like Anna, Swan employs this multi-edged irony as a means of avoiding a drama of dominations (female versus male, Canadian versus American) while

simultaneously creating room for the Canadian giantess in history and literature (room which patriarchal representations deny). The concept of history as an event experienced via selective representation and interpretation in the present supported in *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* challenges the notion of history as a series of tangible facts fixed in a past and fully accessible. While the intertextual play in the novel allows for the inevitable and inescapable influence of the dominantly masculine representations of the past, Anna's ironic commentary calls into question the "universality" or "centrality" of this construction of "humanity"; the referencing of a text attests to its influence and power, while irony exposes and contests the logic of that influence and power. Linda Hutcheon writes:

Postmodernism nevertheless tries to understand present culture as the product of previous codings and representations. The representation of history becomes the history of representation too. Postmodern art acknowledges and accepts the challenge of tradition, however ironically: the history of representation cannot be escaped, but it can be both exploited and commented upon critically, often by means of parody.¹¹

ANNA, AS A CHILD, is trapped behind a wall of yellow ice created by her father and his friend, who are busy inscribing their identities onto the snow. Anna's father amuses himself by writing his initials with his "daily waterings" — "a humble way to impress himself on the land" (Swan 14). The act of inscribing the landscape as a metaphor for identity has a long literary tradition in Canada. Leonard Cohen's *The Favourite Game* follows a young male artist who is obsessed with "leaving his mark" in poems, on women, and on the snow (the favourite game involves making snow angels): "I want to touch people like a magician, to change them or hurt them, leave my brand, make them beautiful. I want to be the hypnotist who takes no chances of falling asleep himself. I want to kiss with one eye open."¹² Breavman aspires to control the "other" in order to create and protect his identity as an autonomous agent and a disinterested artist; he wants to affect women and literature without acknowledging his own reflection in the creation. As a child, Anna is both fascinated and separated, by the wall of yellow ice, from this masculine ritual of inscription. This early scene reflects one of the preoccupations of Swan's novel — an interest in feminine and masculine renditions of the self and the history of representations of the subject.

Like Breavman, Captain Bates is concerned with forging an identity. In his treatise, the author forecasts the betterment of the "American" race in a giant's version of "Darwin's *Origins of Species*," entitled "Species Development, or a Tract Towards Continual Anatomical Wonders." The treatise is necessarily exclusive in its limited equation of greatness with size, and the logic of Bates' argument

closely resembles racial, class, or gender based theories which promote the superiority of a given segment of society but which evade the questions: how is great or superior defined and who validates these definitions? In response to Martin's thesis Anna writes: "I have read it over and over, trying to find some points of his thesis I can admire. Unfortunately, it is a long-winded work, flawed by his failure to recognize his subjective view behind his scientific idealism. I cannot hear such tracts without hearing the voice of male pride and, in his case, it is obvious he glorifies size to make up for his excessive height" (Swan 163). Not only is Martin's thesis called into question by Anna's critique but so too is the entire tradition of scientific ("objective," "disinterested") documentation which has been used/abused in attempts to illustrate "empirically" a hierarchy of value.

Martin also exploits another public and powerful venue in his search for a form of documentation that will lend authority to his posture as the potent protector — the media. When Bates starts working for the carnival newspaper he writes a version of Anna's nocturnal escapades in which he, "the manly Captain," comes to the aid of his "wife and partner," a version which of course is very different from the adulterous story Anna and Apollo are making in the Monster Music Car.

Historical records, scientific documents, and news articles profess to be true, unbiased, and objective accounts of events and Bates relies on this tradition to legitimize his narrative and support the inversion of the hierarchy of normal-freak to freak-normal. Despite the Captain's own experience of marginalization within the normal-freak hierarchy, he continues to value the story of power and to support a system that is founded on a policy of exclusion. Thus in order to establish himself as the dominant figure, he must define himself against the inferior other — he continues to wear his Confederate uniform in the north despite the fact that the Civil War ends eight years prior to the couple's return to the States; he engages in a continuous stream of contests and fights in his attempts to assert his physical superiority, and his obsession with his role of husband leads him to cast Anna into the role of the maternal, submissive female.

