Virginia Woolf, in her short memoir "Old Bloomsbury," struggled to define what qualities admitted one to the elusive Bloomsbury group, and what excluded one from it.[1] A specific anecdote focuses on a surprising ingredient as an example of what made Bloomsbury what it was: semen. It was a late spring evening, and Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell sat in the drawing-room of the Bloomsbury group's Gordon Square house. Lytton Strachey's "sinister figure" stood on the threshold of the room, and he eyed a stain on Vanessa Bell's dress.[2] "Semen?" he deadpanned.

Historians have identified this passage as proof of the Foucauldian maxim that the end to the Victorian period was marked by the ability to discuss sex candidly.[3] Indeed, Bloomsbury is largely remembered for its entangled web of romantic and platonic relationships, the lines between the former and the latter often becoming blurred. Queer sexuality in particular is a marker of the Bloomsbury group and the people who were involved in their flamboyant swirl of emotion and creativity. In response to Strachey's utterance, Woolf reflected: "with that one word all barriers of reticence and reserve went down. A flood of the sacred fluid seemed to overwhelm us. Sex permeated our conversation."[4]

In a circle largely remembered for its fluid understanding of sexuality and experimentations with non-monogamy, Dora Carrington is not often the first character to come to mind. Yet her life is full of queer phenomena, and her art is resemblant of her uniquely unconventional life,

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[1] Virginia Woolf, "Old Bloomsbury," in *Moments of Being* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1985), 197.

[2] Virginia Woolf, 198.

[3]Loesberg, Jonathan. "The Afterlife of Victorian Sexuality: Foucault and Neo-Victorian Historical Fiction." Clio 36, no. 3 (Summer, 2007): 361

[4] Virginia Woolf, 196.

one where she engaged in romantic and sexual relationships with women, entered a lifelong companionship with a gay man, and expressed what may have been the inklings of a non-binary identity. What does it mean to attempt to tell Carrington's story when previous iterations of her life have been shaped by authorial conformity to normative identity?

Literary scholar Jesse Wolfe has identified the social phenomenon of modernity as the context necessary to understanding modernism as demonstrated and arguably exemplified by the Bloomsbury group.[5] Wolfe argued that the period between 1900 and 1930 represented the crumbling of the "old order" and the rise of a culture that understood a meaningfully lived life to be one with successful sexual and romantic partnerships. His book provides a useful framework for considering the advent of a sexually open culture in the context of Bloomsbury; that is, Britain during the early twentieth century, specifically the first World War. Wolfe identifies urbanization as a factor that encouraged married couples to "alter the nature of wedded life," which the married couples of Bloomsbury certainly accelerated through the ways they "blurred Victorian 'spheres,' negotiated the limits of female emancipation, and increasingly saw marriage in terms of equality and companionship, in contrast to their parents and grandparents."[6] While the previous scholarly discussions on Bloomsbury and sexuality have focused on the congruences between the Victorian period and the Modernist era, Wolfe's account is unique in that he demarcates the distinct divide between the two periods and attempts to contextualize the change in the historical moment in which it occurred. Similar to Virginia Woolf, he supports the modernists' own claims of their difference from the Victorians and "suggests that the early twentieth century

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[5] Jesse Wolfe, "Introduction: Narrating Bloomsbury," in *Bloomsbury, Modernism and the Reinvention of Intimacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), I.

[6] Wolfe, in *Bloomsbury, Modernism and the Reinvention of Intimacy,* 5.

witnessed a renaissance of intimacies, a renewal of the radical promises of freedom and equality, after the pendulum had swung, through much of the nineteenth century, toward a model of stability and separate spheres."[7] The newly atomized society, with its emphasis on the individual, allowed for new frequencies of independent thought and solitary activity.[8] This historical context that Wolfe provides is necessary in understanding the long-discussed relationship between Lytton Strachey and Carrington, and the social pressures which defined meaningful life as dependent on romantic partnerships may offer some insight into the external factors which shaped their relationship. Wolfe casts doubt upon the idea of a devastating love affair that defied all odds and became the primary reason that biographers chose to document Carrington's life, not by virtue of her work or her unique sexual identity and lived experiences.

In this essay, I hope to reexamine the tradition of biographic work on Carrington, first by noting my own findings which have not been previously pointed out in much capacity (if at all), and secondly by critically analyzing the biographical sources that exist of Carrington and noting how they are at odds with her lived experience as rendered in her first-person ego documents which she left behind. In the biographical review section, my primary finding was that Carrington's experience of sexuality has been modified from the account which appears both explicitly and implicitly in her correspondence and journals in order to fit a narrative of prevailing heterosexuality. It is necessary to find the throughline of both the flourishing of sexual and romantic queer relationships, understand the heterosexism under which they operated, and explore the cul-

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[7] Wolfe, in *Bloomsbury, Modernism and the Reinvention of Intimacy,* 5.

[8] Wolfe, in *Bloomsbury, Modernism and the Reinvention of Intimacy.*

ture and/or meaning of silence in work on Carrington: what has not been said may end up being the most important of all.

Carrington: "I Wish to God I Was Not Made as I Am"

In the swirl of the roaring twenties, among the sexual freedom and thriving nightlife that defined the decade, David Garnett threw a springtime birthday party. Among the guests were Dora Carrington, the Bloomsbury painter with a blonde bob who had been stuck in sexless relationships with both straight and gay men for her entire life, and Henrietta Bingham, a Smith College dropout from one of the most powerful families in the American South. Henrietta was playing the role of bartender, dressed in boyish clothes and flirting with male and female party guests alike. Carrington couldn't help but become infatuated with the Southern belle. "She has the face of a Giotto Madonna," Carrington wrote in a letter to her male lover (not her husband, who she had married months prior). "I became completely drunk and almost made love to her in public."[9] While it is generally agreed upon by linguists that the phrase 'making love' did not carry with it the overtly sexual implications that it holds now, there is no doubt that Carrington was referring to an imagined sensual escapade with Henrietta. Henrietta marked her first experience of sex with another woman—Carrington then wrote that she experienced "no shame afterwards," in stark contrast to the narratives she left behind of sexual encounters with men in her life.[10] The discovery of her attraction to women was an important one for Carrington, yet all accounts of

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[9] Dora Carrington to Gerald Brenan, June 1, 1923, in *Carrington's Letters,* 1893-1932, ed. Anne Chisholm (London: Vintage Books, 2017), 248.

[10] Carrington to Brenan, July 21, 1925, in *Carrington's Letters*, 296.

Carrington maintain that she never loved another woman for the rest of her life, which she cut short by suicide less than ten years later.

Carrington's story is rife with contradictions, as are most of the stories of the women in this paper. She lived a life of complications and distress caused by her fraught relationship to her gender identity and confusion over where she stood in her relationships with the various men of Bloomsbury. Her legacy as a minor character on the outskirts of Bloomsbury and the distraught companion of the genius Lytton Strachey is a disservice not only to her memory but to the larger study of the Bloomsbury group. Her life — and letters — reveal a different perspective about the world she lived in and the spheres she loved and lusted in — often messily, often devastatingly.

In her biographical collection of Carrington's letters, Anne Chisholm characterizes Bloomsbury as a group of individuals who "disregarded social rules, acknowledging and accepting homosexuality and bisexuality and regarding sexual freedom and friendship as just as important for human happiness as marriage and parenthood." Yet the women of Bloomsbury were still subject to the influences of heterosexuality and misogyny, and were in fact often placed squarely at the intersection of the two by their male compatriots. Carrington is a poignant example of this: parts of her life were tainted by compulsory heterosexuality, her socially constructed need to assimilate to the social culture of womanhood, and the judgment and shame she was subjected to by those in her inner circle. Her resistance to these constructions was often fiery and even more frequently misunderstood by the people around her: her short hair, her preferred name, and her refusal to commit to monogamy.[11] While Bloomsbury mythology maintains that Carrington died in devotion to a man who could not love her; she, at times, feared she could not love him. Yet her

[11] Dora Carrington signed her letters with only 'Carrington;' when she had to use a first name, she went by Doric, a sort of defeminized version of Dora.

legacy does not always reflect these complexities. This, then, is what I hope to accomplish in this section: a nearly comprehensive analysis of Carrington's negotiations with and understanding of her own sexual and social identity in order to both contextualize the section which is to follow regarding biographical renderings of her life, as well as provide insight which has not yet been articulated.

Carrington's first experience with romance and sexuality that survives in her correspondence was one of repulsion. Mark Gertler was a Jewish painter who was obsessively devoted to Carrington, with their meeting as classmates at the Slade School of Fine Arts (often simply referred to as the Slade) laying the foundation for years of relentless pursuit on Gertler's part. He never completely faded from the margins of her life, but his involvement was primarily in Carrington's earlier years, before she became fully integrated into the Bloomsbury group. In a letter from 1915 Gertler explicitly instructed Carrington *not* to mention their "sex troubles," as he called them, in her reply as he was "heartily sick" of the situation, which likely consisted of Carrington's refusal to have sex with him.[12] In frenetic capital letters, Gertler demanded emotional intimacy from Carrington: "I WANT *SIMPLY* YOUR *FRIENDSHIP* AND *COMPANY* MORE THAN ANYTHING IN THE WORLD."[13] In a tongue-in-cheek response that would become Carrington's signature affect, she cut and pasted these words from Gertler at the top of her response to him. Her response followed:

> I *cannot* love you as you want me to.You must know one could not do, what you ask, sexual intercourse, unless one does love a man's body. I have never felt any desire for that in my life… I do love you, but not in the way you want. Once, you made love to me in your studio, you remember, many years ago now. One thing I

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[12] Gertler to Carrington, April 1915, in *Carrington's Letters*, 19.

