Introduction: Angela Carter and Japan – A Global Perspective

Charlotte Crofts

and

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> There was a dreadful confusion of expectations and I never knew what was going to happen next, because of the confusion. It was both an enriching and a devastating experience, and in many ways it was an affair with Japan itself. (Angela Carter qtd. in Bell 27)

Since her premature death in 1992, Angela Carter has become recognized as one of the most important writers in the English language, with numerous edited collections, theater adaptations, documentaries, and *The Bloody Chamber* now on the A-Level syllabus cementing her legacy as the "white witch of English Literature" (Day 3). However, while her work has attracted both significant academic interest and popular acclaim, there is a danger that her radical feminist politics have been simplified and even sanitized in the rush to canonize her as a fairy godmother figure, locating her only in a Western literary tradition. What this special issue demonstrates is the importance of not underestimating the impact of Carter's formative experiences in Japan on her feminist and political consciousness as a writer. The BBC documentary *Angela Carter: Of Wolves and Women* (produced by Jude Ho, 2018) concurs: "while Carter's early work drew on her creepily claustrophobic childhood and miserable early marriage, it was her experience of living in Japan in the 1970s that liberated both her writing and

her sexuality" (BBC). Yet the impact of Carter's transformative experience in Japan has been critically overlooked. This special issue addresses this imbalance by bringing together a range of new readings and perspectives on the influence of her life in Japan on her writing and its politics.

Angela Carter in Japan

Angela Carter travelled to Japan in 1969 on the proceeds of the Somerset Maugham Award she had received for *Several Perceptions* (1968) and there, she asserts, "learnt what it is to be a woman and became radicalised," claiming that she chose Japan because she "wanted to live for a while in a culture that is not now nor has ever been a Judaeo-Christian one, to see what it was like" (*Nothing Sacred* 28). When Carter arrived in Japan for what was originally planned as a short visit, Japanese society was undergoing drastic changes, political turmoil, and shifts in ideology. Nearly a quarter century after the end of World War II, Japan seemed on the surface to be rapidly recovering from the trauma of the defeat and well launched on a smooth transition to becoming an economic giant. The countryside was fast disappearing and the population in the cities growing; a modern, cosmopolitan infrastructure was developing, yet it still had a long way to go before reaching the high-modernity and cleanliness that Japan is associated with today (Carter notices, for example, the smells of "cooking; sewage; fresh washing," *Shaking a Leg* 231). At the same time, following the devastation of the war, people had picked themselves up and were working tirelessly to rebuild the nation, with euphoria in the air.

There was, however, an intense sense of inferiority fermenting, due to the defeat and the knowledge that their society lagged behind. A *ressentiment* was brewing especially toward the United States, which continually demonstrated its superiority by its military presence in Japan and sophisticated hardware, including TV, washing machines, and refrigerators. The Japanese people harbored mixed feelings of awe and loathing, as US TV programs, films, and music, daily infiltrated Japanese life. The Japanese people were so Westernized (i.e., Americanized) after the war that, as Shunya Yoshimi explains, they no longer reckoned themselves Asian (434, 444). In the midst of this identity crisis, some tried deliberately to recover their Japanese heritage.

This is the historical backdrop for Carter's arrival in Japan, where she met and became romantically involved with a Japanese man, Sozo Araki, an aspiring writer who was a few years younger than she. She was still technically married to Paul Carter but was contemplating leaving him. The relationship between Carter and Araki, which Carter called "my First Real Affair" (qtd. In Gordon 141), lasted for about two years, until the summer of 1971, with short intervals when she returned to England. She finalized her divorce from Paul during those years. After she separated from Araki in 1971, she continued to live in Japan for another half year and then, in 1972, left Japan for England. Araki wrote a memoir looking back at the relationship with Carter (its English translation by Natsumi Ikoma, published in 2017, includes "Her Side of the Story," a feminist response contextualising Araki's memoir 153-75).

