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## INTRODUCTION

# Modernism's Unfinished Lives

IN THE FIFTH CHAPTER of *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf's narrator randomly chooses a book from the shelves, pulls it down, and begins to read: "*Life's Adventure*, or some such title, by Mary Carmichael."<sup>1</sup> Skimming, at first, she runs her eye up and down the page, trying to determine whether the author "has a pen in her hand or a pickaxe."<sup>2</sup> She continues to narrate the process of reading, until, deploying the Woolfian ellipses that litter earlier chapters, she suddenly pauses to address her audience directly:

I turned the page and read . . . I am sorry to break off so abruptly. Are there no men present? Do you promise me that behind that red curtain over there the figure of Sir Chartres Biron is not concealed? We are all women, you assure me? Then I may tell you that the very next words I read were these—"Chloe liked Olivia . . ." Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women.<sup>3</sup>

When I teach *A Room of One's Own*, I tend to read this last line to my class in a mocking whisper—a hand flung dramatically across my brow, eyes darting from side to side with exaggerated suspicion. The story of Chloe and Olivia is now canonical, a "founding revolutionary moment" in feminist modernist studies.<sup>4</sup> And while I dutifully explain Woolf's reference to Sir Chartres Biron, the judge who had presided over the previous year's obscenity trial of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, and we discuss the significance of Chloe liking Olivia "perhaps for the first time in literature,"<sup>5</sup> it is that final line—"Sometimes women do like women"—that sparks the shock of recognition in so many of my students. They are impressively adept in the application of the so-called Bechdel Test across genre, media,

and historical period; they are all too aware of the cultural failures it demonstrates. And so, even when temporarily befuddled by Woolf's historical references, they immediately understand and sympathize with her desire for more complicated representations of relationships between women.

Yet the question of what Woolf means by "like" remains murky. Does Chloe like Olivia *like that*, they want to know? Or are Chloe and Olivia *just friends*? In other words, is this a story about lesbian or queer history, or is this a story about feminist history? Should they agree with Lillian Faderman, who argues that Woolf "meant to indicate an emotion far more intense than mere 'liking,'" or, especially given Chloe and Olivia's shared laboratory, should they be swayed by Nancy K. Miller's attention to the way in which this "liking between women" becomes positively and dynamically transformed "when combined with work"?<sup>6</sup> In their frustration with the ambiguity inherent in the spectrum of possible relationships that might be indicated by "like," my students unknowingly concur with Sharon Marcus's assertion that since poor Chloe and Olivia are "overworked," we now "need more than two proper names and a verb to do justice to the variety and complexity of women's social alliances."<sup>7</sup> As a call to action, this is apt. But using Chloe and Olivia as shorthand, as we so often do, obscures the significance of the other name Woolf has already offered to us in the same passage: Mary Carmichael. The author.

For it is not enough for Chloe to like Olivia, no matter what we decide that may mean. Chloe and Olivia are fictional characters. Several pages after they were first introduced, Woolf again pulls away from the plot—away from the description of Chloe and Olivia's relationship—in order to draw our attention to the writer's role in her historic hypothetical. "For if Chloe likes Olivia *and Mary Carmichael knows how to express it*," she continues, "she will light a torch in that vast chamber . . . [of] half lights and profound shadows . . . where nobody has yet been."<sup>8</sup> To find more than two proper names and a verb, we also need to find our Mary Carmichaels—and her colleagues at work in genres other than the novel. Chloe and Olivia don't exist at all without the woman writer who will set down their stories. And Woolf's recognition and restoration of the missing Mary Carmichaels of literary history is a project continued throughout the twentieth century in both academic scholarship and independent publishing.<sup>9</sup> While indebted to this work, this book ultimately departs from the perennially necessary search for Mary Carmichaels (and Judith Shakespeares, for that matter) in order to turn attention to the historical counterparts of Chloe and Olivia. That is, rather than continue the rich tradition of recovering women novelists writing the stories of fictional Chloe and Olivias, I write

about women writers who are themselves embroiled in the story of Chloe and Olivia—women who *are* Chloe and Olivia.<sup>10</sup> How has the torch been lit, I ask, when it is Chloe herself who must write the history of liking—and sharing a laboratory with—Olivia? What happens when Chloe is both the author and the subject of *Life's Adventure*?

