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'A Little Beyond Human': Expanding the Conceptualisation of the Human Subject in Carson's *Autobiography of Red*.

Jewel Oreskovich¹
University of Western Australia

Elizabeth Grosz states that the promise of posthumanist theory is 'its ability to generate concepts that allow us to surround ourselves with the possibilities for being otherwise'.² When Anne Carson translated the fragments of Stesichoros' *Geryoneis* into a contemporary pseudo-autobiography, centred on a queer, red, winged, and androgynous POC named 'Geryon', I argue that she positioned herself at the forefront of the posthumanist venture.³ In this work, entitled, *Autobiography of Red*, Carson subverts the heteropatriarchal dehumanisation of deviant embodiment by granting Geryon a sense of autonomy, recognising him as both the monstrous Other, and as a valid 'subject'.⁴ In my reading of *Autobiography of Red*, I argue that Carson engages with ideas of monstrosity, humanness and subjectivity in her presentation of the monster Geryon as a protagonist in the text. Carson highlights the validity and 'possibility' of 'being otherwise', by invoking Stesichorian precedent and gifting the audience insight into Geryon's lived experience from his own abject perspective. In Carson's recognition of the monstrous, the binary dialectics of the modern patriarchy are perverted, and abstracted and themselves become, 'otherwise'; an expanded conceptualising of 'the human subject'.⁵ In this paper I will explore Carson's talent for revealing alternate possibilities for texts such as *Stesichoros'* in which monstrous individuals are given autonomy, validated and thereby, liberated.

Introduction

The complication of contemporary notions of monstrosity, subjectivity and Otherness that I identify in Carson's text is demonstrably present also in Stesichoros' *Geryoneis*. *Geryoneis* is an early Greek epic poem, written in Doric dialect in the sixth century BC, of which we possess 38 extant fragments.⁶ It is a rewrite of the prominent mythology surrounding Herakles' labours in which he must complete twelve ostensibly impossible tasks to obtain a reward of full immortality; the tenth being the acquisition of the cattle of the monster Geryon. In *Geryoneis*, Stesichoros retells only this episode, of Herakles' tenth labour, and positions Geryon as the subject rather than Herakles. Though Stesichoros' Geryon is

¹ ORCID ID: 0000-0002-8352-3901.

² Elizabeth Grosz. 'The Future of Feminist Theory: Dreams for New Knowledges?' in H.Gunkel, C.Nigianni, and F. Soderback (eds), *Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice* (2012):14.

³ Anne Carson. *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* (1998):14,37. The translation of Stesichoros' fragments I have primarily used for this text is: David A Campbell. *Greek Lyric: Stesichorus, Ibycus, Simonides and Others* (1991). The manner of Carson's translation is discussed further in Beasley, Bruce. 'Who Can a Monster Blame for Being Red?' In J. M Wilkinson (ed), *Anne Carson: Ecstatic Lyre* (2015), 75. Ivan Callus, Stefan Herbrechter, and Manuela Rossini. 'Introduction: Dis/Locating Posthumanism In European Literary And Critical Traditions.' *European Journal of English Studies* 18, no. 2 (2014):117 discuss the importance of such literature in furthering the posthumanist venture.

⁴ This Otherness is expanded upon in Rosi Braidotti. *The Posthuman* (Cambridge 2013):15, 68, 81.

⁵ This expansion of conceptualisation that Carson is partaking in is also considered 'a posthuman theory of the subject,' as demarcated in Braidotti 2013; 37, 61.

⁶ Campbell 1991: 29, 65-89.

ultimately conquered by the hero Herakles, the prioritisation of Geryon's perspective, and the heroic aspects afforded him, represent a deviation from the Classical representation of the monster as incongruous with the human, or the subject.

A reimagining of Stesichoros' *Geryoneis*, author and classicist Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red* is verse novel comprised of a prologue, a set of re-envisioned fragments (entitled 'Red Meat: Fragments of Stesichoros'), three appendices (a,b and c) and the main narrative (which is broken up into titled subsections). Despite having 'Autobiography' in its title, the narrative proper is written from a third person perspective, and follows the main character, Geryon, as he formulates his own autobiography through sculpture, writing and photography. Like Stesichoros, I argue that Carson's positioning of Geryon as a subject, and foregrounding of his perspective as the protagonist of her text, challenges the human/monster binary. In my reading of the text, I argue that Carson's complication of this binary, and positioning of the monstrous Geryon as a valid subject, emphasises the uncategorisable, and the validity of 'being otherwise' to prioritise an expanded conceptualisation of the human subject.