[13] Gertler to Carrington, April 1915, in *Carrington's Letters*, 19.

> can never forget, it made me inside feel ashamed, unclean. Can I help it? I wish to God I could. Do not think I rejoice in being sexless…. Whenever you want my friendship and company, it will *always* be here. You know that.[14]

It is apparent from this correspondence that Carrington was attempting to juggle a sexual repulsion towards Gertler that was impossible to ignore, considering her painstaking awareness of his emotional needs in an attempt not to offend him. She straddles the line between disavowal of his affections and the retaining of his friendship and companionship, certainly pressured by the social context in which she lived—at this point, she was twenty-two years old and would have been expected under normal circumstances to be married sooner rather than later. Furthermore, it is not unlikely that she felt that as a woman she was to comfort and fulfill Gertler, despite her utter disgust towards his aggressive sexual advances. "I do not love you physically, that you know, but I care for you far more than I do for anyone else."[15] The following spring, a letter to Gertler indicated that he had asked Carrington to live with him. She declined, stating that "I could never live with you sexually day after day… It is because you want me sexually that you are miserable… only my corporeal body has left you."[16] Her sign-off, "I wish to God I was not made as I am," indicates both a longing for conformity under heterosexual standards as well as an understanding of her own identity as immutable and unchangeable.

This prompts necessary questions about what Carrington's understandings of sexuality would have been at the time. Thirty years prior, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs had published *Critische Pfeile*, which was the final pamphlet in a twelve-part series on male homosexuality widely re-

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[14] Carrington to Gertler, April 16, 1915, in *Carrington's Letters,* 19.

[15] Carrington to Gertler, December 1915, in *Carrington's Letters*, 27.

[16] Carrington to Gertler, Spring 1916, in *Carrington's Letters,* 36.

garded to be the first scientific theory of homosexuality. The advent of sexology followed soon after, and psychoanalytic theory as popularized by Sigmund Freud and Ernest Jones was prevalent among the primarily queer, intellectually curious Bloomsburians. Freud and Jones were closely interconnected with members of Bloomsbury—the Woolfs' Hogarth Press was the first to publish Freud in English, and Strachey's influence on the popularization of psychoanalysis was both among the exclusive Bloomsbury circle and beyond it. Specifically, Freud and Jones' relation to Carrington is important insofar that it allows for a glimpse into what she would have been reading, learning, or hearing regarding the pathologization of an identity that she wasn't quite sure how to comprehend. Chisholm's edition of *Carrington's Letters* notes both Carrington and Lytton's aversion to Freudianism, whose followers tended to "regard homosexuality as a curable disorder." However, Lytton's brother James Strachey had been analyzed by Freud before undergoing the process of translating Freud's works for the Hogarth Press.[17]

In a letter to Christine Kuhlenthal, also an old friend from the Slade, Carrington described a fog of depression that had overcome her in the same months as her aforementioned correspondence with Gertler:

> I am still depressed… Mostly because I am longing for something which I cannot have, accentuated by the joy of spring everywhere… is getting irritable and nervy a malady which all young females suffer from? All this isn't because I want to love a man, as Havelock would probably tell me. I never felt less disposed. I just always feel melancholy, and haunted by the idea that I am hypocritical.[18]

The question of what Carrington was longing for, yet could not have, remains to be answered, although it would not be outside the realm of reason to speculate that she was grappling

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[17] Anne Chisholm, in *Carrington's Letters,* 106.

[18] Carrington to Christine Kuhlenthal, Spring/Summer 1915, in *Carrington's Letters*, 22.

with her long-standing sexual and romantic feelings for women which she later admits to having experienced throughout her youth. In fact, coupled with her emphasis on the fact that she did not want to love a man, it seems like a reasonable inference. She references Henry Havelock Ellis, a physician who authored the first English medical textbook on homosexuality, whose conceptualizations of homosexuality were likely an early influence on Freudian thought.[19] Ellis had an open marriage with Edith Lees Ellis, who was openly a lesbian.[20] This confirms an awareness of—and interest in—theories of queer sexuality that were being circulated at the time of Carrington's writing, which is significant when attempting to unravel Bloomsbury's ethical and moral attitudes towards sexuality. Part of what I found significant while reading Carrington's letters was the fact that while male homosexuality was widely accepted in the Bloomsbury circle, misogyny permeated their sphere and created an atmosphere of distrust and aversion to female expressions of queer sexuality. Contemporary iterations of this phenomenon can be seen clearly in biographical depictions of Carrington, who is usually remembered as the lifelong companion of Lytton Strachey. Strachey himself is memorialized as a key character central to the inner workings of Bloomsbury; his close friendship with Virginia Woolf often foregrounds him in biographical accounts of Bloomsbury, and his sexually promiscuous nature placed him at the center of much of the social seismology of the group. Carrington's relationship with Strachey developed in a matter of months following her rejections of Gertler's advances; after his fumbled attempt to kiss her on a walk through the gentle hills of Asheham, Carrington learned of his homosexuality and was

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[19] Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis* (London: Karnac Books, 1988),

[20] Kate Atkinson, "Ellis, Havelock (1859-1939), in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism,* ed. Vassiliki Kolocotroni (Oxfordshire: Routledge, February 5, 2017), dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781135000356-REM1610-1

infuriated.[21] Michael Holroyd's biography of Lytton Strachey details Carrington's attempt to punish Lytton: she crept into his room while he slept, tightly grasping a pair of scissors, planning to cut off his beard. But his eyes opened just as she planned to take the first strands of hair off of his face – and Holroyd maintains that she fell, "there and then and for the rest of her life, violently in love with him."[22] This is perhaps the most well-known Carrington-related anecdote among those interested in Bloomsbury culture; Holroyd does not describe its origins and does not cite a source for it, casting doubt upon its authenticity.

Her relationship with Lytton was marked by its noncommittal nature—both Carrington and Lytton acknowledged very early that "the physical" (read: sexual intimacy) was going to be neither successful nor lasting—and longstanding emotional intensity. Carrington's eventual suicide has been narrated as linked to her despair over Lytton's death of stomach cancer. Chisholm describes this period in which Carrington and Lytton cohabitated, in a section entitled "Building Love," as a time where Carrington "[built] her world around Lytton Strachey. Her love for him drove her determination to make a home in the country for them both."[23] I believe it is necessary to determine whether or not this so-called 'devotedness' was due to the social conditions under which she operated that necessitated heterosexuality. Lytton was a gay man, and Carrington was not at this point sexually interested in men in any substantial way. Chisholm notes Carrington's "surrendering" of her long-discussed virginity to Lytton, verbiage that regardless of intent carries with it antiquated perceptions of virginity as a prize for a man to walk away with. Carrington's

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[21] Anne Chisholm, in *Carrington's Letters,* 28.

[22] Michael Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey: A Critical Biography* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 184.

[23] Anne Chisholm, in *Carrington's Letters,* 33.

wariness to perform an incredibly intimate act for the first time with someone of a gender she may not have ever been sexually attracted to should not be read as her withholding a valuable object. She was socialized in a Victorian home, where "any mention of sex or the common bodily functions was unthinkable."[24]

Prior to her explicitly sexual experiences with Henrietta Bingham, Carrington showed signs of what could be understood as a crush on a woman in a stream-of-consciousness letter to Gertler:

> Maria [Nys] was there. Looking rather lovely in a voluptuous way. She became morbidly depressed the evening of the concert over Ottoline [Morrell], and walked about pale, with heavy eyes in the moonlight. I felt a strange desire to torment & tease her, & let her have one of her crises. As it was she felt a strange heroine with no one to notice her. I don't believe Ottoline ever noticed her mournful attitudes on the floor once!! I went out into the garden with her … Katherine [Mansfield] and I wore trousers. It was wonderful being alone in the garden. Hearing the music inside, & lighted windows, and feeling like two young boys - very eager. The moon shining on the pond. Fermenting, & covered with warm slime. / How I hate being a girl. I must tell you for I have felt it so much lately. More than usual. And that night I forgot for almost half an hour in the garden, and felt other pleasures strange, & so exciting, a feeling of all the world being below me to choose from, not tied with female encumbrances, & hanging flesh.[25]

Carrington's description of the euphoria that she and Katherine experienced from wearing trousers and "feeling like two boys" is striking, and part of a larger pattern of Carrington's disconnection from her biological sex. Her correspondence indicates that she found pleasure in binding her breasts and pinning her hair up, attempts to androgynize herself. In fact, she would often dress up in male clothing and engage in some form of gendered sexual roleplay with Lyt-

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[24] Carrington, Dora, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from Her Diaries*, ed. David Garnett (New York: Holt, 1970), 193.