*The Passion Projects: Modernist Women, Intimate Archives, Unfinished Lives* locates our writerly Chloes in the years after the height of Anglo-American literary modernism, when women began to feel themselves being marginalized and excluded from emergent accounts of the period. I trace the ways that queer women, in particular, wrote themselves and their Olivias into a literary and cultural history that refused to accommodate them. These life stories were frequently “sanitized,” their subjects rendered “apparitional,” as in Terry Castle’s study, or they were rendered clearly and unapologetically before being censored, suppressed, or destroyed.<sup>11</sup> In each case, *Life's Adventure* turns out to be a biography—or, at least, it is a biographical act, a project driven by an impulse toward life writing, collecting, and other forms of documenting the personal, intimate, and private. This study thus begins with the assumption that the stories we tell about our most intimate lives, and the structures—the torches in vast chambers—in which we preserve them, are of singular importance. This is a bigger, more complicated claim than it may at first seem: it is both formal and material, both literary and historical. What is important here is not only the historical content of the recovered life story—the exact meaning of “Chloe liked Olivia”—but the methods employed by our writerly Chloes, our ancestors both biological and chosen, to write these life stories. To the extent that this is itself a kind of recovery project, it recovers not an identity but a genre: the biographical “passion project.”

This book thus reassesses the importance of biography, broadly conceived, for modernist, midcentury, and contemporary women writers and scholars. By drawing together a diverse archive of biographical acts—published and unpublished books, drafts, outlines, fragments, letters, annotations, collections, objects, and ephemera—I read biography as an activist genre undertaken in late career by queer feminist writers determined to resist the marginalization and exclusion of their friends, colleagues, lovers, companions, and wives from dominant narratives of literary history. Some of these biographical acts were published immediately, some were published only after a substantial delay, and some remain unpublished today. In the experimental life writing of canonical mainstays like Virginia Woolf, the intimate archives of Radclyffe Hall and Sylvia Townsend Warner, the abandoned projects of Djuna Barnes and Hope

Mirrlees, the midcentury memoirs and literary collections of Margaret Anderson, Sylvia Beach, and Alice B. Toklas, and the more contemporary recovery projects of Lisa Cohen, Jenny Diski, Monique Truong, and Kate Zambreno, the biographical impulse signals a shared ethical drive to develop a counternarrative of literary history grounded in women's lives. By tracking this interest in preservation across biographical novels, histories, and archives, this book uncovers the modernist prehistory of the contemporary queer feminist recovery project.

*The Unfinished Business of 1928:  
Modernism, Feminism, and the Biographical Act*

The history of Anglo-American literary modernism is full of declarations about the decisive significance of individual years. Think of Virginia Woolf's assertion that human character changed "on or about December 1910"; think of Wyndham Lewis's crowning of the "Men of 1914"; think of Willa Cather's observation that the world "broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts," and Ezra Pound's habit of dating letters "*p s U*" after the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in the same year.<sup>12</sup> Generations later, feminist and queer scholars turned our attention to the impact of 1928, the year in which English women gained full suffrage and the year in which Radclyffe Hall's now classic novel of lesbianism, *The Well of Loneliness*, was published and put on trial for obscenity.<sup>13</sup> As Laura Doan has demonstrated, the trial was "*the* crystallizing moment in the construction of a visible modern English lesbian subculture," and the publicity surrounding both the scandalous book and its "mannish" author was a crucial part of "the shift from cultural indeterminacy to acknowledgement."<sup>14</sup> In his account of queer modernism, Benjamin Kahan added that the trial "had the analogous effect for lesbianism as Wilde's trial had for homosexuality—it did not invent a language of lesbianism so much as crystalize an image of the lesbian."<sup>15</sup> The intersecting histories of the vote and the trial made increasingly available two distinct vocabularies—feminist, lesbian—with which to imagine and record the lives of modern women. And the public controversy attached to each image increased the stakes (and, sometimes, the inventiveness) of the biographical acts in this study. Many women writers were very aware of their participation in, and scrutiny under, these vocabularies; for example, just before the publication of *A Room of One's Own* in 1929, Woolf admitted that she feared she would "be attacked for a feminist & hinted at for a sapphist."<sup>16</sup> In contrast to modernist biographers like Lytton Strachey and Harold Nicolson, whose irreverent portraits

attacked what they saw as the hypocrisy and foolishness of earlier generations, these writers approached their subjects—their Olivias—with a kind of protective empathy, seeking to preserve rather than flatten their less conventional life stories in intimate biographical acts. As the result of the press surrounding the legal condemnation of Hall's novel, lesbians found themselves newly visible, and close relationships between women were increasingly scrutinized. In the preface of her book about her friend and fellow writer Winifred Holtby, for example, Vera Brittain acknowledges the paradox governing representations of friendship between women: "From the days of Homer the friendships of men have enjoyed glory and acclamation, but the friendships of women," she tells us, "have usually been not merely unsung, but mocked, belittled and falsely interpreted."<sup>17</sup> Brittain here registers both the paucity of the historical record and the modern tendency, especially after 1928, to read all intimate female friendships as potential sexual relationships. This is, in part, why this book focuses exclusively on biographical acts undertaken by women writers, despite the existence of similar projects developed between men and across genders.<sup>18</sup> The very different types of queer feminist biographical acts examined here are all indelibly marked by both the burdens and generative possibilities of this heightened public awareness in the years after 1928.