There exists a gargantuan framework for the history of this modern conceptualisation of the human subject and its treatment in the twenty-first century. I will briefly summarise those ideas which I found suggestive for my conceptualisation of the human subject and the monstrous Other in writing this paper. Judith Butler notes that the only valid and therefore, human, subject in modern, western society is the cisgender, white, heterosexual, normate male.⁷ This subject is formed initially on the model of 'Protagoras as the measure of all things', and then reaffirmed in the following centuries not only as a representation of the crux of 'bodily perfection' but as the only identity that can be granted what Butler terms, 'social recognition' in heteropatriarchal society.⁸ Through this embedded cultural repetition of binary gendered, racialized, ableist, and ageist discourse, a humanist dialectic of the self and the Other was born, according to Rosi Braidotti, who states that any 'difference [was viewed] as a pejoration', and positioned only those who can uphold the ideal as a self-evident and self-contained subject, equated with universal rationality, at the top of the metaphorical hierarchy.⁹ In this paper I intend to evince how, in my reading of *Autobiography of Red*, Carson challenges this notion of the 'viable' subject by positioning the monster Geryon, who does not conform to this conceptualisation of the human subject by any means, as the main subject and protagonist in the text. In positioning Geryon as her protagonist in this way, I argue that Carson expands this conceptualisation of the human subject to fit him, and those like him, complicating the seemingly fixed binary.

An Epithet of Redness

What I consider to be Carson's expansion of the fixed ideas of this 'viable', human subject in *Autobiography of Red*, can be foremost found in her dually innovative and inspired use of language.¹⁰ In the preface of the text, Carson praises Stesichoros' use of language, detailing

⁷ Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Tenth Anniversary Edition*. 2nd ed. (2002): 15, 45, 157; Judith Butler. *Undoing Gender* (2004): 2,53. 'Normate,' is a term used to describe an idealised able-bodied individual by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. *Staring: How we Look* (2009).

⁸ Braidotti 2013: 1, 13, 24, 65; Butler 2002: 15, 45, 157; Butler 2004: 2, 53.

⁹ Braidotti 2013: 15, 27, 28, 68; Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975): 138. Christina Franzen. 'Sympathising with the Monster: Making sense of Colonisation in Stesichoros' *Geryoneis*.' *Quaderni Ubinate Di Cultura Classica* 92, no.2 (2009): 62-63 notes how monsters are the ultimate Other.

¹⁰ Monique Tschofen. "First I Must Tell About Seeing": (De)monstrations of Visuality and the Dynamics of

the manner in which he departed from the 'fixed diction' of Homer and his traditional epithets and in this way began to 'undo the latches of being'.¹¹ Carson writes:

Stesichoros released being. All the substances in the world went floating up. Suddenly there was nothing in the world to interfere with horses being hollow hooved. Or a river being root silver. Or a child bruiseless...¹²

Carson highlights how Stesichoros' unprecedented adjectival use created a new state of 'being' in which 'all of the substances in the world went floating up' or were 'released' from the fixed discourse that had previously categorised them. I read Carson's metaphor of 'floating up' as likening this freedom achieved by Stesichoros to an 'out-of-body-experience' in which individuals journey away from their earthly bodies and view them from a new perspective. Carson states that because of Stesichoros' literary 'releasing' there was 'nothing in the world to interfere' with new and expanded conceptualisations of all beings. I would argue that this statement imbues an almost environmentalist posthuman perspective into Stesichoros' work, in which the set discursive boundaries of human and non-human subjects come tumbling down in order for Carson to make them anew in her revisioning.¹³

Invoking the precedent of Stesichoros, and the subversive intention with which she endows him and by extension herself, I argue that Carson 'undoes the latches of being' in the creation of her own epithets. One such epithet is her use of the term 'red' as an adjectival description of the main character of the text, the monstrous Geryon.¹⁴ Murray has stated that 'moments of Carson's text suggest that Geryon is synonymous with 'red', as if his entire being can be encapsulated by the simple adjective.'¹⁵ In response to this claim, I have come to read Carson's epithet of redness as a signifier of both the internal and external aspects of otherness that Geryon possesses. The use of this epithet then establishes Geryon as an Othered entity through a humanist lens, such that Carson can apply Braidotti's 'posthumanist turn' and stretch the conceptualisation of the human subject to include him, and othered identities such as him, within the text.¹⁶ The epithet of Geryon's redness as a signifier of his difference, and the link between his redness and his monstrosity, features in the first line of the text, situated in the 'Red Meat: Fragments of Stesichoros' section.

Geryon was a monster, everything about him was red.¹⁷

This line explains the epithet, expressing how, due to his deviance from the heteropatriarchal ideal, Geryon is rendered a 'monster' and inhuman, which subsequently

Metaphor in Anne Carson's Autobiography of Red.' *Canadian Literature*, no. 180 (2004):13.

¹¹ Carson 1998: 4, 5, 9. Stesichoros' use of language is also discussed in Franzen 2009: 59. Adrian Kelly. 'Stesichoros' Homer.' In *Stesichoros in Context*, edited by Adrian Kelly and P.J. Finglass (2015): 21-44 explores how despite his experimental tendencies in *Geryoneis*, Stesichoros works reflected a deep knowledge and appreciation of Homer.

¹² Carson 1998: 5.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Franzen 2009: 63 details the historical tradition of redness with Geryon and why Carson may have chosen it.