[25] Carrington to Gertler, September 8, 1916, in *Carrington's Letters*, 50.

ton, a further indication of Carrington's discomfort with her body.[26] When visiting her friend Barbara, who had recently given birth, Carrington demonstrated a complete aversion towards both childbearing and towards children themselves—her and Lytton often called children *le petit peuple*, which literally translates to "the small people" but was used also to refer to the 'lower orders' of society. "I saw Barbara yesterday morning, she looked surprisingly well and a Japanese grub in the cot beside her. What is the female body made of? For she told me it took nearly 24 hours coming out with acute pain all the time."[27]

Carrington's relationship with Lytton, while perhaps somewhat rooted in the necessity of social survival under the framework of heterosexuality, was likely more complicated than just that. Carrington's emotional connection with Lytton comes across as far more sincere in her letters than the one she shared with Gertler, and the separation of platonic attachment with romantic attachment was likely hard to untangle; even now, it is a complicated question of how different the two really are.

Carrington's letters to Lytton do demonstrate passion, genuine care, and an attachment that would lay the foundation for a relationship built upon unequal power dynamics in which Lytton almost always had the upper hand. In October 1917, she wrote:

> And you are sitting in your room, toasting your feet in front of an empty grate, surrounded by your legions of paper knights and horsemen. Oh it's wretched having lost you and not to have you tonight to talk to… Forgive me for writing but I wanted you so badly. One is not even left alone to cry. Dearest Lytton I love you so much.[28]

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[26] Anne Chisholm, in *Carrington's Letters,* 69.

[27] Carrington to Gertler, November 15, 1918, in *Carrington's Letters*, 104.

[28] Carrington to Lytton Strachey, October 18, 1917, in *Carrington's Letters*, 70.

Carrington's affect is marked by very poignant sincerity. Her affection, and level of emotional dependency, is far much more evident with Lytton than it ever was in her letters with Gertler (although their early correspondence from the Slade has been lost). Even if Carrington's relationship with Lytton was tainted by her own confusion about her romantic feelings and an inability to discover sexual compatibility, it would be a disservice to Carrington's memory to deny the emotional weight of this relationship that would follow her throughout the rest of her life and ultimately to its end. It is ultimately also possible that the pressure that Carrington faced to center sex and sexuality as the basis for her depth of feeling is a factor which contributed to their lifelong partnership—which was later to be understood as a romantic one, despite potential evidence indicating differently.

So began the years at Tidmarsh, the country home. It was 1917, and Carrington was still reeling from the official announcement of her brother's death at war when she began to search for a country house to share with Lytton. Gertler had become increasingly suspicious of her relationship with Lytton, and as she continued to string Gertler along while simultaneously keeping him at arm's length, her connection with Lytton grew. The purchase happened in November, and shortly after, Carrington spent a cold Christmas at their mill home in the country with Lytton and friends. What she was unaware of were Lytton's secret letters to Virginia Woolf, complaining about the cold and the isolated nature of the home, even as far as to wonder if he had been remiss to cohabitate with Carrington. "That woman will dog me… She won't let me write, I daresay."[29] He retreated to London after the holiday, leaving Carrington alone in the four-bedroom home. Her loneliness is well-documented in her letters to Strachey:

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[29] Anne Chisholm, in *Carrington's Letters,* 80.

> I am sorry to add to your troubles, by badgering you with letters. But HOW else can a young lady living in the country by herself - neglected by her swain, worn out by the fatigues of the day - and tired of her own company - pass the evening? Beds weeded in front of the windows. Vast bed in the orchard planted with cabbages & a print dress nearly made![30]

Carrington was able to find comfort and self-satisfaction in her assimilation to a situation that mirrored marriage. At least, she was able to convince herself that she felt comforted by it, writing, "Dear Lytton, it's been rather amazing living with you for so long. Now that I am alone I can sit down & think or ponder upon it."[31] But her anguish at the isolation and boredom of her years at Tidmarsh, with Lytton often gone, is not to be understated. Soon she was to enter into a far more demanding relationship with Ralph Partridge, one which would evolve into a marriage that never held fidelity as a key virtue. Ralph Partridge, however, began his relation to Bloomsbury by way of his sexual flirtations with Lytton. It seems that much of Carrington's acquiescence to Ralph's courtship of her was due to the way that she was able to leverage Lytton's affections by having the straight-identifying Ralph as her lover, channeling Lytton's interest into her by way of Ralph. She would later describe their relationship as a "Triangular Trinity of Happiness."[32] Before they were to marry, though, a third man entered the picture: Ralph's wartime friend Gerald Brenan. Brenan was drawn to Carrington's "sweet, honeyed smile," and it appears that Carrington enjoyed Gerald's heterosexuality as it ensured that he would not involve himself in the already complicated Carrington-Lytton-Partridge *ménage à trois*.[33] Instead, his status as a

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[30] Carrington to Lytton Strachey, June 10, 1918, in *Carrington's Letters*, 84-85.

[31] Carrington to Strachey, June 10, 1918, in *Carrington's Letters*, 85.

[32] Carrington to Strachey, November 6, 1922, in *Carrington's Letters*, 219.

[33] Anne Chisholm, in *Carrington's Letters,* 131.

Bloomsbury outsider allowed Carrington to write to him candidly with her thoughts on both Ralph and Lytton. In describing previous instances of sex with Lytton, she wrote: "Do you know even at the most intimate moments, I never get the feeling of being submerged in it. I find myself outside, watching also myself and my workings as well as his, from the detached point of view."[34]

At this time, Carrington was attempting to find her place as an artist in a male-dominated society; despite Bloomsbury's reputation for being a liberated sphere, she never managed to escape the misogyny that pervaded the most liberal of the group's members, to no fault of her own. As her relationship with Gerald progressed, she found his presence to be an outlet and a continued source of support for her musings. In a letter from the fall of 1920, she wrote:

> One cannot be a female creator of works of art & have children. That is the real reason why so few women have reached any high plane of creators. And the few that did become artists; I think you will admit, were never married, or had children. Emily Bronte & her sisters, Jane Austen, Sappho.[35]

Not only is this Carrington's attempt to negotiate her relationship to her own gender identity and the reproductive expectations placed upon her by her traditional family, it indicates the broader pressure that women were under to choose between childbearing and creative output, career, or a personal life separate from the trappings of domesticity.

When she married Ralph in 1921, on the precipice of the roaring twenties, she refused to change her last name to Partridge, lost her wedding ring on their Italian honeymoon, fought constantly with her new husband, and only found solace when meeting Lytton in the Italian hills.[36]

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[34] Carrington to Brenan, January 12, 1920, in *Carrington's Letters*, 140.

[35] Carrington to Brenan, October 1920, in *Carrington's Letters*, 156.

[36] Anne Chisholm, in *Carrington's Letters,* 176.

Was this comedy of errors the root of an unsuccessful marriage, or was Carrington never truly of the belief that the marriage was anything more than a means of survival? Certainly her passions for Ralph Partridge are not illuminated in any surviving correspondence. In a letter to Lytton one month before they were to be married, she describes their mutual situation:

> Virginia then told [Ralph] that she thought I was still in love with you. Ralph asked me if I was. I said that I didn't think perhaps I was as much as I used to be… He knows that I am not in love with him. But he feels that my affections are great enough to make him happy if I live with him. I cried last night Lytton, whilst he slept by my side sleeping happily. I cried to think of a savage cynical fate which had made it impossible for my love ever to be used by you. You never knew, or never will know the very big and devastating love I had for you.[37]

One thing worth noting is that she describes her affections for Lytton—and later for Henrietta—in letters with her friends, something that she never does for the man who is by all standards supposed to be the love of her life. It was not more than two months into their marriage that Carrington had begun a full-blown affair with Gerald.

