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Rachel Mesch, *Before Trans: Three Gender Stories from Nineteenth-Century France*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020. 360 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$30.00 U.S. (cl). 9781503606739. \$30 U.S. (eb). 9781503612358.

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Rachel Mesch's intellectual and literary biography of three people who challenged the gender binary marks a significant watershed in the history of gender and sexuality in France. Even though French historians have been at the forefront of the study of gender and sexuality, trans history has, with few exceptions, remained on the periphery of the field.[1] *Before Trans* shows why this must change. Mesch's reinterpretation of three lives we thought we already understood—those of Jane Dieulafoy, Rachilde, and Marc de Montifaud—demonstrates the power of applying a “modern trans framework” (p. 9) to the past. By “modern trans framework,” Mesch means an active centering of the novel gender identities constructed by these three writers, identities that often fell between the masculine and the feminine. In doing so, Mesch locates the significance of their ability to take on supposedly male social roles – living public lives, participating in military adventures, or dressing in male clothing, for example – not in an implicit feminist rebellion against patriarchy and political exclusion, but rather in their ability to showcase the constructed nature of gender before there was even language with which to do so. Indeed, in their resistance to the label feminist, Mesch shows how gender rebellion could in fact buttress conservative politics in other realms. Ultimately, *Before Trans* raises important new questions for scholars to pursue regarding the relationship between social, political, and cultural hierarchies and the emergence of new gender and sexual identities in fin-de-siècle France.

Mesch binds her three stories together by emphasizing the theme of authorship and the difficulty of creating new identities that had no existing modes of expression. As Mesch explains, “Without the nonbiological notion of gender...it was much more difficult to talk about any difference between the gender assigned to you and who you might otherwise know yourself to be” (p. 9). All three thus had to create their own language with which to express their sense of self. Jane Dieulafoy invested herself in the ideal of the soldier, linked to imperial conquest, that she argued reflected a natural strength that had been lost in modern women.[2] Rachilde questioned the gender binary in work such as *Monsieur Vénus* (1884), where she created characters and situations that did not fit any known category. Finally, Marc de Montifaud found herself frustrated that, despite convincing readers that she was a man, she was never treated as such. Refraining from writing too directly about her gender identity, de Montifaud retreated to a radical individualism that could not be accommodated by the world into which she was born.

Among the many strengths of *Before Trans* is its refusal to pin down the exact identities of its subjects. The point, in other words, is not to ask whether Dieulafoy, Rachilde, or de Montifaud really were trans and just lacked the vocabulary to express themselves as such, but rather to show how the gender binary confined, confused, and confounded them even as they made and expressed

their own identities. Mesch thus participates in an ongoing conversation within queer history over the extent to which we should seek the origins of contemporary identities rather than understanding the often quite foreign modes of self-fashioning that existed prior to contemporary classifications.[3] Mesch's trans framework serves as a kind of centering device, ensuring that her analysis emphasizes the ways Dieulafoy, Rachilde, and de Montifaud pushed against the gender binary without simply transposing modern transgender identities into the past. In doing so, Mesch rejects modern interpretations that have "consider[ed] their subversion of gender norms to be a form of early feminism, regardless of the different motivating forces behind some of those challenges" (p. 21). Indeed, none would really have considered themselves to be feminist at all. Dieulafoy critiqued divorce; Rachilde explicitly declared she was not one; de Montifaud rested her identity on an extreme individualism. As Mesch shows, these writers were not on a mission to challenge patriarchal constraints for all women, but rather to find ways of working within and against them for their own purposes.

