The Weight of Impossibility

USING FAIRY TALES TO REIMAGINE THE FEMINIST SUBJECT
AN HONORS THESIS BY CARLISLE HUNTINGTON
Introduction

Kelly Link, Carmen Maria Machado, and Helen Oyeyemi are three contemporary feminist storytellers who in the last five to seven years have published massively successful collections: Get in Trouble (Link, 2015), What is Not Yours, is Not Yours (Oyeyemi, 2015), and Her Body and Other Parties (Machado, 2017). Many of the stories presented in these collections ask questions such as, how can women resist a system which prefigures them to be docile and submissive? To what extent does achieving subjectivity really grant us liberation? And perhaps, most pressingly, if the female subject is prefigured to submit, are there other avenues for resistance that transcend individual subjectivity? If so, what shape might these new opportunities take? In addition to these larger thematic concerns, these stories also engage with the fairy tale genre in one way or another. While there are many reasons writers have taken up the fairy tale—a delight in the pure “cerebral pleasure of the recognition of patterning,” as Angela Carter once said, or the “narrative quickness” it affords— for Link, Machado, and Oyeyemi, I believe there is a direct relationship between their choice to engage with the fairy tale genre and their shared interest in the formation of female subjectivity. These three authors are drawn to the fairy tale because they are interested in the role storytelling plays in the formation of political subjects and the maintenance of existing structures of power. Throughout this paper I hope to demonstrate how these three authors appropriate formal and thematic elements of the fairy tale as well as experiment with narrative point of view to critique contemporary forms of neoliberal feminisms and explode the notion of a unified and coherent female subjectivity.

To help refine such ever-elusive terms like “the subject” and “subjectivity,” I will turn to literary theorist Kandice Chuh and her theory of “subjectlessness” as articulated in her book

Imagine Otherwise: On Asian American Critique. While Chuh’s text constructs a theory of understanding Asian-American subjectivity, I believe many of her insights can elucidate our understanding of gendered subjectivity as well. After considering Chuh’s theory, I will give a brief history of the literary fairy tale and the ways in which its coherence and continuity as a genre depends on the labor of female storytellers and the manner in which it was weaponized to position women as docile political subjects. I will then proceed with an analysis of one short story from each author that I feel is particularly emblematic of the ways in which they use the fairy tale to deconstruct female subjectivity. The stories under consideration include: “Secret Identity,” by Kelly Link, “Real Women Have Bodies,” by Carmen Maria Machado, and “Sorry Doesn’t Sweeten her Tea,” by Helen Oyeyemi. By this paper’s conclusion, I hope to successfully demonstrate the ways in which these three authors wrestle with the politics of storytelling. Each of these stories complicates the notion that the opportunity to represent or construct your own subjectivity through story is inherently liberatory, exploring the ways in which reproducing one’s subjectivity can make them even more vulnerable to forms of commodification and consumption. In fact, we may go so far as to claim that female subjectivity is, in some sense, defined by this very vulnerability, but more on that later.

Kandice Chuh and the Problem of the Subject

Before we explore the exciting and innovative fictions of Link, Machado, and Oyeyemi, we must first define what we mean by “the subject.” For this, I turn to Kandice Chuh and her theory of “subjectlessness.” In her book, Imagine Otherwise: On Asian American Critique, literary theorist Kandice Chuh advocates for the adoption of a discourse of “subjectlessness,” in the context of Asian of American Studies. Since a “subject” can only become recognizable by

2 Chuh, Kandice. Imagine Otherwise: On Asian American Critique. 9
“conforming to certain regulatory matrices” to adopt a theory of subjectlessness is to provide a conceptual space that prioritizes difference, without essentializing it. By accepting a text to be subjectless, Chuh argues that we (the reader) do not approach the text looking to complete an already fraughtly constructed social category, but rather prime ourselves to examine the configurations of power and knowledge presented throughout the text that grant such categories coherence to begin with. Since her goal is primarily to develop an alternative method of reading ethnic literatures, Chuh does not spend a lot of time exploring the ontological implications of her concept of “subjectlessness,” which are indeed quite radical. According to Chuh, to be recognized as a “subject” in American society is to be subjectified. This reframes the achievement of subjecthood, making it not a liberatory or empowered state, but rather a state of inherent disempowerment as the granting of one’s social and political autonomy (or at least the impression thereof) is at the mercy of an interpretive “other” who must judge the authenticity and adequacy of one’s given performance of a predetermined subject position. The “subject” is no longer an ontological actor (as the “subject” of a sentence), but rather “an epistemological object” that is only granted agency through an external authority (as in a King and his “subjects”). Rather than being born with an essential core self or identity, one it’s forced to produce themselves as subjects to satisfy the needs of a given system. To produce subjectivity is then to reproduce subjugation.

Chuh identifies this dynamic in the literary marketplace, calling it the “burden of authenticity,” a term used to describe the pressures felt by writers of certain ethnic backgrounds to perfectly reproduce and perform their identities according to certain audience expectations.

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3 Ibidem
5 Ibidem, 20
This tension is compounded by the fact that the very term “Asian-American” is itself a living contradiction, since “Americanness” is predicated on the exclusion of a variety of ethnic others and “Asian” collapses a myriad of ethnic and cultural identities whose only commonality lies in their mutual discrimination under the American political system. Chuh argues that by accepting Asian American studies and literature to be a “subjectless” discourse, we tacitly accept the subject position of “Asian-American” to be a constant state of deconstruction, “at once making a claim of achieved subjectivity and referring to the impossibility of that achievement.” To grasp subjectlessness means to understand that:

“Asian American” is/names racism and resistance, citizenship and its denial, subjectivity and subjection—at once becoming and undoing—and, as such, is a designation of the (im)possibility of justice, where “justice” refers to a state as yet unexperienced and unrepresentable, one that can only connotatively be implied. Arguably, the overarching purpose of Asian American studies has been and continues to be pursuit of this (im)possibility, the pursuit of an as yet unrealized state of justice by tracing, arguing, critiquing, and by alternatively imagining the conditions that inscribe its (im)possibility.  