This book registers these tensions while resisting the temptation to provide a single persuasive account of the relationships described in its pages. As lesbian feminist scholars such as Lillian Faderman, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, and Sharon Marcus have shown in different contexts, sexual desire pervades friendships between women even as sexual identities remain historically opaque.<sup>19</sup> It simply may not be possible for us, now, to know exactly what it meant for Chloe to like Olivia, then. There is a danger in confidence, in certainty, in the assurance of being right: one "reading" can close down the possibilities of a text and, with it, the historical preservation of identities other than those currently legible to us and preferred by us. For this reason, this project is anchored by my determination to write *about* biography without writing biography itself. My methodology includes close reading and formal analysis, but these readings share space with biographical narrative and cultural history. As Lawrence Rainey once reminded us, stories are simply another form of criticism:

For many academic literary critics the presence of any story at all has become an object of suspicion. Narrative is thought to be a linear and monologic form that offers factitious coherence at the cost of analytic complexity, storytelling a form of pandering to popular tastes depraved

by mass media. Expository prose, written in rebarbative jargon, is the sign of resistance to the culture industry and the seal of academic integrity. But is it necessary to remind literary critics that a story is not an object that has been merely happened upon? No less than expository prose, stories are complex and contradictory artifacts. The apparent ease with which they may be recounted should not be confused with a resistance to analysis. Stories are analyses—by other means.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout this book, biographical stories *are* analyses, not simply the historical building blocks with which to construct other, more literary-critical arguments. Our use and misuse of the biographical can tell us a great deal about the shifting values of our literary traditions. And while I remain unwilling to ask for a single definitive answer to the question of what it means for Chloe to like Olivia, I am particularly invested in the demonstrated commitments of so many real-life Chloes to the biographical commemoration of their Olivias. In this sense, it does not seem outlandish to think that one of the books pulled down from the shelf by Woolf's narrator might have had an unmentioned subtitle: not just *Life's Adventure* but *Life's Adventure: A Biography*.

Biography, biographical act, biographical practice: throughout this book, I understand these three terms to be part of the same generic framework, and that framework is inclusive of a wide variety of biographical acts and archives. Why, I ask, does what I identify as a common biographical impulse take such drastically different forms? Each chapter details the result of a biographical turn, an impulse toward biographical writing, and the development of a kind of biographical practice, but since the resulting text or archive is not always legible in the same terms as standard biography, I describe the effort born of the biographical impulse itself—no matter the result—as a biographical act. I initially borrowed the term “biographical act” from Charles Caramello, who used it to describe the literary portraiture of Henry James and Gertrude Stein. In Caramello's analysis, the biographical acts of James and Stein were “covers for autobiography,” and their literary portraits were mere performances undertaken in order to “construct autobiographical portraits of themselves as exemplary modern artists.”<sup>21</sup> Unlike Caramello, though, I do not mean to imply that the coding of this work as biography is always misleading. The writers I study are not *putting on acts*; instead, they are *beginning to take action*, even if their biographical projects cannot always be finished or published during their lifetimes.

These biographical acts are undertaken throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century—a time when the genre was fraught with



importance for the future of modernist studies. The height of literary modernism, as an artistic movement, had passed, but the development of modernist studies as a widely recognized scholarly field within universities was still to come. In *Modernism: Evolution of an Idea*, Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers grapple with the long history of the term “modernism” and trace its development, contestation, and revision over the course of the century. In their account, the midcentury consolidation of modernism into an object of professional study first took place in the “full-length studies and biographies of key figures that helped make the authors themselves into embodiments of genius, innovation, and free thought.”<sup>22</sup> This foundational biographical criticism was dominated by men writing about men: their paradigmatic examples are Richard Ellmann and Hugh Kenner, whose studies of Joyce and Pound, respectively, “built the core of a high modernist canon around linguistic innovation, difficulty, and autonomy” and provided the grounding for “the new field of modernist studies.”<sup>23</sup> While Latham and Rogers go on to acknowledge the parallel significance of classroom-ready anthologies and the establishment of institutional archives for the birth of modernist studies, I want to linger on their observation that critical attention to individual modernist writers, in biographies and single-author studies, is a founding methodology of modernist studies. As several feminist literary critics have suggested, biography had already become the generic terrain on which women battled for their inclusion in history.<sup>24</sup> I extend and elaborate that claim in the context of modernist studies, arguing that these writers take up biography in order to engage in what I call generic activism on behalf of their intimate friends, partners, and companions. They believed that this unconventional biographical work, undertaken in defiance of cultural and generic norms, could eventually transform long-standing social conventions. These intimate biographical practices, which document the trace of desire between women with very different relations to avowal and orientation, feminism and lesbianism, and the work of partnership in private and professional life, are driven by an implicitly pedagogical, future-oriented impulse. In this light, the biographical acts assembled in this book comprise a counterhistory of the field. These projects were not always finished, and they certainly were not understood to be analogous to the big biographical tomes that continue to be named as the founding criticism of modernist studies. Nevertheless, they persisted. And in these biographical acts, these passion projects, these women wrote themselves and their communities into a literary history from which they were being slowly but insistently excluded.