¹⁵ Stuart J. Murray. 'The Autobiographical Self: Phenomenology and the Limits of Narrative Self-Possession in Anne Carson's Autobiography of Red.' *English Studies in Canada* 31, no. 4 (2005): 102.

¹⁶ Braidotti 2013:16. As Butler 2004: 3 states, 'There is a certain departure from the human that takes place in order to start the process of remaking the human.'

¹⁷ Carson 1998: 9.

renders ‘everything about him’ red, tainting him with aberration primarily. Its position as the opening line of Carson’s narrative privileges the notion of Geryon’s difference and his deviance as a monstrous body. As the first line of the text, it foregrounds what I read to be Carson’s complication of the typically distinct binary between the narrative roles of the protagonist and the monster, and representation of an expanded conceptualisation of the human subject that encompasses both, and informs the remainder of the narrative.

I would argue that Carson’s use of the epithet of redness here is an example of what Georgis terms ‘the defamiliarizing devices of language’.¹⁸ I consider Georgis’ definition as particularly apt for Carson’s purposes, as Carson’s use of the epithet of red is abstract and links a familiar word with an unfamiliar meaning.¹⁹ This linking of a familiar word with an unfamiliar meaning has an alienating and ‘defamiliarizing’ effect that parallels Geryon’s alienation, and Otherness, as a result of his deviant ‘redness’. It gives the adjective an undefinable and ambiguous quality, removed from our previous understanding of the term as readers.²⁰ This defamiliarization of language, and use of red as an epithet to create a new ‘possibility for being’ red, invokes Stesichoros’ subversion of historically imposed boundaries upon the scope of the epithet, and mirrors Carson’s expansion of the human subject through the autonomising of Geryon as an ambiguous anthropomorphic entity.²¹ It is within this space of ambiguity that many socially monstrous identities have historically resided, uncontained by the demands of the dimorphic gendered and sexual binary, and it is the proliferation of this tradition of ambiguity that allows Carson to create an unprecedented space for the human subject to expand into; a red space of monstrosity and possibility.²²

A Reclamation

By marking her text as an autobiography despite it functioning otherwise, Carson prioritises the subjectivity of her literally and figuratively monstrous character, Geryon. In doing so, I argue that she subverts tradition in which POC, queer, disabled and femme bodies were unable to ‘assume the position of the speaking subject’, and instead allows Geryon the reclamation of his own mythology.²³ Initially, Geryon writes down the ‘total facts known about Geryon’ on the first page of his autobiography, which includes an assortment of information about Geryon from various real-world scholia, including different considerations of his appearance.²⁴ This summary of facts ends with the death of himself and his dog at Herakles’ hands, mimicking Geryon’s murder in the mythology. Yet, with the prompting of his teacher, Geryon later chooses to rewrite the final line of this summary of facts, and in doing so, reclaims his own narrative. He writes:

¹⁸ Carson 1998: 4, 5.

¹⁹ Dina Georgis. ‘Discarded Histories and Queer Affects in Anne Carson’s Autobiography of Red.’ *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 15, no. 2 (2014): 156.

²⁰ Georgis 2014: 156. Carson discusses this intentional ambiguity in Kevin McNeilly. ‘Gifts and Questions: An Interview with Anne Carson.’ *Canadian Literature* 176, no. 176 (2003):12-25. The defamiliarisation of language is expanded upon in Jes Battis. ‘Dangling Inside the Word She’: Confusion and Gender Vertigo in Anne Carson’s Autobiography of Red,’ *Canadian Literature*, no. 176 (2003): 203.

²¹ Here Carson further engages in what Braidotti 2013: 88 terms the ‘defamiliarisation of the dominant vision of the subject,’ in her paralleled defamiliarisation of language.

²² Battis 2003: 199, 202 discusses how this ambiguity may be further associated with the fragmented ambiguity of Stesichoros’ original *Geryoneis*.

²³ Beasley 2015: 78. Butler 2002: 158; Franzen 2009: 63, 67; Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge* (2020): 20; Lunblad 2020: vii. Geryon has an interesting reflection on this history of subjectivity and his place within it in Carson 1998: 52.

²⁴ Carson 1998: 37.

New Ending.

All over the world the beautiful red breezes went on blowing hand
In hand.²⁵

In my reading of this alteration, I argue that Carson positions Geryon not only as the subject of the text but gives him the power to choose his own ending. By shifting perspective to the 'beautiful red breezes' that will continue blowing even after his death, Geryon does not erase his death, or deny the original end of his mythology, but evinces an alternative perspective upon which to focus. This new ending prioritises the beauty of what endures past his death, rather than the violence of his own abject suffering. This rewrite of Geryon's autobiography at his own hand parallels Carson's rewrite of the *Geryoneis*, in which Geryon's alternative perspective is prioritised, and the narrative of Geryon's life and survival as a monstrous figure is foregrounded, instead of his death at the hands of the celebrated hero.