I feel the need to reproduce Kandice Chuh’s argument here because, while her work focuses on Asian American Studies, Feminist scholarship has also reached a similar kind of “crisis of the subject,” so to speak. After all, how is one supposed to organize around gender equality, when the very concept of gender is inherently unstable? How do we organize around an identity that has been imposed upon us without merely reproducing modes of subjection? Like Chuh, I believe these authors are also contending with a similar state of (im)possibility. But the weight of this (im)possibility is great. It takes a very real toll on the human bodies who must carry it.

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6 Ibidem, 8
Chuh’s assertion that it is the work of the critic to move perpetually closer to this yet unrealized state of justice is indeed a true one. But there remains the question of how are we to live on in the meantime? This, I believe, is the question that motivates the three stories presented and provides at least part of the explanation as to why these authors share a predilection towards fairy tales.

Unlike myths, which tend to provide large metaphysical explanations or etiological origins of natural phenomena, fairy tales and folk tales are more concerned with the processes of daily life, such as marriage, child-rearing, the securing of food and resources, and navigating transitions from childhood to adulthood. With their origin in communal storytelling, fairy tales, even in their literary transformations, are collaborative and instrumental efforts to address or process a communal ill. In the wake of the #MeToo movement, there has been a hypervisibility around different kinds of violence against women. The age of the internet has undoubtedly given women a platform to share their stories, but it has also given a new platform for different forms of gender-based violence. In this era of global late capitalism, it can be difficult to find space or time to process these atrocities as a collective and we are often left feeling more fragmented and alienated than ever. Perhaps these feminist authors are moved toward the fairy tale because it represents a kind of shared consciousness, free from the “burden of authenticity” that Chuh describes as it bears no allegiance to realism. It is a space of shared symbolic resonances, that historically has represented opportunities for both female freedom and entrapment.

**The Fairy Tale: A Genre of Female Subjectivity & Subjection**

Our modern conception of the “Fairy Tale” is a capacious one that carries with it several centuries worth of storytelling traditions and the theorizing thereof. For the purposes of this study, let us understand a “fairy tale” to mean a short, fantastical story that, while it can take
written form, originates from an oral story-telling tradition. It is also worth noting that we will be focusing primarily on Western European fairy tale traditions. Many scholars divide the fairy tale into two major categories: the literary “Fairy Tale,” which include written adaptations of traditional tales by specific authors, and the common “fairy tale,” which refers to the oral folk tales upon which the former are based. While the distinction between these two categories is not absolute, it is an important one. As folklorist Jack Zipes notes: “folklore thrives on the collective, active participation of the people who control their own expressions. Literature as the printed form of individual and collective products of fantasy brings an entirely new dimension to the way people relate to their own cultural expressions.”

It is not the technology of printing alone that is the decisive factor in separating the “Fairy Tale” from the “fairy tale” but rather, the formation of a new literate middle-class that seized control over most forms of cultural expression. Beginning as early as the 16th century and continuing well into the 20th, the creative and intellectual labor of the lower classes, especially women, was appropriated by elite authors of the emerging bourgeois class to suit their particular political needs.

The first known usage of the term “fairy tale” by a writer to describe their own work was in 1697 by the French writer and aristocrat Madame d’Aulnoy in her collection entitled Les Contes des Fees or Tales about Fairies. With her powerful female fairies and the happy opulence of their “queendoms,” Madame d’Aulnoy’s tales presented a defense of the fashionable secular culture emerging in 17th century France that ran directly counter to pietistic sensibilities of the fin de siècle. At the same time, the associations of fairy tales with women and children of the lower classes seemed to neutralize their cultural threat.


8 Zipes, Jack. The Irresistible Fairy Tale: A Social History of the Genre. 25
tale was deeply tied to the interrogation of oppressive gender politics. But these critiques only served the interests of the upper class. The tales did allude to the laboring classes, especially midwives, a role nearly always relegated to fairies in d’Aulnoy’s stories. But the nurses, midwives, maids, and nannies that undoubtedly inspired her tales are never named. They are instead transfigured into mystical mouthpieces for her palace politics. The old midwife, nurse, or crone would soon go on to represent the generic storyteller of the literary fairy tale, her character serving as “a bardic repository of tribal lore.” She would serve to naturalize the modern ideology embedded in the tales, disguising it as ancient folk wisdom, eternal and self-evident.

Around the same time D’Aulnoy was writing her subversive fairy tales, Charles Perrault published his *Contes du temps Passé, or Tales of Olden Times*, with its subtitle “Tales of Mother Goose.” Perrault did not put his name on the first edition of the collection and instead attributed it to his son, who had written down all the stories he heard from his nurses growing up. The volume was dedicated to the niece of King Louis XIV, princess Elisabeth Charlotte d’Orleans. The cover of the original collection depicts an old peasant woman with her mouth open, presumably in the act of storytelling, as three aristocratic children eagerly lean in to listen to her tale. However, while the cover centers the storyteller, as scholar Christine Jones points out in her book *Mother Goose Refigured*, Perrault’s dedication to the princess seems to cast the reader as the more powerful role. The dedication reads:

> Mademoiselle, whatever difference there may be between the childish simplicity of these stories and the extraordinary constellations of knowledge that nature and education have brought together in you, I am not as worthy of blame as I may at first appear if you consider that these

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9 Zipes, Jack. *The Irresistable Fairy Tale*. 29
tales almost always contain a very wise lesson, which becomes more or less apparent according to the sharpness of the listener’s perception.\textsuperscript{11}