After two years of trudging through a sexless, loveless relationship with Ralph, marked by frequent lapses in fidelity with Gerald, Carrington was to find someone who sent her spiraling into the throes of deep-seated, long-suppressed sexual desire. This person was able to do something that neither Lytton, nor Ralph, nor Gertler, nor Gerald had ever been able to do for Carrington: drive her mad with lust. As mentioned in the introduction to this section, it was not a man but a woman, an American girl, twenty-two years old (Carrington, at this point, was thirty) by the name of Henrietta Bingham. Upon meeting her for the first time, Carrington noticed that Henrietta was "[her] style, pink with a round face dressed in mannish clothes, with a good natured

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[37] Carrington to Strachey, May 14, 1921, in *Carrington's Letters*, 170.

smile."[38] Henrietta, accompanied by her lover and professor Mina Kirstein, was to run into Carrington two months later, at David Garnett's birthday party. Carrington was unable to restrain herself, and under the combined influence of Henrietta's masterfully crafted cocktails and her infatuation, she "almost made love to her in public."[39]

The first person she told of this escapade, at least in surviving writing, was Gerald: "I am sure she is far more beautiful than your E! … Ralph cut my hair too short last week. When it has grown longer and my beauty restored, I shall visit the lovely Henrietta and revive our drunken passion. Gerald dear I care so much for you."[40] Several things necessitate analysis here: firstly, Carrington compares the physical attractiveness of her sexual "conquest" to that of the woman Gerald was slated to marry; while the identity of 'E' is unclear, it is possible that it refers to another Smith student Eleanor Carroll Chilton (class of 1922), one of Henrietta's former lovers. Furthermore, in this passage, Ralph acts both as a literal and figurative instrument of separation between Henrietta and Carrington. And yet she does not see him as a legitimate obstacle standing in the way of her access to Henrietta, as his blunder with her haircut might suggest. It is also relevant that she blends her telling of her romantic evening with another lover with her words of affection to Gerald. This poses the question of whether the men of Bloomsbury would have considered lesbian relationships to be less threatening to their relationship to a woman's lover than heterosexual affairs. It seems a reasonable inference to make, given the hoops Carrington had to jump through in order to justify her relationship with Lytton to Gertler, and later to Gerald. It is

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[38] Carrington to Brenan, March 6, 1923, in *Carrington's Letters*, 236.

[39] Carrington to Brenan, May 31, 1923, in *Carrington's Letters*, 248.

[40] Carrington to Brenan, May 31, 1923, in *Carrington's Letters*, 248.

altogether unsurprising that womens' queer sexuality was deemed as an extension of friendship; that the Bloomsbury men considered other men to be important enough to become objects of jealousy while women were not to be feared is a probable cause of this.

On the flip side of Gerald's lack of concern towards Carrington's growing affection for this woman, Lytton and Ralph both expressed disapproval of Henrietta.[41] As the summer passed her by, she found herself becoming more aware of Gerald's rising sensitivity on the matter – yet she did not cease communication about her affection for Henrietta. "I got carried away by Kentucky Princesses who after all compared to my Amigo are not worth one half minute's thought," she wrote to Gerald in June, just a week after she spent an afternoon tea at Henrietta's borrowed Knightbridge flat, dining on biscuits and garlic sausage and tea with lemon, gushing over her "unusual" goodness..[42] A letter to Gerald from the following day describes Carrington's utter adoration for Henrietta, suggesting that she was in some way struggling to find the balance between the fleeting nature of what was to be a short-lived fling and the excitement and novelty of the whole affair:

> All yesterday we spent at Ham Spray. Henrietta came down with Tommy to lunch, and helped paint the walls all the afternoon. After tea we all went for a long walk to the top of the Downs. And H and I went far across ploughed fields, through a little cornfield plantation… She won me by being completely captivated by my Downs. I long for you to know her. I can hardly bear to care so much for anyone that you do not know also! She dresses badly, talks American, and has a hundred faults but somehow they don't matter, she is so beautiful, and so charmingly sensitive.[43]

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[41] Anne Chisholm, in *Carrington's Letters,* 272.

[42] Carrington to Brenan, June 13, 1924, in *Carrington's Letters*, 273.

[43] Carrington to Brenan, July 25, 1924, in *Carrington's Letters*, 275.

Her insistence that Gerald and Henrietta must meet is resemblant of her earlier 'triangular trinity' with Lytton and Ralph, but also a telling example of her inability to maintain a relationship without male influence—this is likely an impact of the way that she was socialized to submit to men's emotional needs and desire for social domination. It is relevant insofar in that it provides insight on the nature of non-monogamy and freedom of sexual relations in the time period, exemplifying both the liberatory nature of sexuality among the Bloomsbury group compared to the social conditions under which they were raised and also the intersection of misogyny and homophobia that thrived among Carrington's male associates like Lytton and Ralph. After all, Carrington was able to make amends with her husband's mistress Frances, and the two got along quite well despite the circumstances, in stark contrast to Carrington's necessary secrecy regarding her affair with Gerald. Carrington's actions infer both the lack of weight and also the power of revulsion that queer women's relationships held within Bloomsbury, especially compared to gay men's relationships. Their concerns were founded in the real possibility of Carrington's losing interest in them, since Chisholm notes that by July, Carrington had become reluctant to "spend the night" with Gerald, having found sex with Henrietta a revelation.[44]

Carrington's negotiations for privacy with Gerald had become frantic amidst her juggling of many lovers. As the summer drew to a close, an incident of an unsealed letter left her fuming:

> Oh, but you did enrage me yesterday. Or rather I raged against Fate, and flu and thin envelopes and curious Amazon post mistresses and sensibilities and everything I could rage against. You posted your last letter to me unsealed. Really it was never glued, because when I examined it most carefully I saw the glue was virgin — unlicked. The post mistress gave it to me breathless with agitation and confusion… in a terrific loud voice so that R outside in the car, heard every word. Imagine my feelings all the way back in the car to Ham Spray. Can you? Or does

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[44] Anne Chisholm, in *Carrington's Letters,* 275.

> that mean very little to you? I was so sick with agitation, that by the time I reached my room I could hardly read what was inside. Please, please give up thin envelopes. They are fatal to keeping stuck even if licked and please remember to seal your letters, or I shall go mad.[45]

In this instance, she was practically begging Gerald for some semblance of privacy, privacy that was not typically afforded to women regardless of class or social status. Carrington's anxieties about exposure had stemmed, quite reasonably, from the group's practice of sharing letters over breakfast at Duncan Grant's Suffolk farmhouse.[46] "Promise you will *not* show my letter to a Wisset breakfast or I will *never never* write to you again quickly. Promise," she wrote to Lytton in 1916, far before Gerald entered the picture.[47] Even her virginity, in the pre-Lytton years, was a topic of discussion among all of her companions, providing entertainment for the group at the expense of her privacy. Years later, in a letter to Stephen Tomlin discussing her work in the production of the Russian ballet, she would write "this is a very private letter and I shall MURDER you if you show anyone my scenario, or pictures."[48] While her insistence on secrecy may seem resemblant of paranoia, it is imperative to consider Carrington's status as a woman who was never granted privacy. Aldous Huxley's first novel, *Crome Yellow,* was a "satirical portrait of goings-on at Garsington with a disobliging and very recognisable portrait of Carrington as a tiresome virgin."[49] And Gilbert Cannan, in 1916, published Mendel, a fraught portrait of Carrington's old

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[45] Carrington to Brenan, October 19, 1924, in *Carrington's Letters*, 278.

[46] Anne Chisholm, in *Carrington's Letters,* 41.

[47] Carrington to Strachey, June 19, 1916, in *Carrington's Letters*, 41.

[48] Carrington to Stephen Tomlin, July 1931, in *Carrington's Letters,* 382.

[49] Anne Chisholm, in *Carrington's Letters,* 44.

suitor Mark Gertler with an emphasis on his "tormented relationship with Carrington."[50] Carrington despised the novel, writing, "How angry I am over Gilbert's book! Everywhere this confounded gossip & servant-like curiosity."[51] Her condemnation of the nosiness and entitlement to personal information that Cannan's book exemplified speaks to her discomfort with these conditions. To live a life defined by the complete and utter lack of emotional confidentiality that marked Carrington's relationships must have been humiliating — possibly even dehumanizing.

Carrington's friendship with Lytton's sister-in-law, Alix Strachey, became a source of reassurance in her comprehension of her newfound sexual identity. In the winter of 1924, she wrote to Alix, laying foreground for how her relationship with Henrietta was to fizzle out in the coming months:

> I really confess Alix I am very much more taken with H than I have ever been with anyone for a long time. I now feel regrets at being such a blasted fool in the past, to stifle so many lusts I have had in my youth, for various females. But perhaps one would have only been embittered, or battered by blows on the head from enraged virgins. Unfortunately she is living in London now with a red-haired creature from America, so as she tactfully put it; "You must wait, if you can. My passions don't last long, but at the moment…" I find her completely sympathetic. In other words nothing she does ever gets on my nerves. And most of the things she does charm me very completely. She is a little terrifying, partly because I know her so little.[52]

Alix's bisexuality allowed Carrington to be forthright with her about her own understandings of her sexuality. Alix was undergoing analysis in Berlin, and "knew all about Ernest Jones," the psychoanalyst treating Henrietta and Mina.[53] As Carrington and Henrietta began to drift apart,

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[50] Anne Chisholm, in *Carrington's Letters,* 27.

[51] Carrington to Brenan, November 1, 1916, in *Carrington's Letters*, 54.

[52] Carrington to Alix Strachey, Winter 1924, in *Carrington's Letters,* 281.

