

The Claim of Fragmented Self in *Autobiography of Red* by Anne Carson

ABSTRACT

This paper offers a discursive reading of the *Autobiography of Red* (1998) written by Anne Carson, a novel loosely based on the myth of Geryon and *The Tenth Labor of Herakles*. Carson's Geryon is a fragmented modern subject who is molested as a child and betrayed in a love affair as an adult. At one of its thematic levels the work examines the efforts of an outcast who attempts to reclaim a meaningful subjectivity in a modern world characterized by fragmentation grounded in anxieties, frenetic confusion, and cultural pressures.

The term "fragmentation" has a multiplicity of meanings and changes its significance depending on the individual/subjective sociocultural context. The study of the formation of a fragmented self must take into account the variety of factors, including class, gender and cultural frameworks. This paper interrogates such symbiotic relationships between the processes of subject fragmentation within a social realm and the principles and values introduced by the power structures apparent within society. Referring to Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, where discipline "makes" individuals in the society and is the technique used by the dominant power to control its subjects as instruments, this paper examines the connection between Carson's novel and the notion of agency within fragmentation. By portraying a sexually disoriented subject, Carson shows how power structures are formed and manipulated through its agents (Geryon's mother, brother and Herakles), and offers an illustration of the alternatives available to those who resist being framed. I examine the portrayals of such subjects' striving for liberation from the hierarchies of power through the intertextual embodiment of the image of an eruptive volcano and its generative power of wrath which resists to be categorized or tamed by "Mother Nature." This paper evaluates the essential features and outcomes of the myth of Geryon as a study of a fragmented subject struggling to bring the fissuring dimensions of his personality and sexuality together to form an autonomous subjectivity.

KEYWORDS: Subjectivity, Fragmentation, Power Principle, Body, Individuality Norms



To complete his tenth labour, Herakles had to journey to the end of the world, kill the red monster Geryon, and take possession of his red cattle. The monster Geryon had dwelt lonely on an isolated island in the far west of the Mediterranean. He had three heads, three legs and one body. Herakles had no personal hostility with Geryon, rather, he was ordered to fulfill this mission. In the 6th century BCE, the Greek lyric poet Stesichorus recited a poem named *Geryoneis* to tell the story of Geryon's murder. In his poem the red monster was winged. Centuries later, in 1998, the Canadian writer Anne Carson wrote *Autobiography of Red* to tell the story of a red, winged boy named Geryon. Although most people around him do not acknowledge his strange physical features, Geryon is ashamed of his wings and red complexion. Sexually abused by his older brother and hopelessly in love with an older boy named Herakles, Geryon struggles to claim a subjectivity of his own as an outcast in a hostile modern context characterized by anxiety, confusion and pressure. The yearning of such a subject for liberation from the power-principle is in contradiction of the regulated norms of a constricting sovereignty that desires docile subjects to achieve ultimate productivity throughout objectification of free subjects.

According to Michel Foucault's philosophical insight defining the relationship between the individual and the power-principle, the main concern of disciplinary power is individuals. As he asserts with reference to the ideal exercise of the power-principle, the hegemonic discourse in a society never deals with a mass or a group, rather, it deals with individuals. Foucault writes, "Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific techniques of a power that regards individuals as objects and as instruments of its exercise" (Foucault 1979: 170). Accordingly, discipline is a certain technology of power that produces individuals as its objects and instruments. However, what will happen if an individual resists being objectified as an instrument by the power system and fragments itself from the principled totality? To be more specific, what aspects and features of the power-principle should be resisted in order to claim a self? Is it possible to claim that subjectivity is not only externally imposed and a resistant subject can make, unmake and create an autonomous self?

In his *College de France* courses, Foucault illustrates that subjectivity is a social, cultural and historical form rather than a pre-given substance that is outside of and therefore distinct from sociocultural norms and values. He suggests that subjects must critically analyze their present, identify power-principle norms, practice resisting them and reuse them in new ways to create totally new forms of subjectivity (Taylor 2011: 6-7). An overview of disciplinary power and its exercise through

Autobiography of Red, demonstrates that Carson's modern Geryon is a fragmented subject who resists the norms and values of his power-disciplined society in an innovative way to make his own subjectivity rather than accepting an imposed, predefined, productive subjectivity. Modern Geryon's life story is not simply the life story of a mystical red monster rejected by totality because of his unusual physical features. It is a critical modern reinterpretation of an estranged subject who analyzes norms, resists them, reinvents them and claims a self within the social fabric driven by the power-discipline discourse.

The first characteristic that makes Geryon different from other individuals surrounding him is his red, winged body. His distinctive body is in a constant clash with the disciplinary power's tendency to target individuals' bodies in order to shape and objectify them. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault writes: "what is essential in all power is that ultimately its point of application is always the body" (Foucault 1979: 14). The power discourse constantly tries to control the activity of bodies to form them into more obedient and more useful individuals in the service of a normative totality. Power-principle explores the human body, breaks it down and rearranges it as a machine that, along with other optimized bodies, may operate "as one wishes, with techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, docile bodies" (138). As Foucault explains, disciplinary power does not modify the body through extreme violent manipulation but through detailed training to reconstruct a new body with new kinds of habits and skills. Ironically, developing new skills and mastering abilities opens space for resistance to disciplinary power. Disciplinary power thereby attempts to resolve the threat of resistance through production of restrictive norms or standards. Such established norms are combinations of qualities that render an individual distinct from others. These norms of individuality consist of cellular, organic, genic and combinatory traits. What follows is an engagement with these traits and the manner in which Carson's modern Geryon embodies them.