Through the “sharpness of the listener’s perception” these vulgar peasant tales can be transformed into “constellations of knowledge.” It is up to the upper class to consume the voice of the peasantry and in their consumption refine it and reveal the tale’s hidden wisdoms. The dedication shifts the binary of teller and listener presented on the cover illustration, to that of the writer and reader, privileging a new epistemology around the written word and methods of interpretation, rather than the participatory experience central to oral storytelling. While we may think the old woman on the cover to have some agency in her act of storytelling, the dedication tells us that she is merely the vessel which brings the raw materials that authors like Perrault will transform into cultural capital. As Jones puts it:

The designation ‘Of the Past’ in Perrault’s title does not date the ideas in a time gone by but announces a Modern project: to update inherited wisdom and make it pleasing and meaningful to perspicacious young courtiers such as Elisabeth d’Orleans.\textsuperscript{12}

Perrault appropriates these peasant tales, many of which depict real violence women face, such as rape, incest, child and spousal abuse, and sanitizes them according to the traditions of French decorum. By appropriating the voice and image of the crone or old “mother goose,” Perrault erases the narratives of women in rural communities telling stories to each other, and transforms tales which once were a genuine expression of working-class hardships, into an instruction manual for how the French aristocratic woman should best navigate courtly society.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, 19

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid 91
Debates concerning the political subjectivity of women, or “Querelle des femmes” (the woman question) played a central role in the first official attempts at nation-building in France.\textsuperscript{13} Part of the Académie française, France’s highest council on arts and letters, and historiographer to the king, Perrault was charged with “nothing less than developing new representational and propagandist strategies for the Sun King.”\textsuperscript{14} It is no wonder then why he would feel motivated to construct a collection of stories that artfully demonstrated the ideals of womanhood, and dedicate it to Princess Charlotte, “the granddaughter of France,” as she comes of age. Perrault’s collection undertakes a larger task than simply “updating inherited wisdoms” as Jones suggests. It outlines the parameters of the French female subject, figuring women of French society to be valuable insofar as they manage to soothe the savage nature of men by performing their role as dutiful wives and mothers. Perrault’s tales construct female subjectivity as contingent upon their ability to reproduce or reaffirm the male subject. It is for this reason that nearly every tale in Perrault’s collection follows the tale type Walter Burkert identifies as “the maiden’s tragedy.”

In his book, \textit{Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religion}, author Walter Burkert classifies these stories as “initiation tales,” also referred to as “the maiden’s Tragedy.” According to Burkert, the key defining patterns in fairy tale stories relating to female experiences are: an eruption in a young girl’s life that causes her to become alienated from her family and community, a period of isolation in some remote or idyllic setting, a catastrophe that drives her away from this setting due to her transgression of a promise or her being violated, a period of wandering in which she must atone for her mistakes, and lastly the accomplishment of a set of tasks, or a rescue that brings about a happy ending. While the qualities listed may appear to be a

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 50
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 48
straightforward bildungsroman, or adventure quest, what is unique to the structure of “the maiden’s tragedy,” is the central role of sexual violation. In this tale formation, it is not just any catastrophe that upsets the young girl’s state of normalcy, but specifically “the intrusion of a male, in most cases a special male, a demon, hero, or god who violates the girl.”\textsuperscript{15} Burkurt concludes that the maiden’s tragedy tale-type reflects early initiation rituals determined by natural biological processes:

\begin{quote}
It is obvious that the sequence of the maiden tale closely follows the natural, biological life cycle of women in transition from childhood to adulthood. By nature, there are three dramatic events that work this change: menarche, intercourse, and pregnancy. The parallels in the tale pattern are seclusion, sexual encounter, and childbirth. This is no coincidence; the biological foundation of culture, however much it is verbalized in the tradition of the tale, could not be more obvious.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

But Burkert’s biologically deterministic reading of these tales sweeps under the rug the ideological work they perform: to define womanhood as a state of erasure or sublimation in service to the male subject. In the formation of the maiden’s tragedy, the young girl’s “initiation” into society manifests as the violation of her bodily autonomy. The maiden’s tragedy story type does not merely dramatize the process of biological maturation. Rather, it reflects a larger cultural mechanism whereby young girls must become sexual objects in order to become cultural subjects. A condition which does not apply to their male counterparts, despite their equal role in sexual reproduction. In these stories, the young maiden’s emergence into society is also her erasure, as her identity becomes subsumed by the needs and desires of others.

As discussed above, the continuity of the fairy tale genre relied on the voices of women, particularly those of the lower laboring classes, such as governances, wet nurses, and midwives.

\textsuperscript{15} Burkert, Walter, \textit{Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religion}, 71
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 73
Many fairy tales, especially those of the maiden’s tragedy format, present the earliest representations of female subjectivity. But even so, it is a subjectivity that serves to reinforce its own erasure, placing the female protagonist in a paradoxical state of non-being, as her process of becoming is co-opted and commodified for male consumption. We might think back to Chuh’s argument, wherein one cannot be a subject or represent their own subjectivity without also becoming “an epistemological object.” Subjectlessness complicates the very notion of a “coming-of-age” by denaturalizing the idea of the subject, asking us to consider who truly benefits from this process of reification. The tragedy of the maiden is that she may only embark on her quest insofar as it leads her into the arms (or mouth, or claws) of the male other. If selfhood is truly an illusion in service to reproducing cultural hegemony, what are we to make of resistance? This is one of the questions that animates Kelly Link’s short story “Secret Identity,” wherein Link constructs a character who attempts to write her way out of the maiden’s tragedy.