Biography may well seem an unlikely hero. Writers, in particular, have a long history of suspicion toward the genre: W. H. Auden labeled it “always superfluous” and “usually in bad taste,” James Joyce envisioned biographers as “biografiend[s],” and Vladimir Nabokov accused them of being “psycho-plagiarists.” Even in Latham and Rogers’s account of modernist studies’ dependence on the genre, the biographical can seem somewhat retrograde. Scholars of modernism routinely employ a wide variety of research methods, many of which rely upon the biographical, and biographically based scholarship has been of long-standing importance not just in the initial formation of the field but in virtually all of the later expansions of that early canon.<sup>25</sup> Yet, especially in our capacity as teachers of modernism, we still tend to imply that the principles of close reading and formal analysis are the most important methods for literary study. For this reason, it has been hard for the field to fully move beyond the long-standing relationship between modernism and New Criticism.<sup>26</sup> And even beyond modernist studies, the necessity of biographical information in other fields of humanities research does not always translate into respect for biographical projects. In his preface to *The Seductions of Biography*, for example, historian William S. McFeely recalls his feelings of surprise and dismay when he first heard himself referred to as a biographer: “About all I knew about that label was that it marked the doom of one’s reputation in the historical profession.”<sup>27</sup> Real scholars, it would seem—not just literary scholars but historians, too—keep their distance from the biographical.<sup>28</sup>

Scholars of literary modernism, in particular, have only recently begun to acknowledge the extent to which modernist writing itself is saturated by experiments in biographical life writing. Autobiography, driven by changing notions of the interior self, has long been an essential object of inquiry in our narratives (and syllabi) of modernist studies, but, perhaps because of the vehemence with which the most well-known modernist biography—Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* (1918)—rejects not only its subjects but the conventional form of the genre, modernist literary history rarely attends to the interest in biography sustained by so many of its most well-known writers. With few exceptions, scholars have preferred to address other related forms: autobiography, portraiture, the roman à clef, the bildungsroman.<sup>29</sup> Even Latham and Rogers’s acknowledgment of the role of biography in scholarly field formation implicitly positions the genre as an early mode of criticism to be eclipsed by more sophisticated theoretical work. As both corrective and continuing conversation, my study highlights the urgency of a critical return to biography studies, especially in the context of modernist, feminist, and queer studies, and it suggests that we should

understand the archive as a site of bio-critical action for the writers and subjects long marginalized by dominant disciplinary narratives.

### *Intimacy and the Archive*

Not all of the biographical acts examined in this project are immediately recognizable as biographies. Sometimes biographical impulses find other outlets. Sometimes they fail. One of the basic premises of this book is that the responsible recovery of queer women's life writing requires that we read around the edges of dominant generic form—in other words, that we read biographical impulses, acts, and archives in addition to published biographies. If modernist and midcentury biographical practices could not yet acknowledge the great variety of intimacies between women without what Sylvia Townsend Warner called a “safe margin for every one to be dead in,” then the formal structures and governing notions of the genre had to be broken down and rebuilt in other, more capacious ways.<sup>30</sup> In a sense, the formal revolutions of literary modernism in which many of these women had participated in earlier moments in their careers proved to have been a perfect training ground for this later work. Like William Carlos Williams, who argued—in the pages of his own autobiography, no less!—that every form of art “presents its case and its meaning by the very form it assumes” and that “past objects have about them past necessities . . . which have conditioned them and from which, as a form itself, they cannot be freed,” many of the writers in this study struggled with the inherited limitations of biographical form.<sup>31</sup> Frustrated by the “past necessities” of the genre, they became amateur archivists, impassioned collectors, and intimate historians, and they pursued projects of collection, collation, and annotation rather than of holistic narrative creation. Each project “presents its case and its meaning” in its expansion of biographical form to include the intimate archive.