Furthermore, as other males in the novel concern themselves with forging an identity, Anna is cast as a marketable commodity in Apollo and Barnum's story, as the fecund, fertile female by her father, as a domestic mate by Angus, as an interesting scientific specimen by the numerous Victorian doctors, and as a Cinderella figure who married for love in the fairy tale narrated by the curator at the Sunrise Trail Museum in Tatamagouche. Although Anna's participation and complicity in these various roles cannot be denied, her simultaneous resistance to them is not given a voice in the masculine scenarios. For example, after the freaks are forced to perform a version of *Macbeth*, one protests: "It is a mistake to cast us in dramas that were not made for special people like ourselves" (Swan 99). As an alternative to the Shakespearean drama, Anna proposes "Giant Etiquette" which

articulates a giant's experience to normals. Anna's protest both challenges the universal relevance of Shakespeare (and, by implication, the canon of literature) and gives voice to a silenced and marginalized sector; however, Barnum dismisses Anna's etiquette claiming that Anna's "appeal" (market value) lies in her size, and hence, silences her resistance to the process of objectification and commodification that he, as a capitalist, inflicts on his performers. As Anna travels the world searching for a place, she is unable and sometimes unwilling to perform the absolute and limited dramas assigned to her in the course of the masculine narratives: she does not marry for love, she is not fertile, and she resists being sold as a commodity.¹³ On her death bed, she concludes: "I was born to be measured and I do not fit in anywhere" (Swan 332).

The silencing and control of female identity is analogous to the repression of the female body in the Victorian aesthetic of the demure, petite, asexual maiden. The image of the physically and mentally contained and restrained female who is eclipsed by a vocal and dominant male is realized in the marriage ceremony of Anna and Martin during which Anna literally loses her voice. Patricia Waugh writes: "Subjectivity, historically constructed and expressed through the phenomenological equation self/other, necessarily rests masculine 'selfhood' upon feminine 'otherness.' The subjective centre of socially dominant discourses (from Descartes's philosophical, rational 'I' to Lacan's psychoanalytic phallic/symbol) in terms of power, agency, autonomy has been a universal subject which has established its identity through the invisible marginalization or exclusion of what it has also defined as 'femininity (whether this is the non-rational, the body, the emotions, or the presymbolic).'"¹⁴ The limitation and control of Anna's identity through the representation of her as "other" in the masculine narratives is parodied in the third spiel in which Anna reduces the men in her life to their hand size, which she implies is indicative of their sexual potency, that is, of what "makes a man a man."

BUT ULTIMATELY SWAN must confront the problematic tradition of the subject in her portrayal of Anna. Martin's attempt to invert the normal-freak opposition to freak-normal provides ample reason for Swan to avoid replacing the male centre with a female centre. Anna does become a character, a subject, a presence, but her identity necessarily emerges in relation to a fluctuating social, historical, and cultural environment both within and outside the text; she is neither static nor fully autonomous but a fluid character who both participates in and is incorporated into the inconsistent and heterogeneous narratives constructed by herself, her husband, family, friends, lover, enemies, acquaintances, the author, and the reader. The structure of Swan's novel also challenges the fixed

autonomous identities that Anna's male counterparts attempt to establish via their official documentation — the Route Book of Judge, Martin's scientific treatise, the doctor's medical records. The masculine texts and, by implication, the tradition of authority and objectivity, are placed in a context which both allows for the inevitable connection between representations of the world and self interest and admits multiple and fluctuating perspectives that necessarily de-stabilize the notion of "fixed" identity.¹⁵ Barbara Herrnstein Smith argues in *Contingencies of Value* that the various boundaries that have been used to delimit the self or humanity (from the sense of man as divinely free to the sense of man as driven by his libidinal impulses) are necessarily incomplete, subject to change, and contingent:

What I am suggesting here, rather, is that all such terms and accounts (homo economicus, homo ludens, man as rational creature, cultural creature, biological creature, and so forth) offer to conceptualize is something that might just as well be thought of as our irreducible scrappiness. . . . It is out of these scrappy (heterogeneous) elements and the local resolutions and provisional stabilities yielded by their continuous scrappy (more or less conflictual) interactions that we (and, from various perspectives, others) construct our various versions of our "selves" and, as necessary, explain or justify our actions, goals, and beliefs.¹⁶

In keeping with Smith's philosophy concerning the irreducibility of the subject, Swan does not in the end mark out a definitive place for Anna but instead subverts the notion of place — in the course of the novel everyone joins Anna in her displacement.

Again, Swan employs intertextuality as a means of acknowledging the inevitable influence of historical and literary representations of the subject on her own work and then uses parody as a method of offering a critique of the process by which these representations are constructed. Textual references for Anna's autobiography include eighteenth-century novels that employ the epistolary form, notably, Richardson's *Clarissa* and *Pamela*. Anna, like those eighteenth-century heroines, writes out her story in diaries and letters. The effect of the epistolary form is both to contextualize Anna's experiences and to allow for the acknowledgement of her private voice in her public performance. The letter challenges the assumed opposition between public (official/objective) and private (personal/subjective) documentation and allows for the politics of the individual. In a way that the media, historical, or scientific documents do not allow, the letter invites a dialogue and implies multiple perspectives. Although Richardson appears to privilege this tradition of women and letters in his novels, he resists the values of openness and fluidity implicit in this mode of communication. The increasing faith in science and empiricism in the eighteenth century encourages Richardson to validate the subjective, private voices of his heroines in terms of a fixed referent or an "objective" reality. Richardson, in order to fix the identities of his female heroines, con-

cludes his novels with the translation of Clarissa and Pamela into “tangible” public emblems — the inscription on Clarissa’s tombstone locates her in terms of symbols of eternal virtue (her name is circled by a crowned serpent with a tale in its mouth and accompanied by the images of a winged hour-glass and the head of a white lily snapped off);¹⁷ and, Pamela, in the course of a parable, takes on the role of Prudentia (“PRUDENTIA is YOU,” exclaims her daughter).¹⁸ Hence, Richardson attempts to make his heroines “veritable” by writing them into a text that is ostensibly fixed and autonomous. Terry Eagleton argues that Richardson, finally, does not privilege “feminine” (socially constructed) values; evidenced in his earlier novels and confirmed in his last novel, *Sir Charles Grandison*, these values are “recuperated by patriarchy and centered on a man.”¹⁹

Swan parodies Richardson’s attempts to legitimize and complete his fluid and relative heroines by molding them into stable, public symbols. Thus, Anna at the conclusion of the novel is translated, ironically, into a symbol of righteousness. The tombstone that is erected bears an inscription from Psalm 17, verse 15: “I will behold thy face in righteousness. I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness” (Swan 340). In the course of the novel, a great deal of the Canadian giantess’ grief and torment has arisen precisely from the pressure of righteousness — the pressure to conform to what is considered “right” or “normal.”

THE CARNIVAL ATMOSPHERE (which is established both through the plot of the novel and the intertextual references to Rabelais and to Bakhtin’s reading of Rabelais) challenges this attitude of righteousness and contests the rigid and exclusive boundaries of race, class, and gender erected in the production of identity. The performers of the carnival, in their exaggerated roles, are necessarily self-conscious about the production of their “identities” in relation to the “other”; as their roles fluctuate, the other is absorbed and recognized as an inescapable aspect of the “self.” Julia Kristeva writes:

It [carnavalesque structure] is a spectacle, but without a stage; a game, but also a daily undertaking; a signifier, but also a signified. That is, two texts meet, contradict and relativize each other. A carnival participant is both actor and spectator; he loses his sense of individuality, passes through a zero point of carnivalesque activity and splits into a subject of the spectacle and an object of the game.²⁰

Within the world of the carnival, Swan sets up a continuous stream of dichotomies between male and female, black and white, poverty and royalty, American and Canadian, the Confederate south and the Union north, heterosexual and homosexual, and normals and freaks. However, the barriers that allow these opposites to exist in an absolute and hierarchal relationship, begin to fall away as differences are stacked on differences until everyone is absorbed into a literalization

and modernization of what Bakhtin refers to as “gay relativity”²¹ — the Canadian giantess, the impotent Yankee, the lonely lesbian queen, the Québécois strongman, Apollo the normal, the right-wing dwarfs. In the course of the novel, everyone is exposed as different, the dynamic of privileged self and the marginalized other is subverted, and the term normal is defamiliarized. Leslie Fielder writes that even though we desperately attempt to defend the boundaries between normal and freak, the true freak, which we recognize as both human and monster, “challenges the conventional boundaries between male and female, sexed and sexless, animal and human, large and small, self and other, and consequently between reality and illusion, experience and fantasy, fact and myth.”²² The problem of representing the self for a feminist postmodernist is to some extent addressed in this notion of the “freak” which involves a reflexive approach to the construction of the self fuelled by the awareness of the false dichotomy between self and other.

Perhaps the most pervasive intertexts in *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* are Rabelais’ *Gargantua & Pantagruel* and Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*. In Rabelais, according to Bakhtin, an aspect of the carnival, the “grotesque” body, subverts and contaminates the “high,” “transcendent” culture of the learned. Swan mimics Rabelais’ use of the body and its excretion of fluids to further stress the co-mingling and impurity of communities.

Tears, urine, menstrual blood, waters of pregnancy, and sweat breakdown (if only temporarily) the barriers of the “self” that are constructed to exclude the “other.” When Anna’s waters break, the reserved “Brits” passing below her window experience a “spring shower.” As fire sweeps through Barnum’s museum, the “barbarous” mudskills enjoy the spectacle of the burning “freaks”; in the midst of this terror, the Living Skeleton and Anna are brought together in friendship as their sweat mingles and converts to steam. And in the newsroom of the “New York Tribune” Anna and Jane unite the traumatized victims of the fire who float on the bodies of the Fat Woman and the Giantess in a lake of urine and tears. Finally, in the closed and exclusive community of Seville, Anna, the outsider, is temporarily embraced by the women who are affected by Anna’s menstruation: “Cora says one bleeding woman brings on the monthlies in other females close by and because I am so big, I may have caused all the women in Seville to spill over together with the blood of creation!” (Swan 272). The outflow of bodily fluids invites a point of intersection between the “self” and the “other.” Bakhtin in his analysis of Rabelais explicates the “logic of the grotesque”: “The object transgresses its own confines, ceases to be itself. The limits between the body and the world are erased, leading to the fusion of the one with the other and with surrounding objects.”²³

As in Rabelais, images of creation, birth and renewal are simultaneously accompanied by images of destruction and death — Anna’s waters break (in keeping with the images of her as a fertile fecund female that permeate the novel) but her

children are stillborn; burning flesh and the threat of drowning are aspects of the symbols of renewal — the flames and the flood; and Anna's menstrual blood serves as a reminder that she will not bear children. The universe is contained/uncontained in this circular chase of life and death that takes place on the site of the grotesque body; the gigantic female body of Anna, even as it mingles and changes and interacts with other bodies, forfeiting its autonomy, cannot be silenced by Martin's history of a master race or Barnum's imperialism or Apollo's capitalist schemes. The grotesque body as it confuses common dichotomies and disrupts the "normal" also challenges the boundaries of conventional narratives. Susan Stewart defines nonsense as a challenge to traditional and "normalized" practices; like the grotesque body, the borders defining nonsense are arbitrary: "If these nonsense activities show the arbitrariness of all beginnings and endings, they also show the arbitrariness of all middles as well. With this method of making nonsense, the center — the place of privileged signification — drops out and all that is left is a voice infinitely tracing itself into an infinite domain."²⁴ Anna, as a nonsensical figure, exposes the arbitrariness of the privileged narratives of history and displaces the masculine nucleus around which the "autonomous" self is constructed.

