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Dominique Kalifa, *Paris: Une histoire érotique: d'Offenbach au Sixties*. Paris: Payot, 2018. 288 pp. Maps, figures, appendices, notes, and index. \$36.30 (pb). ISBN: 978-2228922098.

Review by Judith G. Coffin, University of Texas at Austin.

Dominique Kalifa is disarmingly skeptical about the subject of his book at the outset. As he says, he has lived in Paris almost his whole life, and his emotional landscape—his *paysage intérieur*—has taken shape around the city. “J’y ai évidemment été amoureux, et je le suis encore. Je n’ai cependant jamais eu conscience de vivre dans une ville ‘dédiée’ à l’amour, une ville où l’on s’aimerait plus ardemment qu’ailleurs, où la sensualité et la sentimentalité l’emporteraient sur tout autre lieu” (p. 9). “Paris, city of love” will strike many as a tired cliché, but it may seduce many more, and one suspects Kalifa put aside his reservations in order to write for a broad public. Kalifa is a brilliant and extraordinarily prolific historian. He has written and edited books about policing, crime, the underworld, penal colonies, the press, mass culture and, most recently, chrononyms, or how the historical imagination frames eras.[1] With *Paris: Une histoire érotique*, he is interested in the point at which the literary imagination meets the organization of urban space and social relations—in the built environment and feeling, mobility and sociability, class identities and gender identities, projection, imagination. The approach is topographical, or, as Kalifa puts it, psycho-geographical: he is after the sentiments and erotic fantasies that became attached to the different gardens, parks, boulevards (and metro line #1 was seen as a new boulevard when it opened!), and river banks of Paris, and he wants to capture the power of those places to preserve memories, arouse feeling and indeed shape social practices. As he rightly observes, these spaces are already overflowing with signification before we get to them.

The time frame is familiar. Kalifa starts with Haussmann’s rebuilding of Paris and ends with what Louis Chevalier called the “assassination” of the capital in the 1960s: gutting Les Halles, building La Défense, and constructing a périphérique that would further sever the city from the suburbs. The Belle Époque stands at the middle of this time period, and for Kalifa it marks the apogee of the “erotic imaginary” of Paris, the moment that sealed the city’s reputation. The argument is that a new model of urban life brought with it a distinctive set of sexual and romantic practices, erotic fantasies, and gender relations. The built environment of the newly “extroverted” Paris offered not only more ways to see and be seen, but also new places for furtive encounters, from the *portes cochères* of new buildings, where working-class men and women might grab a few moments of privacy, to the urinals, where men seeking sex with other men might find the same. (The urinals were first installed by Claude-Philbert Rambuteau, prefect of the Seine from 1833 to 1848, as part of his post-cholera campaign for public hygiene; they went on to become part of the “urban furnishing” of Haussmann’s city and, re-appropriated, became a well-known spot for

same-sex trysts.) From the Second Empire through the Third Republic, Paris famously offered a sensual feast of theatres, dance halls, and café concerts in addition to brothels and what Kalifa calls “more vagabond forms of venal love” (p. 212). Kalifa describes an exhilarating sense of freedom and erotic abundance for men—men with means and power that is, including the Nazi military during the Occupation and, as Lou Roberts has shown, the Americans at the Liberation.^[2] He also shows us a very limited increase in women’s freedom to move about, a lot of prostitution, and a memorably off-putting portrait of the sidewalk as a “terrain de chasse à la femme” (p. 222).

The book might come with a trigger warning. The vast majority of Kalifa’s sources come from men, and he remarks that his witnesses have “tous les préjugés de genre que l’on imagine” (p. 47). That is putting it mildly. Balzac writes this about crossing a boulevard: as he steps onto the sidewalk and thinks of the whores who had been there the night before, trailing their dresses and shoes, a “contraction galvanique” courses up through his body (cited p. 48). The erotic musings of surrealists loom large, and not in a way that endears them to us. For example, Aragon, in *La Grande Gaité*, writes of “les jambes de fer écartées” of the Eiffel Tower which, “fit voir un sexe féminin. Qu’on ne lui soupçonnait guère” (cited p. 82). Joseph Delteil, a poet and writer in the 1920s admired by Aragon and Breton, declares, dreamily, “tout d’ailleurs à Paris converge vers les jambes de la femme, vers la femme. La cause finale de toutes chose à Paris, c’est l’amour” (cited p. 30). What’s “love” got to do with this? Kalifa does not mince words about the testimony that he draws on: “Ce regard masculin sexualise, et parfois animalise toutes les femmes qu’il rencontre” (p. 48). But neither does he plumb other archives or discourses. Sharon Marcus’s *Between Women* (on Victorian England) shows how an attentive critic might discover a female gaze lurking in unexpected places, like fashion plates; Andrew Ross’s rereading of police archives uncovers new ways of conceptualizing the sexual uses of public spaces; and Patricia Tilburg puts the turn-of-the-century *midinette*, or woman garment worker, on the streets—on strike.^[3]