In calling these unfinished biographical acts “intimate archives,” I highlight the process of archiving as an ongoing biographical practice that pieces together the stories of these authors' most intimate relationships. In Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips's collaborative work on intimacy, they describe psychoanalysis as “what two people can say to each other if they agree not to have sex,” and, in a slight adaptation, we can characterize the intimate archive as a collection comprised of what one partner can say about the other once they can no longer have sex—once one partner bears the sole responsibility for making their story together legible.<sup>32</sup> As we will see, this is emotionally difficult work, and the authors I discuss pursue it

in full knowledge that they are collating and annotating these biographical acts for an audience that may be several generations in the future.<sup>33</sup> The archive here is, in Jacques Derrida's various formulations, "a pledge," "a promise," and "a question of the future."<sup>34</sup> For this reason, my use of the term "intimate archive" differs from the way Maryanne Dever, Sally Newman, and Ann Vickery use it, in the introduction to their 2009 volume, to refer to "collections of private and, in some cases, highly personal papers that have found their way into public collections."<sup>35</sup> While the intimate archives in my study are also comprised of private papers, there is no confusion about how they "found their way" into their current institutional homes. As biographical acts, they are intimate, not inanimate; rather than understanding them as the passive victims of historical change, I read them as deliberately curated projects.

These archives are intimate for another, perhaps more practical, reason, too. The archival collections of many of the women discussed here are intertwined: the Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge Papers are held together at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin; the Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland Papers are held in the same tiny reading room at the Dorset County Museum in Dorchester, England; the papers of Djuna Barnes and the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven were initially deposited together at the University of Maryland, though they have been separated into different fonds; the Hope Mirrlees and Jane Ellen Harrison Papers, while stored separately in the Newnham College Archives at the University of Cambridge, contain numerous cross-references and must be read together; and, most famously, the archival remains of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas are filed together throughout the collections of both the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library and the Harry Ransom Center. In each case, it is impossible to research the life and work of one woman without bumping into the life and work of the other. And although, with the exception of the Stein-Toklas Papers, these archives were not immediately celebrated alongside those of Eliot and Joyce as the foundational archives of modernist literary history, the intimacy of their relationships has been built into the structure of their physical archives.

Throughout this book, I describe these biographical acts as both "intimate" and "queer," and I use these terms in ways that sketch their sometimes ambivalent relationship to the specificities of sexual desire, acts, and identities. Intimacy, like queerness, is suggestive rather than specific. It does not necessarily indicate a sexual relationship, but neither does it foreclose that possibility. Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner describe how

the word “intimate” calls forth a “cluster of related ideas: privacy, familiarity, love, sex, informality, and personal connection.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, J. Samaine Lockwood’s practice of “intimate historicism” relies on an understanding of the intimate as that which “seems to be about privacy, personal relation, and the domestic.”<sup>37</sup> Intimacy usually implies the presence of a relationship: though it is possible to experience intimacy alone, one is more frequently understood to be intimate *with* someone or something—a person, an animal, an object, a group. In Lauren Berlant’s account, intimacy “names the enigma of [a] range of attachments . . . [and] poses a question of scale that links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective.”<sup>38</sup> As a theoretical term, intimacy allows for connection—for its own strategic deployment—despite this definitional instability.

The word “queer,” like the word “intimate,” is useful here because of a similarly unresolvable friction between historical specificity and theoretical abstraction. Several strands of contemporary queer theory have sought to “disconnect queerness from an essential homosexual embodiment” on the basis that “queer maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal,” while others see the critical capaciousness of the term as a weakness rather than a strength.<sup>39</sup> In an early *PMLA* article heralding, however ambivalently, the institutionalization of queer theory, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner demanded resistance to the stabilization of “queer” in favor of the term’s “wrenching sense of recontextualization.”<sup>40</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “Queer and Now” provides a paradigmatic example of how to imagine the coexistence of multiple valences of queerness. In a now oft-quoted passage, she describes the anti-foundational fluidity of queerness as an “open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically.”<sup>41</sup> But she also insists that, despite the unpredictable and exciting movement of some queer theoretical scholarship “along dimensions that can’t be subsumed by gender and sexuality at all,” queerness should not be fully divorced from sexual object choices, practices, and/or identities:

Given the historical and contemporary force of the prohibitions against *every* same-sex sexual expression, for anyone to disavow those meanings, or to displace them from the term’s definitional center, would be to dematerialize any possibility of queerness itself.<sup>42</sup>

