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Melanie Hawthorne

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Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Women Writing Decadence: An Introduction

Melanie Hawthorne

Texas A&M University

There was a time when the *fin de siècle* seemed to be an all-male club. The dandies, Decadents, dukes, drug-addled dreamers, and sundry other down-and-outs lolled or strutted across the pages of turn-of-the-century literature and the literary history of that period, and if women entered the story, they figured only as muses, unattainable visions, or regrettably available resources who licensed men's most vicious failings, such as prostitutes. As the explosion of interest in women writers and women's writing shone a light on the neglected corners and forgotten by-ways of the literature of yesteryear, it was allowed with grudging reluctance that maybe there had been one or two women Decadents. In France, the name of Rachilde (Marguerite Eymery Vallette, 1860-1953) would often come up in this context, for example, as though the concession proved the general truth. Such women were still presented as an exception, however, and the paradigm remained unchanged.

Measure then, the shift in perspective that occurs when women are put not on the margins, as an afterthought, but at the centre of *fin-de-siècle* literary activity, as nodes in networks that stretch across time and space linking entire coteries of writers as well as lone maverick individuals. What if one were to focus on the women themselves, and their transnational maps of movement and influence, with a view to uncovering the hitherto overlooked (or at least understudied) patterns of life and work (since life sometimes *was* work for Decadents) that surge through the currents of literary history of a century ago?

Of course, this re-visioning hinges on what definition of 'Decadence' one is prepared to allow. Was it a short-lived, aesthetically specific fraternity, such as Oscar Wilde plus those associated with *The Yellow Book*, say, in England, or contributors to Anatole Baju's journal in Paris? Such a narrow definition may have its place and its merits, but widening the lens for writers of all

stripes and genders offers a more accurate picture of the extensive international movement that linked multi-faceted reactions against the realisms of the nineteenth century to the innovative Modernist experiments of the early twentieth century. This more generous embrace takes in a wealth of talent. In French, the panoramic frame includes, in addition to Rachilde, an entire 'lost generation' of women writers who delved into more or less Decadent matters: Marguerite Coppin (1867-1931), Camille Delaville (1838-1888), Jane Dieulafoy (1851-1916), Tola Dorian (Kapitolina Sergeevna Mestcherskaya Dorian, 1839-1918), Judith Gautier (1845-1917), Gisèle d'Estoc (Paule Courbe, 1845-1894), Marie Krysinska (1857-1908), Jean Marni (Jeanne Barousse, 1854-1910), Marc de Montifaud (Marie Amélie Chartroule, 1845-1912),¹ Georges de Peyrebrune (Mathilde-Marie de Peyrebrune, 1841-1917), Jane de la Vaudère (Jeanne Scrive, 1857-1908), Renée Vivien (Pauline Tarn, 1877-1909). In Britain and Anglophone Ireland, one can cite Olive Custance (1874-1944), George Egerton (Mary Bright, 1859-1945), Michael Field (Katharine Harris Bradley, 1846-1914, and Edith Emma Cooper, 1862-1913), Vernon Lee (Violet Paget, 1856-1935), and Ada Levenson (1862-1933). And lest it be assumed that Decadence flourished only in Western Europe, examples of women writers from around the continent (and beyond) flock to mind: the Norwegian Dagny Juell-Przybyszewska (1867-1901); Maria Jotuni (1880-1943) and L. Onerva (Hilja Onerva Lehtinen, 1882-1972) in Finland; Emilia Pardo Bazán (1851-1921) in Spain; Zinaida Gippius (1869-1945), Sophia Parnok (1885-1933), and Lydia Zionvieva-Annibal (1866-1907) in Russia; Eleonora Kalkowska (1883-1937) and Kazimiera Zawistowska (1870-1902) in Poland.

The transnational nature of the Decadent movement that spread far and wide, creating eddies and ripples around the world, reflects something that was in the cultural air, and calls out for further exploration. On the one hand, the nineteenth century that gave rise to the *fin-de-siècle* mood of Decadence was *the* century of nationalism, as so many experts from different perspectives agree (Benedict Anderson, Isaiah Berlin, and Stefan Zweig, among others).² As an ideology, the notion that 'nations' existed and had certain characteristics, a shared sense of place, history, and culture, was an increasingly accepted truth. And yet these nations had borders that could be

surprisingly porous when viewed through modern eyes, accustomed as we are at the beginning of the twenty-first century to the ever-more intrusive ability of the modern state to track the movement of people.

