

“Ours is an Orgiastic, Not an Ecstatic Culture.” Angela Carter Discusses Cultural Expressions of Sexuality in her Non-Fiction

DOMINIKA ORAMUS
Uniwersytet Warszawski
dominika.oramus@uw.edu.pl

“I found myself, as I grew older, increasingly writing about sexuality and its manifestations in human practice. And I found most of my raw material in the lumber room of the Western European imagination,” Angela Carter wrote in “Notes from the Front Line.” The passage is significant for several reasons. Carter identifies sexuality in its diverse manifestations as her main concern and acknowledges images derived from European popular tradition as the source of her “raw material.” Moreover, she characterises her prose as intertextual and identifies herself as a Caucasian Westerner. It is from this contemporary, Europe-centred perspective that she, first, surveys manifestations of sexuality, and then uses them to create her own—often allegorical—imaginative stories. This paper is concerned with the former stage of Carter’s intellectual endeavour: surveying expressions of sexuality in public discourse from a Western woman’s point of view.

Keywords: Angela Carter’s essays; sexual emancipation; orientalism; feminist discourse; repressive desublimation

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“Ours is an Orgiastic, Not an Ecstatic Culture.” El análisis de Angela Carter de las expresiones culturales sobre la sexualidad en su obra de no ficción

“Me encontré, a medida que crecía, escribiendo cada vez más sobre la sexualidad y sus manifestaciones en la práctica humana. Y encontré la mayor parte de mi materia prima en el trastero de la imaginación de Europa occidental”, escribió Angela Carter en “Notes from the

Front Line". El pasaje citado es significativo por varias razones. Carter identifica la sexualidad en sus diversas manifestaciones como su principal preocupación y afirma que la fuente de su "materia prima" son las imágenes derivadas de la tradición popular europea. Además, caracteriza su prosa como intertextual y se identifica como una occidental caucásica. Desde esta perspectiva contemporánea, centrada en Europa, examina primero las manifestaciones de la sexualidad y luego usa esas manifestaciones para crear sus propias historias imaginativas, a menudo alegóricas. Este artículo se ocupa de una etapa anterior del esfuerzo intelectual de Carter: examinar las expresiones de la sexualidad en el discurso público desde el punto de vista de una mujer occidental.

Palabras clave: Ensayos de Angela Carter; emancipación sexual; orientalismo; discurso feminista; desublimación represiva

Angela Carter's oeuvre attracts significant critical attention, and her trademark is writing about human sexuality. For over thirty years, her bizarre fiction has been the subject of numerous debates, and, as it is erudite, stylistically overblown and formally complex, it has become famous for being "notoriously difficult" (Dimovitz 2016, 1). Carter's use of violent imagery, her mockery of cultural pretensions and her exposure of sexual myths trouble some of her critics (Dworkin 1979, 84), as she does not hesitate to create offensive sexual scenes that women might find degrading. In this respect, her fiction seems both mainstream and marginal: Carter is simultaneously outside contemporary feminist discourse and one of its most famous representatives. Her advocacy of "moral pornography" (Gamble 1997, 101), aimed at liberating women, is a prime example of this controversy, as are her satires of feminist utopias—myth-driven fantasies of primordial matriarchy (Lesinska 1999, 99-114).

Throughout her creative life, Carter wrote fiction and non-fiction side by side: her novels and short stories reflect intellectual concerns discussed in her articles, reviews and essays. Among her subjects, cultural expressions of sexuality rank high. In her manifesto "Notes from the Front Line," originally published in 1983, she confesses that she finds herself "increasingly writing about sexuality and its manifestations in human practice. And I found most of my raw material in the lumber room of the Western European imagination" (Carter 1997, 39). This passage is significant for several reasons. Carter identifies sexuality in its diverse manifestations as her main concern and acknowledges images derived from European popular tradition as the source of her "raw material." Moreover, she characterises her prose as intertextual and identifies herself as a Caucasian Westerner. It is from this contemporary, Europe-centred perspective that she, first, surveys manifestations of sexuality, and then uses them to create her own—often allegorical—imaginative stories. This paper is concerned with the former stage of Carter's intellectual endeavour: surveying expressions of sexuality in public discourse from a Western woman's point of view. By analysing her comments on sexuality in her journalism, I hope to reconstruct her opinions on notions such as sexual liberation, permissiveness and pornography, and show how she invented herself as a journalist. Then, her journalism from subsequent stages of her writing career will be discussed to determine her opinion on the place of sexuality in "the social fictions that regulate our lives" (Carter 1997, 38).