**Kelly Link, The Maiden’s Tragedy, and the Commodification of the Female Self**

In “Secret Identity” Link provides the perfect dramatization of the Chuh’s critique of neoliberal subjecthood by creating a character who attempts to narratively reconstruct their own subjectivity, an exercise which, due to systemic pressures results in a fractured sense of self as demonstrated by the story’s ever shifting point of view. The story follows fifteen-year-old Billie Faggart as she leaves her small-town home of Keokuk Iowa for the big city, in search of her true love, Paul Zell, whom she met on “FarAway,” an online fantasy role-playing game, while posing

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17 Chuh, Kandice. *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian American Critique*. 9
as her older sister, Melinda. Unfortunately, this meeting never comes to fruition. Instead, Billie gets swept up in a joint Superhero and dentist convention being held at the hotel where she was supposed to meet Zell. The morally ambiguous world of superhero-celebrities leads Billie to contend with the ways in which her own life is made of a complex web of half-truths, elaborate fantasy, and of course, many many secret identities. At its core, “Secret Identity” is a story about telling and retelling stories. Through Billie’s narration we come to understand the conflict of the story not merely to be whether or not Billie will meet Paul Zell, but whether she can re-write her own narrative such that she can escape subjugation.

However, this process is not a seamless heroic pursuit. In fact, it seems to cause Billie a fair amount of psychological distress, to the point where she completely dissociates from her active self, creating a kind of split consciousness comprised of Billie the author, who is writing the letter to Paul Zell, and Billie the character, who enacts the narrative quest. This disassociation is formally represented by the dual points of view Link employs: the first-person letter Billie is writing to Paul Zell, and the third-person narrative she writes in order to tell the story of what happened in New York. This modulation is a technique developed out of necessity in order to move the story forward. Consider the story’s opening line:

_Dear Paul Zell. Dear Paul Zell_ is exactly how far I’ve gotten, at least a dozen times, and then I get a little further, and then I give up. So this time I’m going to do something new. I’m going to pretend that I’m not writing you a letter Paul Zell, dear Paul Zell.

--Link, 83

Here, we see that something about the letter form doesn’t allow for the story to narratively move forward. Just as Paul Zell represents the threat of male consumption to Billie’s subjecthood, so

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18 For the sake of expediency, moving forward I will refer to these two “versions” of Billie as Billie-A and Billie-C respectively.
too does this direct addressal to Zell immediately stop the story in its tracks, rendering it a static object. By beginning with *Dear Paul Zell*, Billie immediately hands authority over to him as the reader and interpreter of her text and by extension *herself*. It is only by adopting a third-person narrative that the story can move forward, and Billie can effectively author herself into being. Still, this transformation is unstable and as the passage implies, recursive. This is but *one* iteration of a letter Billie has started and *re*-started at least “a dozen times.” It is a revision of a multiplicity of other tellings, and by extension, other *Billies*. Even in this, presumably “final” version, Billie does not *stop* writing to Paul Zell, she only *pretends* to. Billie is able to narratively innovate in order to propel herself forward within the story, but even so she always ends up circling back to Paul Zell, specifically, to *justify* her authorial choices to him.

These constant asides to Zell delay the pace of the narrative like a stalling car and constantly remind us that Billie’s autonomy—both as author and as subject—is still contingent upon this absent male reader. Take, as an example, this pivotal scene which, in many ways, is the inciting incident of the story’s manifested plot:

All Billie can think about is you, Paul Zell. She has the key to Paul Zell’s hotel room. Back before she met you, way back in FarAway, Billie was always up for a quest... And the quest always went like this: Find yourself in a strange place. Encounter a guardian. Outwit them or kill them or persuade them to give you the item they’ve been guarding. A weapon or a spell or the envelope containing the key to room to 1584. Except the key in Billie’s hand is a real key and I don’t do that kind of quest much anymore. Not since I met you, Paul Zell. Not since the Enchantress MagicEightBall met the Master TheifBoggle in King Nermal’s Chamber and challenged him to a game of chess.

—Link, 90
Here, Link breaks down the structure of the typical fairy tale quest, laying bare the mechanics of the narrative Billie is attempting to construct. In his chapter on the structure of the folkloric quest, Walter Burkert defines the “adventure quest” tale as not a series of words, but “a sequence of events and actions that make sense… It has an obsessive impact combined with a freedom of expression.” According to Burkert, the repetition of the folktale and the transference of its knowledge does not depend on any precise sequencing of words, but rather the manner in which the storyteller may “expand, abbreviate, change the words, and translate” familiar “programs of action” that allows for the complex experience to become not only communicable, but pleasurable for the listener, ensuring that the tale will live on (though transformed). Returning to Billie’s tale, we see that Paul Zell’s presence stalls narrative movement both in terms of the tale’s content and the tale’s teller. In other words, Zell’s presence prevents both Billie-C from moving forward in the story and Billie-A from moving forward with the story.

If we are to see Billie’s making a character out of herself as a means of seizing control of her own identity through the opportunity to author herself, then this conception is complicated by the fact that Billie does not seem to have control over her own story. The “I” that is Billie-A invites the “you,” or Paul Zell, back into the telling of the narrative, which leads Billie-A to deviate from the story action for another two-and-a-half pages. Following this modulation in perspective, Billie-A goes on to give Paul Zell a “minor confession” in which she attempts to separate which parts of her online persona are “true” and which have been fabrications. After this exercise leads to her musing about the nature of truth, she says “Sorry. This is supposed to me. Not me solving the big mysteries of the universe and everything” (92). This line reminds us that the central project of Billie’s narrative enterprise is not to come to a fuller understanding of herself or the world around her for her own benefit, but to produce her(self) for Paul Zell’s
consumption. If “this”—the narrative—is supposed to be Billie, then by reading it, Paul Zell consumes Billie. Her performance of an identity demonstrated through narrative construction becomes a commodity for the absent male other. And we, as readers, are also implicated in this consumption. When Link employs the second person “you,” the reader stands in the place of Paul Zell, gesturing towards a larger societal structure wherein women are produced only to be consumed and/or subsumed by others.