The choice to adopt or avoid the term “queer” is thus a deliberate rhetorical strategy. Valerie Rohy, for example, uses “lesbian” rather than “queer”

throughout her work as a “strategic anachronism that can illuminate the continuities between nineteenth-century views of female deviance and twentieth-century notions of lesbian identity.”<sup>43</sup> While I respect her implicit indexing of Adrienne Rich’s “lesbian continuum,”<sup>44</sup> I refer to queer rather than lesbian biographical acts throughout this book precisely because I prefer the broad range of possible intimacies it represents. Only some of the biographical acts in this book are undertaken within relationships we can define with precision. Only some of the relationships between these Chloes and Olivias are known with any real degree of certitude—with the agreement and consensus of both the subjects themselves and the leagues of literary historians who have trailed after them. And it is perfectly fine—responsible, even—to admit we do not know everything about the past. Some queer studies scholars have suggested that the historical gaze of LGBTQ studies has made some sexual histories, identities, and acts legible at the expense of others.<sup>45</sup> While some theorists of queer temporality share Carolyn Dinshaw’s critical optimism about the possibilities of a queer “touch across time,”<sup>46</sup> others, like David Halperin and Heather Love, remain wary of the identificatory pleasures of such connection.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, one of the larger goals of this project is to put late modernist and midcentury theorists and practitioners of biography—of early feminist and queer biography, at that—in conversation with more contemporary formulations in queer theory: queer temporalities, queer failures, queer archives.

My contention that the queer feminist literary archive is a form of intimate biography that carries an alternate narrative of modernist literary history is built on the lessons of feminist and queer archival scholarship. Significant academic readerships and para-academic activist groups have developed around concerns about queer, amateur, or otherwise marginalized archives, and this project contributes to this much larger cultural conversation by tracing the fluid boundaries between intimate and institutional modes of preservation.<sup>48</sup> Generations of feminist criticism are indebted to the fundamental idea that the personal is political, or, in this context, that the intimate bears a legitimate relationship to the institutional. Feminist and queer archives value the personal, the private, and the intimate as part of the historical record, and this requires us to read for absence rather than simply acknowledging what is present. As the editors of “Queering Archives,” a 2014 special issue of the *Radical History Review*, point out, “the drama of existence is a central, compelling narrative or mystery inhering in queer archives, a drama borne out by countless scholars’ efforts to find lost queer things.”<sup>49</sup> They go on to describe the queer archive as “a space where one collects or cobbles together historical understandings

of sexuality and gender through an appraisal of presences and absences, . . . where queer subjects put themselves together as historical subjects, even if done in the context of historical lack.”<sup>50</sup> That lack—that untold, unvalued, unfinished history—is constitutive of queer archives. As many scholars have shown, queer archives have often been preserved—when they have been recognized and saved at all—in private rather than public spaces. Ann Cvetkovich’s work on “archives of feeling,” for example, asks us to consider the value of “objects that might not be considered archival” alongside immaterial histories that resist documentation because, she argues, sometimes “sex and feelings are too personal or ephemeral to leave records.”<sup>51</sup> In this way, the queer archival project is structured by absence—and the question of how to read, preserve, and honor the violence of that absence.

Throughout *The Passion Projects*, unfinishedness is the symptom of this absence. The biographical acts described here are each in a state of arrested development: they were organized but not written, or drafted but not completed, or collected but not narrated, or even, in the case of Woolf’s *Orlando*, published but not truly finished. But these are their forms; none will become a more ideal version of itself. Each of these archives, however incomplete, and despite whatever length of time it spent in private hands, is now preserved within the institutional archives of a university, library, or museum. This has taken both advocacy and labor: everything scholars “discover” in an institutional archive has already been processed and catalogued by professional archivists and librarians.<sup>52</sup> And as Linda Morra reminds us in her work on the “un-arrested archives” of Canadian women writers, a writer’s personal papers take on a newly public life once transferred into an institutional repository: “while institutional archives might physically hold or ‘stop’ papers, they also contradictorily allow for ideas to be circulated as researchers gain access to them and render them public.”<sup>53</sup> In this way, archives are potential sites of queer pedagogy, or what Kevin Ohi has called “queer literary transmission.”<sup>54</sup> While his study focuses on gay male writers and readers, Ohi describes scenes of “thwarted” or “interrupted” transmission as central to a queer literary tradition. Thwarted, interrupted, arrested, incomplete: queerness moves from one generation to the next as an unfinished project.