1. BRITAIN

In *Angela Carter: Surrealist, Psychologist, Moral Pornographer*, Scott A. Dimovitz claims that "[r]eading the entirety of her published journalism and essays, it becomes increasingly clear that Carter often used her non-fiction [...] as a method of exploring ideas, themes and symbols that figured into her recent or upcoming fiction" (Dimovitz 2016, 16). This comment is especially revealing because it suggests that the chronology of Carter's career should be taken into consideration while reading her journalism;

her research for “recent” and “upcoming” novels influences her opinions, which evolve over time. Carter’s writing career falls into two periods: before and after her long stay in Japan, during which she was exposed to a non-European culture. In both periods Carter’s fiction was concerned with women’s sexual emancipation and, by showing violent sexual parables, she pointed to Western modes of suppressing it. And yet it is through contact with Oriental culture, together with reading psychoanalytical and social theories, that her perception became increasingly acute. Throughout her life, Carter read cultural theorists voraciously and thus grew progressively more culturally aware. Moreover, as she commented on her immediate cultural surroundings (fashion, popular entertainment, fashionable book editions) from the late 1960s to the early 1990s, her journalism reflected the changing attitudes toward sexuality at the end of the twentieth century in the West and allows us to see not only her own development but also the changes in the world around her. Writing non-fiction, Carter continuously reinvented herself. In her journalism, she scripted her own life and created a number of female writer personas: a young intellectual in Bristol, a thirty-something Westerner in Japan, a mature woman in Thatcher’s Britain.

Carter started writing non-fiction at eighteen, within weeks of receiving her A-level results. She became a teenage reporter on *The Croydon Advertiser*, a local newspaper where she was “the token woman on a staff of twenty writers, and she had to adapt herself quickly to a self-consciously masculine environment” (Gordon 2016, 37). According to Edmund Gordon, the author of *The Invention of Angela Carter*, she gave her editors a lot of trouble. Her writing style was vivid, and she was good at capturing the atmosphere of the events she reported on; nevertheless, she was also very inaccurate and tried to smuggle puns and intertextual allusions into her copy. Luckily, the editor spotted her stylistic aptitude and promoted her to feature writer, which suited her much better. For several months she wrote culture-informed pieces such as “The Pin-Up of Yesterday” and “The Railway Station as an Art Form” (Gordon 2016, 41). However, after her early marriage, which involved a move to Bristol, she had to quit. Because she could not find a journalist job in Bristol, she began looking for freelance commissions. Among others, she contributed to the art pages of *The Western Daily Press* by writing about folk music (Gordon 2016, 65), and, on entering Bristol University, she became a contributor to *Nonesuch*, a student magazine where she wrote reviews of music events and her first book reviews. Occasionally, she sold texts about the contemporary music scene to *The London Magazine* and *The Guardian*. However, it was only when she entered what turned out to be a two-decade-long collaboration with *New Society*, a left-of-centre social weekly magazine, that she started writing full-blown cultural criticism. *New Society* specialised “in essays that deconstructed the minutiae of everyday life (the configuration of adolescent value systems, the politics of pornography, the aesthetics of ice-cream vans) from a line-up of contributors” (Gordon 2016, 99).

Writing for *New Society* allowed Carter to comment on the beatnik culture of her fellow students, on the appearance of hippies, on the changes in English industrial

areas, on evolving dress-codes and, later, on Japanese culture as reflected in the eyes of a Caucasian female who did not speak the language, and, finally, on the changes in British culture in the days of Margaret Thatcher. In “Chronology of Journalism and Occasional Writings (1964-92),” Mark Bell and Charlotte Crofts, who researched Carter’s oeuvre after her death, enumerate one hundred and twenty four articles written for *New Society* during the years 1967-1986. They are now the main source for scholars interested in Carter’s ideas and the theories she considered persuasive at given times. Together with pieces written in the remaining five years of her life, mostly for the *London Review of Books*, they constitute the bulk of her cultural criticism and help us to understand Carter’s views on sexuality: from the days of sexual liberation to the neo-conservative 1980s; and from her naive belief in sexual freedom to her understanding of the ideological power structures that operate beyond immediate perception and allegedly grant this freedom. Carter’s criticism was collected twice in her lifetime: in the *Nothing Sacred* volume she prepared in 1982 and in the *Expletives Deleted* collection she worked on in the last weeks of her life in 1992. In 1997 Virago Press published a comprehensive selection of her non-fiction in *Shaking a Leg. Collected Journalism and Writings*.

Her journalism for *New Society* in the 1960s was under the intellectual influence of Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies* and *The Fashion System*, and she looks at the world around her trying to understand the meaning of what she sees. As far as decoding the cultural expressions of sexuality is concerned, the most important early essay is a fashion study entitled “Notes for a Theory of Sixties Style.” At the beginning of this text Carter claims:

[T]he nature of apparel is very complex. Clothes are so many things at once. Our social shells; the system of signals with which we broadcast our intentions: often the projections of our fantasy selves (a fat old woman in a bikini) [...]. Clothes are our weapons, our challenges, our visible insults. (Carter 1997, 105)

In contrast to Barthes’s *Elements of Semiology*, she tried to seize the moment when these codes collapse and each individual’s choice of dress becomes unique. However, in her “readings” of hippie fashion, Carter was mostly indebted to Barthes’s ground-breaking *The Fashion System*. This study, written between 1957 and 1963 and published in French in 1967, was intended to offer a semiological analysis of actual clothing, but, as Barthes explains in the Foreword, in the end it became “the structural analysis of women’s clothing, as currently described by Fashion magazines” (Barthes 1990, ix). Believing that she was living during a time in which social and sexual groupings were disintegrating, as reflected in youth’s pursuit of visual magnificence, Carter decided to adapt Barthes’s semiological method of studying fashion to what she saw in the streets:

[A girl] might well select the following ensemble: a Mexican cotton wedding dress (though she's not a bride, probably no virgin, either—thus at one swoop turning a garment which in its original environment is an infinitely potent symbol into a piece of decoration); her mother's fox fur (bought to demonstrate her father's status); and her old school beret dug out of the loft because she saw Faye Dunaway in 'Bonnie and Clyde' (Carter 1997, 106).