While in Japan, Carter familiarized herself with Japanese culture, history, and literature. Her reading was extensive, ranging from fiction, poetry, and studies of art, through psychology, history, and sociology, to manga and cookery books. Her Japanese oeuvre is comprised of the short story collection *Fireworks* (1974) and various articles

published in *New Statesman* and *New Society*, collected in *Nothing Sacred* (1982) and later *Shaking a Leg* (1997). She also wrote *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) while living in Japan, and the character of Albertina, who is the ultimate object of desire for the male protagonist Desiderio, is based on Araki (Ikoma, "Encounter with the Mirror of the Other" 79). Helen Snaith quotes Edmund Gordon noting that Carter had originally planned to dedicate the novel to Araki: "For Sozo Araki, my more than Albertina" (Gordon 206, qtd. in Snaith, "'Fictions Written in a Certain City'" 27).

The significance of this encounter with Japan in Carter's writing has been recognized by Carter's scholars (see Sage, 1994; Gamble, 1997, 2001; Cardi, 2003; Crofts, 2006; Pasolini, 2012; Araki 2017; Ikoma, 2017, 2020; Snaith, 2018; Tonkin, 2019). Edmund Gordon's official biography, *The Invention of Angela Carter* in 2016 and the English translation in 2017 of Sozo Araki's *Seduced by Japan* shed light on the previously hidden aspect of Carter's life in Japan and began the work of gauging the extent of its impact on Carter's personal as well as professional life was glimpsed. These, with the above-mentioned recent BBC documentary, have generated both scholarly and public interest in Carter's Japan years, paving the way to a more extensive examination of their influence on Carter's literature.

As demonstrated by the articles in this special issue, Carter's experiences in Japan had a profound influence on her subsequent writing. Her Japan experiences had a more extensive influence on her writing than previously thought, and her professed interest in "decolonialising" ("Notes from the Frontline" 75) existing hegemonic structures is expressed in *The Passion of New Eve* and *Black Venus*. Observations she made during her time in Japan expanded her literary universe and sharpened her

understanding of the complicated human condition. What she experienced was not merely an encounter with the new and the exotic: she found herself caught in a multi-layered power struggle in post-war Japan for cultural, racial, and sexual dominance between patriarchal control and personal agency and between national autonomy and psychological freedom, in which the unfamiliar and the familiar intermingled. Carter found herself the object of both a racial and a gendered gaze as a white woman. In "A Souvenir of Japan," Carter writes: "I had never been so absolutely the mysterious other. I had become a kind of phoenix, a fabulous beast; I was an outlandish jewel. He found me, I think, inexpressibly exotic. But I often felt like a female impersonator" (*Fireworks* 7). She felt exoticized, while at the same time she was aware of exoticizing and objectifying the Japanese herself. In "Notes from the Front Line" Carter discusses how her encounter with Japanese culture troubled and denaturalized her racial identity (72). Finding herself "the other of the other" led to "the slow process of decolonialising our language and our basic habits of thought" (75).

Global Critical Perspectives

This special issue of *Contemporary Women's Writing* on Angela Carter and Japan is the first scholarly collection of critical writings dedicated to examining Japan's influences on Carter's writing. It includes articles by scholars from different countries, ethnic backgrounds, and at different stages of their careers, in our conscious effort to diversify and decolonize the field. It developed from the papers originally presented at the Angela Carter and Japan symposium of 30 June 2018, held at the University of East Anglia,

where Carter taught creative writing from 1984 to 1987, organized by Stephen Benson and Natsumi Ikoma. Both the conference and this special issue offer significant benchmarks in the scholarship, filling gaps in the current research by reconfiguring Carter as an author working across cultures and recognizing the complex influence of her non-European experience in Japan. The range of work presented here also encompasses diverse approaches, from archival research through textual analysis to comparative literary studies, translation studies, and adaptation studies.

The special issue opens with Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère exploring the pivotal role that translation plays in Carter's development as a writer in "'Morning Glories of the Night': Translational Poetics in Angela Carter's *Fireworks*, from Baudelaire's *Fusées* to Bashō's *haikus."* Hennard's central argument is that Carter's engagement with literature in foreign languages and her critically neglected work as a translator developed an alertness to linguistic and cultural differences and a playful approach to language that permeate her writing. Carter's own formative experiences in Japan are both informed by and intertwined with the literary traditions of her predecessors (often men), including Baudelaire, Buñuel, and Bashō as well as the work of Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon which she was reading while in Japan. Through close readings of the short stories in the *Fireworks* collection, read in dialogue with Carter's Japanese journals where she glosses Japanese words in English and French and back again, Hennard extends her research in *Reading, Translating, Rewriting: Translational Poetics* (2013) to delineate Carter's "translational poetics" as a creative methodology.