Billie’s authorship may grant her a certain degree of agency within the structure—it is through these means that she is able to advance beyond the first page, after all, but her story still begins and ends with Paul Zell. He is still the spectator and consumer to her process of actualization and the final judge of its product. By creating a character of herself, she also creates an object of herself. What Link reveals through this multi-layered narrative is that self-actualization does not equate to liberation. In this way, Link’s story perfectly dramatizes Chuh’s problem with the subject: to create subjectivity is to necessarily recreate subjugation.

**Carmen Maria Machado and the Mass Production of Womanhood**

If writing our way into our own narratives only furthers the cycle of consumption, then may the liberation of the female subject lie in her very erasure? What would it look like if instead of attempting to counteract or prevent the erasure of the maiden’s tragedy, we embrace it as the ontological starting point? To investigate this idea further, I would like to turn our attention to another writer of fantastic feminist fiction, Carmen Maria Machado, particularly the story “Real Women Have Bodies.” Like Link’s “Secret Identity,” Machado’s “Real Women Have Bodies” explores the seemingly inevitable process of objectification and commodification involved in women’s coming of age. However, whereas Link illustrates this process on the
individual/psychological scale, Machado’s story is explicitly invested in how the 
commodification and consumption of the female subject operates on a global scale, creating a 
dynamic web of exchanges wherein women are not only made consumable for men, but for other 
women as well. Just as there is no such thing as ethical consumption under capitalism, so too is there no true individual liberation of the subject in an oppressive system. However, to produce this reading, one must read against the narrator’s point-of-view and instead focus on the objects/subjects that occupy the narrative’s periphery.

“Real Women Have Bodies,” follows an unnamed narrator, a young woman, who works at a high-end dress boutique at the local mall called Glam, as the country is besieged by a strange pandemic whereby women mysteriously turn into phantoms. She falls in love with her snarky co-worker, Petra, whose mother makes dresses for the store. When Petra takes the narrator home to her mother’s shop, she discovers that Petra’s mother is sewing the phantom women into the dresses. Petra and her mother claim that they tried to get the phantom-women to leave, but they refuse, seemingly wanting to be made into garments. Soon, Petra too falls victim to the pandemic. The rest of the story follows Petra’s last days as an embodied person as the narrator attempts to reconcile with this tragedy. When Petra finally disappears, the narrator breaks into Glam and attempts to “free” the phantom women in the dresses, but they refuse to move.

On the first read, it is easy to regard Machado’s story as a mere allegory for the worldwide injustice against women under a patriarchal capitalist structure. Women are exploited across the globe in a myriad of ways and through capitalism, made complicit in their own exploitation, as represented by the endless purchasing of the “haunted” dresses and the poor fading women’s zombie march into literal objectification in the form of being sewn into clothing. This read is further supported by the narrator’s own fear of the fading crisis. From the start of the
story, the faded women are characterized as pure victims by the narrator, their fate one worse than death. However, upon further examination, I would argue that Machado’s story is doing much more nuanced work than merely depicting systemic patriarchy with a fabulist filter. In fact, there’s much evidence to suggest that Machado is encouraging us to read against the narrator’s perspective and critique her understanding of liberatory feminism. The central flaw in the narrator is that her perspective erases the agency of the faded women. While the faded women are certainly limited in their ability to participate in society, they are not dead. They still exist in the world, even if it’s an existence the embodied person cannot understand.

In this way, the faded women become a metaphor not just for the erasure of women, but also a vision of some alternative kind of subjecthood. If we accept the socio-political subject as the presentation of a self that conforms to society’s “regulatory matrices,” and therefore is an “epistemological object,” then “fading” actually has the potential to be a liberatory process. To remind us once more, what makes the maiden’s tragedy tragic is that the young girl is denied the full extent of subjecthood as her male counterpart, partly because the male’s subjective fulsomeness depends on the female lack. By deeming this narrative unfolding as tragic we are implicitly valuing and legitimizing the status of the male subject as the only, default position worth striving for. The goal becomes not to imagine other ways of being a subject in the world, but to achieve a state of being that has been historically denied. Machado’s story asks us to imagine more creative avenues for liberation than merely inverting existing systems of oppression. Considering this conceptual framework, we can begin to understand Machado’s story as not merely a critique of capitalist patriarchy, but also a critique of the kinds of liberatory feminism that can only imagine agency in the oppressor’s own terms.
To understand the full extent of this critique, let us first define how Machado frames what it means to ‘have a body’ within the context of her story. Like Chuh’s understanding of the subject as subjugated, for Machado, to be a woman and to have a ‘body’ necessarily means to be open and available for consumption. One of the most salient articulations of this dynamic comes early in the text, when the narrator is standing outside of Glam, taking a break with a group of her male coworkers who go on to define what ‘makes’ a woman. After some seto-philosophical musings about why women need bodies, one of the boys concludes that trying to hold a woman without a body is like “trying to drink water without a cup” (128). In one short exchange of dialogue Machado sets the ontological stakes of her story. A woman without a body is like water without a cup; a woman without a vessel in which her essence may be contained and easily consumed for the nourishment of others, is not a “real woman” within the logic of the story. As such, Machado asks us to consider: what’s so good about being embodied? Despite the narrator’s apparent fear of the fading women, likening their glowing forms to “after-thoughts” (134), the story itself seems to present a different view. Like the short bit of dialogue between the narrator’s co-workers, this view is always on the periphery, on the outskirts of the narrator’s field of vision, and just barely within the reader’s. Another moment that challenges us to think about how the story understands what it means to be embodied can be found in a news clip the narrator hears in passing on the television:

Pundits point fingers at each other, screaming as the co-host between them shimmers and waves under their studio lights. They are talking about how we can’t trust the faded women, women who can’t be touched but can stand on the earth, which means they must be lying about something, they must be deceiving us somehow (146).