If we accept that redness is a signifier of difference in the text, the 'beautiful red breezes' that 'went blowing on hand in hand' can be read as a metaphor of inclusivity and endurance. In this metaphor, the red breezes constitute those who are considered different, like Geryon, and have historically been made abject for their deviance from the ideal human subject. That they 'went on blowing' is a metaphor for the endurance of these individuals through the micro and macro aggressions they must weather for this deviance: with Herakles' attempt to slaughter Geryon for his monstrosity being a prime example. That they are 'hand in hand' also invokes connotations of unity and endurance. This new ending, replacing the original ending's focus on the murder of the monstrous Geryon, can be read as a message of recognition for that which all these historically discarded figures have had to endure, and includes them, and more importantly their survival and endurance, in a mythology that has canonically focalised their trauma and demise.

I identify Carson's exploration of this notion of inclusivity also in her reworking of Stesichoros' fragments in the first section of her text. In my reading of these reworkings, I suggest that both Carson and Stesichoros humanise Geryon, but argue that they do so in very different ways. Stesichoros' humanising of Geryon is well documented by Eisenfeld, who rightly suggests that Stesichoros confuses the binary of hero and monster by gifting his Geryon attributes associated with the ideal Greek hero. While I agree with Eisenfeld's notion that Stesichoros humanises Geryon by gifting him attributes that fit the patriarchal ideal, I also purport that Carson humanises Geryon by expanding the conceptualisation of the human to include him. I identify this inclusion of Geryon in the notion of the human in my reading of Carson's most overt reworkings of the *Geryoneis* fragments, which I will term the 'Simile' and the 'Centaur Fragment' for the purpose of this paper.

The Poppy Simile

What I deem the 'Poppy Simile' features in fragment S15 of Stesichoros' *Geryoneis*, in which Geryon's head falling to the side at the moment of his death is compared to the movement of a poppy. This fragment, and Stesichoros' use of the poppy imagery in reference to Geryon and his monstrosity/humanity has been considered by both Franzen and Eisenfeld in detail.²⁶ I hope to add to this discussion by considering how Stesichoros'

²⁵ Carson 1998: 38.

²⁶ Eisenfeld 2018; Franzen 2009.

emphasis of Geryon's social viability and mortality in in this simile is reworked by Carson, to empower Geryon as a subject despite his monstrosity. In fact, fragment S15 is reworked by Carson twice in her text. The first of these reworkings is in fragment XIV of her 'Red Meat: Fragments of Stesichoros' and in the second instance, the fragment is reimagined as an eroticised interaction between Herakles and Geryon during a plane ride in the narrative proper. It is this pruriently erotic revisioning that most neatly emphasises Carson's empowerment of Geryon as an otherwise deviant figure, and as such I will focus my reading upon this second rewrite.

To examine Carson's revisioning of the fragment S15 I will consider only the excerpt containing the poppy simile that Carson explicitly reworks in *Autobiography of Red*. This excerpt of fragment S15 of Stesichoros' *Geryoneis* is translated by David Campbell as the following:

[A]nd the arrow held straight on the crown of his head, and it stained with gushing blood his breastplate and gory limbs; and Geryon drooped his neck to one side, like a poppy which spoiling its tender beauty suddenly sheds its petals.²⁷

Stesichoros humanises Geryon in the use of this poppy simile by referencing and aligning Geryon with the death of a heroic Homeric figure and emphasising Geryon's mortality and, thereby, his humanness. Geryon's death at the hand of Herakles, as emphasised in this excerpt, parallels the demise of the Trojan Gorgythion in the *Iliad*, where he is compared, using the same language, to 'a poppy' (μήκων) which 'to the side lets drop its head'.²⁸ Eisenfeld (2018:92) argues that this comparison between Geryon and the heroic Gorgythion not only grants Geryon a measure of honour and social viability, but in the invocation of the Homeric reference to death and the natural element of the dying poppy, Geryon is associated with the concept of mortality and is thereby humanised.²⁹

In Carson's text, Stesichoros' fragment S15 is reworked into an erotic scene in a subsection entitled 'Gladys'. In this scene, Herakles sexually stimulates Geryon during a plane ride whilst Herakles' new partner sleeps beside them. This erotic entanglement occurs in the aftermath of the breakup between Herakles and Geryon, with Geryon seeming to still harbour unrequited romantic feelings for Herakles. Fragment S15 of *Geryoneis* is alluded to as the intimacy begins, in the line:

[H]e felt Herakles' hand move on his thigh and Geryon's head went back like a poppy in a breeze.³⁰

In Carson's reworking of this fragment, she evinces the eroticism present both in Stesichoros' and Homer's use of the poppy imagery in Geryon's death scene.³¹ In the excerpts from Stesichoros and Homer, the poppy, passively dropping its head and abruptly shedding its petals, is configured as a symbol of violent defloration as Geryon is

²⁷ Campbell 1991: 77.

²⁸ Hom. *Il.* 8.306-8.