### *Passionate Commitments*

There is more than one way for something to be unfinished. Writing about Tillie Olsen’s novel *Yonnonidio: From the Thirties* (1974), Scott Herring has countered its frequent critical description “as a loss, a failure, as an ‘if only’

wish, and as a thwarted revolution” with the suggestion that Olsen’s text represents “an ethos of incompleteness” that governed “a sustained act of creativity.”<sup>55</sup> Herring calls this “slow writing”: “a decades-long revolutionary project that waits for us, refusing to finish wherever ‘here’ might be.”<sup>56</sup> It is slow, in part, because Olsen continued to work on it despite the ongoing pressures of domestic and professional life, but the constitutive unfinishedness of her novel should not be reduced from an aesthetic project to an unfortunate biographical fact. It has taken years for Olsen’s unfinished work to be lauded rather than mourned. As Herring wryly points out, “a book never completed took time to become more and more unfinished.”<sup>57</sup> And while Herring here gestures toward Olsen’s authorial intention, it is also true that *Yonnondio*’s recategorization from tragedy to masterpiece, should it come to pass, will be the result of its reception by readers and critics. As James Ramsey Wallen has noted, “not ‘just anyone’ is capable of producing” an unfinished work: “Given the vast amounts of scholastic labor that their publications inevitably entail, the mere existence of an unfinished work is usually enough to mark it as a work of genius—or, at the very least, as the work of a genius.”<sup>58</sup> Like Herring, Wallen acknowledges that most discussions of unfinishedness are underpinned by “a tragic rhetoric of failure.”<sup>59</sup> But failure can be a subversive choice rather than a passive fate. In Jack Halberstam’s formulation, failure can be “a form of critique” and “a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline.”<sup>60</sup> Halberstam’s “queer art of failure,” like Herring’s “ethos of incompleteness,” is a description of the commitment to unfinishedness underlying each of the passion projects in this book.

Reframed as a defiant commitment in the face of ongoing erasure rather than a lack of dedication, the unfinished biographical acts encountered in every chapter can be categorized as passion projects. Indeed, this book’s title—*The Passion Projects*—is not drawn from any one text; rather, it is a term that usefully describes how the concerns and practices I track through the lives of these women are bound together. A passion project is work that its practitioner undertakes for a reason other than professional duty or immediate gain, and so, in this sense, it is characterized by what Dinshaw describes as an “amateur sensibility.”<sup>61</sup> The women in *The Passion Projects* are similar to the amateur medievalists in Dinshaw’s study in that they are “defined by attachment in a detached world,” they “wear their desires on their sleeves,” and they undertake projects for which they will never be professionally recognized or paid, projects they may never even finish.<sup>62</sup> The passion project is work that comes at personal cost without the guarantee of a social reward; it is sacrifice that leads to no certain



redemption. To undertake a passion project is often to move outside of one's field of expertise or specialization, to labor in a foreign land and to do so for love. It is to pursue desire over practicality, affect over intellect, amateurism over professionalism. It is work in the service of unreasonable pursuits: memory, legacy, the future world. The passion project is a promise to oneself or another that begins in private but continues in an imagined public. And as it originates at that scale, its ultimate goal is an intimate one. This project will, in essence, *matter* because it matters to this intimate, maybe even impossible, audience. And it is perhaps the unavoidable tragedy of the passion project that so many of them remain unfinished. Because they exist outside the lines of ordinary genres, because they strive toward an ethereal goal, because they are frequently last on the existential bucket list, they are often left behind unassembled, askew, incomplete, or unpublished. But even as these projects eschew world-historical ambitions, the purity of their conception lends them a power and potentiality absent from other, earlier works. Their power resides in their queer temporality, their naked emotion, their lateness, even in the way they exist as adjunct to more canonical literary texts. Even in a fragmented archive, these works vibrate with a transhistorical feeling, a *passion* that supersedes their formal disarray or their forgottenness in the eyes of history. The biographical turns of the women in this book—inasmuch as they represent a turning away, however temporary, from the profession of the artist and toward the curating and archiving of love, friendship, and desire—have produced passion projects in this manner. And *The Passion Projects* seeks to excavate them, recognize them, and see the radiant lives left behind in the most intimate, incomplete archives. In every chapter, we will find that Chloe likes Olivia, and she has embarked upon a version of *Life's Adventure* to express it. Following Marcus's suggestion to seek "more than two names and a verb," I query the stakes of a slightly altered phrase: not only "Chloe likes Olivia" but "Chloe *writes* Olivia."

### *Between Women, Between Generations*

Each chapter of *The Passion Projects*—"Intimate Archives," "Abandoned Lives," "Modernists Explain Things to Me," and "The Sense of Unending"—theorizes a specific type of unfinished biographical act and provides several case studies that range across the middle decades of the twentieth century. The book thus forms a loose taxonomy of biographical passion projects undertaken by women during the very period in which women were systematically written out of histories of modernism.