Robert Seguin, in his critique of Bakhtin, argues against what he sees as the "liberalism" inherent in this acceptance of the mingling of bodies:

I have in mind simply the passage from the early days of the revolution — when a heteroglot and dialogically vibrant polity was not a theoretical construct or Utopian hope but rather an aspect of experience — through to the repression of Stalinism, where this reality was eradicated and its value ever more strongly affirmed. This historical experience for us becomes flattened out, its two distinct moments now simultaneous and coterminous within the printed pages of the Bakhtinian text. It begins resonating with that bourgeois liberalism which is the dominant ideological register in contemporary North America, in which everything is at once all freedom and all deprivation, where "difference" is now the language of advertising, where one can say anything one pleases precisely because it doesn't matter what is said anymore.²⁵

In defence of Bakhtin, Rabelais, and Swan, who, because of her complicitous relationship with the texts of the aforementioned authors, might be accused of advocating "bourgeois liberalism," I would like to examine the terms of the charge in light of *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*. Martin and Anna, the masculine American and the feminine Canadian, appear diametrically opposed at the opening of the novel; however, by the end of their life (and the novel) they come to recognize in each other's displacement a point of intersection: "Following Babe's death, Martin and I stayed together in the manner of married couples who are inseparably wedded by the geography of their souls. Babe's death confirmed the bond between us and sometimes we think he is with us so we leave a third chair" (Swan 332). Thus, the opposition that is set up by Seguin between the

absolute good of “the early days of the revolution” and the absolute evil of the repression of Stalinism, in Swan’s terms could not exist. Rather, the “pure” revolution is already contaminated by the possibility of repression and vice versa. As the revolution affirms its identity, it necessarily posits an “other” (what is outside the revolutionary aims) which must be repressed — the borders established around the revolution must then be defended. Furthermore, Seguin’s suggestion that the “early days of the revolution” are not a “construction” but “an aspect of experience,” is problematized by Swan’s text which, points to the artifice inherent in the representation of any reality (“no reality without representation”).

The language of difference, in the context of the carnival atmosphere of Swan’s novel, does not promote apathy or nihilism (“one can say anything one pleases precisely because it doesn’t matter what is said anymore.”) Difference is a breakdown of the self/other, good/evil dichotomy — the intersection of races, classes, and gender challenge the rigid borders of an “autonomous” identity. Rushdie’s defence of *The Satanic Verses* could perhaps also serve as a defence for Bakhtin, Rabelais, and Swan: “Those who oppose the novel most vociferously today are of the opinion that intermingling with a different culture will inevitably weaken and ruin their own. I am of the opposite opinion. *The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelisation and fears the absolutism of the Pure.”²⁶ The differences between Swan and Seguin’s representation of Bakhtin can possibly be explained by Swan’s willingness to support the philosophy of the impure, while Seguin is adamant about and nostalgic for the “Purity” of the early days of the revolution.

SWAN CONFRONTS THE tensions between the modernist defense of the “autonomous agent,” the postmodernist privileging of an “absent agent,” and the feminist dilemma of not having a fully present agent to make absent, by challenging and problematizing the literary and historical representations of the subject; she both acknowledges and parodies the traditions of past representations of the subject in the play of intertexts that takes place within her novel. The presentation of the modernist’s forging and the postmodernist’s un-forging of identity is challenged by the conceptualization of a subject that is local, fluid, relative, and contextual. The feminist concern with recovering stories that will allow for a sense of “history and agency in the world” is addressed in Swan’s novel as the author both participates in this process of recovery in her story of Anna Swan, while recognizing that it is impossible to access an “authentic” version of history. However, Swan is not discouraged by this prospect; rather, in writing