Kalifa provides abundant vivid and revealing glimpses of social and cultural encounters, strategies, and practices. Where and how did young people meet each other? Kalifa underscores the constraints, from the protectiveness of families and codes of respectability to the dangers of the streets. Young men and women were introduced through their families, they met because they lived near each other, or, if they were working-class, they crossed paths at a workshop, a store, or the exit of a factory. In working-class neighborhoods, young women could go to cafés with their women friends or, sometimes, male dates. Not so the single women of the bourgeoisie, at least until well into the twentieth century. The wealthy socialized in their protected enclaves of leisure—private dances, the beach, the mountains, the countryside. For women to meet men at school or university only became common with the explosion of higher education after the Second World War.^[4] Once you met someone, the fact that families were strict and interiors small made public places into refuges for privacy, as Kalifa nicely observes: the Luxembourg gardens were a place to be alone together.

Conventions of respectability made neighborhood dances and dance halls the most common place for a first encounter. *Bals populaires*, a much older village tradition transplanted to the city, were the center of nineteenth-century popular Parisian romantic life. The number of these *bals* peaked under the July Monarchy, for Haussmannization drummed many of them out of business. Those that survived, however, attracted even bigger crowds than before. Kalifa’s topography of Parisian “dansomanie” takes us from private balls for high society and the neighborhood balls of the Bastille and Montmartre to the open-air *guingettes* along the Seine and the Marne, the dance

halls (like the *Bullier* next to the Closerie des Lilas), and the trans and gay balls, for those drawn to different erotic expressiveness. As Magnus Hirschfeld, pioneering German theorist of intermediate sexualities and champion of gay rights, observed of Parisian night life, the different kinds of dancing perfectly illustrated “l’innombrable modes d’expression de la vie érotique” (cited p. 67). The more transgressive dancing spots went underground in the Occupation, emerging afterwards in forms like Le Tabou and Whisky à Go Go, both of which opened in 1947. The waltz and polka had been sexy in their nineteenth-century heyday, with the “closed couple” and bodies joined and moving together, but in the 1920s that intimate eroticism had ceded the spotlight to the more uninhibited and anarchic bodily pleasures of the Charleston and other dances that came with jazz from the United States. A reader cannot help but want more in this book on jazz or, for that matter, any testimony by or about African, Antillean, and African-American figures, or some more discussion of racialized erotic imagery. The most recent contribution to that conversation, one also focused on the geographical imaginary, is Laila Amine’s *Post-Colonial Paris: Fictions of Intimacy in the City of Light*.^[5]

Kalifa describes theatre as the heart of hedonist Paris. Romantic drama, erotic suggestion, and sexual display on the stage charged the atmosphere in the house. “La figure de ‘l’actrice’ cristallise sur sa personne tous les fantasmes : appât, femme offerte, prostituée, lesbienne” (p. 111). As he says, that kaleidoscope of images made the theatre a metonym for the city itself (p. 105). The section on kissing is fun, though here as elsewhere in the book one regrets the publisher’s stinginess with visuals. Kalifa reminds us that Auguste Rodin’s famous sculpture, *The Kiss*, was part of a larger work depicting *The Gates of Hell*. In the nineteenth century, to kiss in public was an offense to public decency (*attentat à la pudeur*). In the real world, that legal prohibition only meant that you had to *think* you were out of eyesight in order to kiss. Still, it was not until the emotional partings and homecomings of the First World War that kissing became more acceptable. American movies did much to popularize kissing on the mouth, beginning with William Heise’s 1896 short, “The Kiss,” and continuing with Hollywood. Heise’s film was new to me, and it would be worth working into courses on the history of sexuality.^[6] Lush advertisements for lipstick were erotic manuals in their own right.

