



Map of Assemblage: Fluid Identity in Donald Barthelme's Postmodern "Snow White"

Shan Zhang

Department of English Literature, University of Chinese Academy of Sciences (UCAS)

Received: 09 Mar 2024; Received in revised form: 22 Apr 2024; Accepted: 05 May 2024; Available online: 13 May, 2024

©2024 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Postmodernist writer Donald Barthelme in his work "Snow White" reimagines the archetypal characters from the Brothers Grimm fairy tales as disenchanting anti-heroic figures. His multiple rewrites of identities such as the princess, the dwarfs, and the prince not only reflect the de-authoritative characteristic of postmodern literature, but also mirror the map of assemblage consisting of molar lines, molecular lines, and lines of flight proposed by contemporary French postmodernist philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, through which Barthelme not only achieves the fluid identity on the subversive lines of flight but also subtly suggests hope and pathways within the micropolitical terrain of the postmodern society.



Keywords— Fluid Identity, Line of Flight, Map of Assemblage, Postmodern, Snow White

I. INTRODUCTION

In Donald Barthelme's postmodern "Snow White" (1996), the quintessential protagonists of the fairy tale undergo a transformation into disillusioned, anti-heroic characters. Barthelme's reinterpretation of classic archetypes, namely the princess, the dwarfs, and the prince, exemplifies the de-authorization prevalent in postmodern literature. This aspect stands as a central point of interest within the critical discourse surrounding the work. As a result, the literary critique on the postmodern "Snow White" compared to the Grimm fairy tale archetype is numerous and has already presented a macro socio-cultural vista of different creative eras. At the same time, the subversive nature born from "the uncertainty of textual meaning" (Liu 43) and "the loss of word efficacy" (Lei 104) within Barthelme's works has been thoroughly discussed. Yet, there has been little mention of the micropolitical framework behind Barthelme's subversive writing style, which is closely associated with postmodern literature's emphasis on depthlessness and experience-based reading.

Despite postmodern literature's declaration of denying deep interpretative readings of a work's underlying meaning, the ideological imprints of the author's era are embedded within the work in an

unconscious form of expression. Therefore, in Barthelme's "Snow White", the portrayal of fluid identity echoes the map of assemblage consisting of the molar lines, molecular lines, and lines of flight posited by contemporary French postmodernist philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In crafting this narrative, Barthelme not only captures the essence of fluidity characteristic of the line of flight but also deftly implies the existence of hope and potential pathways within the micropolitical terrain of the postmodern society.

II. MOLAR LINE AS THE DEAUTHORIZED DISCIPLINE

In Barthelme's parody of "Snow White", the characters are placed in a contemporary urban setting, while their traditionally fixed identities undergo substantial rewriting. For example, Snow White's previously flawless innocence is marred by budding desires, and after losing hope in the prince's rescue, she starts to save herself. The hardworking and kind dwarfs become numb and deluded, transforming from guardians and knights into oppressors and aggressors. The brave and mighty "prince", though of noble lineage, shirks his responsibility to save the princess and descends

into pettiness. The "hunter", despite his lingering conscience and aiding in Snow White's escape, becomes mired in the tangled desires for both the "princess" and the "queen". Even the powerful "stepmother queen" appears to be a prisoner of love. This set of distorted character identities is not only a bold postmodernist movement of de-authorization and anti-tradition, but also Barthelme's unconscious expression of subversion against the molar line of the traditional discipline.

Deleuze and Guattari in "Mille Plateaux" remark that humans are segmented everywhere in all directions, becoming a creature of segmentation (Deleuze and Guattari 290). Segmentation is a key characteristic of the molar line, where the most conspicuous type is the segmentation of binary oppositions, that is, humans follow the binary opposition of the molar line discipline such as opposing classes, male and female, adults and children, etc. In an ever-maturing society, people are segmented in rings or lines, creating larger circles or moving along predetermined lines. For instance, in the postmodern "Snow White", there is a vivid scene description where the "dwarfs" work from a height, looking down the street. The human figure seen from a bird's-eye view can be considered as an abstract creature of segmentation transformed into concrete shapes. As a result, people are no longer in their original form but are composed of circles resembling targets and straight lines like the legs of a compass. In this process of segmentation, the society imposes its power on the segments which it maintains or preserves, possessing and enforcing its segmentation. The postmodern "Snow White" is set within a unified modern political system, where technical rule operates through segmental labor division. In other words, modern life in "Snow White" has not abolished segmentation but instead made it more rigid.