While ideas and cultural movements may have flowed freely, there were still many controls on the movements of individuals at the turn of the century. These restrictions were not only at international borders, however, but operated even within the boundaries of a particular state. Many people today take for granted the freedom to move around within their own country, but in the nineteenth century, restrictions on domestic travel was a common way to exert political control (to prevent popular protests) and to maintain economic control (over the labour market, for example). In France, a passport might be required simply to travel from one region to another. Writing to his mother from Saché in 1832, the novelist Honoré de Balzac explained that he was terribly tired from his journey there because ‘everywhere there was a *gendarmerie*, they asked to see our passports.’³ Flaubert’s eponymous characters Bouvard and Pécuchet, though fictional, worry about being asked to produce theirs while on their lunch hour in the streets in Paris.⁴ As such, passports had little to do with foreign travel (the use most closely associated with them today), and were seen as repressive documents destined to disappear in more liberal, progressive times.

It wasn’t until the upheavals of World War I and the Russian Revolution, which redrew maps and wrote entire countries out of existence, brought massive population displacements and cases of statelessness, and introduced new concerns about spying, military intelligence, and surveillance, that the modern passport system took root in the form we know today: a government-issued form of identification required mainly for crossing national boundaries. Prior to this clampdown, at the *fin de siècle* and throughout the Belle Époque, those who enjoyed a certain status and class privilege were not required to submit to the same levels of scrutiny as others. The fact of being rich and/or of coming from certain families (the nobility) was guarantee enough. Those who sailed to the United States and entered the country via the port of New York, for example, were processed through the now-famous site of Ellis Island. Here, the ‘poor and huddled masses’⁵

had to disembark and present themselves to immigration agents who required proof that they would not become a public burden (that they had an income or a way of earning one, and did not present a threat of costly infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis). Those who were *not* poor and did *not* need to huddle – because they enjoyed the space and comfort of first class – were interviewed by agents who came to them and interviewed them on board ship, conveniently, in their cabin.⁶ The agents had no cause to worry that these passengers would drain the public purse; the very fact that they travelled first class was the proof of their wealth, and their wealth was the manifest sign that they merited admission to the country.

This was not a world that pretended to treat everyone equally regardless of status. Membership in an elite class had its privileges, and no one pretended that public servants should be blind to such differences. For the upper echelons of society, then, national borders had little meaning. Beyond just a certain cultural cosmopolitanism – a feeling of being at home in various cities around the world where elite culture looked more or less the same – there was a certain transnationalism, a feeling that national borders did not exist (or at least, that they were only for other people, not for oneself).

Not all the women who participated in the Decadent movement were of this class, but Renée Vivien was one. Not only did her class background insulate her from the constraints of national boundaries, she was transnational by birth and by upbringing. Born in London, England, in 1877 to an English father from Yorkshire and an American mother from Michigan, the family moved to Paris when she was very young, and she grew up speaking both French and English and thinking of the Bois de Boulogne as home (she once referred to it as her ‘patrie’). Independently wealthy, she settled in Paris permanently when she came of age, but she travelled extensively, regularly going to Nice for the carnival season in spring and Bayreuth for the Wagner opera festival in summer, for example.

Vivien became most famous for her poetry. Though she also wrote prose, she is often remembered as a kind of *poète maudit* in the tradition of Charles Baudelaire and Paul Verlaine, which

is to say as that a sort of latter-day Decadent. She had a tempestuous and legendary affair with the American heiress and salonnière Natalie Barney beginning in the winter of 1899-1900, and travelled to the US with Barney, whose family split their time between Washington, D.C. and a summer home in Maine. Vivien went on to have many affairs with other women, most notably the Rothschild heiress Hélène de Zuylen who was a keen automobilist. Vivien found inspiration in the work of the Greek poet Sappho, and learned Greek in order to be able to translate her work. Sappho was a touchstone not only for women writers in general, but for women who loved other women, particularly as she lived in a pre-Christian time in which same-sex love was considered noble, and not tainted by religious notions of sin. Not content merely to study Sappho, Vivien travelled to her home island of Lesbos and toyed with the idea of setting up a community for women writers there that would echo the school founded centuries ago by her role model.⁷