There are some eyebrow-raising moments. One involves Léon Blum, best known as prime minister of the Popular Front. Blum’s 1907 book *Le Mariage* made a robust, progressive case for sexual knowledge, relaxing taboos about premarital sex, and recognizing women’s sexual desires. Blum also acknowledged that he regularly followed women in the street, too shy to speak to them directly. In his short cameo in Kalifa’s book, Blum comes off as hapless and creepy, trailing one woman from the Avenue de Courcelles to the Étoile, down and across the river to the Invalides and then to Montparnasse. (Kalifa maps this pursuit, and by Google’s calculations it is a good four miles.) Kalifa’s point is that for a man to shadow someone on the sidewalk in the hope of striking up a conversation was a common practice. That did not necessarily feel like stalking, but it surely kept many women at home.

Kalifa does not believe one can speak of a gay subculture in this period, but “Same-Sex Paris” is a separate chapter. Paris was not Berlin, he argues: police harassment and public censoriousness made most queer sociability, let alone sex, dangerous outside small circles. Only in a small theatre and amongst a night life elite could one be openly out—precariously. The life and the murder (in 1933) of night club owner Oscar Dufrenne illustrates the possibilities and dangers. Dufrenne, from a working-class family in the Nord, bought a series of prominent Parisian clubs. He was openly gay and well respected in his profession and neighborhood, becoming the arbitrator of

trade disputes in the Fédération des Spectacles and elected municipal councilor of the tenth arrondissement in 1929. Four years later, he was assassinated. Kalifa's short version of the story sent me to Florence Tamagne's fascinating *Le Crime du Palace*, which details the investigation, publicity, and lurid right wing-fantasies that surrounded Dufrenne and the man accused of murdering him. Tamagne carefully parses both different ways of living one's queerness and how, during the trial, the nasty homophobia directed at the alleged murderer shifted to Dufrenne himself. The Dufrenne scandal broke after that of Violette Nozières and just before Stavisky, and Tamagne's work is well worth the read for those interested in the history of sexuality and the troubled years of the interwar Third Republic and its gravediggers.[7]

Kalifa is even more adamant about the absence of a lesbian subculture, quoting American historian Elyse Blankley to the effect that "The city cultivated lesbianism like an exotic plant without ever feeding it" (note on p. 257). He takes us on a quick tour through the lesbian literary salons around Colette, Janet Flanner, Gertrude Stein, et al., and the women's bars and clubs that migrated from Montmartre to Montparnasse in the 1920s. The best known of these was *Le Monocle*, modeled after the *Monokel* in Berlin and famously photographed by Brassai. Kalifa is reluctant to say anything about "ordinary lesbians," but a little speculation or loosening of the category of "lesbian" might be in order, especially since his subject is the erotic imaginary. Fantasies, desires, and practices can float quite free of identities, as Anna Clark and many others have pointed out. Michael Lucey's brilliant *Someone* demonstrates how literature might be mined for all kinds of unexpected traces of "misfit" sexualities and the expectations, recognitions, and knowledge that those traces activate.[8]

The chapter on prostitution comes almost at the end of the book. That is deliberate: Kalifa wanted to write a book about sex and sensuality in Paris that was *not* about prostitution. To begin with, scores of historians have taken up the topic, inspired by the pioneering work in the 1970s by Alain Corbin and, for England, Judith Walkowitz.[9] Kalifa is wary of much nineteenth-century testimony on the subject. As he notes, the fact that prostitution seems everywhere in nineteenth-century writing, art, and social science may simply reflect the conviction that women's presence in public was illegitimate. A woman on the street was presumed to be available for sex, fondling, following, or ogling, whether she was paid or not. The six preceding chapters of *Paris: Une Histoire Erotique* have made that abundantly clear. What is more, prostitution was an almost endlessly malleable metaphor—for corruption, degradation, the dishonor of selling what should not be sold, abject submission to the pressures of the market, for womanly vulnerability and female shamelessness, for the capitalist commodification of everything, for alienated social or class relations, for modernity writ large.[10] To read nineteenth-century sources about prostitution is to be swept into the cross currents of inchoate social theory, moralism, class fears, fantasy, and misogyny.