Chapter 1, “Intimate Archives: The Preservation of Partnership,” demonstrates that some intimate biographical acts are designed as archival projects to be mined later. Reading the competing biographical preparations of Radclyffe Hall’s long-time partner, Una Troubridge, alongside those of her lover, Evguenia Souline, I suggest that these compilers of intimate archives prioritize future researchers over midcentury readers. Drawing on Cvetkovich’s notion of the “archive of feelings,” I further propose that some queer feminist life stories were intentionally left incomplete—even unwritten. The chapter concludes with a substantial engagement with Sylvia Townsend Warner’s late-career life writing. Claiming that the archive of her partnership with Valentine Ackland could not be published without “a safe margin for every one to be dead in,” Warner spent years after Ackland’s death assembling an intimate archive of their literary life together. Like Troubridge and Souline’s letters, Warner’s archive was intentionally assembled, collated, annotated, and saved for a more generous future audience.

Chapter 2, “Abandoned Lives: Impossible Projects and Archival Remains,” theorizes biographical failure. What happens when it feels impossible to finish telling a life story? This chapter reads two incomplete biographical projects in the context of what Halberstam has called the “queer art of failure”: the recognition and reframing of failure as one possible form of the deliberate subversion of heteronormative metrics of success. Djuna Barnes worked for decades to turn the attempted autobiography of her Dadaist friend, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, into a publishable biography. Hope Mirrlees compiled a series of half-done drafts, notes, and outlines toward the biography of her late mentor, friend, and intimate companion, the celebrated Cambridge classicist Jane Ellen Harrison. Though their projects were very different, neither Barnes nor Mirrlees would finish their biographies *or* consent to let anyone else take over their projects. This chapter reframes the discourse of failure surrounding both projects and suggests that these so-called failures represent acts of resistance to the normalizing pull of typical biographical narratives.

Chapter 3, “Modernists Explain Things to Me: Collecting as Queer Feminist Response,” demonstrates that some impassioned biographical acts and archives range beyond the merely textual. Turning toward three examples of canonizing (if not ultimately canonical) life narratives, I read the midcentury memoirs of modernism-in-the-making written by Margaret Anderson, Sylvia Beach, and Alice B. Toklas as anecdotal archives in which the stories of their relationships are strategically encrypted—and thus preserved—in larger stories of renowned bohemian communities.

None of these memoirs sold well, and none were acclaimed by critics, then or now, as literary achievements in their own right. But the publication of each of these failed projects was silently accompanied by the accumulation and preservation of a collection of modernist artifacts. This chapter thus attends to both textual archives and material collections of art, photographs, and household goods. After taking stock of the relative failure of her memoirs, Anderson's decision to begin what she called her "collection" signaled her transition into this curatorial mode. And reading Sylvia Beach's expansive collection of literary artifacts alongside Alice B. Toklas's dwindling collection of modernist art, I draw on Jeremy Braddock's description of modernist collecting to posit collection and curation, rather than creation and innovation, as late modernist acts capable of turning years of personal witness into public testimony and commentary.

Chapter 4, "The Sense of Unending: Revisiting Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography*," returns to the most canonical of modernist women in light of these unfinished biographical projects. I reconsider Woolf's 1928 "joke" biography of Vita Sackville-West as an unfinished text, a work that provides a theoretical key for reading the queer temporality of the rest of this book's passion projects. Attending to its (non-)ending in medias res, in which the last page is turned while the subject is only entering middle age, I suggest that valuing the unfinished as an aesthetic category can bring the lessons of queer feminist biographers into sharper focus. The chapter ends by considering how reevaluating unpublished and unfinished work shifts our understanding of modernism's past, present, and future history.

Finally, in the coda, I turn toward the future audience imagined for many of these biographical passion projects. More recent experiments in biographical writing by Lisa Cohen, Jenny Diski, Nathalie Léger, Monique Truong, and Kate Zambreno, I argue, share intellectual and affective motivations with the modernist practices discussed earlier in this book. If the biographical and archival projects I examine hope to assure a future readership for queer feminist life stories, then these contemporary writers volunteer as that readership through the generosity of their attention and the experimental forms of their continued custodianship. I suggest that they write with the affective engagement and sense of generic activism that so many midcentury women harnessed to preserve the lives of their friends, partners, lovers, wives, and companions. In this sense, *The Passion Projects* ends with a generation of women writers who, like their ancestors at mid-century, see the work of writing as inseparable from the work of recovery.

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