This thumbnail sketch of Vivien can be summed up by the label of a mid-century book that looks back on the turn of the century. In *L'Époque 1900* (1951), André Billy describes Vivien as ‘Sapho 1900, Sapho 100%’.⁸ The words work better in French than in English: ‘Sapho mille neuf cent, Sapho cent pour cent’ has a pleasing symmetry. Each phrase comprises just four words, of which the first and last are exactly the same in both phrases (‘Sapho’ and ‘cent’). The second word of each phrase consists of a number (‘mille’, ‘cent’) so that while the exact word is different, they share a semantic field. It is only the words ‘neuf’ (nine) and ‘pour’ (per) that are really different, so that the two aspects of Vivien that are conjoined in this phrase – her *fin-de-siècle*-ness and her sapphism (both affective and poetic) – seem to echo and reinforce each other.

Both aspects – the Sapphic and the Decadent – are evident in her published work. Following the first signs of trouble in the relationship with Barney, Vivien began publishing furiously, starting with a volume of poems inspired by Barney, *Préludes et études*, in 1901. She continued publishing at a furious rate of several books a year – books of poetry, but also short stories, novels, and translations, sometimes under yet other pseudonyms. By the time of her premature death at the age of thirty-two in 1909, she had published about twenty books (an average

of over two a year), and that is not counting revised editions that appeared during her lifetime or posthumous publications. The exact causes of her death are still debated, but there is general agreement that it involved a combination of what might be called the ‘three A’s’: Alcohol, Anorexia, and the Abuse of drugs.

Vivien was one of the first modern women to write openly about female same-sex love, to celebrate women’s physical beauty, not just their intellectual powers, and to do so unapologetically (which is not to say that she did not feel the brunt of negative public opinion). Taking control of the narrative of female same-sex desire is one of Vivien’s most significant contributions to literary history. The roster of ‘classic’ texts of lesbianism in French, for example, runs as follows: Diderot’s *La Religieuse*; Balzac’s *La Fille aux yeux d’or*; Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin*; Baudelaire’s ‘femmes damnées’; Zola’s *Nana*; and Pierre Louÿs’ *Les Chansons de Bilitis*. In each case, a male author controls the discourse. Why did this topic remain in the hands of men for so long? Where was the testimony of women themselves? Why do we not hear the voices of women until the twentieth century? Part of the answer, I submit, has to do with the discourse of nationalism.

When a modern discourse about homosexuality began to emerge in the nineteenth century, the way people thought about nationalism provided a lens through which to filter and understand it. At this time, nationalism was one of the dominant ways of classifying people, generating an ideology (an ‘-ism’) based on the notion that people who shared a country also shared certain other characteristics. At the same time that stereotyped notions about national character were evolving, the idea that ‘the homosexual’ was a *type* of person (not just the agent of certain actions) was also taking root. To paraphrase Foucault, it was not just that certain actions were wrong, ‘sodomitical’ acts (variously defined), for example. It was the idea that the person who committed such acts belonged more generally to a type, in Foucault’s words: ‘a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, [...] a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology.’⁹ This person was inherently immoral, regardless of any particular action they may or may not perform. To illustrate, consider the identity of someone who might

choose to self-identify as an ‘alcoholic’ or perhaps more readily as a ‘recovering alcoholic.’ An alcoholic who does not drink alcohol is not a contradiction in terms given our understanding of that disease today. It is a person who refrains from certain actions, but is still prone to certain patterns of behaviour. That is the homosexual who is emerging in the nineteenth century.

Foucault and others name this type the ‘homosexual’, but of course that word was not really in circulation until the very end of the century. It was coined by a German speaker in 1869, and it leads Foucault to date the origins of ‘the homosexual’ to 1870 (neater, though of course less accurate, than 1869). The word gets picked up by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, but it does not circulate much until it is used in French in a medical journal in 1891 and then a year later in English in 1892 in a translation of Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*. These are somewhat specialized publications, however, and it is only at the very end of the century, in 1897, when Havelock Ellis uses the word in his *Sexual Inversion* that it really gains currency.