²⁹ Eisenfeld 2018:80 notes the honour of Stesichoros' Geryon. Franzen 2009:67-72 also argues for the death imagery implicit in the poppy reference. Ian Rae. "Dazzling hybrids": The poetry of Anne Carson.' *Canadian Literature*, 166, (2000): 24, details how Geryon may have been regarded as 'death,' himself, at the time of Stesichoros' writing.

³⁰ Carson 1998:118-119.

³¹ The eroticism of this fragment is evinced in Franzen 2009: 68-70. Ian Rutherford. 'Stesichorus the Romantic.' In *Stesichorus in Context*, edited by Adrian Kelly and P.J.Finglass (2015): 98-107 argues for Stesichoros' potential penchant for romance and the erotic, based on the testimony of Athenaeus and his highly skepticism authorship of three romantic fragments.

conquered and overcome by Herakles. The erotic aspect of this violent deflowering is further emphasised by the metaphorical eroticism of flowers in the invocation of deflowering and the loss of virginity.³² This invocation is supported by the fact that the poppy, specifically, already possessed erotic connotations at the time of Stesichoros' activity.³³ I read the image of the poppy shedding its petals as a violent and erotic metaphor for Geryon's loss in Stesichoros' mythology, and in this sense, I argue that violence becomes synonymous with an act of sex in fragment S15.

I read an inversion of this relationship between sex and violence in Carson's reworking of the poppy simile. The transformation of Stesichoros' fragment into an overt homoerotic exchange in Carson's text foregrounds the death-like violence of Geryon's social othering as a queer individual and emphasises Carson's inversion. Where the fragments of Stesichoros and Homer can be read to position violence as an act of sex by utilising erotic allusion in a climactic battle scene, Carson presents sex as an act of violence by fixing her erotic exchange with a lethal undercurrent. The context of Geryon's painful, unrequited love, in tension with Herakles' nonchalance add to this notion and endows the sexually driven scene with a foreboding and complex sense of emotional trauma.

Furthermore, I would argue that this pruriently homoerotic focus also empowers Geryon by transforming his moment of death in Stesichoros' *Geryoneis*, into a receipt of pleasure in Carson's text. The image of the poppy shedding its petals as a symbol of the loss of Geryon's life is reworked into a dynamic image of vivification and ecstasy as the poppy is livened by the breeze, and Geryon experiences a moment of erotic gain in Carson's rewrite.³⁴ The implied shift of the arrow from the figurative phallus in Stesichoros,³⁵ to the literal phallus in Carson, also grants Geryon its possession and situates him further in the position of power within the context of the original fragment. The brevity of the line, concise treatment of Stesichoros' simile and dynamism of 'a poppy in a breeze', lends Geryon's movement a self-possessed strength in contrast to the slow drop of his neck to 'one side' in submission after his death in David Campbell's version. Carson's simultaneous empowerment of Geryon and emphasis of his social deviance serves to humanise Geryon, like Stesichoros, but in this case by expanding the domain of the human subject to include him, rather than moulding him to fit the patriarchal ideal.

The Centaur Fragment

What I read as Carson's exploration of violence and eroticism in the Geryon myth, and humanising of deviant figures to expand the conceptualisation of the human, is also demonstrable in Carson's identifiable reworking of what I deem the 'Centaur Fragment'. The centaur fragment constitutes Stesichoros' fragment S19 of *Geryoneis*, which is reworked by Carson into fragment VII of her 'Red Meat: Fragments of Stesichoros'. Carson's fragment VII, entitled 'Geryon's Weekend' reads as the following:

Later well later they left the bar went back to the centaur's

Place the centaur had a cup made out of a skull Holding three

³² The long literary tradition of this metaphor is mentioned by Franzen 2009: 68 in his analysis of the simile.

³³ Franzen 2009: 68.

³⁴ Rae 2000: 30.

³⁵ Franzen 2009: 71.

Measures of wine Holding it he drank Come over here you can
 Bring your drink if you're afraid to come alone The centaur
 Patted the sofa beside him Reddish yellow small alive animal
 Not a bee moved up Geryon's spine on the inside.³⁶

This fragment of Carson's parallels the following fragment (S19) in Campbell's translation of *Geryoneis*:

And taking the bowl-cup with the capacity of three flagons he drank it holding it to his lips- the bowl-cup which Pholos had mixed and handed to him.³⁷

Fragment S19 is believed to describe Herakles' visit with the centaur, Pholos. The canon puts Pholos 'in possession of a very strong wine' which he gives Herakles to drink per instruction by Dionysus.³⁸ As the story goes, the scent of this wine then attracts a multitude of other centaurs in the vicinity who attack Herakles and Pholos in a fit of sensational rage. In response, Herakles slaughters the centaurs with an array of poisoned arrows he has in his possession. Ultimately, Pholos dies as a result of touching the poison in the act of burying the fallen centaurs.

What I regard to be most notable about alternative translations of the Stesichoros' fragment S19, and Carson's reworking of it, is the discrepancy regarding who the male subject of the fragment is. In the original fragment there is no subject named, but translators and scholars tend to agree that the 'he' in question is Herakles, based on alternate sources for the myth and contextual clues.³⁹ Carson completely neglects this tradition by choosing to instead grant Geryon the role of the male subject in the fragment.