Within the molar segmentation context of the postmodern "Snow White", each segment is corrected, emphasized, and homogenized both in itself and in relation to other segments. For example, the depiction of the seven "dwarfs" in the novel is actually a microcosm of the mid-20th century American male working class, performing repetitive mechanized tasks on the factory assembly line, with a desiring gaze towards the female body, and a life lacking in emotional communication. The seven "dwarfs" often come to a consensus and paint walls together, a testament to the homogeneity of identity which is the result of continual emphasis, correction, and homogenization of segmentary molar lines. The portrayal of the "dwarfs" as male workers not only clearly defines the segmentary binary opposition between the working class and other classes, but also reflects the binary molar discipline of gender. For instance, the four labor cadences

of "HEIGH-HO" mentioned in the novel originate from a song in a Disney animated film, illustrating the concept of male visual discourse complicity (Wei 9). However, unlike the male "dwarfs" who go out to work and provide for the household, Snow White, who represents the female identity, despite having studied courses in sociology, music, literature, and psychology, is still unable to participate in social labor and division of work. Instead, she remains at home to manage the household chores, which mirrors the educated and somewhat autonomous young women of the 1960s and 1970s in America. The different identity expressions of the "dwarfs" and Snow White not only showcase individual differences, but also mark the typical gender expressions under the segmentary molar discipline of the modern society.

Although Barthelme has rewritten the identities of the "dwarfs" and "princess" from the Grimm tales, in effect, this has only placed the traditional fixed identities under the segmentary molar discipline of the 18th and 19th centuries within a modern context. The seemingly distinct identity expressions, which aim to be de-authoritative and merely based on anti-traditional foundations, are in fact another fixed identities under the new segmentary molar discipline of modern society. Thus, the macro sociocultural aspect's attempt to counteract fixed identities has not been able to deviate from the segmentary molar discipline at the political micro-level, as a result, the attempts of characters' postmodern rewriting enter a labyrinth of molecular lines.

III. MOLECULAR LINE AS A DEAD-END LABYRINTH

Barthelme's parody of the archetype story of "Snow White" goes beyond changing the social and cultural context or rewriting the traditional character identities. His deconstruction of authority and pursuit of anti-tradition are not just breakthroughs but also new starting points. Barthelme expressed that many plot lines in "Snow White" are themed around gender resentment, which reflects and anticipates the feminist movement of the time (Barthelme and Brans 123). This statement confirms the critique that in Barthelme's works "Snow White" gradually gains female consciousness, and it also confirms that the postmodern "Snow White" has not only changed the fairy-tale archetype identity but has also undergone a secondary transformation within the modern context.

The more a collective becomes molar, the more its elements turn molecular, namely, the molecular individual and the molar humanity (Deleuze and Guattari 320). When it comes to female collective, Gilbert and Gubar point out that since the Old Stone Age, women have

worked to emphasize their timeless kinship through carefully styled hair, various adornments, and makeup (Gilbert and Gubar 14), reflecting the collective characteristics of women under molar discipline. Barthelme also noted the special symbolism of women's hair. In the mid-20th century, Barthelme saw many women with unkempt hair disseminating political meetings or anti-war leaflets (Fischer 44). In his postmodern version of Snow White, the "princess" frequently lets down her long hair from the window, a parody of the Rapunzel tale, which seems to reflect the image of women during the second wave of American feminism, actively expressing political stances and striving for agency (Zeng and Jiang 41).