In pursuit of the ways these three extraordinary people moved around and between the gender binary, we sometimes lose sight of the ways their ability to do so rested on various forms of privilege. For instance, Jane Dieulafoy came to understand her own gender difference in large measure through her travels in Persia. She, along with her husband, participated in the excavation and plundering of artifacts there with the backing of the French military. While Mesch acknowledges that Dieulafoy's adventures formed part of an imperialist endeavor, one that rested on highlighting and exacerbating the perceived differences between Occident and Orient, we remain so focused on Dieulafoy's gender story that we lose sight of those she victimized and the way she perpetuated that victimization in the pursuit of her own identity. I sometimes wanted to know more about the bigger picture and the ways the pursuit of new kinds of gender formations shaped and were shaped by other forces in politics, the economy, and culture. Put differently, what is the relationship between these "three gender stories" and the history of empire, identity, and politics in which they were enmeshed? Three possible avenues of research are worth highlighting here.

First, what role did France's imperial culture play in the construction of modern sexual and gender identities, especially vis-à-vis the specific forms of masculinity taken up by Dieulafoy, Rachilde, and Montifaud? This theme is most evident in the story of Dieulafoy, for whom the construction of a martial femininity relied explicitly on her ability to "conquer the orient" (p. 68). Dieulafoy's story raises uncomfortable issues about the imbrication of modern sexual and gender identities and empire. It reminds me of André Gide's linkage, in *Corydon* (1924), of "pederasty" with martial values and the reconstitution of French masculinity.[4] In fact, for Gide as well, adventures in the "Orient" (in his case, Morocco) were key to his own awakening to his sexual difference.[5] In addition, one might put Mesch's subjects into dialog with those studied by Shari Benstock, who showed the attraction of right-wing politics to early twentieth-century elite lesbian artists.[6] In light of the recent work by Judith Surkis and Todd Shepard, who have highlighted the complicated links between sexual regulation and identity in the colonies and former colonies and in the metropole, we might follow Mesch's analysis of Dieulafoy with a greater attention to how both homosexuality and trans identities depended on these kinds of power relationships in their initial formations.[7]

Questions of power and hierarchy beyond the imperial context percolate throughout *Before Trans*. All three writers were wealthy, well-educated, white, and married. They lived in a world that would have been inaccessible to the vast majority of the population. And yet, they also all experienced the consequences of their gender difference in ways that rubbed against their otherwise privileged lives. I am especially interested in their encounters with the police. While all three of Mesch's subjects had to get permission from the police to dress in male clothing, only de Montifaud faced any criminal liability for her behavior, and even in that case it was for what she had written, not what she had done. They were not surveilled, like others who protested against the gender binary, in the cafés, music, and dance halls that featured cross-dressed participants.[8] *Before Trans* thus encourages us to consider not only whether these models of female masculinity women spread more broadly, but how less privileged people constructed their own solutions. The archives may only be partially revelatory here. The records of the pants permits are mostly lost to us, for instance.[9] That said, as Tamara Chaplin shows in her forthcoming work on lesbian communities in the twentieth century, sometimes we have missed evidence in the archives because we simply were not looking in the right place or with the right lens. Armed with Mesch's trans framework, we should return to the archives in order to understand how gender nonconformity was understood not only by the authorities, but by other urban residents as well. Centering a trans framework may indeed reveal new connections between gender and sexual difference, especially since the latter was so often understood in terms of the former, as seen, for instance, in the memoirs of Arthur Belorget from a slightly earlier period.[10]

Finally, Mesch's analysis of the different models of gender might be placed more fully in the history of sexual and gender categorizations themselves. Queer scholars such as Heather Love, Scott Herring, and Benjamin Kahan have encouraged historians to pay closer attention to the models of same-sex sexuality that got left behind or were folded into the rise of the homo/hetero binary.[11] We might do the same with the emergence of trans identities. When Mesch emphasizes, for instance, that Rachilde did not seek to construct a single gender identity, but rather existed in "a state of constant flux," she shows the ways these thinkers constructed senses of self that do not always align with the now-common distinction between sex and gender (p. 204). Moreover, future researchers might take the models presented here and ask to what extent they drew on or influenced the broader sexual discourses that at least some of these women were familiar with. De Montifaud, with her interest in the history of sexuality and her emphasis on the relative nature of sex and gender, might be a worthwhile place to start. While de Montifaud did not frequently speak about her own gender and sexual identities, Mesch successfully shows how her writings nonetheless enunciate a theory about sexuality: that it is both "different in every time and place" and "everywhere" at the same time (p. 258). More might be said about the ways that non-experts deployed and utilized the sexological, medical, and psychological discourses that surrounded them as well as how the so-called experts modeled their own theories on others' writings. The theories of gender these three writers articulated will thereby be more fully integrated into our understanding of the emergence of modern gender and sexual identities.