This shift of subject means that the narrative differs markedly in Carson's reading, and subsequent reimagining, of the fragment. Yet again, what is imagined as a scene of violence in *Geryoneis* is reimagined into an instant of eroticism in Carson, with her fragment VII appearing to detail an intimate fling between Geryon and Pholos. In invoking the tradition of violent exchange in the erotic encounters between Geryon and his male sexual partners, the fragment can once again be read as positing sex as an act of violence. By representing their homoerotic entanglement in this way, Carson emphasises the internal and external forces of violence that have threatened, and continue to threaten, the queer individual as social punishment for their deviance.⁴⁰ This reading is supported by the fact that in the original mythology both Pholos and Geryon are situated as monsters that become eventual victims of Herakles, who here functions as a symbol of the patriarchal ideal.⁴¹

Despite this focus on violence, like Carson's reimagining of the poppy simile, the transformation of what would have been a death scene in the original text into a primarily erotic encounter in Carson's fragment VII can be read to empower both Pholos

³⁶ Carson 1998: 11.

³⁷ Campbell 1991: 81.

³⁸ Diod. Sic. 4.12.3-8. As described by Eisenfeld 2018: 96.

³⁹ Campbell 1991: 80-81; Eisenfeld 2018: 96.

⁴⁰ Butler 2002: 45. Foley, Helene P. *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (2001):11. Marilyn B. Skinner. 'Woman and Language in Archaic Greece, or, Why is Sappho a Woman?' In E. Greene (ed), *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches* (1996): 176.

⁴¹ Diod. Sic. 4.12

and Geryon. Having transformed their traditionally physical monstrosity into a social abjection due to their queer nature, Carson goes on to humanise the pair in her execution of a casual normalisation of their queer romance, using easily recognisable heterosexual context clues associated with 'one-night-stands'. This shift of focus denies the tradition that centres their demise and dehumanises them, and replaces it with an episode detailing their humanness, in their shared pleasure and connection.

I read Carson's granting of the position of the subject to Geryon in her fragment VII as another example of this empowerment of deviant figures, as it works to expand the conceptualisation of the human subject. The shift of subject to Geryon removes Herakles from the fragment entirely. This removal is significant and allows the audience insight into Geryon's lived experience outside of the influence of Herakles. In turn, Geryon is validated as a humanised subject in Carson's rewrite, rather than a monstrous rival against which Herakles' ideal identity is measured.⁴²

Taking into account the recognisable alignment of Carson's fragment VII with fragment S19 of Stesichoros' *Geryoneis* and the absence of a clear subject in the original fragment, I argue that Carson not only rewrites the fragment in the literal, modern sense but can be said to have rewritten even the original fragment with her insertion of another potential subject, imbuing it with 'the possibility for being otherwise'. This reconfiguration of both fragment VII and, potentially fragment S19, by Carson not only calls for a new perspective on the human subject in the present but destabilises the patriarchal tradition which seems to inform the Classical world by exposing it as a modern construct. In this way, I read Carson's reimagining of Geryon's subjectivity in this fragment as an encouragement for the reader to expand their perception of the human, and that which is regarded as absolute.⁴³

I identify this notion of questioning modern absolutisms regarding humanness, subjectivity and deviance also in Carson's choice of language, grammar and prosaic structure in her rewrite of the centaur fragment. Upon first reading Carson's fragment VII, one immediately notices the unusual use of enjambment, and ostensibly chaotic application of capitalisation, splaying the sentences haphazardly across each consecutive line and emphasising what would be grammatically deemed the wrong words in the sentence. An example of such would be the line 'Place the centaur had a cup made out of a skull Holding three', in which both place (being the last word of the previous sentence) and holding (due to the lack of full stop before it) are, at first glance, incorrectly capitalised. The word 'place' here, and others like it in this passage, as the last word of the previous sentence and the first word of the second line, serve a dual function. These words simultaneously represent Geryon's sense of displacement due to his deviation from the social norm (as the incorrectly capitalised end of a sentence), but also his capacity to function in an utterly unique and equally important way (as the necessary, capitalised beginning of a line). A lack of even basic punctuation, such as commas and full stops, may also be noted.

This subversion of known grammatical rules is a technique often used in poetry, but I read its use here as emphasis of Carson's subversion of the patriarchal order, in her exploration of an expanded human subject and the possibility for being otherwise. In the rejection of all known grammatical rules, a sense of legibility is sacrificed for an alternative and creative ambiguity in which the reader must learn to navigate the new patterns. I read this new space of creative ambiguity that Carson crafts as being symbolic

⁴² Eisenfeld 2018: 93 remarks on how Stesichoros uses Geryon's character as a tool to guide the reader's perspective on Herakles and his mortality.