But the gay men who were interested in identifying each other did not wait around for this medico-juridical label to come along in order to facilitate interactions. They got on with their lives, using a variety of euphemisms and signals to make their interests known. Proscribed forms of sexuality (and other inadmissible behaviours) have always been identified as coming from somewhere else, because nobody nice ‘from around here’ would ever admit to doing evil things, so there is a long tradition of attributing vice to foreigners. The origin of the word ‘bugger’ is ‘Bulgarian’, for example, because those heretics indulged in non-procreative sexual practices. Syphilis spread to France and England from Italy, and so unclean sexual morals were ‘the Italian vice’ (though if you were Italian you would blame the French). And allusions to ‘Greek’ love were perfectly transparent as ways of naming pederasty. So there was already a predisposition to associate non-normative sexual practices with other nationalities, but in the nineteenth century this link was strengthened by the increasing perception that there were national ‘types’. Gay men used this isomorphic thinking to communicate. Euphemisms for gay-ness and pick-up lines borrowed national stereotypes, so that ‘do you speak German’ served as a pick-up line for gay men in France.

When, in the early twentieth century, the German leadership was caught up in a gay sex scandal surrounding Philip von Eulenburg, the French started referring to ‘Eulenburgres’, punning on the name’s resemblance to the slang ‘bougre’ (or bugger).

This means of communication seems to have worked well for men, but examples of women borrowing from the discourse of nationalism to articulate their own ideas about sexual identity are lacking. Indeed, there is even a kind of obtuseness about such questions, a refusal to understand, as the following anecdote suggests. Just over a hundred years ago, a young and naive Lady Aberconway, then known as Christabel McLaren, found herself making polite conversation at a shooting party luncheon in Wales. She later recounted the exchange in her memoirs:

The daughter-in-law of the house, also newly married, sat beside me and asked: ‘Are you a Lesbian? I am!’

‘No,’ I answered, ‘I’m Irish and Scottish and partly English.’

[...]

That night at Bodnant I said to my father-in-law: ‘Do you know that today I was asked if I was a Greek!’¹⁰

The humour of the misunderstanding is partly about naivety: Christabel is asked point-blank about her sexuality, but mistakes the question and gives an answer that references nationality. But it is also revealing that when she relays the conversation to her father-in-law (an indiscretion excused on account of her innocence), she paraphrases and substitutes ‘Greek’ for ‘Lesbian’. In her account of the conversation, she goes on to explain to her father-in-law: ‘The island of Lesbos is a Greek island, isn’t it? A--- asked me if I was a Lesbian.’¹¹

The details McLaren supplies allow us to identify her interlocutor and to date the anecdote. Christabel Mary Melville Macnaghten, born 12 December 1890, married Henry Duncan ‘Harry’ McLaren (1879-1953) in 1910. Harry’s father (and hence Christabel’s father-in-law), the politician Charles McLaren (1850-1934), inherited the Bodnant estate in north Wales in 1895 through his marriage in 1877 to Laura Pochin. Harry had only one brother, so there can be no confusion about the identity of the other daughter-in-law of the house. Harry’s brother Francis (1886-1917) married

Barbara Jekyll (niece of the garden designer Gertrude) on 20 July 1911, allowing us to place the anecdote as occurring most likely some time later that year. McClaren identifies her interlocutor by the initial ‘A’, but perhaps either she confused Barbara with her mother (Agnes Graham), or she meant something like ‘[Person] A’, the way one might refer to people as X and Y, or as ‘Person 1’.

Consider how differently the same question (‘Are you a Lesbian?’) is received a century later when it is put at another luncheon in 1994. At the second of the four weddings in the film *Four Weddings and Funeral* (dir. Mike Newell, 1994), Fiona (played by Kristen Scott Thomas) is sitting alone at a wedding reception when one of the other guests, an older woman who looks like a maiden aunt, engages her in a polite conversational exchange by asking her if she is a lesbian. It is a very *fin-de-siècle* moment in a number of ways. To begin with, all the weddings in this film are between men and women, gay marriage being not yet legal. The only ceremony that the token gay couple is allowed is a funeral. If weddings don’t happen for gay people yet at this end of century, death does, as it always has, although unusually for this cultural moment, it is not an AIDS-related death. Also, the audience is invited to think that the intrusively personal question is a progressive moment. The maiden aunt reveals herself to be anything but prudish and explains her startlingly frank question by noting that ‘[being a lesbian] is one of the possibilities for unmarried girls nowadays.’ Especially as the question comes from what may be perceived as the ‘older generation’, it acts as a sign of changing times from a surprising quarter. Fiona, for her part, shows no confusion about the question, at least, no confusion that she is being asked about her national origins. Instead, her only hesitation in answering revolves around ‘what counts’.