As Kalifa says, however, he found it impossible to write about eros and erotic imagery and to sideline commercial sex. Likewise, it proved hopeless to contend with male sexual experience, initiation, and education without entering the brothel: "C'est dans l'expérience bordelière qui se forge souvent la masculinité" (p. 201). And prostitution was everywhere. The numbers skyrocketed in nineteenth-century Paris, and Paris was not alone; the cases of London, Shanghai, Nairobi, Buenos Aires are only some well-studied examples of a nearly global urban phenomenon.[11] In Haussmann's city, commercial sex was one of the chief new forms of consumption and pleasure. Paris became "une ville-spectacle qui fait de la prostituée une de ses attractions phares" (p. 207). In Andrew Ross's words, "the entire city was designed to facilitate

male heterosexual pleasure.”[12] Both historians underscore that the French system of regulation helped to make prostitution more visible. Regulation’s efforts to recognize the sex trade and, at the same time, to disavow it, to discipline women who sold sex, and to channel prostitution into specific neighborhoods only made it easier for the public to understand what was being offered, and to be enticed as well as indignant. Ross argues that the desires and possibilities aroused by the sexualized city—for sexual experimentation, including sex between men—could not be contained. Ross, like Kalifa, is wary of the terms “prostitute” and “prostitution,” with their implications of utter subordination, but Ross’s discussion of the *brasseries de femmes* offers a subtle and persuasive analysis of how women were able to exploit the limited possibilities they had.

True to his interests in the erotic spaces of Paris, Kalifa sticks to the changing geography and forms of prostitution over the course of the period: the decline of the Palais-Royal from the 1830s on in favor of the clubs and brothels of the ninth arrondissement and street prostitution from the Bastille to the République, around La Chappelle, Sebastopol, and train stations (p. 208). He traces the emergence of new forms of prostitution: theatre, brasseries, massage rooms, baths, and the *maisons de rendez-vous* (mostly in the ninth arrondissement) with their erotic *tableaux vivants* and films, which attracted couples in search of new kinds of erotic adventure as well as clients looking for prostitutes and vice versa. The famous elite brothels like Le Chabanais (founded 1878, in the second arrondissement) and Le Sphinx (opened in 1931 below Montparnasse) illustrate as starkly as possible both the erotic charge of conquest and domination and the imperial dimensions of sexual fantasies. For how these dynamics played out beyond the metropole, see Judith Surkis’s incisive *Sex, Law, and Sovereignty in French Algeria, 1830–1930*. [13] The high-end brothels offered clients luxurious and themed rooms. At the One-Two-Two (in the eighth arrondissement), for instance, clients could choose a room decked out as a sleeping car on the Orient Express or a cabin on a transatlantic cruise ship, hoping, we suppose, that travel would free their imaginations, loosen their inhibitions, and/or reinvigorate their bodies.

The most striking aspect of the scenes and passages quoted in this chapter, however, is not the erotic charge of conquest or the fantasy of escape but the misogyny that subtends the discussions of prostitution and the logic of regulationism. A *flâneur* in Charles-Louis Philippe’s *Bubu de Montparnasse* (1901) has had enough of *flânerie*. Tired of walking and taking in the visual pleasures of the city, he can think only of sex. “Pour avoir la paix, il prenait la première venue et, sur un lit d’hôtel... se déversait dans une fille sale comme dans un déversoir public” (cited p. 208). Kalifa also lets his readers sample indignant grumbling about the sex trade from the police, shop owners, residents, or passers-by. The complaints drip with disgust at the ostentatiously vulgar groups of streetwalkers and their obscenities, the “*racolage ignoble*” that prevents honest gentlemen from enjoying the out of doors. My favorite of these complaints comes from a former head of the Paris criminal investigation unit. He is offended by the brazen streetwalkers who, barred from the Place des Vosges, now gather on the rue Saint Antoine. Impossible to escape being harassed and followed, he grouches: “Elles finissent par vous saisir au passage, c’est la véritable chasse à l’homme” (p. 222). This is grotesquely comic in light of everything we have read in the preceding two hundred pages about men stalking women on the sidewalk.