In "Angela Carter's Metaleptic Turn: The Possibilities 'of a Mutation, of a Revolution in the Propriety of the Symbolic System,'" Karima Thomas argues that

Carter's vertiginous experience of Japan provided her with an opportunity to challenge the dominant discourse of a unified subjectivity in what she calls a "metaleptic turn," positing a discursive construction of identity. In her reading of "Flesh and the Mirror" and "The Loves of Lady Purple," Thomas unpicks Carter's use of *bunraku* puppetry as a metaleptic device, drawing on Roland Barthes' analysis of the "three separate writings~~narrations~~" of *bunraku* in *Empire of Signs*. Both Barthes and Carter see *bunraku* as revealing the artificiality and emptiness of the sign, but *bunraku*'s theatrical strategies allow Carter also to reveal the constructedness of the symbolic order in terms of gender.

Nozomi Uematsu and Aneesh Barai, in "Dis-Oriented Desires and Angela Carter's Intersectionality: Nationalism, Masochism, and the Search for "the Other's Otherness,"~~Seeking 'the other's otherness' in Fantastical Creatures,"~~ examine the complex intersections of race, gender, and nationalism through a close textual analysis of *Miss Z, The Dark Young Lady*, and stories in the *Fireworks* collection, read alongside Japanese contemporary woman writer Taeko Kono's "Bone Meat." Uematsu and Barai situate Carter's work in the context of intersectionality both in the critical appraisal of her work and in her own writings. The essay identifies a shift in Carter's imagery of the British unicorn while she was in Japan and examines her use of the Japanese nationalist image of *Momotaro* ("Peach Boy") to critically explore men's and women's masochism. This comparativist reading sheds new light on Carter's writing and connects it to international developments in feminist theory and thinking. In "Animal Tricksters from Japanese Folktales in the Work of Angela Carter,"~~The Role of Japanese Folktales in Angela Carter's Literary Production,"~~ Luciana Cardi, with her extensive archival research on Carter's reading experiences, broadens our understanding of

Carter's folk influences, usually associated with the European fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault (who Carter also translated), by refocusing attention on Japanese folktales with specific reference to the shape-shifting figure of the Japanese fox trickster that appears in *Fireworks*, *Love*, and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*. Cardi unpacks the East-Asian fox as a means through which Carter, unlike her European predecessors who regard Japanese folklore nostalgically, "as if it were a reflection of the fading British traditions," ~~(Cardi xx)~~ explores its potential to subvert contested hierarchies and binaries between male and female, European and Asian, human and animal. Carter's fox tales explode cultural boundaries around race and gender and prefigure Carter's well-known reappropriation of European fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber*.

Yutaka Okuhata, in "Angela Carter and Modern Japanese Fiction: Her Re-e~~E~~ncounter with Western Literary Legacies," deftly unpacks Carter's engagement with modern Japanese literature, with specific reference to four key authors, Tanizaki, Akutagawa, Kawabata, and Mishima, who directly influenced her novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*. Okuhata argues that, while it would be easy to spin Carter's encounter with Japanese culture as represented by these seminal Japanese authors as potentially appropriative cultural imperialism, that interpretation presupposes that these texts offer an uncomplicated "Japaneseness." As he points out, her Japanese sources themselves reappropriate Western traditions deriving from a "longstanding, dynamic relationship with Western cultural influence." ~~(Okuhata xx).~~ By complicating the relationship between Western and Japanese traditions, Okuhata shows how Carter challenges both orientalist and Eurocentric assumptions, "re-encountering Western literary legacies through the lenses of modern Japanese fiction.~~writers~~" ~~(xx).~~