She notes this with satisfaction. As such, in her twenties and writing from within British provincial bohemia, Carter believed that the changing fashion of the 1960s reflected profound social changes and that the non-restrictive sexual norms of her own milieu granted young people personal freedom: not only in their choice of partners but also politically. She saw sartorial extravagance as a powerful tool in a war with "age and class" and a sign of upcoming liberation in all spheres of life. The male and female dandies she described were, for her, followers of Albert Camus: by selecting particular clothes to wear, they consciously or unconsciously challenged the conservative and authoritarian power structures. Carter described the world around her in terms she borrowed from Camus's *The Rebel* (1951), in which he claimed that the dandy is always in opposition to the establishment, "always a rebel" (Carter 1997, 107). Camus and Barthes gave her lenses through which to look at her friends and acquaintances.

2. JAPAN

It was only when she left the West that Carter was forced to adopt another point of view. Her long stay in Japan started when, after receiving the prestigious Somerset Maugham Award, she visited the country during her United States-and-Southern Asia tour. Interestingly, she decided to prolong her stay in Asia and, after the tour was over, she arranged to live with a native boyfriend and work in Tokyo. The choice of Japan as the country of her voluntary exile is puzzling for Carterian critics and biographers, especially since she gave varied reasons for it in letters, interviews and essays at different times in her life (Gamble 2009, 105). The reason Carter gives for choosing Japan in *Nothing Sacred* is a good example of how she created her own image of a Western woman abroad while writing about her own evolving views on sexuality:

In 1969, I was given some money to run away with, and did so [...]. It took me as far as Japan [...] so there I stuck, for a while, making a living one way or another including working in a bar, and looking at things. Indeed, since I kept on trying to learn Japanese, and kept on failing to do so, I started trying to understand things by simply looking at them very, very carefully, an involuntary apprenticeship in the interpretation of signs [...]. Why Japan though? I wanted to live for a while in a culture that is not now nor has ever been a Judeo-Christian one, to see what it was like. In Japan, I learnt what it is to be a woman and became radicalized (Carter 1992, 28).

Therefore, it was looking at an alien culture with the eyes of a self-appointed naturalist and semiologist that apparently taught Carter what it meant to be a woman. This statement precedes her analysis of Japanese culture in the part of *Nothing Sacred* entitled “Oriental Romances-Japan.” It comprised a collection of five journalistic pieces, originally written for *New Society*, centred around a hippie-anthropologist thrown into a tantalising yet unintelligible culture whose meaning she tries to decipher through informed guesses. In “People as Pictures” she describes Japanese tattoos, *irezumi*, which, for her, display “the weird glamour of masochism” (Carter 1997, 234) and “one of the most exquisitely refined and skilful forms of sadomasochism the mind of man ever divined” (Carter 1997, 238). Sadism and masochism seemed to Carter the most telling features of Japanese culture: *irezumi* are memories of pain inflicted on living skin, and they also change “natural” human nakedness, something that the Japanese abhor, into an artefact by rendering it erotic. By the same token, erotic actors in “the pictorial sex-instruction manuals of the Edo era rarely doff their kimono” (Carter 1997, 236); their genitalia are accurately depicted but the bare skin of the rest of the body remains covered. Pictorial presentation of sex and masochism is also the main theme of another piece devoted to Japanese comics, “Once More into the Mangle.” The comics, she states, “appear to be directed either at the crazed sex maniac or the dedicated surrealist” (Carter 1997, 244). Their content is sexual violence, mutilation and deviation, “imagery of desire, violence and terror, erupting amidst gouts of gore, red-hot from the unconscious [...] against a background of skyscrapers, iconographic representations of present-day Tokyo; or... among the pine forest, castles and geisha houses of the glorious but imaginary past” (Carter 1997, 245). Among all the “Oriental Romances-Japan” pieces, the one most critically debated is “Poor Butterfly,” a reportage with a proto-action: a bar called Butterfly in Tokyo has to hire “exotic” hostesses for the Christmas season. The author and an American girl are thus hired, which turns out to be a rare occasion to study Japanese bar customers and the outrageous way they behave towards women when they are having fun:

A friend of mine, who is an English teacher of English, asked one of his Japanese students, ‘What is the quality you would require in a wife?’ The student, a young lawyer who had graduated from one of Japan’s best universities, replied in all seriousness: ‘Slavery. I can get everything else I need from bar-hostesses’ (Carter 1997, 249).