Christabel McLaren’s anecdote provides some insight into how women communicated with each other (or, as in this case, failed to communicate) about sexual matters in the pre-World War I years of the Belle Époque, Vivien’s milieu until her death in 1909. Men asked each other ‘are you Greek?’ and heard a coded question about sexual preference. Women asked each other a direct question about sexual preference – ‘are you a Lesbian?’ – and instead heard a question about

nationality: ‘are you Greek?’ The discourse of nationalism was clearly working differently for men and for women. Why?

Up to this point, my argument has been that men could think of themselves as having a sexual ‘identity’ because they already perceived themselves as having a national identity, but how does one become ‘nationalized’? As the political philosopher Montesquieu once put it, ‘Comment peut-on être français’ [How can you be French]? How can existence – ‘being’ – enter a national mode? History suggests examples of many loyalties that might shape a person’s sense of who they are, from family to tribal affiliations and beyond. One might feel defined by and beholden to a feudal lord (and hence a place) or to an institution such as a church. But channelling these ideas into the concept of national belonging is a different order of magnitude. In thinking about how one acquires the sense of ‘imagined community’ that is a nation, Benedict Anderson has privileged phenomena such as print culture, so literacy may be one general prerequisite. In France specifically, the historian Eugen Weber has described the grand project of the nineteenth century as that of turning ‘peasants into Frenchmen’, that is, taking a rural population with an identity primarily shaped by regional connections and making all those people feel part of one single, bigger, all-encompassing entity: France.¹² Of course, Weber is talking not about all people, but about French *men*, ‘Frenchmen’, des français.

How did French men learn that they were part of France? The answer seems to be through a combination of military service and participation in national political activities such as voting. Women, of course, were excluded from both activities until well into the middle of the twentieth century (as far as France is concerned), and until after WWI as far as Britain and the US are concerned. In all cases, Vivien was long dead by then. In the world that she knew, women were not thought of as having a claim to national belonging in their own right. Women took the citizenship of their nearest male relative. Fathers could confer citizenship on sons and daughters, but it was clear that this passed through the male – not the female – line. And just to make sure, a number of countries formalized laws that stipulated that married women took the citizenship of

their husband. One example will illustrate: in 1907, the US Congress passed a piece of legislation that came to be known as the Expatriation Act. Section 3 of this Act stated ‘that any American woman who marries a foreigner shall take the nationality of her husband.’ The hitherto American painter Romaine Brooks, who had married a British man in 1903 (but went on to have an affair with Vivien in around 1908) suddenly found herself expatriated and a British subject. Loss of citizenship could have consequences for property rights and for those practising a profession that required them to be a citizen, so more was at stake than just a piece of paper. The Expatriation Act was challenged in the US, but it was upheld by the Supreme Court in 1915 in a case known as *Mackenzie v. Hare*. That is but one illustration, but gender asymmetry in claims to citizenship was commonplace. As late as 1930, only five countries in the world made no distinctions at all based on sex in their nationality laws, and it is an interesting list: Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay – all in South America – and the Soviet Union. *All* European countries, *and* the US, continued to discriminate until relatively recently (and some continue to do so in certain matters).

So women didn’t learn that they were ‘citizens’ of a country by being called to fight and defend it, they weren’t given a stake in national matters by having a vote in national elections (even though the suffrage movement was beginning to militate for this at the end of the nineteenth century). In short, women had no ‘nationality of their own’.

An obvious objection arises here, which is that anyone who travelled as much as Vivien did must surely have been aware of what country she was ‘from’. Today the experience of crossing national borders is a common one, and reinforces an awareness of national belonging. To travel, a person must have a passport, so it is hard to avoid knowing where you are ‘from’, and the knowledge is reinforced in various ways that call upon people to sort themselves into groups, such as ‘EU passports’ and ‘non-EU passports’ or ‘US citizens and permanent residents’ and ‘other’. Vivien travelled constantly. In 1905, for example, her travels took her to Constantinople, Greece, Amsterdam, Cologne, Basel, Bellagio, Milan, Genoa, Florence, and back to London. At the end of the year she travelled around the Mediterranean, visiting Italy, Greece, Palestine, and Egypt. These

are her movements for 1906: Constantinople, Nice, Blois (in France), Constantinople, Mytilene, Marseille, Nice, Amiens, London, Utrecht, Constantinople, Vienna, Constantinople. In 1907, the last year she would still have the energy to travel before her death in 1909, she visited Naples, Nice, London, Japan, Honolulu, and Nice again. How could she not know where she was ‘from’?