It is clear from the fear and paranoia exhibited by the male pundits that the mere idea of the fading women—of women who exists yet cannot be consumed—presents to them an existential
crisis. There is, alternatively, a reading of this scene as a mere demonstration of victim blaming and how the threat comes, not from the fading women themselves, but the public outrage of the pandemic and the sudden surge of media attention given to a marginalized group. However, I don’t see these readings as conflicting at all. The fading women are *victims*, to be sure. Victims of the fading and the patriarchal mechanisms that produce it, but they are not just victims.

And this brings us to the ways in which Machado repositions erasure as a kind of liberatory mechanism. When Petra, someone in the narrator’s direct field of vision, starts fading, we suddenly see this periphery view of the fading women come into focus. When the narrator and Petra are hiking through the forest, Petra relays some crucial updates about the fading women:

> It turns out that they think the faded women are doing this sort of—I don’t know, I guess you’d call it terrorism? They’re getting themselves into electrical systems and fucking up servers and ATM’s and voting machines. Protesting… I like that (144).

Here, we see the fading women’s erasure as a revolutionary force. Their disembodiment enables them to physically change the machinations of the larger social system in ways that embodied subjects never could. Because they are no longer concerned with properly performing their subject position, they can now redirect that energy towards active disruption. Suddenly, we see a new narrative emerge, a narrative that may not align itself with the maiden’s tragedy at all, but something else entirely.

This ‘something else’ is further articulated when Petra and the narrator discuss whether or not the faded women ever die, the narrator musing, “You’ll be haunting me when I’m a hundred and you’ll look fantastic and I’ll look like shit” (144). Here, the narrator identifies a way in which the faded women could retain some value in the present societal structure via their everlasting youth. But Petra cuts right through this attempt by presenting a different set of
values: “Nah you’ll be a beautiful crone. You’ll have a cabin in the forest and there will be
rumors that you’re a witch, but the kids who are brave enough to get close will listen to your
stories” (145). Here we get an allusion to a Mother Goose-like figure, but in this story, with Petra
instead of Perrault as our author, the Old Crone is not appropriated and subsumed back into
patriarchal ideology, but a resilient force of resistance. Petra’s comment reminds us of the power
of storytelling to imagine new ways of being and knowing in the world. The reason the narrator
cannot see the liberatory potential of the fading is because she is recreating the same stories that
she has been told all her life, stories in which the maiden always dies, metaphorically, spiritually,
or literary. According to these stories, the state of non-being represented by the maiden is still
more desirable than that of the crone or witch—the demonic inversion of the maiden who cannot
produce male subjects and is therefore either disgusting or invisible. In this quick allusion to
Mother Goose, Machado asks us to consider what the world might look like if female storytellers
could seize the means of cultural production, so to speak.

Oyeyemi and the Art of Invocation

As much as Machado’s story helps us start to conceptualize another kind of female
subject, one that does not depend on the naive notions of liberatory feminism, instead finding
power from her space at the margins, she leaves the process of this transformation rather
ambiguous. Her evocation of the witch figure certainly gestures towards another option, but it is
unclear what we are meant to do with this new position. For this next and final step, I would like
to turn to our third story under consideration: Helen Oyeyemi’s “Sorry Doesn’t Sweeten her
Tea.” This story takes the Witch figure as its central focal point and privileges not just fairy tales,
but oral folktales and the process of oral storytelling itself to articulate a new ontology of the
female subject, one that is not just defined by a shared state of subjugation, but rather a collective
engagement towards an aspirational future, as expressed both through the oral invocation of ancient forces and the choice of narrator seemingly outside the events of the story. For Oyeyemi, the realization of the bankruptcy of the subject does not produce the same kind of death knell as it does in the other two stories. Both Kelly Link and Carmen Maria Machado, with their allusions courtly romances and Mother Goose, engage with figures and formulas codified by the Literary Fairy Tale. Oyeyemi, however, centers her story around a folkloric ethos. Rather than operating under an ontology of text, Oyeyemi privileges an oral ontology, which aims to produce a collective subjectivity, rather than an individual one. Oyeyemi reminds us that there was a time before the so-called-subject and as such, there can be even more transformations to come. As a result, she figures the female subject, like the oral folktale itself, in a constant state of becoming, something that must constantly be produced, destroyed, and reproduced in order to move forward.

Unlike the previous stories, the narrator of “Sorry Doesn’t Sweeten Her Tea,” a young Iranian man named Anton, is not so much an active participant in the story’s plot, as he is an outside observer. The bulk of the narrative focuses on Anton’s stepdaughter Aisha, as she grieves the moral death of her beloved pop Idol, Matyas Fust, who has been accused of beating a sex worker to near death. The story culminates with her and Anton’s co-worker Tysh invoking the ancient Greek goddess Hecate to essentially haunt Matyas Fust until he is able to sincerely atone for his crimes. Oyeyemi’s choice of Anton as the prospective character further speaks to her project of reproducing a written story that privileges the logic of orality. In an oral culture, the individual storyteller is merely a conduit for the larger collective. As a result, Anton does not project his own agenda onto the story, but rather weaves together a myriad of different voices from his community, such as his best friend Chedolomar, his partner Noor, Aisha and
Tysch. Because this story is simply one instantiation of an event which regularly takes place under larger systems of misogynistic violence, who narrates the story is practically irrelevant. Rather, it is the combination of individuals to create a communal voice that gives the narrative power. Furthermore, by choosing a narrator who has limited access to the subjects of the story, Oyeyemi makes it clear that it is not her goal to recreate the subjectivity of victims of violence. Rather, Oyeyemi uses her story as an opportunity to imagine a world in which women are not forced to reproduce their trauma of subjugation in order to receive justice, but rather can unite under a collectivity made cohesive by a shared aspirational vision for the future.