Thus reads the opening of the text that scrutinises the institution of a bar-hostess from the very paradoxical perspective of a narrator who simultaneously is and is not one of them. Hired for much better money and being a Caucasian (and a Caucasian who speaks perfect English, which is the aspiration of every Japanese businessman), she sees the shameful way the businessmen (and the female owner of the bar, a *mama-san*) treat native hostesses, but she herself is spared some of the humiliation. The voice we hear in the text is alternately that of the hostess, who suffers through an evening of “masculine crassness sufficient to make a Germaine Greer out of a Barbara Cartland” (Carter 1997,

252) and a tall red-haired, white-skinned tourist who looks at the spectacle around her and makes mental notes for her article. This tourist describes the world around her in terms of the contrast between her Western self and the oriental world around her.

Charlotte Crofts, in an illuminating essay “‘The Other of the Other’: Angela Carter’s ‘New-Fangled’ Orientalism,” calls for a re-exploration of Carter’s experience in Japan. This would shed some light on “both the risks of eliding sexual and racial difference, and the dangers of straightforwardly situating Japan as an intellectual playground for the development of Carter’s Western aesthetic” (Crofts 2006, 86). Michelle Ryan-Sautour undertakes such a re-exploration, but she is interested in Carter’s fiction, albeit in the context of her life, rather than her journalism. In “Autobiographical Estrangement in Angela Carter’s ‘A Souvenir of Japan’, ‘The Smile of Winter’ and ‘Flesh and the Mirror’,” Ryan-Sautour analyses the titular three short stories that “resonate biographically with the author’s life” (Ryan-Sautour 2007, paragraph 1), against Philippe Lejeune’s writings about autobiography. Ryan-Sautour aptly calls Carter’s narrative technique “playing with the Autobiographical Pact” and stresses the “self-conscious performativity” (paragraph 21) of the narrator’s experience of Japan. In these stories, Carter describes oriental cityscapes as a background against which the protagonist reinvents herself rather than writing “a revised, self-conscious version of feminine autobiography” (Ryan-Sautour 2007, paragraph 21). Helen Snaith, in her doctoral dissertation “‘Fictions written in a certain city’: Representation of Japan in Angela Carter’s works,” is also interested in the fiction Carter wrote in Japan, though she does refer to Carter’s essays. Snaith’s main claim that “Carter’s time in Japan exposed her to new aesthetic possibilities” (Snaith 2018) is supported by her readings of Carter’s fiction against chosen artefacts of Japanese culture: the literary topography of Tokyo, Japanese puppet theatre and kabuki theatre and Japanese cinema. Carter’s journalism written during her stay in Japan is discussed in “‘The Mysterious Other’: Carter’s Japanese Reflections” by Anna Pasolini. She claims that—in contrast to the short stories from the same epoch of her life—in the articles devoted to Japanese cultural practices Carter adapts to the perspective of “an Imperial Eye,” a Western perspective, “which on some occasions conveys a sense of orientalisation” (Pasolini 2012, 131). She notes that, although Japan has never been a European colony, the political and social situation in the country in the decades following the second world war and the dominance exercised by the American Army over the territory fits the definition of both imperialism and orientalism. As Edward Said famously put it in *Orientalism*, texts written from a Western perspective usurp the power of “dominating, restructuring and having the authority over the orient” (1977, 3). Thus, Carter-the journalist is judgmental: when looking at Japan she brings along her previous European ideas and value systems and imaginatively “produces” her own vision of the Orient. Moreover, according to Pasolini, Carter describes Japan only in relation to Europe; its culture is for her a distorted image of the West, and its otherness allows her to understand the real nature of her native civilisation:

Carter's aim is probably to be looked for in a political agenda, where the priority is not to uncover power imbalances in the relation between the European self and the colonized oriental other, but rather those shaping uneven gender roles and relationships in the West—which she problematizes and becomes even more aware of when experiencing their exacerbation in Japanese society (Pasolini 2012, 131).

Carter is simultaneously a Western tourist, a domineering imperial Eye and a woman, “a subject who speaks from an unprivileged position, the subordinated other in her homeland” (Pasolini 2012, 131). Her journalism is written from an ambiguous position: she looks at a culture whose language is mysterious to her and fills in what she considers empty signs with her own meanings. In Japan, she is partly a male impersonator (she is powerful and sure of her judgments, she pays the rent, speaks back and is so tall that only male footwear fits her), and she is partly a mysterious foreign woman, marginalised because of her femininity. Her job at the bar embodies these contradictions: Carter in turns describes herself as an outsider and an insider, a tourist and a hostess, “an Imperial Eye” and an exotic other. This episode of her stay in Japan is emblematic for her non-fiction from the period: she learns what it means to be a woman by exposing herself to a foreign environment and, at the same time, she creates a literary persona, the picture of herself in Japan produced for the sake of the leftish British readers of *New Society*. Not surprisingly, Carter's critics and biographers read her Japanese journalism with varying degrees of credulity, some of them, such as Paul Barker, the editor of *New Society*, to whom Carter sent her pieces, consider them slices of life, a truthful picture of Carter's stay in Asia:

Her life in Japan was bizarre. She joined a lover there. I think he was Korean, and Koreans are as despised in Japan as (say) Poles are in Chicago [...]. She worked briefly for a broadcasting company, but then she did anything and everything. She was a bar hostess on the Ginza, where, she told me, ‘I could hardly call my breasts my own’. In one short story collection, there is what seems like direct reportage of being picked up in the street and taken back to a be-mirrored cheap hotel for an instant seduction. I was never sure how close she got to prostitution in Tokyo (Barker qtd in Gamble 2009, 7).