According to Foucault the cellular form of individuality insists on ordering individuals properly within space. It rests on the division of individuals from the others and distribution of them in space properly, in order to break up collective activities that deter the progress toward the goal of utility (141-3). As Foucault makes clear, cellular trait is a spatial manipulation technique that discipline uses to transform, rank and distribute subjects in a network of relationship to obtain an efficient end.

This art of distributions produces cellular individuality mainly by enclosing a space different from all others through the use of walls or gates to prevent any form of direct connection or attachment among individuals. In the case of modern Geryon, his red body breaks the first individuality standard, the cellular form, by writing a descriptive photographic autobiography. Modern Geryon begins to express the close bond between his body and the mythic Geryon's body by writing an autobiography when he is still a child. Within the six-line autobiography, *Total Facts*

Known About Geryon, he forms a close bond between his own individuality and the slain mythological Geryon:

Geryon was a monster everything about him was red. Geryon lived
On an island in the Atlantic called the Red Place. Geryon's mother
Was a river that runs to the sea the Red Joy River Geryon's father
Was gold. Some say Geryon had six hands six feet some say wings.
Geryon was red so were his strange red cattle. Herakles came one
Day killed Geryon got the cattle. (Carson 1998: 37)

Geryon's factual understanding of his self-subjectivity is just like a sequence of fragmentary photos that are following each other with the possibility of any interpretation. In the case of Geryon, fragments carry more truth about his subjectivity. Geryon's autobiography is full of ambitions and desires that are described in a vivid photographic manner. His close connection with his surrounding space through the shared colour of red demonstrates a strong attachment and mutual belonging between individual and its occupied space that obviously resists cellular trait. In addition, living alone on a faraway island is a perfect trope to convey the sense of detachment from disciplinary power that tends to control and order his body. This passage resembles a photo with Geryon and his bizarre red body at its centre. The strong sense of abundance and lavishness that is emphasized throughout his body figure—six hands, six feet and wings—shows the failure of the power discourse to monitor and form his subjectivity. This functions as an interpretation of Herakles as a necessary presence that allows for control of the the rebellious fragment.

Continuing the red account of mythological Geryon, the modern Geryon dares to question the act of killing. His simple question is: Why did Herakles kill Geryon?

Just violent.

Had to it was one of His Labors (10th).

Got the idea that Geryon was Death otherwise he could live forever. (37)

The third option—Geryon being Death—shows authority's fear of the fragment. The totality is not able to imagine that a fragment is capable of leading an autonomous self-governed life. For the totality, separation is death and death lives forever because it puts an end to everything and everyone while there is no end for itself. Thus, the totality renounces the fragment/Geryon as metaphysically dead and sends Herakles to stage his physical death as well. In the modern context, the authority, through the agency of a teacher, tries to control modern Geryon's autobiography and forces him to write a new ending. He writes the following: "New Ending. All over the world the beautiful red breezes went on blowing hand in hand" (38).

However, through this new ending the fragment is breaking down the power discourse's control of its physical movement.

The image of the beautiful red breezes circulating all over the world is a metaphor for Geryon's freedom in bodily activity which defies organic norms of individuality. Disciplinary power tends to produce an organic individuality by establishing coded activities for the body to follow. Foucault calls this individuality norm "organic" because the hegemonic discourse causes the individual to lend itself to disciplinary practices all on its own, "as if spontaneously and naturally" (Foucault 1979: 155). By being identical in redness with the flying breezes, Geryon's body is able to circulate freely and resists the trait of controlling activities and movements. However, if mystical Geryon is defeated by Herakles' poisonous spear, the power system tries to subjugate modern Geryon in the custom of wrong love.

When Herakles suddenly ends their relationship, Geryon tries to reach consistency in his own identity by bringing all the fragments of his life together. He tries to overcome the memories of lost passions created by the sexual transgression of others—his brother and Herakles—who conducted his passions in some inappropriate times and places. The presence of past in the present creates a mood of resistance to the third individuality norm of the disciplinary power. The discourse constantly tries to constitute an appropriate form of individuality by subjecting the individual's body to a perpetual progress—an optimal end; Foucault names this demand "the organization of genes" (30). However, Geryon reacts to this established norm through photography while the disciplinary power applies the following three methods to enforce genetic individuality on the subject: first, through the division of time into distinct segments, like periods of practice and training; second, through the organization of these segments into a plan proceeding from the simplest elements; through the ascription of an end to these segments in the form of progress assessments; and finally, through the production of a series that assigns exercises to each individual according to rank (Hoffman 2011: 30).