Though Oyeyemi is working within the written form, she is very much interested in the power and possibility presented by oral storytelling, especially as it pertains to our understanding of art and the formation of culture. We see this centering of orality and ancient folk-culture early in the story’s opening, when Anton tells us of his best friend Chedolomar—the effective foil to Matyas Fust—and how he rose to international fame with the help of the disembodied voices of ancient bards. When describing how Ched composes his music, Anton explains:

In this world, there are voices without form; they sing and sing, as they have from the beginning and will continue until the end. Ched borrows their melodies: That’s the music part of the songs he writes. For words, Ched uses rhymes from our village, the kind nobody pays attention to anymore… These songs of Ched’s turned out to be a hit with a lot of people outside our country. Ched got Internet famous and then magazine famous and all the other kinds of famous after that. It was fun to see. His mother still says to me: But don’t you think people overreact to our Chedorlaomer? These girls are screaming and fainting just because he looked at them or whatever. He’s just some boy from Benzi. That’s the power of those true voices, man.

—Oyeyemi, 56
In her description of Ched’s song-writing process, Oyeyemi creates a meta-analysis of the evolution of storytelling. In her formation, the artistic process begins as an inherently communal affair. The “voices without form” speak to the cultural consciousness from which oral tales are produced. These tales and melodies are then collected and written down by an individual Author, Chedolomar in this case, whose name becomes attached to them and, in so doing, they become intellectual property, which can then be commodified and consumed on a massive global scale. While Ched’s name might be attached to the final product, his work is still inherently engaged in a centuries-long process of communal storytelling as a social/spiritual practice. It is not Ched himself that has the power to make girls across the world scream and faint at his presence, but rather those “true voices” which act as agents in and of themselves and shape networks of sociality, in this case, fandom culture.

The formation of storytelling which Oyeyemi describes fits perfectly in line with theories of socio-narratology utilized by scholars such as Arthur Frank and Jack Zipes. Socionaratology regards all stories as being “reassemblies of fragments on loan,” such that “no one ever thinks of a story that is wholly original to that person and no one ever thinks a story alone.”19 Storytelling is an inherently dialogic process wherein no one voice is ever singular, but rather contains a multiplicity of other voices. Furthermore, stories are not just static artistic objects, but “actors” in that they continue to shape and influence human consciousness regardless of whether an individual is aware of said influence. As such, stories not only contribute to the creation of our individual narrative selves, but also our networks of sociality as they “connect people into collectives and coordinate actions among people who share the expectation that life will unfold

We can observe this phenomenon in the many reactions to Matyas Futs’s crime presented in the story. Because the story of Matyas—that he is a saint and a prince, a hero among men—has well been so well circulated, people cannot reconcile this new story, wherein he is the villain, with their former beliefs. Rather, it is much easier to rely on stories of female deviance to fill the gap. Hence the comments on the sex-worker’s confession video:

“LOL cool allegation junkie, maybe it was all a dream and LMAO people will say anything to ruin a good man’s reputation... Even if it is true, this isn’t the full story. We know Matyas wouldn’t just lash out like that, so we need to be asking what she did” (73-74). The fans have already integrated the “story” of Matyas Fust into their understanding of the world and as such are extremely protective in preserving it.

According to Zipes, the role of story in constructing and maintaining social relation is an integral to understanding the function of fairytale and folklore. Telling stories or “command of the word” was vital if one wanted to become a leader in small societies, whether that be in the form of the Priest, Priestess, medicine man or Shaman. In fact, Burkurt, in addition to the Adventure Quest, and the Maiden’s Tragedy, identifies a third tale-type as the potential source origin of all other storytelling: The Shaman’s Tale. The Shaman’s tale involves a spiritual leader who, “in a state of ecstatic performance, acts out a quest of supernatural dimensions; he can ascend to heaven or go down to the netherworld; he meets with spirits, and demons, and gods.”

In the oral and shamanistic traditions, storytelling is a speech act that does not serve to produce or reify subjects, but rather to solve particular social problems of a collective. Oyeyemi’s poetics is not a poetics of subjection and consumption. Rather, it is one of deconstruction and

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20 Ibid, 15
21 Burkurt, Creation of the Sacred, 67
reconstruction. Through the character of Tysch, Oyeyemi presents us with a female shaman who comes to right a communal injustice.

Like Ched, Tysch also interacts with those powerful “voices without form,” but rather than being a passive receptacle of them she actively invokes these spirits as a means of direct resistance to forms of female subjugation. She first discovers her talent after suffering for years in an emotionally abusive relationship, to the point where “her body disagreed and tried to get her out of it. She got sick. Her hair started falling out and her skin was scaly; she was cold all the time and could only fall asleep by reciting words of summoning” (65). As in Machado’s “Real Women Have Bodies,” Oyeyemi figures being disembodied as a more suitable alternative than trying to fit within a broken system. However, rather than opting out of the system entirely, as seems to be the suggestion in Machado’s story, Oyeyemi shows us how the death of the Subject does not have to mean the death of agency, or that a more fulsome sense of identity drawn along less determined and more fluid lines does not exist. Tysch grows stronger with the recitation of ancient words, “she heals herself” from the toxicity of a Patriarchal culture which seeks to reduce her to an object. This recitation resuscitates her, demonstrating how oral and folk traditions, when practiced, maintained, and believed in, imbue one with a certain strength and solidity of self that is resistant to modern forms of subjection.