The above quote is taken from Carter's posthumous profile that Barker wrote in 1995 for the *Independent*. “The answer will disappoint scandal-seekers: she didn't get very close at all,” comments Gordon, whose biography of Carter, tellingly titled *The Invention of Angela Carter*, shows that in her non-fiction Carter was continuously creating her own half-fictitious persona. “Though she worked in the bar for just one week—barely enough time to gather the material for the article—she later spoke as if it had been a major component of her Japanese experience” (Gordon 2016, 195). Thus, her Japanese texts are inspired by looking at Japan, depictions of women in Japan and visual representations of sexuality in Japan. In “Oriental Romances Japan,” sex is

graphic to the point of seeming surreal: looking at the exactness of its representations the narrator experiences alienation. Once she sees “a special games room full of pin-ball machines where one directed one’s balls towards the pictured orifices of women” (Carter 1997, 249), and reading some of the comics she is continuously puzzled:

[W]hy isn’t this girl fighting back during a gang rape? Because they forethoughtfully dislocated all her limbs, first. Why is this weeping old lady in bed with this wild-eyed boy? She is his mother; she had given herself to him as rough-and-ready therapy for his persistent voyeurism. Can this really, truly, be a close-up of a female orifice? Yes, it can (Carter 1997, 245).

In her “involuntary apprenticeship in the interpretation of signs,” Carter learned not only about Japan but also reinvented herself as a woman for whom notions of “men,” “women,” “sexuality,” “rudeness” and “sexual decorum” were culture-dependent and had nothing to do with nature at all. Additionally, the Japanese experience of reading pornographic comic books alongside the works of de Sade, which Carter discovered for herself at that time (Gordon 2016, 181), inspired her to write *The Sadeian Woman* in the years following her stay in Tokyo—a book-long essay of cultural criticism in which she provocatively calls the Marquis de Sade a “moral pornographer.” Carter claims that violent pornography is far less pernicious for women than, say, *Playboy* or other forms of socially acceptable “soft” pornography. Violent and destructive parables by de Sade expose the stubborn hypocrisy of social institutions that, as Sophie Lesinska writes, are unwilling to “recognize their own destructive and criminal practices” (Lesinska 1999, 110) geared against women. In “Sixty Years After the Surrealist Revolt: Epistemology and Politics in Angela Carter’s *Heroes and Villains* and *The Sadeian Woman*,” Lesinska rightly emphasises Carter’s reluctance “to reiterate the cliché inscribing women as humiliated victims” (Lesinska 1999, 101). By exposing the monstrosities of de Sade’s imagination, Carter demonstrates that in an unfree society, both sexes are bound to become monstrous in the pursuit of pleasure. De Sade is for Carter a “moral pornographer” (Carter 1979, 19) who is bold enough to elevate pornography to the status of a liberating, if minor, art devoted to the “total demystification of the flesh” (Carter 1979, 19) and an un-masking of sexual myths. It is in *The Sadeian Woman* that Carter defines sexual myths as “consolatory nonsense,” fictions women are conditioned to cherish: myths of the woman as an embodiment of life, as fertile ground, as a goddess, as a redeeming virgin, as an eternal mother:

If women allow themselves to be consoled for their culturally determined lack of access to the modes of intellectual debate by the invocation of hypothetical great goddesses, they are simply flattering themselves into submission (a technique often used on them by men). All the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciliatory mother, are consolatory nonsenses; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth, anyway (Carter 1979, 5-6).

The myth of the Goddess is “silly” because it is but the consolatory reversal of the patriarchal mythology. “Both myths are imbued with the will to power and offer women only two equally undesirable modes of existence—that of master or of slave” (Lesinska 1999, 107). De Sade exposes the silliness of the emotional consolation offered by gender stereotypes by sketching libertines of both sexes that are bold enough to pursue their desires and reveal their truth. *The Sadeian Woman* is probably the most criticised of Carter’s works. Her first and harshest critic was Andrea Dworkin, who, in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (Dworkin 1979, 84-85), protests against calling de Sade a moral pornographer or a pornographer in the service of women, something which Carter herself acknowledged in an interview given many years after the book’s publication. It was “[a] phrase that got me into a lot of trouble with the sisters” (Katsavos 1994, 15). Indeed, as Gamble sees it, Carter describes feminist critics’ reaction to the book in an interview given many years after the publication of the book: “Hovering as it does between the celebration and critique, the book is a showcase for the paradoxes of Carter’s response to pornography. It has been too often misinterpreted as an unequivocal defence of de Sade” (Gamble 1997, 99). In retrospect, Carter’s “trouble with the sisters,” by which she meant second-wave feminists offended by *The Sadeian Woman*, might be explained by the fact that, as Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton wrote in 1997, “feminist thought is only now catching up with [Carter’s] insights” (Bristow and Broughton 1997, 14). Hera Cook, in “Angela Carter’s *The Sadeian Woman* and Female Desire in England 1960-1975,” further explains:

Reviewers initially responded to *The Sadeian Woman*, as if it were about the ethics of pornography, which was emerging as a major issue within feminism in the late 1970s as the book was published. In this context, literary critics and reviewers, already discomfited by the apparently glib acceptance of violence against women in Carter’s novels, struggled to make sense of her admixture of ironic comment and intense seriousness about Sade and female sexuality (Cook 2014, 938).

Rachel Carroll, in “‘She had never been a woman’: Second Wave Feminism, Femininity and Transgender in Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve*,” develops this observation by noting how it is only posthumously that Carter’s work was reassessed by feminist critics who mobilise queer frameworks. Carroll’s own discussion of *The Passion of New Eve* and its critique points to how “the ways in which motifs of gender crossing and ‘sex change’ have come to be equated both with Butler’s theories of performativity and—as if by extension—with a queer sensibility” (Carroll 2018a, 64).

3. REPRESSIVE DESUBLIMATION

After her return from Asia, Carter re-defined herself as a “radicalized woman” who had seen many foreign places. In Britain, she began writing non-fiction in the voice

of a mature woman who had learned to see through the cultural clichés that described the “nature” of femininity and sexual relations. This self-fashioned female intellectual simultaneously adopted the perspectives of participant and outsider-observer and posed as a keen observer of how social fictions written in the West are presented as universal.

In this period, Carter focused on identifying and deconstructing other sexual myths—pieces of common knowledge, clichés describing men and women, boys and girls—that are entirely inaccurate but tend to be believed. The major narrative strategy employed in her post-Japan journalism on the cultural representations of sexuality in the West is reversal. By turning ready-made notions upside-down and reversing the conventional depictions of male-female differences, she shows her readers how much we take for granted. In “Belle as a Businessperson,” an essay devoted to the revival of *Gone with the Wind*, the reversal of sexual clichés occurs on many levels of the text. Remembering her childhood experience of watching this film in the 1950s she says: “I was but a kid in short pants, then” (Carter 1997, 378). We all know she was a female kid but refraining from saying “a girl” and tellingly remarking about “short pants” renders her memories ambiguous. The reason for her choice of words soon becomes clear—she goes on to discuss her sexual fantasies from this period, ironically reversing stereotypes and showing how sex-dependant our cliché opinions of young girls watching film stars are:

I was of that generation whose sexual fantasies were moulded by Elvis Presley and James Dean. Presley, white trash with black style, [...] himself the barbarian at the gates of Tara talk about the irresistible, could even Scarlett have resisted had Elvis pleaded with her to let him be her teddy bear? As for Dean, it is impossible to imagine James Dean carrying a girl upstairs; I used to fantasize about doing that to him (Carter 1997, 378).

Carter is angry with *Gone with the Wind* for selling sexual myths: “macho violence versus female guile, bull v. bitch” (Carter 1997, 378) and making good money from it. Hollywood tycoons perpetuate the “consolatory nonsense” (Carter 1979, 35) quality of sexual myths in order to cash in on it. It is the commercialisation of sexuality that Carter finds especially appalling.

After her return from Japan, Carter-the critic is keen on spotting how representations of sexuality in contemporary Western culture are used to serve one of two goals, the first being commercial, the second political. Selling sexuality and making buyers (very often female buyers) believe they want it to feel free, joyful and modern is discussed in “A Well-Hung Hang-Up,” an essay devoted to the pin-ups of male nudes in magazines such as *Playgirl* and *Viva*. Carter analyses both the pictures and the stories of the models’ lives that accompany them (“he raked his first million by the time he was twenty-one” is a good example) and opines that “the person [the editors] want to titillate is a maturish professional woman not unlike, perhaps, me” (Carter 1997, 61). Yet, apparently, that woman is supposed to be sexually liberated: “in the ideology behind the aesthetics lurks the notion that, as a general rule, women are looking for love and therefore the

flesh [...] has a top-dressing of sentiment" (Carter 1997, 61). This is why the models have caricaturally sensitive faces, and the magazines, which seemingly support the Women's lib movement, peddle some very stale sexual clichés. By the same token, in "The Sweet Sell of Romance," an essay devoted to Judith Krantz's commercial success, Carter compares representations of sexuality (and the "sell" of them) in "romances of high consumerism" (Carter 1997, 469). She juxtaposes Krantz's two novels: *Scruples* (1978) and *Princess Daisy* (1980) and notes that, quite unexpectedly, in the period between the books, "the sexual hard sell is already *déjà-vu*" (Carter 1997, 469). Krantz, with her businessperson's instinct, made the later novel much "softer" as the notion of aggressive female sexuality had receded into history:

The difference in the treatment of sex between the two novels is the most startling single contrast. *Scruples* contains anatomically precise descriptions of the parts of the greater part of the male principals [...]. Men and women fall to it in soft porn sequences at cunningly spaced intervals. There is an interlude of men-only sex [...]. But sex in *Princess Daisy* is soft focus rather than soft porn. It rises to infrequent peaks of the explicit only on special occasions (Carter 1997, 470).