[53] Anne Chisholm, in *Carrington's Letters,* 28.

separated both by space and by the social conditions (those of which included Carrington's other lovers, Henrietta's other lovers, and Bloomsbury's general distaste for Henrietta) under which they were operating, Carrington composed another letter to Alix, her frustration shining clear as day:

> Now I've recovered slightly from my misfortune, and misadventure, I dream only once a week — instead of every night — of that wretch H and I think of her only 2 hours out of the 24. I've also used my self control to such purpose that I've not written to her since December the 10th… It's left me a warped, and gnarled old tree, with a pain in my head whenever I hear the name of 'H' or the word American. I did not lose her through pride as you suggested in your letter, but through excess of L [love? lust?]... I suspect she found my affections so cheap that she doubted they could be worth very much… I can't be such an ass as her American female bitches that she consorts with.[54]

Having accepted the fact that Henrietta was no longer going to be a part of her life, Carrington attempted to prioritize her shared life with Lytton at their Ham Spray house that winter, retreating to the domestic confines of their purported heterosexuality. Her attempts to keep Gerald nearby were perhaps driven by either a desire for validation or for a mental leveraging of power over Ralph, and she denied the feelings she had for Henrietta to him, in stark opposition to what she had written to Alix:

> Do not blame yourself that anything was ever your fault. I hardly think it was mine. It was simply an irony of fate, that drew out suddenly from a past bundle of suppressions, these feelings of mine for H, which are of course perfectly futile and senseless. My secretiveness has always been my own misery. But when I tell you I suffer literally, physically sometimes, when I hear my inside self discussed - but if you haven't had these feelings it is difficult to explain.[55]

How much of these notions of 'suppression' were influenced by Freudian intellectual thought and nascent psychoanalytic theory? Carrington earlier described Henrietta to Alix as a catalyst

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[54] Carrington to Alix Strachey, February 4, 1925, in *Carrington's Letters,* 288.

[55] Carrington to Brenan, July 19, 1925, in *Carrington's Letters,* 294.

who had brought up all she had suppressed in her thirty-three years; with Gerald, she turned the narrative around to characterize her feelings for Henrietta as senselessly resulting from irrelevant suppressions of her youth. Gerald's response was perhaps more apt than he intended: "Perhaps for your own happiness you should give up men and become a complete sapphist."[56]

In the coming years, Carrington would entertain flirtations with other women, but present sources argue that they never crossed the boundary of an explicitly sexual relationship. She became enamored with Dorelia John, an enigmatic bohemian mostly memorialized for her role as the wife and muse of painter Augustus John. Her two teenage daughters, Poppett and Vivienne, did not escape Carrington's interest; she referred to them as Dorelia's "R.D.s (Ravishing Daughters)."[57] Carrington had harboured a crush on Dorelia for the last ten years, mentioning her in passing as "amazingly beautiful" on two separate occasions (years apart, might I add) and describing her appearance at a party thrown by Virginia Woolf's psychoanalyst younger sister: "Dorelia like some Sibyl sitting in a corner with a Basque cap on her head and her cloak swept round her in great folds, smiling mysteriously, talking to everyone, unperturbed watching the dancers. I wondered what went on in her head. I fell very much in love with her… it's something to have seen such a vision as she looked last night."[58] Now this was coming to fruition, albeit in a rather roundabout way, as Carrington pursued Dorelia's 16-year-old daughter. Carrington had the habit of sending drawings as part of her correspondence, and Poppett was no exception — her letters to the teenager included drawings of (presumably) Poppett in blissful rural scenes, en-

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[56] Brenan to Carrington, Summer 1925, in *Carrington's Letters,* 297.

[57] Carrington to Dorelia John, Christmas 1927, in *Carrington's Letters*, 328.

[58] Carrington to Strachey, November 2, 1920, in *Carrington's Letters,* 161.

tirely in the nude, soft curves on display in a manner that seems too intimate - and knowing - to be entirely nonsexual.[59] "I got some very passionate kisses out of Beakus… but had a much more passionate affair in Saxon's flat afterwards in a very small camp bed with Poppett John. Oh! La! La! As she says…"[60] To Poppett, she wrote: "It seems a terribly long time since we lay together in that sweet embrace in the taxi on Monday…. I suppose a hundred lips have pressed yours since I last drove in that romantic taxi to Chelsea. But mine I assure you Madame have been surrounded by wire netting ever since."[61] Her affection for Poppett and Vivien may have stemmed, somehow, from a place of boredom: "My life is a complete blank except for my passionate love affaire with Vivienne & Poppett John."[62] It is possible that Augustus John, Poppett and Vivienne's father, was also aware of the possibly sexual nature of their relationship, as Carrington documented in a letter to Lytton:

> We had a strange party at Fryern the other night, and I had the strangest of strange conversations with old Augustus.
> A[ugustus]: Do you like cxxxs [cunts] Carrington?
> C[arrington]: 'Um – yes – I do.'
> A: 'So do I. I adore them.'
> Then he confided in me all his love affairs. Dear, oh dear![63]

The possibly incestuous quadrangulation of Poppett, Vivien, Dorelia and Carrington (with the potential involvement, even, of Augustus) has not been documented extensively, nor does it survive outside of their correspondence, except in one photo of the pair kissing. Her lin-

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[59] Carrington, "Untitled," Drawing, August 1928, in *Carrington's Letters,* 345.

[60] Carrington to George Rylands, October 20, 1928, in *Carrington's Letters,* 348.

[61] Carrington to Poppett John, Summer 1928, in *Carrington's Letters,* 340.

[62] Carrington to Sebastian Sprott, November 20, 1928, in *Carrington's Letters,* 350.

[63] Carrington to Strachey, August 7th, 1928, in *Carrington's Letters,* 346.

gering affections for Dorelia would not go unnoticed, however, and she referred to her as "Princess Dorelia" in passing—a pet name reminiscent of her dubbing Henrietta the "Kentucky Princess."[64]

Carrington's lifelong aversion to childbearing was realized in the autumn of 1929, when, having entered into a halfhearted affair with a sailor called Beakus Penrose, she began to suspect that she was pregnant. As Chisholm notes, there are no overt references to her suspicion either in her journal or her correspondences. Much to Beakus's relief, Ralph arranged a discreet abortion in December, which Carrington "seemed to have taken … in her stride."[65]

By 1931, Lytton had fallen extremely ill, a continuation of years and years of problems with his health. After nursing him for years, Carrington had grown somewhat exasperated with his complaints, and emotionally separated herself from his inability to devote himself entirely to her. He was bedridden that winter, diagnosed first with typhoid fever and then with ulcerative colitis before doctors came to the conclusion that he suffered from terminal stomach cancer. As his health deteriorated, Carrington spent most of her time at his bedside. His deathbed confession is perhaps the most memorialized moment of Carrington's life: "Darling Carrington. I love her. I always wanted to marry Carrington and I never did."[66] Biographers of both Carrington and Lytton have questioned Lytton's truthfulness in this utterance. Holroyd asserts quite simply that "it was not true," thinking it impossible that a definedly gay man could love a woman, ignoring the fact that Carrington herself was queer and showed no sexual attraction to men other than that

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[64] Carrington to Strachey, September 27, 1927, in *Carrington's Letters,* 364.

[65] Anne Chisholm, in *Carrington's Letters,* 369.

[66] Anne Chisholm, in *Carrington's Letters,* 393

which seemed to come out of social pressure.[67] In Lytton's last days, Carrington attempted to commit suicide: with Ralph in the house, she poured herself an unknown amount of whiskey, walked outside quietly and, illuminated only by the red tint that the rising sun cast the January sky in, entered the garage and turned the car engine on. With Lytton on the precipice of death, Ralph was alarmed by Carrington's absence and, hearing the sound of the car's engine, found her passed out in the driver's seat. "Ralph held me in his arms and kissed me, and said: How could you do it?"[68]

The months following Lytton's death contain Carrington's most professional, proper prose in all of her records of correspondence. She adopted manners of socializing that she had never conformed to before, omitting her usual drawings and sending out Lytton's belongings to people she thought would have liked to have them. Chisholm notes that she also engaged in ritualistic destruction of reminders of Lytton, burning his underclothes and spectacles in a bonfire. Her overwhelming grief attracted concern from Leonard and Virginia Woolf, who came to Ham Spray and found her alone. She sobbed to Virginia: "There is nothing left for me to do. I did everything for Lytton. But I've failed in everything else."[69] Virginia's answer—something along the lines of how life seemed hopeless and useless to her, too, after Lytton's death—may have swayed Carrington's judgment, considering the volatile combination of Carrington's devastating grief and her admiration of and infatuation with Virginia. The next morning, she slipped into one

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[67] Holroyd, in *Lytton Strachey: A Critical Biography,* 706.

[68] Chisholm, in *Letters,* 393

[69] *Diary of Virginia Woolf,* Vol. 4, March 12, 1932, 81-82.

of the few reminders she had kept of Lytton, one of his yellow silk dressing gowns, and watched herself in the mirror as she cradled the shotgun, pointed it at her heart, and pulled the trigger.

To me, this final declaration that everything she had done in her life was for Lytton indicates not a timeless love resemblant of the great Shakespearean tragedies but a reflection on how much she had sacrificed in her own life in order to appease Lytton: her passionless marriage to Partridge, her isolation at Ham Spray, her lifelong devotion that was never quite reciprocated. It would perhaps be of use to examine the ways that Lytton shaped her life, both in terms of their undeniably powerful emotional connection and in terms of the limitations that their pretended heterosexuality placed upon Carrington.

