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H-France Review Vol. 16 (August 2016), No. 173

Nicole Albert, *Lesbian Decadence: Representations in art and literature of fin-de-siècle France*. New York and York: Harrington Park Press, 2016. Trans. Nancy Erber and William Peniston. xix + 403 pp. Illustrations, plates, notes, bibliography, and index. \$85 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1939594075.

Review by Annabel L. Kim, Duke University.

Nicole Albert's *Lesbian Decadence: Representations in art and literature of fin-de-siècle France* puts to rest the truism that lesbianism has historically been the invisible vice, in contrast to male homosexuality's spectacularly policed nature. This work brings together an astonishingly wide range of literary, artistic, medico-scientific, and historical sources to catalogue and trace the many ways in which lesbianism was anything but invisible at the fin-de-siècle. Albert demonstrates persuasively to what extent the lesbian circulated in French (primarily Parisian) society as a figure of thought. *Lesbian Decadence* follows, with a great deal of enthusiasm and energy, the lesbian's circulation throughout a Decadent imaginary. The greatest contribution of the work, besides bringing together a rich collection of archives, is to argue, convincingly, that the fin-de-siècle cannot be thought or figured apart from the lesbian.

As the title of the work suggests, Decadence, as the fin-de-siècle's boldest manifestation and manufacturer of modernity, was permeated through and through by the lesbian. Albert, in this sense, takes up the lesbian where Susan Lanser, in *The Sexuality of History*, leaves off in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>[1]</sup> For Lanser, as for Albert, the lesbian is the harbinger of the modern, and Albert shows how representations of the lesbian, as a figure of modernity, undergo a veritable explosion in the late nineteenth century. As Albert lays out in a prologue to the work, she seeks to employ eclecticism as a method, casting as broad a net as possible in her combing of sources. Hence, she looks to minor and forgotten novelists and artists (who, it would appear, are minor for very good reason) in order to better understand the literary and artistic context in which the so-called greats produced their work. This eclecticism, then, draws upon the magazines and newspapers of a newly accessible and affordable mass press that are not the usual subject of literary studies.

The book is divided into three parts. Part one, "At that time, Sappho was reborn in Paris," comprises three chapters. Chapter one, "Sappho: The Resurrection of a Myth," takes up nineteenth-century scholarship's renewed interest in antiquity, and in particular, the figure of Sappho as a classic poet. Chapter two, "The Poets' Muse," treats the way nineteenth-century poets (passing over Baudelaire briefly to move on to less canonical writers like Pierre Louÿs and Renée Vivien) also recuperated Sappho, but as a Sapphic figure. Chapter three, "Lesbos; or, The Topography of a Vice" moves on from Sappho to Sappho's home, Lesbos, and its place in a primarily Parisian fin-de-siècle imaginary as an isle of vice. In this chapter, Albert tracks the way representations of lesbians transformed Paris and its environs into Paris-Lesbos.

Part two, "Her Traits, Her Vices, and Her Sexual Aberrations" moves from discussing Sappho as a foundational figurehead for lesbianism to the lesbian as a type. Chapter four, "The Birth of the Female Invert," traces the history of the idea of lesbianism as emerging out of tribadism, an older term, and

adopts a lexical approach, examining the numerous terms for the lesbian that proliferated in the fin-de-siècle, a linguistic evolution that helped solidify lesbianism as an identity. Chapter five, "A Vice or an Illness?" discusses both literary and medical sources that treat lesbianism as dangerous, and takes up sexological narratives of lesbianism, which, for the first time, suggested that lesbianism, and homosexuality in general, could be congenital. Chapter six, "A Heroine at the Crossroads of Medicine and Literature," examines the porosity of both medical and literary discourses, with medical professionals informing literary accounts of lesbianism, and vice versa. Chapter seven, "When the Third Sex Comes Out," takes up the lesbian as a figure who, through gender non-conformity (e.g. cross-dressing and engaging in sports such as cycling), carves out a hybrid sex for herself that is neither masculine nor feminine but a third sex.[2] Chapter eight, "Madame Don Juan, Arlequine, and Others" treats the feminization of traditionally male literary characters and turns to the hermaphrodite as an example of this mixing of sexes, with lesbianism as a site of male writers' anxiety over their own masculinity. Chapter nine, "Deadly Pleasures," discusses literary and artistic depictions of the lesbian as a damned woman (*femme damnée*) and her association with an insatiable and excessive appetite, drug addiction, vampirism, and a blasphemous corruption of Catholic sacrament and sociality. For Albert, this multifarious and variegated vice is linked to a quintessentially Decadent modernity.