Therefore, from the commercial point of view, representations of sexuality in the media "sell" in different ways in different cultural climates, and the ideology behind what is represented changes: women-buyers are believed to sometimes be sexually voracious and to sometimes crave love; to sometimes be "liberated" and to sometimes be conservative. This observation leads Carter to realise that sexuality in the media is always represented according to some political agenda, and notions such as attractiveness, sexual freedom and sexual permissiveness are ideologically charged. Carter's most important essay devoted to how sexual liberation becomes mediated by ideological power structures is "Lovely Linda," a review of Linda Lovelace memoirs, in which Carter demonstrates that the apparent sexual freedom is, in fact, a means to maintain power:

The notion of permissiveness can only arise in a society in which authoritarianism is deeply implicit. Now I am permitted as much of the libidinal gratification as I want. Yippee! But who is it who permits me? Why, the self-same institutions that hitherto forbade me! So, I am still in the same boat, though it has been painted a different colour. I am still denied authentic sexual autonomy, perhaps even more cruelly than before, since now I have received permission to perform hitherto forbidden acts and so I have acquired an illusory sense of freedom that blinds me more than ever to the true nature of freedom itself (Carter 1997, 54).

Thus, the sexual freedom bountifully granted contemporary Western women by the state is a means to blind them to their real political lack of freedom and sexual liberation. In this respect, it is just like carnival: a vent designed to maintain order. Scott Dimovitz quotes an interview Carter gave to Lorna Sage in which she compares carnival to the

theory of Marcuse: "I am thinking about Marcuse and *repressive desublimation* which tells you exactly what carnivals are for. The carnival has to stop. The whole point about the feast of fools is that things went on as they did before, after it stopped" (Dimovitz 2016, 16). In her journalism written after her return from Japan, Carter uses this term several times (Dimovitz 2016, 16) to show that sexual liberation in the texts of culture is only apparent and that by allowing citizens "libidinal gratification [...]" the establishment permits everything except absolute freedom. Marcuse's notion of *repressive desublimation* is particularly important for Carter. In "Femmes Fatales," an article about Louise Brooks, she also states: "repressive desublimation—i.e. permissiveness" (Carter 1997, 353).

In *One-Dimensional Man* (1962), Herbert Marcuse criticises the advanced industrial society of the contemporary West. He claims, among other things, that "the liquidation of two-dimensional culture" (Marcuse 1964, 57) takes place not through the rejection of aesthetic values but through their incorporation into the established order. The result is "the transformation of higher into popular culture [...] which allows a sweeping desublimation" (Marcuse 1964, 57). Marcuse explains that repressive desublimation is "practiced from a position of strength on the part of society because its [...] interests have become the innermost drives of its citizens" (Marcuse 1964, 73). Brad Rose in "The Triumph of Social Control? A Look at Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*, 25 Years Later" explains that repressively desublimated sexuality "no longer poses a threat that demands direct repression for the purpose of augmenting production [...], every pleasure and personal liberty is now granted and legitimated by society for the purposes of further, more effective domination and containment" (Rose 1990, 62). Interestingly, though Carter-the journalist advocates "authentic sexual autonomy" (Carter 1997, 54) for both men and women, and argues that the carnivalesque excess of sexual images in the media allows for the old order to perpetuate itself, she rarely writes about true and unrepressed representations of sexuality.

In fact, as a cultural critic, Carter is puzzled by the absence of representations of uninhibited female sexuality and thus of real freedom in British culture. She tries to find instances of it in texts written in previous generations. In "Alison's Giggle," her article devoted to how female desire and gratification are represented in literary texts, she describes Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400) as a narrative whose male narrator is sometimes able to "identify with a woman rather than with another man and perceive some aspects of male desire as foolish" (Carter 1997, 542). The Miller's Tale is, in her opinion, a prime example of this narrative flexibility: Alison, a young heroine who has just played a crude sexual practical joke on a man she does not want, emits a satisfied giggle and returns to bed with the partner she fancies—her elderly husband is conveniently absent from the house. Alison's joy is loud and true, Carter finds it difficult to find more examples of such female mirth in other texts. She can think of a few robust, sexually frank heroines of much more advanced age but "the sexual threat [they]

pose has been removed by the menopause” (Carter 1997, 543). The Wife of Bath and the Nurse in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* belong to this category as does Mae West—a “real” woman who, nevertheless, re-invented herself in the characters she played. Therefore, one can identify in the texts of culture the stereotype of a middle-aged tough and sexually frank woman that probably corresponds to “some kind of real behaviour” (Carter 1997, 543). Yet young and sexually active heroines capable of the uninhibited giggle are almost impossible to find—from Jane Austen’s heroines, whose sexuality is only potential, as we see them before their sexual initiation, to George Eliot’s Dorothea, whose sexual disappointment at the beginning of *Middlemarch* is only very subtly hinted at—; British literature is unable to represent female sexuality. Only Alison’s giggle gives

that entirely spurious sense which only the greatest art gives us, that the past, in all its unimaginable difference from our lives, can nevertheless shiver, fall apart and reveal human beings, for all they believe the sun went round the earth, lived on the same terms with themselves that we do and made the same kind of compromises with circumstances (Carter 1997, 547).