Carrington's legacy, then, is markedly defined by her relationship to Lytton and the supposed all-consuming love that she felt for him, right down to her last moments. Holroyd perpetuates the narrative which attributes Carrington's suicide to complete devastation regarding Lytton's death: "No possibility of anything resembling recompense existed for her on the wide, wide earth, since she could no longer talk with Lytton; since of all the scenes around her, of all her favourite pursuits, of whatever delighted her ear, her eye, and her understanding, his society was the vivifying soul."[70] This perception is dripping with misogyny and an inability to view Carrington as a complex human outside of her relationship with Lytton. Disregard for her artwork prevailed both in her lifetime and beyond it, despite the fact that her work both reveals valuable insight into her life, and that it is worth reflecting on, by merit of its creativity, personality, authenticity, and demonstration of extreme technical skill. Carrington's life was full of contradictions—but what queer woman in the 1920s did not live a life of incongruity? She was incredibly

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[70] Holroyd, in *Lytton Strachey: A Critical Biography,* 718.

sexually guarded, except when Henrietta swept her defenses away, in which case she could not avoid almost "making love to her in public."[71] She was embroiled in a lifelong struggle with her gender identity and her female body, one which did not absolve her from the misogyny that surrounded every aspect of her life from her work to her relationships. She lived large, with a love for parties and socializing and drinking, but she also feared exposure of her private self. Carrington's most well-documented contradictory aspect was her relationship with Lytton, which is not always (if ever) depicted as an inner conflict.

One would hope that Bloomsbury scholarship has been collaboratively moving towards a more complete portrait of Carrington, one acknowledging the details of her emotional and romantic situation in a way that does not reduce her to the men she knew. The following section will detail biographical accounts of Carrington's life and attempt a critical analysis of their shortcomings and the homosexual trappings that they fall under, considering the elements of misogyny that influenced both her life and retellings of it.

"Queer Potentials" versus Queer Realities: Scholarship and Popular Media on Carrington's Gender and Sexual Identity

The first time I heard of Carrington, it was in the context of her nude portrait of Henrietta Bingham. The sketch is a memento from their 1924 fling—Henrietta poses, posture erect, with her shoulders down and her hands placed assertively on her hips. She wears nothing but a pair of

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[71] Carrington to Brenan, June 1, 1923, in *Carrington's Letters,* 248.

kitten heels.[72] I was reading Emily Bingham's 2015 biography of her great-aunt Henrietta, which explores quite comprehensively the nature of Henrietta's relationships with her professor Mina Kirstein, with Carrington, and with Stephen Tomlin—all Bloomsbury affiliated. When I turned the page, the nude sketch jumped out at me. Who was the woman who drew this? While I'd not yet developed an academic interest in Carrington's life and art, I retained the following about Carrington: her refusal to conform to traditional feminine expectations of appearance, coupled with her sentiments about her own womanhood which she expressed throughout her life, made her an early example of non-binary identity; I also remembered that she had a blonde bob.

Most people's mental picture of Carrington, if it exists at all, was not shaped by a biography of one of her female lovers, but rather by the popular media that exists about her: namely, the 1995 film *Carrington*, whose film's tagline reads "she had many lovers but only one love." While it would be neither useful nor true to deny the legitimacy of Carrington's connection to Lytton, which did take the form of a lifelong impactful companionship, the view of her relationship with Lytton as her one great love is reductive in that it rids Carrington of her real experiences of complex infatuations, as well as of the misogyny that Lytton imposed upon her which greatly affected the social and material conditions of her life. The idea of Carrington as Lytton's loyal devotee, rather than the full story of her sexual repulsion towards men and her affairs with women, serves a narrative which elevates heterosexuality as a structure that triumphs over both Carrington and Lytton's conceivably homosexual inclinations.

Carrington (1995) is a biographical film—who it actually intends to biograph is a question that remains to be answered. Considering that the very first shot is of Lytton, the fact that

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[72] Dora Carrington, *Henrietta Bingham,* 1924, in *Carrington's Letters*, 332.

Carrington's character has almost no characterization whatsoever, and her entire life (as represented by the film) begins when she meets Lytton, *Strachey* would perhaps be a better title for the film. The opening sequence credits Michael Holroyd's 1967 *Lytton Strachey: A Critical Biography* as the basis for the film.[73] Why, then, does the movie claim to be about Carrington? Gertler's artistic output receives more attention than Carrington does throughout the entirety of the film, and events are reordered in order to emphasize the dominant role that Lytton plays in her life—for instance, Carrington is shown meeting Lytton before Gertler makes his first on-screen appearance. Lytton's homosexuality is documented, but Carrington's is not; there is no discernable mention of Henrietta, whereas Lytton's homosexuality is a central plot point. The film foregrounds Carrington's attraction to men far more than it ever mentions her repulsion to men; her sexual disinterest in Gertler is situated as a one-off, contrasting the actual record of her apathy towards sex with the majority of men she was 'romantically' involved with, including her husband. Perhaps the strangest thing about what the movie gets wrong is the fact that it shows Lytton arranging Carrington's abortion, when in fact it was Ralph Partridge who paid for and organized the procedure. I understand this as an attempt to place Lytton in the center of Carrington's life, right down to her unwanted pregnancy and subsequent experience with reproductive healthcare. There is no mention of Carrington's androgyny and discomfort with her female body other than the fact that when Lytton first sees her, he mistakes her for a boy.

Holroyd's characterization of Carrington is undeniably flat; there are points in which it becomes unbearable to read due to the degree of narrative liberty Holroyd takes, mostly radiating misogyny:

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[73] Holroyd, in *Lytton Strachey: A Biography*, 669.

> She was not really pretty, and certainly not beautiful - her body being made for action, like a boy's. But she radiated an extraordinary aura of attractiveness. Her mind was intuitive rather than intelligent, and she had not been well educated. Nor did she talk particularly well, her voice being unusually flat and only in moments of emotion taking on a more expressive melodious tone. Although not erudite herself, she had the charming gift of making others feel clever, drawing them out and listening with rapt attention to every syllable they spoke.[74]

It would appear that Holroyd's favorite thing about Carrington was her intriguing attractiveness. In describing Gertler's effect on Carrington, he wrote that "he seemed composed of elements which knew no tradition, which were as far removed from her own dull background as it was possible to imagine," and that Carrington must have been "undoubtedly [...] excited by Gertler's wild personality."[75] Holroyd's attempts to predominantly insert masculine figures in the center of many of Carrington's experiences are not to be ignored in considering how he has constructed much of the narrative regarding her life.

Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina's biography, *Carrington: A Life,* came six years before the film *Carrington* and at times seems not to have actually been consulted by Christopher Hampton, writer and director of *Carrington* due to its lack of inclusion of the source material. The paperback version of the biography advertised itself as "the life that inspired the major motion picture," thereby inextricably linking the film to the biography as well as offering an endorsement, but many of the events that Gerzina covers in her biography (which was primarily geared towards an academic audience, unlike the film) are neither depicted nor even mentioned in the film.

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[74] Holroyd, in *Lytton Strachey: A Biography*, 183.

[75] Holroyd, in *Lytton Strachey: A Biography*, 198.

While Gerzina takes a far more expansive approach to documenting Carrington's life, there are still several shortcomings in her retellings and assumptions of the narratives present in *Carrington: A Life*. Her introduction is primarily a summary of Carrington's life and relationship with Lytton; she describes Carrington's dismissal by scholars as "yet another physically attractive but sexually repressed and frustrated artist of the Edwardian and Georgian period," then quoting David Garnett's justification of his interest in her life:[76]

> Tens of thousands of young women have china-blue eyes, talk in little gasps and have sex trouble, but one does not want to wade through their correspondence. Carrington would have always been attractive to her friends; what makes her interesting is her relationship with Lytton Strachey, the critic who sprang into fame with Eminent Victorians and his biography of Queen Victoria. Carrington devoted her life to Lytton, and after his death from an undiagnosed cancer of the intestine decided that it was not worth living and shot herself.[77]

Gerzina acknowledges Garnett's statement's truth, but complicates it by arguing that it oversimplifies her life: "She was, in fact, so complicated that writers of fiction, who several times used her as a model, preferred to reduce her to a single characteristic rather than try to come to terms with her complexity… While sexuality, infidelity and modernity were undeniably aspects of her own personality, they were equally balanced by a loathing of her own femaleness, a devotion for seventeen years to one man—albeit a homosexual—even while married to another, and respect for many aspects of traditional English country life."[78]

It becomes increasingly evident throughout the course of the biography that Gerzina, while chronicling far more of the events and complexities of Carrington's life than are apparent

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[76] Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, *Carrington: A Life* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1989), xvi.

[77] David Garnett, ed. *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), 10.

[78] Gerzina, in *Carrington: A Life*, xvii.

in the film, perhaps shares Garnett's view that Lytton's existence is Carrington's most interesting characteristic. My issue with Garnett's statement, which I believe makes it entirely moot, is the presupposition that Carrington is interesting *because of* her relationship with Lytton. In fact, I would argue that there is nothing shocking or fascinating about a woman devoted to a man who does not provide her with reciprocal affection and emotional labor, and that it is in fact one of the most commonplace and longstanding phenomena in the tradition of heterosexuality. What fascinates me about Carrington—her queer sexuality, her potentially non–binary identity, her artwork and her peculiarly sincere way of writing—do not really have much to do with Lytton Strachey at all.