Part three, "Damned Women or Exquisite Creatures?" examines the way the lesbian is a placeholder for both the fall of society and a new and exciting aesthetics. Chapter ten, "The Half-Women," takes up the way the lesbian, as a figure who refused procreation, was assimilated into the general fear of population decline that characterized the moment. Albert links this anti-procreative nihilism with a certain nihilism associated with Decadence. Chapter eleven, "Female Narcissus," treats the deep ambivalence that surrounded lesbianism as both a damnable, antisocial vice and a more complete manifestation of feminine beauty than is possible in heterosexuality (i.e., the more women, the more feminine beauty). Albert discusses the phenomenon of representing lesbians as seeking out partners who resemble them, a pursuit of symmetry and identity that takes on incestuous resonances. This doubling is taken to be a sign of the lesbian as a narcissist whose same-sex relationships are a form of self-love, and Albert catalogues the many artworks and literary texts that take up the theme of the mirror or doubling. Chapter twelve, "Female Spaces, Male Gaze," uses lesbian interiors (lesbian private spaces) to conceive of lesbianism, as figured by Decadent male writers and artists, as simultaneously refusing and excluding the masculine and coming into being through voyeuristic masculine participation, thus casting lesbianism as primarily an exhibitionistic performance for the benefit of masculine audiences. After these twelve chapters, the book ends without a conclusion, making the work a somewhat impressionistic treatment of the decadent lesbian.

In her prologue, Albert describes the book as having two aims: First, it "invites the reader to discover the multiple metamorphoses of a figure who symbolizes the first echoes of feminism," and second, it tries to answer the question of how the lesbian could "be demonized and poeticized at the same time" (p. xix). While the work amply takes up the second aim, the feminism Albert opens the work with was strangely absent from the rest of the study. Upstaged by the marginal sexuality and the ambivalence it inspired, which constitute the book's primary focal point, discussions of gender were surprisingly peripheral. To put it another way, the book, though it very admirably shows the dizzying range and diversity of representations of the lesbian and her various configurations at the fin-de-siècle, does not interrogate some key aspects of that act of representation. For example, Albert discusses the anxiety over masculinity that animated the male writers who wrote these narratives of lesbianism, but she does not discuss what is at stake in lesbian self-representation. Because of the focus on the lesbian as a figure that is represented, we lose sight of the lesbian as an agent of representation, and the lesbian writers and artists discussed, like Renée Vivien and Nathalie Clifford Barney, seem to serve to punctuate the otherwise consistent dynamic of the lesbian as represented but not representing. Moreover, Vivien's and Barney's non-Frenchness is strangely not glossed—what does it mean, in a work on fin-de-siècle France, to have voyeuristic French male voices who objectify the lesbian placed on the same plane as representative foreign female voices? What of the "native" French lesbian?[3] Why would the British

Vivien come to Paris and adopt French and Sappho respectively as her poetic language and as her muse? *Lesbian Decadence* seems as much about the lesbian as a specifically French, or more specifically, Parisian, figure—a figuration of Parisianness—as it is about the lesbian as a decadent figure, but Paris is relegated to the background, or setting, of this work, when it strikes me as being a principal player. [4]

The work also raises another question along spatial lines. The original French title for the work was *Saphisme et décadence dans Paris fin-de-siècle*. Besides the move from the sapphic to the lesbian, I was struck by how the English translation places the work in France rather than in Paris. This was all the more surprising for the way the book remained firmly grounded in Paris and never really ventured into the provinces. What does placing the work under the sign of the nation rather than of the city accomplish? The geographical and temporal situation of the book is remarkably fluid, and just as the title performs a slippage between city and nation, so too are British sources (e.g., Swinburne, Woolf, Le Fanu) discussed along with French ones without reflecting on the relationship between these countries on either side of the English Channel. Sources from the 1870s are discussed in the same breath as sources from the 1900s, and their temporal distance is collapsed. While the work obviously constrains itself to focusing primarily on the fin-de-siècle (very loosely conceived, as Albert treats sources from after World War I), the lesbian operates in a strangely ahistorical way within that temporal frame.