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Scott A. Dimovitz navigates Carter's shifting attitudes towards race before, during, and after her time in Japan, in "'Violated Angels': Japan, Sadism, and Angela Carter's Orientalism ~~*Irezumi* and Angela Carter's Sadistic Orientalism,~~" drawing on Gordon's biography and personal correspondence with Carole Roffe, collected in the British Library. Dimovitz d~~O~~elineates a shift between those works published before and after her trip to Japan; the latter include works like *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of New Eve*, in which she assiduously deconstructs the troubling racist depictions from the lumber room of European and American culture that had crept, uninterrogated, into her earlier work. She referred to this literary strategy in her post-Japan writings as "demythologising" ("Notes from The Front Line" 71) – a process of playing with allegory, fantasy, and archetype to trouble and explode racist (and other) stereotypes. Dimovitz suggests that Carter's transformative experience in Japan provided a catalyst for her evolving thinking about not only race, but also its interrelationships with gender, power, and sexuality.

In "Through the Looking Glass of *Madame Butterfly*: Narrative Gender Transition in the Writings of Angela Carter," Natsumi Ikoma questions the reading of Carter's encounter with Japan as either straightforwardly orientalist or unproblematically neo-orientalist, with Japan acting as the other through which Carter could undergo her radical feminist self-discovery. Drawing on recent critiques of Said's *Orientalism* which acknowledge the gendered discourse of colonial power, Ikoma traces Carter's growing awareness of her Western perspective, while at the same time highlighting the difficulty of navigating being a woman within this highly gendered colonial discourse. Ikoma situates her reading of Carter's journey within the wider socio-cultural context of the 1960s and 1970s, teasing out tensions between European

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postcolonialism and Japanese self-orientalization in relation to both race and gender. The article explores how Carter's Japan experiences inform her later writing, particularly *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of New Eve*, demonstrating a shift in her authorial voice from one of masculine impersonation and an initially orientalist engagement with Japanese culture (in her pre-Japan fiction, such as *Love* and earlier journalism about Japan) to a more complex rendering of the intersections of race, gender, and power.

The special issue ends with Charlotte Crofts discussing the process of adapting "Flesh and the Mirror" into a screenplay. In "Through the 'Magic Mirror': Adapting Angela Carter's Neglected Japanese Writings for the Silver Screen," Crofts explores a collaborative work in progress, critically reflecting on the challenge of translating Carter's narrative strategies into another medium. The article focuses on Carter's playful autobiographical writings which focus on her experiences in Japan and her relationship with her Japanese boyfriend, Sozo Araki. Crofts links these to the Japanese I-novel, arguing that Carter subverts this male tradition and breaks the autobiographical contract with the reader, before outlining how the screenplay attempts to honor Carter's highly metaleptic technique in cinematic terms.

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Conclusion

This special issue on Angela Carter and Japan makes a timely intervention in Carter scholarship, offering new perspectives by international scholars, from across Europe, North America, and Japan, to extend our understanding of Carter's influences beyond a European range of reference. Collectively, these articles acknowledge both the

importance of Carter's experiences in Japan on her formation as a writer and the complexities of evaluating the significance of this cross-cultural experience across the nexus of race, gender, and power, without reducing either to cliche or stereotype. By situating Carter as a global author, whose writing traverses multilateral cultural influences and criss-crossing traditions, these articles question the meaning of national borders in contemporary literary discourse. They demonstrate how Carter was transformed and radicalized by the experience in Japan, not only as an author but in her identity and political views, and how this change is reflected in her narrative voice, her representations of gender, her motifs, and her writing style. Carter's radicalized literary universe and her story of transformation offer us a hopeful and even liberating space for international, interracial, intercultural, and nonsectarian possibilities of hybridization and communication. As guest editors, we offer this special issue ass a similarly collaborative space where readers will find each chapter in conversation with the others. It is also our hope that this special issue has a ripple effect for the deeper exploration of the multilateral global influences in literature, such as those found in Carter's work, to encompass the works of the diverse authors and artists influenced by Carter, such as Kazuo Ishiguro, Neil Jordan, Nicola Barker, Sarah Waters, Anne Enwright, and Ali Smith. We believe the need for collaboration and dialogue between diverse others has never been more pressing in this era of various global crises and polarized societies.

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