Gerzina's biography is groundbreaking in that it is the only full-length biography of Carrington ever published, and it is also a very useful source as it does not exclude any primary sources in order to construct a certain narrative. What I mostly find troubling about *Carrington: A Life* is the subtle verbiage that Gerzina uses to fill in the gaps of what we know about Carrington's life based on her journals and correspondence, one which perpetuates the narrative of Lytton's all-consuming importance while avoiding extensive analysis into Carrington's sexual identity. Gerzina relied heavily on Holbrook's *Lytton Strachey: A Critical Biography* in order to construct the story of Carrington's life; this is ever-apparent in her retelling of the famous moment where Carrington sneaks into Lytton's room to cut off his beard. Gerzina tells the story with authority: "from that moment, until the end of her life, she was absolutely in love with him," she writes, citing Holbrook's biography (which itself does not have any evidence for this claim).[79] Yet she does not interrogate who this narrative of Carrington's utter devotion may have served—

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[79] Gerzina, in *Carrington: A Life*, 70.

could it be Lytton Strachey, the genius to whom she was simply a loyal companion? It is worth consideration, especially considering that the story comes first from a biography of Lytton rather than any of Carrington's first-person sources.

In a passage regarding Carrington's early sexual relationship with Lytton, Gerzina writes that "while their sexual preferences and difficulties boded ill for a physical relationship between them, the remarkable thing was that they cared enough about each other to attempt it… It seems likely that they did indeed have a physical relationship, but how far it went and exactly how long it lasted (it did not last very long) will never be known. The most important aspects are their willingness to try, and the fact that Carrington offered herself to Strachey first."[80] Mention of Carrington's "long-standing vow of virginity" precedes this inference; what Gerzina does not immediately contextualize, however, is the pressure that Carrington experienced from all those around her to give up her sexual hang-ups and perform the most intimate of acts. In discussions of her virginity, Gerzina writes that when Carrington had previously agreed to have a sexual relationship with Gertler, by the time that came to fruition she "found herself quite unable to do so and remained a virgin. Her fears and shame were simply too great."[81] Could it be possible that it was not just shame that prevented her from having sex with Gertler but disinterest and repulsion, as is rather clearly demonstrated in her correspondence? "You must know one could not do, what you ask, sexual intercourse, unless one does love a man's body. I have never felt any desire for that in my life…"[82] At this point, Carrington was 22 years old. In that same vein, might it also be

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[80] Gerzina, in *Carrington: A Life*, 90.

[81] Gerzina, in *Carrington: A Life*, 66.

[82] Carrington to Gertler, April 16, 1915, in *Carrington's Letters,* 19.

possible that Carrington's willingness to have sex with Lytton was just as related to the constant pressure and belittling she faced from her peers regarding her virginity as it was to her comfort and sense of safety around Lytton? It is necessary to remember the caricatures of Carrington as a tiresome virgin that were published in novels by Aldous Huxley and Gilbert Cannan, both of which are indicative of the teasing and disdain she faced. There is absolutely no denying the difference between her relationship with Lytton and her relationship with Gertler, but a more complete picture would reveal far more about the complexities and inner turmoil of Carrington's life.

Carrington did not necessarily thrive in the domesticated sphere; in fact, her dismay at the loneliness she often faced at Ham Spray due to Lytton's absence is well-documented in her correspondence. Yet Gerzina writes of Carrington's dependence on the household: "Although she had struggled to quit the regimented Victorian household, she later found that she could be happy and work only in that well-oiled machine, the smoothly-run house."[83] While Carrington and Lytton both found comfort in their seemingly heterosexual pseudo-marriage, to erase Carrington's clear discomforts she experienced in the Ham Spray years and beyond also preserves the idea of Carrington as Lytton's steadfast companion who could not help to do anything but keep the home nice for him.

When Henrietta enters the picture, Gerzina's biography becomes more complicated, introducing notions of bisexuality and sexual passion that may not have aligned with Carrington's understanding of her own experience: "the discovery of [Carrington's] own bisexuality and first real sexual passion clouded her judgement."[84] As projection of modern identities onto historical

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[83] Gerzina, in *Carrington: A Life*, 73.

[84] Gerzina, in *Carrington: A Life*, 210.

characters is something I have focused on in my research on Carrington, I find it important to try to historicize Gerzina's formulation with this. It was not common to use the word 'queer' to refer to non-normative sexual identity until the 2000s, and if Gerzina could only choose between 'bi-sexual' and 'lesbian,' it makes sense to go with the one that would not negate the relationship which supposedly defined her life. While I entertain my own personal speculations about Carrington's identity, mostly based on her consistent lack of sexual attraction towards men, I am extremely reluctant to apply a modern label to someone who lived 100 years before me—in my opinion, Gerzina's use of the word 'bisexual' therefore does not pose an issue. I am also appreciative of Gerzina's use of a label that defined Carrington's identity as decidedly *not* straight, which I think provides important accuracy to the story of Carrington's life, as she very likely did not think of herself as similar to the model Victorian heterosexual woman.

Gerzina's lack of analysis into Lytton's instant dislike for Henrietta, however, leaves something to be desired:

> For the first time in her life, Carrington was in active pursuit of a particular lover. Men had always been attracted to her, but she had never taken on the chase herself. With an eagerness and openness that could only yield disappointment, Carrington threw herself into the courtship. Lytton's instincts were entirely against this involvement, and she was forced into subterfuge, pretending that when Henrietta accompanied the sculptor Stephen Tomlin and Alix to Tidmarsh, she had not invited her. She was 'self-conscious about [her] feelings' for the woman, and wanted no criticism, particularly if it were justified.[85]

What, then, of the male lovers Carrington took? Lytton showed no issue with Carrington's relationships with Gertler, with Gerald, with Ralph, and even later with Beakus. Even a sentence on the possibility that heterosexism had influenced Lytton's "instant" dislike of Henrietta may have

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[85] Gerzina, in *Carrington: A Life*, 209.

revealed far more about the nature of his relationship with Carrington. Another factor of note in Gerzina's retelling of Carrington's relationship history is that in the appendix, the *Relationships* section lists Mark Gertler, Ralph Partridge, Gerald Brenan, Beakus Penrose, and, of course, Lytton Strachey. Henrietta Bingham is not listed as one of Carrington's relationships.

The most obvious example of Gerzina's centering of Lytton in Carrington's life story comes in the afterword, in which she attempts to unpack Carrington's suicide and her lasting legacy:

> Those who knew Carrington insist that her life was tragic only in its ending. Her great originality, ability to entertain and intrigue others, and love, offset, in their opinion, the misery she experienced in her final months. I hope this biography has made clear those aspects of her life.
>
> At the same time, she was a very complicated woman whose difficulties cannot be summarily dismissed as idiosyncrasies. What makes her life merit a close look are the things that made her different: her unique outlook, her strong artistic ability, the environments she created for those she loved. These things combined with characteristics which often made them hard to achieve. Her outlook estranged her from her family; her insecurity about her painting kept her from popular or commercial success; some, like Gerald Brenan, believed that the living spaces she created were more important than outside relationships, and ultimately damaged those relationships. But all these qualities found harmony and near perfection with Lytton Strachey.[86]

I wonder about the difference between stripping a historical figure of their agency and attributing all of their challenges to the context in which they lived versus recognizing the aspects of their life that may have been shaped by external factors— in Carrington's case, these were heterosexism and misogyny. It seems possible that her insecurity about her paintings was in some ways attributable to constantly living in Lytton's shadow. Gerzina denies this, writing that

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[86] Gerzina, in *Carrington: A Life*, 303.

it was "no fault of Strachey's. He admired her work unreservedly and did whatever he could to buoy her spirits and career."[87] Regardless of whether Lytton himself was responsible for Carrington's lack of confidence in her work, Gerzina clearly thinks that some of her insecurity was due to the judgment passed upon her by other members of the Bloomsbury group. It is not as black-and-white as it may seem: some of the group's disapproval of the Carrington-Lytton relationship may have been based upon knowledge of the arguable incompatibility of their sexualities, while other origins of their dislike may have been rooted in misogyny and disrespect for Carrington. Acknowledging the nuance in both historical and scholarly perceptions of Carrington is imperative to a full understanding of her life. Gerzina's biography falls short in some areas, but still provides far more context and compassion towards Carrington than the (mostly nonexistent, with the exception of Garnett's remarks) scholarship, as well as the film that followed.