“Alison’s Giggle” tries to account for the absence of representations of female sexuality in British literature by referring to the material conditions of life throughout history. In it, Carter claims that “the nature of sexual repression in a society where heterosexual activity usually results in pregnancy and pregnancy may result in death is quite different from that of sexual repression in a society where birth control is freely available [...], although, as Adorno implies, the ghosts of the old pain may not be so easily exorcized as all that” (Carter 1997, 552). The allusion to “The Meaning of Working Through the Past” by Theodore Adorno shows Carter’s affinity with the New Left and her strong belief that culture reflects the material circumstances of human life. In “Love in a Cold Climate. Some Problems of Passion, Protestant Culture and Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*,” she develops her point. Looking at expressions of sexuality in diverse spheres of British culture—the lewd jokes, the commercial success of a farce called *No Sex, Please, We Are British*, the reporting of atrocious rapes in the tabloid press, the celebrity gossip concerning sexual affairs, the profane language of proletarian sexuality in D. H. Lawrence’s novels, the famous reserve of the British middle-class, Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and the novels of the nineteenth century—she makes the distinction between the orgiastic, working-class culture and the bourgeois culture of repression. Though the distinction itself is a historical phenomenon, it still influences the way sexuality is represented in contemporary culture: “In short, ours is an orgiastic, not an ecstatic, culture. The morning after orgy comes a hangover; ‘never again’, we cry. But the morning after ecstasy comes enlightenment and the desire to do it again as soon as possible” (Carter 1997, 591). In the analysis of the representation of passion in *Wuthering Heights* that

follows this introduction, Carter discusses the normative repression of middle-class female sexuality as a cultural standard of the day and the ways Brontë depicts acts of transgressing the norm. She also attempts to demonstrate that in the post-Protestant culture of contemporary Britain, the centuries-old duality is still traceable: the working-class culture of sexuality “that has a pagan simplicity and excess” (Carter 1997, 591) and is masculine and aggressive can be still found in mass-culture. The middle-class, Protestant culture of repression that made Brontë’s heroines die for forbidden passion is responsible for the telling silences and absences in post-Chaucerian British literature.

Notably, the descriptions of explicit sexuality in downmarket goods and texts remind Carter’s readers of her Japanese essays devoted to eroticism in Oriental mass-culture. As far as representations of sexuality are concerned, Carter’s journalism underwent radical changes over the years. The early articles written while she was still in Bristol describe the sexual liberation of the 1960s in a celebratory fashion—though her novels written at that time and set in Bristol show how miserable and self-destructive the sexually liberated bohemian protagonists were. In the novels, left alone with the massive bulk of our civilisation’s cultural output, the protagonists try to amuse themselves by playing with old symbols, violating aesthetic codes and transgressing the social order. They indulge in creating pure decoration, in turning themselves into works of decadent art. Dandyism is not the way out of a dead-end culture, but in her fiction it seems to be the only way of living inside the epistemological trap of its exhaustion. However, her fashion essays are not in-depth analyses of how hippies felt, but rather a chronicle of how their colourful world looked. A few years later in Japan, surrounded by an alien culture and forced to recognize her own position as a Caucasian female speaker of English, she attempted to describe the world around her in terms of images. By doing so, she learnt to recognise the power structures behind spectacular, sexual and violent imagery. Her encounter with orientalism influenced her reinvention of selfhood and taught her how to script her own life.

Her newly developed interest in de Sade allowed her to see pornography in a new light: she realised that extremely violent sexual images expose gender power relations which soft pornography obscures. Upon returning to Britain, she applied her critical skills to analysing representations of sexuality in the Western culture that she no longer took for granted. A keen reader of Adorno and Marcuse, she noticed that sexual freedom and permissiveness are instances of *repressive desublimation*: instead of liberating people, they give vent to revolutionary feelings and restore the political establishment. Moreover, as her Japanese experience made her sensitive to the way gender stereotypes work, she began subverting the traditional male-female oppositions which are implied in diverse aspects of contemporary culture. This enabled her to create her final persona: a wise woman on the lookout for the sexual myths we have inherited from the past. It is from this point of view that she redefines the myths of femininity as instances of “consolatory nonsense.”

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Dominika Oramus is a full professor at the Institute of English Studies University of Warsaw (Poland). She is the author of books and articles on Angela Carter and J. G. Ballard, as well as on science fiction and the poetics of postmodernism. She conducts MA and PhD seminars on British fiction of the 20th century.