In a text-based culture, one’s subjectivity is always contingent on an external mediator. But under an oral epistemology, subjectivity is garnered not by how well one aligns to arbitrary standards of authenticity, but in shared, collective experience. Soon after this discovery, Tysch then comes across an abandoned wedding ring in a pub. When Tysch wears the ring, she feels “that a love [exists]… Of this love there would be no photographs, no handwritten declarations, no token at all save the ring” (65). Under a capitalist system, everything must come with a
physical object of mediation. Stories must be written down and given authors who can hold the “rights” and disseminate them for profit. To be recognized as a person, your name must be attached to several forms of written documentation, property, and possessions. As the line quoted above demonstrates, even our conception of true love is boiled down to a series of transactional exchanges of various “tokens.” But in smaller oral cultures that pre-date these larger institutional structures, value is measured differently. There is not always a form of empirical measurement, but rather faith and mutual participation in an affective experience. The kind of self-love Tysch experiences is one that is beyond commodification. Her wedding ring, which binds her to no one but her own person, makes her a closed system which does not require the external authentication that the male authority typically provides in the Maiden’s Tragedy formation.

Through her engagement with oral traditions of the past via her invocations, Tysch has access to a space beyond the distinctions of subjects and objects. By localizing the source of Tysch’s supernatural power in ancient spells, Oyeyemi gives voice to lost oral traditions, and imagines what it might be like if we were able to reach into the past and understand the world from an ontological standpoint untouched by modernity.

This imagined standpoint is best embodied by the Greek goddess Hecate, whom Tysch and Aisha summon to haunt Matyas Fust. In the story’s terms, Hecate is described as follows:

She keeps an eye on big journeys from the interior to the exterior, or vice versa. She’s there for the step that takes you from one state to another. She’s someone you see at a crossroads, for instance. Well, you sort of see her but don’t register what you’ve seen until it’s too late to go back. She holds three keys… some say they’re the keys to the underworld, others that they’re access to the past, present, and future.

—Oyeyemi, 89
In addition to being the goddess of liminal and transitional spaces, Hecate is also the goddess of witchcraft. In Hesiod’s *Theogony*, she is a benevolent figure who aids warriors, athletes, hunters, herdsman, and fisherman. However, starting around the fifth century, she reemerges as a more sinister figure, associated with magic, the underworld, crossroads, lunar lore and creatures of the night. She is often known as the tripartite goddess, having connections with the mother-daughter duo Demeter and Persephone. She is sometimes even evoked as Persephone, perhaps due to her connection to the ghosts and the underworld. The precise nature of the relation between these three goddesses remains unclear, but some have conjectured that three together represent the three stages of female life, the mother, maiden, and crone. As such, Hecate is also known as a protector of women, Greek women often praying to her before leaving the home at night. Given all of this context, it is easy to see why Oyeyemi chose Hecate as the patron goddess of her story and the one who Tysch and Aisha summon to avenge the battered sex-worker. She is a marginal goddess specifically associated with the protection of women, the breaking of binaries between interior and exterior, past and present, and life and death. Her triad form embodies the kind of pluralism required to reorient our understanding of subjecthood as less of a fixed state and more as a continuous process of becoming, of deconstruction and reconstruction.

There are many tales that serve as rigid civilizing mechanisms, that either demonize women as deviants or reduce them to domestics and breeders born to serve the interests of men. However, as Zipes notes, “we have seen in early tales about women, witches, and fairies, there were certainly thousands of stories that women told to one another, and that were never collected or written down, in which heroines were assertive, confident, and courageous—in short, nobody’s slave… it is in the other moral world of fairy tales that women tend to find an iota of
justice.” While many Literary Fairy Tales—namely the collection of the Grimm Brothers, Charles Perrault, and other notable male collectors—may have us believe that these ancient tales were the means by which men subjugated women, there existed in oral traditions long neglected by scholars, stories which served as sources of resistance to the status quo. Through her privileging of oral storytelling, Oyeyemi asks us to imagine a world where the legitimacy of the individual subject is inconsequential to liberation. Rather, it is a collective consciousness united by a shared aspirational vision for the future that leads to progress.

**Concluding Remarks**

In an interview with the literary blog, Longreads, Helen Oyeyemi explains what attracts her to fairy tales and folklore and what the genre brings to her work:

I think traditions like that are more rewarding when you do this kind of simultaneously working with and working against it. It’s almost like, maybe like making dough… but you’re sort of pummeling something that’s taking form, even as you’re pushing it out of shape. And I think that’s the best way to write. It feels like you’re really changing, as if your mind is changing as you’re writing these things.

What Oyeyemi describes—this sensation of simultaneously inviting in and pushing away, of watching something take form as you break it apart into pieces—is not unlike Kandice Chuh’s description of what it means to occupy a state of subject lessness. To embrace subjectlessness is to engage in a constant pushing and pulling between ourselves and the structures that control us. It is embracing justice as not a single point of arrival, but a “state yet unexperienced and

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22 Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale*, 80
unrepresentable, one that can only connotatively be implied." The work of fiction is then to imagine alternative ways of being and knowing that may carry us ever closer to this unrealized state. And what better tools for this imaginative exercise than the fairytale, a genre which particularly lends itself to this continual process of re-imagining and transformation. The mode of fairy tales is one which by default operates in a mode of (im)possibility. By making gestures to the fairy tale genre, writers like Link, Machado, and Oyeyemi ask us to examine our own notions of (im)possibility. Fairy tales gesture towards a world of structure, form, and order while simultaneously hinting at the inevitability of chaos that lies just beneath the surface. But the instability and volatile nature of the fairy tale is a feature, not a bug. And as our understanding of our own world grows increasingly unstable, the fairy tale teaches us how to embrace the unknown and transform anxiety into possibility.

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23 Chuh, Kandice. *Imagine Otherwise*, 8.
Works Cited