The temporal dimension of photography succeeds in negating the time-based genetic norm. Geryon is aware of the disturbing nature of photography and later in a brief encounter with Herakles in a video store, he tells his ex-lover that photography is disturbing and "[it] is a way of playing with perceptual relationships" (Carson 1998: 65). For Geryon, photos are the prisons of living memories that convey a sense of becoming. Geryon's photographs cannot be categorized in distinct time periods—they reflect the continuity of becoming in time. They are the presence of past in both the present and coming future. Geryon's photography is interestingly concentrated on fragments. His first photos are taken in a library and show only the shoes and socks of each person.

Taking those fragmentary photos in a library—a symbol of knowledge— can act as a counter-hegemonic attempt to question the perfection of a system that tries to frame everything and everyone. Moreover, the fragmentary nature of Geryon's

photography shows how he struggles to recreate the subjectivity that he is banned from. He protests against his brother, his mother, his lover, and the system that has constantly tried to form and frame him into a unitary shape by denying his diverse orientation and aspiration to become someone different. As the novel moves forward the photographic technique of approaching reality as fragmented and temporal establishes Geryon's core method to perceive and connect with the outside world. From here, he approaches his own physical and corporeal interactions photographically too. For example, in his second encounter with Herakles he likes to touch in slow succession each of the bones of Herakles' back:

As it arched away from him into

Who knows what dark dream of its own, running both hands all the way
down

From the base of the neck

To the end of the spine which he can cause to shiver like a root in the rain.
(141)

Geryon tries to break his lover into fragments and view these fragments through close-up pictures. He tries to explore the unknown body of Herakles, which stands as a perfect totality made and controlled by power-principle individuality norms in comparison to his different beastly body. The photographic technique of seeing established beings negates the tendency of genic organization to progress in a linear time line to reach an optimal end.

However, Geryon's freedom from the hegemonic discourse is not fulfilled completely, because he is a twice-fragmented subject who tries to bring his fragments together and internalize them to reach unity. Just like his surrounding system, he forces his fragments to come together in the frame of his body. Since there is no strong principle to curb the passions and desires of fragments, they erupt, grow and deform the prison/body. The red colour of the body and the wings stand for such an internal revolt. But the revolt is only at the verge of being, not becoming because the wings, which also symbolize freedom, are not yet able to fly. Geryon's wings are related to the Yazcol Yazcamac myth that is the story of wise creatures who descend into the volcano and return against all odds. Ancash— Herakles' new boyfriend—reveals for Geryon that Yazcamac return as red people from the volcano by use of their wings while all their weaknesses are burned away and they are transformed into immortal beings. The Yazcol Yazcamac myth is an account of freedom and release from the normal subjectivity imposed by disciplinary power. As Foucault explains, to open a space of concrete freedom is not to figure out who a subject might be; it is to experiment and try different possible transformations to see where they might lead.

Geryon's wings are the most important part of his body to help him to resist the power-principle's final trait in the individual's normalizing project that is composition of forces. The composition of forces creates combinatory individuality by first treating individual bodies as mobile elements to be connected to other individual bodies as well as the totality of bodies. Second, by coordinating the time of each of these bodies to maximize the extraction of their forces and to combine them with others for the optimal results and finally by commands that may be transmitted through signs and that therefore need not be verbalized, much less explained (Foucault 1979: 164-7). Geryon's different physical features, his red-coloured body and, even more importantly, his wings never let his body connect to other individuals' bodies in a homogenous manner. However, his wings make his flight from the disciplined society possible. Moreover, his connection with photography and narrating his autobiography as well as his fragmentary perception of other beings through photography again negates the concept of framed time. Here the medium of photography and the camera itself act as an impenetrable shield against the hegemonic power's methods of control. Geryon as the photographer is always behind the camera and is never present in his photos. His subjectivity as an autonomous individual is formed through the point of view of a camera lens and his medium of self-expression cannot be interpreted through the disciplinary power's standard sign system. As a result, the power-principle and its other objectified subjects are only the viewers of his photographs and do not have access to the subject behind the camera.

Once the power-principle to frame the subject is suspended within the narrative, freedom and flight become possible. As the *Autobiography of Red* had begun with a mythic tale, it also takes on the style of mythical writing at the end. A mythic red monster thinks of immortality while standing in a bakery near a volcano in South America. The monster is looking at fire's furious flame that challenge any imposed framing forces and he is ready to fly to the volcano. Geryon thinks:

We are amazing beings,

We are neighbors of fire.

And now time is rushing towards them

Where they stand side by side with arms touching, immortality on their faces, night at their back. (Carson 1998: 146)

The red winged monster is ready to embrace his different life as an autonomous fragment. He has achieved this autonomy through fragmenting time and memory. Carson's story of Geryon as a distinctive modern subject, who regains his subjectivity despite frameworks of control and discipline, is not merely a record and autobiography of an isolated individual's personality. It is the autobiography of an excluded and abused fragmented modern subject who desires to be. By exploring and accepting his counter-heteronormative physical features and focusing on

the temporal dimension of photography as well as its fragmentary nature, the red modern monster finally learns to resist the controlling discourse and rethink his different red body as a self.

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