Anna's story Swan calls into question the whole tradition of the universal, autonomous, cohesive subject and the fixed, accessible, objective, historical account. The carnival structure in the text sanctions the intermingling of identities and renders the self/other dichotomy, employed in the construction of the autonomous agent, inappropriate; the resulting impure, incomplete, inconsistent, physical body of Anna contests and undermines the tradition of authority and objectivity in the documentation of history.²⁷

NOTES

- ¹ Patricia Waugh, *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (New York: Routledge, 1989): 6.
- ² Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon, ed. Donald Bouchard (New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977): 147.
- ³ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Grafton Books, 1989): 85.
- ⁴ Robert Kroetsch, *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch*, ed. Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1982): 14.
- ⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, preface, *Of Grammatology*, by Jacques Derrida (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976): xiv.
- ⁶ Susan Swan, *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1983), p. 10. Subsequent page references appear in parentheses in the text.
- ⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern* (Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press Canada, 1988): 121.
- ⁸ *The New Lexicon Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language*, (New York: Lexicon Publications, 1988): 956.
- ⁹ Linda Swan-Ryan, letter, *Maclean's*, 29 October 1984, p. 8.
- ¹⁰ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," p. 150.
- ¹¹ Linda Hutcheon, "The Politics of Representation," *Signature 1* (1989): 40.
- ¹² Leonard Cohen, *The Favourite Game* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1963): 101.
- ¹³ Susan Stewart's, "The Gigantic" in *On Longing* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1984) traces the historical and cultural significance of the giant; Stewart argues that with the development of commerce, the gigantic is "appropriated by the state and its institutions" and held up as a model of "abstract social formations" but also continues to belong to the submerged and material world of the carnival. Anna Swan is similarly situated between the official and the subversive world; she is held up as a symbol of success by the institutions of a capitalist state while her "grotesque" body simultaneously resists and challenges the boundaries of these official labels.
- ¹⁴ Patricia Waugh, *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern*, p. 8.
- ¹⁵ Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (London: Pan Books, 1985) is another interesting text to read in conjunction with Swan's *The Biggest Modern Woman in the World*; both texts forefront the problematic depiction of the female subject. Fevvers, the heroine of Carter's text, is a female "freak," an aerialist with wings; in the

course of her performance Fevvers, like Anna Swan, is constructed by the “normal” gaze. However, Jack Walser, the reporter who attempts to write Fevvers into a narration which is dependent on self/other, male/female, normal/freak dichotomies, is simultaneously caught in the vortex of Fevver’s gaze which in turn (like Anna’s contextualizing of the masculine texts) undoes his stable constructions and threatens his identity.

- ¹⁶ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988) : 164.
- ¹⁷ Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985) : 1305.
- ¹⁸ Samuel Richardson, *Pamela*, vol. 2 (London: Dent, 1976) : 471.
- ¹⁹ Terry Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982) : 95.
- ²⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1980) : 78.
- ²¹ In the context of the passage from Bakhtin (“The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity”) “gay” is used in the sense of happy or joyous.
- ²² Leslie Fielder, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978) : 24.
- ²³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1986) : 310.
- ²⁴ Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1979) : 143.
- ²⁵ Robert Seguin, “Border, Contexts, Politics: Mikhail Bakhtin,” *Signature* 2, (1989) : 48.
- ²⁶ Salman Rushdie, “A Pen Against the Sword: In Good Faith,” *Newsweek*, 12 February 1990, p. 52.
- ²⁷ I would like to thank Linda Hutcheon for reading drafts of this paper and for her invaluable comments.

WHITE LIES

Neile Graham

for Christine

I hang the Thunderbird your son carved
next to my door
to say that I know you

and what belongs to your people
mine can only borrow.
I hope not to misuse what we have stolen
but hope is worth little