In 2016, nearly thirty years after the publication of the biography, Gerzina published a new essay entitled "'[T]here were so many things I wanted to do & didn't': The Queer Potential of Carrington's Life and Art." In this article, Gerzina writes about the new materials which make possible a more comprehensive understanding of Carrington's sexuality, including Chisholm's biography of Frances Partridge and the publication of *Irrepressible*, a biography of Henrietta Bingham written by her great-niece Emily. Gerzina's narrative of Carrington's early life remains largely the same as in her biography, attributing her fears about sex to her upbringing:

> If we put this into the context of a young woman, no matter how rebellious, who was raised in a Victorian family where 'any mention of sex or the common bodily functions was unthinkable,' and who left home as a teenager in 1910, it is easier to understand why she found it difficult to take a step that others found entirely natural. For Carrington, it appeared impossible to make the leap from freedom to de-

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[87] Gerzina, 303.

> sire and, au fond, she did not love Gertler. Love, however, changed the story: what Gertler did not know was that it was not to him that she had eventually surrendered her much-discussed virginity, but to someone no one ever imagined. Quickly disabused of his initial perception of her as a boy, Strachey began to join her for long walks…
>
> One day he suddenly stopped and tried to hold and kiss her. She recounted this later in horror to Barbara, and plotted revenge. She slipped into his bedroom that night while he was sleeping, intending to cut off his beard. Instead, he opened his eyes, and she fell deeply, and permanently, in love.[88]

Her emphasis on Carrington's lack of love for Gertler as the primary reason why she did not want to have sex with him, rather than an innate apathy and/or repulsion towards the male body —as Carrington said in a letter to Gertler, she had "never felt any desire for [a man's body] in [her] life,"[89] a stark contrast to her later reflections on at "so many lusts I have had in my youth, for various females."[90] The dominating Lytton narrative continues with an affirmation of Carrington's "permanent" love for him, a story that originated in Holroyd's biography of Lytton Strachey but is no longer cited in this newer article as it has become part of Bloomsbury mythology, so widely recognized that it does not require a source.

Gerzina also describes the nonmonogamy which marked Carrington's marriage to Ralph: "Whatever they imagined marriage might be, it soon involved affairs on both sides, Carrington with Partridge's close friend Gerald Brenan, and Ralph with a series of women. At first Ralph did not seem to mind, but then he made it clear that infidelity was fine for him, but not for his wife."[91] It might also be important to discuss the social grace Carrington was required to demon-

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[88] Gretchen Gerzina Holbrook, "'[T]here were so many things I wanted to do & didn't': The Queer Potential of Carrington's Life and Art," in *Queer Bloomsbury,* ed. Brenda Helt and Madelyn Detloff (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016,) 189-209.

[89] Carrington to Gertler, April 16, 1915, in *Carrington's Letters,* 19.

[90] Carrington to Alix Strachey, Winter 1924, in *Carrington's Letters,* 281.

[91] Gerzina, in "The Queer Potential of Carrington's Life and Art," 198.

strate towards Ralph's mistress Frances, grace which was not reciprocated by Ralph towards Carrington in the slightest—this is certainly an aspect of Carrington's life shaped by her socialization as a woman which reveals much about the social identities of the group when viewed through a gendered lens.

Gerzina does provide some analysis into the misogynistic attitudes towards Carrington's relationship with Henrietta:

> Her friends' responses to this affair are fascinating, and show how misogyny crept into what otherwise seems a very sexually open group. Brenan, far from being jealous initially, actually offered them his rooms for their trysts. He had always found her sexual interest in him 'unpredictable' (Brenan 85), and did not view her as a lesbian, despite her intense fling with Henrietta. Ralph worried that she would be hurt, for Bingham had a reputation for seducing and abandoning both men and women, but he showed none of the possessiveness he had about other men. Lytton too worried that her heart would be broken, as seemed inevitable, since her emotional investment seemed so great.[92]

This, primarily, is what I would argue is missing from her 1989 biography; the inclusion of an acknowledgement of it in this article makes it all the better for it. Gerzina provides an interrogation of Carrington's relationship with Poppett John complete with drawings and photos that had not been previously shown in her biography, asserting that the relationship was very likely non-sexual but still undeniably romantic and flirtatious, despite their seemingly very sexual nature coupled with the overt correspondence that exists between Carrington and Poppett. What is the motive behind denying the sexual nature of their relationship? For Carrington to be over thirty while pursuing a sixteen-year-old girl is certainly troublesome, certainly stomach-turning and undeniably would be nice to brush aside. But biographers have a responsibility to interrogate the less-than-appealing aspects of their subject's life; even perhaps a questioning of what exactly

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[92] Gerzina, in "The Queer Potential of Carrington's Life and Art," 201-202.

their relationship consisted of would provide useful insight into how Carrington coped with losing Henrietta. While it certainly isn't pretty, it is *more* than certainly relevant.

Gerzina concludes the essay with a quote which appears to be a reflection on her earlier biography:

> 'Recent scholarship on Bloomsbury shows how easy it becomes for biographers and critics to pass authoritative judgments that enforce highly normative values', writes Christopher Reed. 'Much about Bloomsbury – and 1920s culture more generally – surprised and discomfited later generations, as evidenced by reactions to less stylized (more explicit, less campy) explanations of Bloomsbury's attitudes toward sexuality when these appeared decades later.' Carrington, in her life and art, and even in her death, challenged all normativity.[93]

What, then, is *latent* about Carrington's queer life? The title "Queer Potentials" implies dormancy, undeveloped sexuality, a story that requires reading between the lines to understand the full implications of. If Carrington challenged normativity in all of her life and art, why is the essay called "Queer Potentials" rather than "Queer Realities?" However, the acknowledgement of biographers' tendency to pass authoritative judgements which enforce normative values— primarily, in Carrington's case, ones of heterosexuality as a prevailing narrative—is absolutely necessary, and rather fitting considering the centrality of Lytton in Gerzina's biography of Carrington. Reed himself does not implicate Gerzina in this; however, she clearly found it fitting enough to reference with thirty years of hindsight regarding her biography.

Christopher Reed's aforementioned writing on Bloomsbury sexuality and biographical tendencies also offers an important framework for studies of Carrington's life. In "Bloomsbury as Queer Subculture," he writes about the importance of authorship in how it partakes in authority, and the pathologization of sexuality both in biography and in memory:

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[93] Gerzina, in "The Queer Potential of Carrington's Life and Art," 208.

> The issue of choice is important. Vanessa Bell, Dora Carrington, and Lydia Lopokova all rejected men who desired them sexually when they chose men who desired men. This can be psychologized on an individual level. We are told that … Carrington's boyishness extended to ambivalence about her gender and sexuality (as she put it, "I hanker after intimacies, which another side of my nature is perpetually at war against")... Whatever the relevance of these explanations, they all presume that a woman's decision to opt out of the conventions of heterosexual coupledom ("we'll not 'set up' in a house with a neat maid in black and white and napkin rings," insisted Carrington of her relationship with Strachey) requires an explanation framed as a psychological problem. What if, rejecting psychology's tendency to conflate normativity with health in a model of pathology and treatment, we instead followed Vanessa Bell in pathologizing sexual possession and jealousy?[94]

Reed's insights place the biographer at the forefront of creation of an understanding of a person's life, arguing that even implicitly understood frameworks become apparent in biography. This is an approach I hope to take in understanding Gerzina's biography of Carrington; despite the fact that her biography is sympathetic to Carrington and does not purposely omit information or try to construct an untrue narrative, it still retains the structures of misogyny and heterosexism, at no fault of Gerzina's own but as evidence of these troubling trends in the biographic tradition.

Concluding Thoughts

Carrington's life cannot be told in absolutes, whether those absolutes pertain to her fraught understanding of her gender, the question of a label for her sexuality, the true nature of her relationship with Lytton, or any other facet of her life imaginable. There is no right answer to how much of her life was shaped by the environment surrounding her and how much of it was

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[94] Christopher Reed, "Bloomsbury as Queer Subculture," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Bloomsbury Group,* ed. Victoria Rosner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 71-89.

inherent to her character. There is no final piece of the puzzle to Carrington that will suddenly make her relationships, her loves and lusts, her oddities and quirks all make sense. Yet by piecing together a record of Carrington's life that is based not only upon the surviving correspondence and other first-person documents that she left behind but on how the scholarship and media portrayal that followed her death shaped a widespread perception of her personality, it is possible to begin to understand her.

"I feel like I know her," I said to a friend after completing my preliminary research on Carrington, a sentiment I've said many times before about other subjects I've written about. Perhaps this is the downfall of the biographer, an assumption of authority. Then again, is it so wrong to want to set the record straight? There is no escaping the feeling of knowledge that comes from spending time with the life materials that somebody left behind; my experience studying Carrington is no exception to this rule. However, I hope that I have perhaps begun to interrogate which structures have shaped the narratives that exist of Carrington's life and death without attempting to enforce a certain narrative onto her story. Adrienne Rich, in her groundbreaking article on compulsory heterosexuality, wrote that women "may have faithfully or ambivalently obeyed the institution [of marriage], but our feelings — and our sensuality — have not been tamed or contained within it."[95] This holds true for Carrington, who refused to be tamed or contained in her life; even posthumously, her life's story of sexuality, of passion and desire and discomfort and curiosity, is thrashing in its restraints, ready to escape.

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[95] Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4 (Summer 1980): 631-660, at 654.

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