In truth, Snow White recognizes that she has been forced to become an accessory that serves men. The "dwarfs", seemingly providing her with shelter and sustenance, in reality imprison her for their own pleasure. She is thus forced to rely on men, manage household chores for her oppressors daily, and loses her autonomy and free identity. Compared to the well-dressed female collective seeking dependency under molar discipline, Snow White chooses to use her abnormal behavior to strengthen her agency for self-rescue. Hence, by indulging in madness and bizarre behavior that deviates her from molar line, Snow White expresses her rage against patriarchy, stops wearing tight pants favored by men, and changes to bulky blue cotton pants to declare her stop from dressing like the molar female collective and her refusal to become a victim under the male gaze. Instead of the compliance and self-restraint of molar women, Snow White repeatedly lets down her hair to actively express her desires, reflecting an awakening and rebellion from the gaze of men in a patriarchal society and a deviation of the molecular individual from the molar collective.

Barthelme's "Snow White" not only rewrites the fixed identity of modern women, but also breaks through the fixed identity of modern men, deepening the deviation of the molecular individual from the molar collective. For instance, Bill, who is tired of Snow White, begins to refuse the touch of others, and Paul, as the "prince", continually doubts his responsibilities and nobility, satisfied with Snow White's negative critique of his paintings. These changes in male identity actually reflect the doubts of American men in the 1960s about traditional values and masculine virtues after the experience of war, highlighting the dual oppression by patriarchy of both men and women (Aljadaani and Laila 161).

While Barthelme gives his characters a molecular deviation that breaks through their molar identities, he does not lead them onto a positive path. The

awakening female consciousness of Snow White is accidentally disturbed by Paul; Bill, who defects from the dwarfs' molar collective, is ultimately hanged; Paul, who strays from traditional masculine virtue and responsibility, inadvertently drinks the poison meant for Snow White and dies. Thus, it seems that the molecular deviation from the molar line ends up trapped in a dead-end labyrinth, and the molecular individual is re-segmented amidst wavering attempts. However, what appears to be an unchanging ending has already undergone the subversive line of flight in the process, which also presages the fluid identities as well as the hope and way out implied in the chaos of the postmodern.

IV. LINE OF FLIGHT AS A ORGANLESS BECOMING

In a given space, three types of lines coexist and are tightly entangled with one another, while the molecular line continuously sways between the molar and the line of flight (Deleuze and Guattari 312). In the postmodern "Snow White", the molecular line that symbolizes the change of identity constantly wavers between the molar line of discipline and the subversive line of flight. From a micro-political perspective, a society is defined by its lines of flight, which are molecular, always in motion and escape, avoiding binary organization.

In the novel, Snow White must first break through the molar boundaries and then tend towards the CsO (organless body), that is, once a body has acquired enough organs and wants to give them up or loses them, the CsO has to form (Deleuze and Guattari 208). The CsO is not the opposite of the organs, instead, it is the opposite of the organized organism which is a layer imposed over the CsO with hierarchical constraints. Breaking through molar lines and dissolving the organism is not suicide but opening the body up outwardly, allowing for the line of flight and fluidity of identity. Thus, the CsO is desire, and it is through this process that desire operates.

Barthelme mentions six moles on Snow White's body at the beginning, which, from a medical perspective, are skin pigmentation due to genetics or environmental factors and can be seen as blemishes or flaws (Nealon 128). However, moles as the negative aspects of bodily organs are attributed beauty in the novel, indirectly affirming the positive significance of the loss of organs. Therefore, Snow White's beautiful organism is dismantled, the molar boundary is broken and her body begins to open outwardly. Thus, the aesthetic value of Snow White as a molar organism no longer maintains meaning, paving the way for her identity to become fluid and marking the beginning of the escape of her desire.