⁴³ Eisenfeld 2018: 80.

of the new perspective of the human subject Carson constructs in this fragment. The unconventional structure and ambiguity it brings gives the reader the opportunity to manipulate the rhythm of Carson's fragment VII to suit their own preferences, which, in turn emphasises how our understanding of the world rests on perspective alone rather than what are perceived to be concrete truths and absolutisms.

The prioritisation of the uncategorisable is channelled also into what I read as an exploration of the tension between the themes of life and death in fragment VII. This paradox invokes a sharp sense of foreboding in the fragment. This sense of foreboding can be identified in the phrases 'cup made out of a skull', and 'bring your drink if you are afraid', which parallel this erotic scene with the death-filled scene in the original mythology. These phrases emphasise the fact that both Geryon and 'the centaur', Pholos, are victims of the patriarchal tradition, and, if not slaughtered, become Othered because of their physical and sexual deviance from the ideal norm. The paradox between life and death is also emphasised in the inclusion of the 'cup made out of a skull', and the 'small alive animal' that crawls up Geryon's spine,⁴⁴ reinforce the mortality, and therefore humanity of both these otherwise monstrous characters. In fact, 'the small alive animal' that 'moves up Geryon's spine', in the fifth line, emphasises the life within Geryon, and can be read as a symbol of how Carson has brought Geryon and Pholos 'back to life' in her fragment by refusing to detail their gruesome deaths, and instead focusing on their shared desire to express their humanity. The emphasis on the fact that the 'Reddish yellow small alive animal' is 'Not a bee', and the intentional (yet technically incorrect) capitalisation of 'Not', reinforces that Carson is working in the realm of Grosz's 'otherwise', and refuses to categorise the animal or subscribe to binary discourse. The animal, like Geryon, is something Other, yet the focus upon it in the fragment is not upon what it is, but the fact that it is alive. I read this prioritisation of documenting the animal's life over its categorisation as a parallel to Carson's engagement with Geryon primarily as a subject in the text, without attempting to label his social position or sexual, racial or gender identity. The fact that the bee 'moves up Geryon's spine on the inside', not only provides an imaginative representation of erotic titillation and the literally animalistic desire felt by Geryon in the fragment, but emphasises his queer internality, and the focus upon his subjectivity and perspective in Carson's text.

The Uncategorisable

Geryon's queer internality is explored elsewhere in the text to emphasise Geryon's perspective of the world, in which he exists untethered to the realm of binary or category. Early in the narrative proper, after experiencing sexual assault at the hands of his older brother, Geryon develops, or gains access to, an interior sense of self, and states that 'inside is mine'.⁴⁵ I read the phrase, 'inside is mine' as referring to the fact that it is only in Geryon's own interior world that he can amass any sense of self-possession, whereas in the outside world, his monstrosity monopolises his existence and leads to social abjection and disposability.⁴⁶ In Geryon's autobiography he 'set[s] down all inside things', which Carson's frame narrator then relates to the audience, and in this way, Geryon's alternative

⁴⁴ Stesichoros' Homeric focus on the themes of life and death, as well as mortality and immortality are discussed by both Eisenfeld 2018: 90-93 and Franzen 2009: 62-71.

⁴⁵ Carson 1998: 25, 29, 37, 97.

⁴⁶ Georgis 2014: 158, 159. The importance and vitality of Geryon's interior perspective, as a queer and deviant figure, is expanded upon in Butler 2002: 91 and Astrida Neimanis. *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (2017): 57.

perspective of the world is prioritised, separate from that of the heteropatriarchal 'outside' world, and his monstrosity is validated, recognised, and humanised.⁴⁷

Geryon's focus on the inside often translates into an inability to differentiate between his own perception and what we perceive as reality. This inability to differentiate leads to the inclusion of seemingly illogical and synaesthetic sentiments, such as 'roses screaming' in which his own emotions are prioritised and appear to infiltrate his understanding of the world primarily.⁴⁸ In addition to this defamiliarization of language being a continuation of Stesichoros' deviation from the 'fixed diction of Homer', I read this collusion of senses and prioritising of the abstract as another subversion of the hegemonic structure by Carson.⁴⁹ It creates a new perspective of the world in which emotions are prioritised over rationality, destabilising the social hierarchy that places the rational masculine at the top, and in turn signifies a new conceptualisation of the ideal social subject as one who feels. This foregrounding of Geryon's abstracted perspective of the world is another way in which Carson, through Geryon, can be read as literally creating a new way of seeing and of being otherwise.⁵⁰