None of this is likely to leave one nostalgic for a certain idea of Paris. That seems subtly intentional; Kalifa subverts the very packaging of the book as a chronicle of the capital of “love” or eros from 1860 to the 1950s. He dispels shopworn clichés and drives home some dark points about sexual violence and very stark gender inequalities. One knows there are different stories

to tell, other social and sexual practices to ferret out of the archives and literary sources, and different spaces and *quartiers* to explore. Less familiar itineraries and, above all, a more varied cast of characters, would bring some of those to light. The later twentieth and twenty-first centuries provide resources for different studies--Amine's *Fictions of Intimacy* is but one example. Anthropologist Julie Kleinman's study of the Gare du Nord and the policing of black male bodies is a vital counterpoint to the geography and politics tracked in *Paris: Une histoire érotique*.^[14] The different histories uncovered will not necessarily be more uplifting, for the erotic enlaces desire with contempt, self-abandonment with domination, and love with cruelty. Still, they will give a fuller version of social and sexual life in this complicated, multi-ethnic, multi-racial, global city.

NOTES

[1] Dominique Kalifa, ed., *Les noms d'époque, de "restauration" à "années de plomb"* (Paris: Gallimard, 2020).

[2] Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[3] Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Andrew Israel Ross, *Public City, Public Sex: Homosexuality, Prostitution, and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019); Patricia Tilburg, *Working Girls: Sex, Taste, and Reform in the Parisian Garment Trades, 1880-1919* (New York: Oxford, 2019).

[4] See also the more detailed social history of the same period by Anne-Marie Sohn, *Du premier baiser à l'alcove : la sexualité des Français au quotidien* (Paris: Aubier, 1996).

[5] Laila Amine, *Postcolonial Paris: Fictions of Intimacy in the City of Light* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018).

[6] <https://www.google.com/search?q=william+heise+the+kiss&oq=william+Heise+the+&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0j69i61.8357j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

[7] Florence Tamagne, *Le crime du Palace. Enquête sur l'une des plus grandes affaires criminelles des années 1930* (Paris: Payot, 2017); and "Le 'crime du Palace': Homosexualité, médias et politique dans la France des années 1930," *Revue d'histoire moderne & contemporaine*, vol. 53-4, no. 4, 2006, pp. 128-149. See also Sarah Maza, *Violette Nozière : A Story of Murder in 1930s Paris* (Los Angeles: University of California, 2012) and Sian Reynolds, *France Between the Wars: Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

[8] Anna Clark, "Twilight Moments," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14 (January-April 2005): 139-160; Michael Lucey, *Someone: The Pragmatics of Misfit Sexualities from Collette to Hervé Guibert* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019). See also Nicole Albert, *Saphisme et décadence dans Paris fin-de-siècle* (Paris: La Martinière, 2005) and Tamara Chaplin's research, part of which will be published as "A Woman Dressed Like a Man: Female Masculinity at the Sapphic Cabaret, Paris, 1930-1960," *French Historical Studies*, vol. 44, no.1. Chaplin's *Cabarets to Counterpublics*:

Female Same-Sex Intimacy and the French Public Sphere, 1930-2013 is forthcoming with the University of Chicago Press in 2021.

[9] Alain Corbin, *Les filles de nocce: misère sexuelle et prostitution: 19e et 20e siècles* (Paris: Aubier, 1978); Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society. Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[10] See Timothy J. Gilfoyle's excellent review essay, "Prostitutes in History: From Parables of Pornography to Metaphors of Modernity," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 104, no. 1 (Feb., 1999): 117-141.

[11] See Gilfoyle, "Prostitutes in History," Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) and Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). I sympathize with Kalifa's effort to get beyond Paris as a "nest of whores" and explore a broader range of feelings, including love, embedded in places of Paris. Yet "venal love" is hard to disentangle from sociality, reciprocity, and love plain and simple. Both Luise White and Gail Hershatter have described not only the sexual education that came with prostitution, but also the non-sexual services that prostitutes and courtesans provided: bathing, care, meals, sociability, conversation and in some cases long-term relationships and ongoing exchange. These were the everyday gestures that educated one's feelings as well as senses. Prostitution, in other words, involves more than transactional sex. And as we all know, sex doesn't have to be paid in order to be transactional.

[12] Ross, *Public City, Public Sex*, 13.

[13] Judith Surkis, *Sex, Law, and Sovereignty in French Algeria, 1830-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

[14] Amine, *Postcolonial Paris*, Julie Kleinman, *Adventure Capital: Migration and the Making of an African Hub in Paris* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019). See also Todd Shepard, *Sex, France, and Arab Men, 1962-1979* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

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