However, the CsO is not an achievable goal, instead, it is a continuous molecular production in the process of "becoming" (Deleuze and Guattari 206). Snow White's molar entity possessing organs and functionalities is controlled by a machine that operates under gender binary opposition. Yet, "becoming-woman" isn't about trying to mimic or transform into this entity but to emit particles into a microfemininity, a molecular womanhood on the body. Therefore, Snow White first recognizes the molar entity of womanhood, separating herself from the male collective, thus reclaiming her organism and identity without being a definable collective. Meanwhile, it is necessary for Snow White to produce the molecular woman, to act as an agent of "becoming", distinguishing herself from the female collective and infiltrating into the molar confrontation. As reflected in the novel, Snow White firstly takes control of the molar female organism and refuses to submit to male aesthetics and plundering, separating herself from the male collective. Secondly, Snow White starts the process of "becoming" towards the CsO through fluid desire and becomes a molecular woman engaging in molar confrontation.

"Becoming-woman" is key to all other "becoming" (Deleuze and Guattari 393). In Barthelme's Snow White, there is not only "becoming-woman" but also "becoming-animal" and "becoming-child" which start from and firstly experience the process of "becoming-woman". For instance, the novel repeatedly addresses Snow White as "horsewife" (a pun on housewife), which not only suggests Snow White's enslavement but also leads her identity towards "becoming-horse" along the line of flight. Thus, on Snow White's molar body, a molecular animal is becoming, which in turn combats the "becoming" agents as human beings, forming a "becoming-animal" on the line of flight. Moreover, when Paul comments on his noble father, he does not reinforce his traditional sense of responsibility as a noble adult male because of his inherited lineage. Instead, he falls into a state of absurd doubt and immature impotence, creating a line of flight that deviates from the traditional adult responsibilities conditioned by molar discipline, and directs his identity towards a "becoming-child". More broadly, if the entire world and all people were to form a "becoming", it suggests the creation of an inevitably interconnected world, clearing away all barriers to fluid identity and line of flight, thereby realizing the continuous flow of identity and the subversion of the line of flight, referring as well to the implicit hope and way out contained within the seemingly chaotic fragmented narrative of postmodern literature.

V. CONCLUSION

Barthelme's "Snow White" places the archetypal characters of the fairy tale within a postmodern context and rewrites their identities in multiple ways, aligning with the map of assemblage consisting of molar lines, molecular lines, and lines of flight proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. These three co-existing "lines" sketch a postmodern micropolitical context for the fluid identity and subversion in the work, pointing to a way out of the postmodernist labyrinth through the molecular CsO and the incessant process of "becoming".

REFERENCES

- [1] Aljadaani, M. H., & Al-Sharqi, L. M.. (2019). The subversion of gender stereotypes in donald barthelme's snow white. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 8(2), 155.
- [2] Barthelme, D.. (1996). Snow White. *Simon & Schuster*. ---, and Brans J.. (1982). Embracing the world: an interview with Donald Barthelme. *Southwest Review* 67(2), 121-137.
- [3] Deleuze, G., and Guattari F. (2010). Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2: mille plateaux. Trans. Jiang Yuhui. *Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House*.
- [4] Fischer, M.. (2016). Snow white wars: adapting animation in donald barthelme's snow white. *Literature-Film Quarterly*, 44(1), 34-47.
- [5] Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S.. (1979). The madwoman in the attic. *Yale University Press*.
- [6] Lei Xiao. (2013). What comes after "form": on the lack of lexical effectiveness in the postmodern novel Snow White. *Foreign Languages*.
- [7] Liu Hui. (2007). Barthelme's strategy and intention of deconstructing text meaning from Snow White. *Contemporary Foreign Literature*.
- [8] Nealon, Jeffrey T. (2005). Disastrous aesthetics: irony, ethics, and gender in Barthelme's Snow White. *Twentieth Century Literature*, 51(2), 123-141.
- [9] Wei Hong. (2022). "Snow White of Barthelme": the mad woman in the attic and the "beauty of play". *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, 43(1), 5-13.
- [10] Zeng Chuanfang, & Jiang Hua. (2016). An interrogation of the American feminist movement in the sequel to Snow White. *Foreign Languages*, 32(5), 5.