*Before Trans* is a hugely significant book for a number of reasons. It provides one of the first explorations of French history from a trans perspective and shows how queer perspectives can be brought to bear on the field. Its willingness to resist simply placing its subjects into new boxes highlights the success of Mesch's project to analyze and understand the possibilities for telling new gender stories in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century France. As I have said, I wish

that some of these stories had more fully engaged with broader context in order to show more explicitly what remains implicit here: that trans history has much to tell us about the history of France. Not only regarding the history of trans life and identity themselves, but also imperialism, the lives of marginalized people, and the emergence of new forms of knowledge. Mesch's book will provide future historians with a roadmap to investigate the ways the models constructed by Jane Dieulafoy, Rachilde, and Marc de Montifaud shaped those stories in turn. For now, *Before Trans* remains not only an important re-interpretation of these writers' lives and works, but an essential contribution to the history of gender and sexuality in France.

## NOTES

[1] One important exception is the work of Maxime Foerster. See, for instance, his *Elle ou lui? Histoire des transsexuels en France* (Paris: La Musardine, 2012).

[2] I follow Mesch in using female pronouns to refer to her subjects, as they mostly did in life. I do, however, avoid simply referring to them as "women."

[3] For an overview of these debates, see Laura Doan, *Disturbing Practices: History, Sexuality, and Women's Experience of Modern War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), esp. chapter 2. I addressed some of these issues in the French context in Andrew Israel Ross, "Sex in the Archives: Homosexuality, Prostitution, and the Archives de la Préfecture de Police de Paris," *French Historical Studies* 40/2 (2017): 267-290.

[4] André Gide, *Corydon* (Paris: Éditions de la Nouvelle revue française, 1924). On these themes in *Corydon*, see Martha Hanna, "Natalism, Homosexuality, and the Controversy over *Corydon*," in *Homosexuality in Modern France*, edited by Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 202-224.

[5] Robert Aldrich, "Homosexuality in the French Colonies," *Journal of Homosexuality* 41/3-4 (2002): 210.

[6] Shari Benstock, "Paris Lesbianism and the Politics of Reaction, 1900-1940," in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey (New York: New American Library, 1989), pp. 332-346.

[7] Todd Shepard, *Sex, France, and Arab Men, 1962-1979* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Judith Surkis, *Sex, Law, and Sovereignty in French Algeria, 1830-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019). On these themes see also Joseph A. Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

[8] I discuss some of these spaces in *Public City/Public Sex: Homosexuality, Prostitution, and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019), pp. 205-210. See also Nicole G. Albert, "De la topographie invisible à l'espace public et littéraire: Les lieux de plaisir lesbien dans le Paris de la Belle Époque," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 4/53-54 (2006): 92-93.

[9] Christine Bard, “Le ‘DB58’ aux Archives de la Préfecture de Police,” *Clio: Femmes, Genre, Histoire* 10 (1999), <http://journals.openedition.org/cliio/258>.

[10] Arthur W-----, “Secret Confessions of a Parisian,” in *Queer Lives: Men’s Autobiographies from Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. and ed. William Peniston and Nancy Erbert (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), pp. 7-72.

[11] Scott Herring, *Queering the Underworld: Slumming Literature, and the Undoing of Lesbian and Gay History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009); and, Benjamin Kahan, *The Book of Minor Perverts: Sexology, Etiology, and the Emergence of Sexuality* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2019).

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