What I read as Carson's prioritisation of the uncategorisable to present an expanded conceptualisation of the human subject⁵¹ is present also in the ambiguous gender and sexuality of her main character. The monster Geryon is never labelled with a specific gender or sexuality in the text, and often seems to oscillate⁵² between genders. In fact, Carson's Geryon 'dangles inside the word she like a trinket at a belt'. The word 'dangling' recalls something loosely secured, symbolic of Geryon's lack of adherence to the masculine gender, or alternatively something flaccid, evoking imagery of the masculine genitalia in this sense to symbolise Geryon's dissidence from erect masculinity. The belt has connotations of punishment in the modern imagination, for one stepping out of line – or, in this case, the possibility of Geryon's social punishment and relegation to the monstrous for his departure from expected gender performance. In the same vein, the trinket, of a flimsy, and irreverent nature, comes to symbolise Geryon and his abject gender ambiguity. The belt, in its sturdiness, cyclical shape, and function of keeping order and serving the patriarchal and modern function of assuring modesty, comes to symbolise the expected dual-gender regime of the patriarchal system and the gendered human subject. If we acknowledge the Butlerian notion that 'gender is the repeated stylization of the body⁵³ a natural sort of being', then the gendered body, and therefore the ideal male human subject, becomes a social construction, rather than a natural disposition. I read Geryon's ability to dangle between these categories as akin to a posthuman ecofeminist perspective of the self, such as that of Astrida Neimanis, who likens the human to 'bodies of water' that 'leak and seethe'. Like Neimanis' bodies of water, Geryon in his ambiguity, is uncontained by the limited and restrictive boundaries asserted by western tradition, and possesses sexual difference that has been biologically 'complexified, elaborated', and is likely to be 'developed further'. In this reading, Carson's fluid and⁵⁴ is aligned with the natural

⁴⁷ The use of the term 'recognised,' in this paper refers to the social recognition granted to viable subjects as explored in Butler 2004: 2.

⁴⁸ Battis 2003: 200. This identification of emotions as the key to consciousness is expanded upon in Braidotti 2013: 78. In lines such as those found in Carson 1998: 12, 84.

⁴⁹ Carson 1998: 4.

⁵⁰ Braidotti 2013: 67. Murray 2005; Tschofen 2003: 10.

⁵¹ Carson 1998: 57.

⁵² Battis 2003: 201.

⁵³ Battis 2003: 45, 201.

⁵⁴ Neimanis 2017: 126-129. Geryon's fluidity is further discussed in Rae 2000: 32-34.

body, and the gendered male body of the ideal human subject is subversively aligned. In nonchalantly endowing Geryon with a fluid gender identity, the fluid body is naturalised, recognised, and made viable, such that Carson not only expands the conceptualisation of the human to include those who 'dangle' between categories but goes one step further to subversively align the current gendered human ideal with that which is forced and abnormal.⁵⁵

Conclusion

In a subsection towards the end of the narrative proper entitled 'Tango', Geryon stands in front of his hotel room window in the middle of the night, reflective, and wonders:

[A]t what point does one say of a man that he has become unreal?⁵⁶

I read the term 'Unreal' here as approaching the Butlerian definition of those monstrous identities that are not granted social recognition due to their social deviance and cease to exist as real human subjects in the patriarchal gaze.⁵⁷ Thus, Geryon is really asking: at what point does one become the Other? This question is effectively answered only pages earlier in a subsection entitled 'Distances' in which Geryon sits in an Argentinian café, with a man that he has befriended, named Lazer. In the middle of a conversation the two engage in about his four-year-old daughter, Lazer describes her as:

[N]ot quite human or perhaps a little beyond human.⁵⁸

Both the girl's relegation to the status of the subhuman Other by her own father, and her youth, suggest two possible answers to Geryon's earlier question. The first, is the implication that certain identities are born othered and cannot possibly fit into the category of the ideal human subject. For example, the daughter is a girl, and is thus automatically excluded.⁵⁹ The second is the implication that all beings are born 'unreal' or 'not quite human', if not 'beyond human', until they grow old enough to internalise their own lack of recognition (as Geryon has), and the discourse that has barred them from being 'real'. In the second case, the reality of the human is exposed by Carson as simply a construction, rather than a truth. In either case, the correction of the initial descriptor of the child as 'not quite human', with the gloss 'or perhaps a little beyond human', is representative of the reader's journey through the text. Over the course of *Autobiography of Red*, I argue that Carson transforms those othered monstrous identities who are seen initially as 'less than human', into validated subjects that fit into her new conceptualisation of an expanded human subject, gloriously 'beyond' that which has previously been defined as such.

Where Stesichoros humanises the monstrous Geryon within the bounds of tradition, I have argued that Carson seeks to humanise Geryon by breaking the tradition of the human subject in order to create a new one. What I read as Carson's invocation of Stesichorian experimentation in the defamiliarizing of language, subjectivising of a monstrous protagonist that is more than a 'little beyond human', and alignment of the audience with Geryon's lived experience and subjectivity, not only subverts the traditional definition of the human subject but exposes it as an absurdist construction. As a result of

⁵⁵ Battis 2003: 198.

⁵⁶ Carson 1998: 98.

⁵⁷ Butler 2002: 15, 45, 157.

⁵⁸ Carson 1998: 94.

⁵⁹ Butler 2002: 15, 45, 157; Butler 2004: 2, 53.

this subversion of the fixed notion of the human subject, I believe that Carson expands the term into something new and alien, comprised of glorious ambiguity - and only that.