In compiling this impressively vast collection of sources, Albert's perspective at times strikes me as uncomfortably close to that of the male (or would-be male, as in the case of Rachilde) Decadent authors and artists she treats, who derive pleasure from mobilizing the lesbian toward exhibitionistic ends and immobilizing her agency. For example, she regularly casts male writers and sexologists as "granting" (p. xiii) lesbians an identity, relegating lesbians then to a passive subject position where they play no role in the Foucauldian processes of identity formation. In doing so, Albert grants too much authority and intentionality, perhaps, to these nineteenth-century figures, and she cites her fin-de-siècle sources in ways that seem to take them at face value without taking the time to unpack their deeply problematic assumptions and consequences, as when she writes that "Most of the women in [the sexologist Krafft-Ebing's] study belonged to a lower social class and suffered from hereditary atavism as a result of inbred marriages, incest, alcoholism, and so forth" (p. 112), which agrees with the diagnosis. She reproduces fin-de-siècle conclusions that are fascinating, but she does not analyze them with the perspective that writing from the twenty-first century might provide. In a word, she immerses her reader into the fin-de-siècle and its cultural, intellectual, and social atmosphere without taking her back out. Her considerable skills of evocation constitute both her book's strength and its blind spot.

As a reader who is not a specialist of the fin-de-siècle, I found that the book was a little difficult to navigate as Albert does not introduce or explicate the movements and players that her book is built upon, regardless of their reputation or lack thereof. For instance, there is very little background information given about Decadence as an aesthetic and literary movement, and writers like Catulle Mendès, who are not well known to a lay reader in the way Zola and Balzac are, are not situated. Similarly, Albert evokes a canonical figure like Baudelaire periodically as an essential player in the lesbianization of decadence, but he is never fleshed out. Canonical artists and writers, in general, are evoked but not described or developed, perhaps because Albert assumes that the reader already has a familiarity with writers who enjoy the kind of reputation that Baudelaire and Colette do. What the book lacks in explanatory material, and a somewhat imbalanced focus on the "minor" at the expense of the "major," it makes up for in the reproductions, both in color and black and white, of visual materials from the period, which are very evocative, and which help give a sense of the atmosphere of Paris-Lesbos at the turn of the twentieth century to enrich our introduction to the sources Albert mines.

Albert's work is one that will be of interest to scholars of the fin-de-siècle as well as scholars interested in questions of gender and sexuality. Albert navigates a vast amount of archival material and sources that will be an invaluable resource to scholars working on Decadence and gender and sexuality in the fin-de-siècle. *Lesbian Decadence* describes and evokes more than it analyzes and problematizes, but the

material it presents will lend itself to fruitful interrogation along such varied axes as class, gender, race, fashion, consumer culture, and reproductive technologies, to name just a few. Through her insistence that the lesbian be treated as central even in her marginality, and in taking culture as productive and not simply derivative, Albert will provoke readers to treat the lesbian as an important site of inquiry.

## NOTES

[1] Susan Lanser, *The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic, 1565-1830* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

[2] It may come as a surprise that Albert does not mention Laure Murat's *La loi du genre: Une histoire culturelle du troisième sexe* (Paris: Fayard, 2006). Granted, Murat's book was published a year after the original French version of *Lesbian Decadence*, but given that Albert describes the English translation as a revision and updating of the original, this omission is striking, though one that is consonant with her almost exclusive focus on primary sources.

[3] Colette and Rachilde are rare French female voices to figure in the book and their vexed and vexing identities vis-à-vis gender and sexuality are not discussed. Rather, Albert's interest pivots toward how they represent lesbians, so that they are treated more or less like the male writers she discusses in the book, who occupy an exclusively externalized position with regards to their Sapphic subject matter.

[4] Leslie Choquette, for example, foregrounds Paris as an urban space in a number of articles that treat the relationship between place and space and the formation of marginal sexual identities. See "Paris-Lesbos: Lesbian Social Space in the Modern City, 1870-1940" *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 26(2000):122-132; "Homosexuals in the City: Representations of Lesbian and Gay Space in Nineteenth-Century Paris" *Homosexuality in French History and Culture*, eds. Jeffrey Merrick and Michael Sibalis (New York: Haworth, 2002), pp. 149-167; "Beyond the Myth of Lesbian Montmartre: The Case of Chez Palmyre." *Historical reflections/Réflexions historiques* (2016, forthcoming). (Many thanks to Hannah Frydman for drawing my attention to these bibliographical references.) Choquette is a historian. For a literary perspective on the importance of space to marginal sexuality, see the work of Jessica Tanner. Tanner has published "Turning Tricks, Turning the Tables: Plotting the Brasserie à femmes in Tabarant's *Virus d'amour*," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 41.3-4(Spring-Summer 2013):255-271 and is working on a book manuscript entitled *Mapping Prostitution: Sex, Space, and the Novel in Nineteenth-Century Paris*.

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