Part of the answer lies in the fact that the document that we think of today as the emblem of our nationality, the passport, was not tied to national origin that way in the *fin de siècle*. In the nineteenth century, it was not uncommon for citizens of one country to travel using a passport issued by a completely different country. Thus, when Robert Browning eloped with Elizabeth Barrett, he was travelling on a French passport. Similarly, it is enlightening to learn that passports were considered such a repressive system that just over a century ago the collective diplomatic wisdom in Europe was that passports would soon be obsolete. In addition, as discussed above, Vivien was shielded by class privilege from many intrusive regulations. In short, it is entirely possible that Vivien never had a passport, never possessed a single document that told her where, exactly, she fit.

There was very little, then, in the way of formal structures that imposed an awareness of national identity on Vivien. And her personal family history gave her plenty to play with that encouraged the opposite. Her mother Mary, born in Michigan in the US, had attended school in Canada before being orphaned, at which point she went to live with an aunt in Hawaii (not yet part of the US, though soon to be). It was there that Mary met and married John Tarn, an English gentleman from Yorkshire, a region that likes to tout its Viking roots, so that Vivien also felt an ethnic connection to Norway and ‘the North’. Add to this that she grew up in Paris, which is where she felt most at home, and it’s easy to see that she may not have felt that she belonged to any one single ‘nation’ at all.

And this brings us back to the question of what it might have meant if Vivien had been at that shooting party luncheon in Wales instead of Christabel McLaren. I have argued that a woman’s sense of national identity was not as well established at the beginning of the twentieth century as

by its end, and that Vivien's extensive travel, rather than consolidating a sense of national belonging, might instead have brought home how fluid (for women) such a national identity still was for those with class privilege. But if Vivien shared the widely-held perception that there was somehow a connection between nationality and sexuality, then the sense of fluidity of the one perhaps suggested an analogy with sexual identity. For there is one point in Vivien's work where national and sexual identity clearly intersect, and that is her understanding of the term 'lesbian'. Vivien was a great admirer of Sappho, studying Greek in order to be able to translate her work into French, and consciously borrowing metrical forms and trying to adapt them to French prosody. An extension of this admiration was Vivien's dream of re-creating Sappho's community of women in Mytilene, the capital city of the island of Lesbos, and she made several trips there before finally abandoning the project. Vivien sought a lesbian community, then, but what seems significant about that search is that it was understood partially as a sexual identification, but also a national one. For Vivien, one became a lesbian by living on Lesbos.

Lacking a solid sense of national belonging may have provoked a feeling of insecurity at times: one could be expatriated by the stroke of a governmental pen without recourse, as some of Vivien's peers discovered. But the experience may also have suggested a way of inhabiting a category without the alignment becoming a form of identity, a way of negotiating affiliations without being constrained by them. While the male homosexual became a species (Foucault's word), then organized into taxonomies, the lesbian briefly remained something more amorphous, for better or worse.¹³ Vivien's contemporaries who lived longer, such as Natalie Barney and Romaine Brooks, lived long enough to experience ways that women were corralled into categories of national belonging in the twentieth century, and they perhaps not uncoincidentally express a more clearly-defined sense of their sexual identity. In the course of the twentieth century, legal reforms eventually granted women a claim to a nationality of their own, one they could claim in their own right. On the other hand, women were increasingly subject to the effects of a repressive system of national control that took the form of the passport as guarantor of identity. Alongside

this nationalization came the emergence of a clearer sense of lesbian identity, also with its pluses and minuses (the advantage of visibility being traded off against the constraint of a label). Women experienced a hardening of the arterial conduits that allowed one to circulate among different categories. Where previously, permeable boundaries allowed for exchange, rigidity brought clearer definition but less flexibility. As Heather Love has put it, in her examination of the historical investment in looking back at gay lives in the past, ‘One may enter the mainstream on the condition that one breaks ties with all those who cannot make it.’¹⁴ Negotiating this emergence into the mainstream and its implications for accepting limits would be the work of Modernist women – Barney and Brooks, but also women such as Djuna Barnes, Radclyffe Hall, and Virginia Woolf. (It is no coincidence that Woolf made her famous proclamation of transnationalism in *Three Guineas*, that as a woman she had no country.) But Vivien died before this transformation in the way we perceive sexual categories was complete, and lived at a time when being in between things was potentially empowering, at least for a financially comfortable woman of independent means.

This precarious moment emerges at the *fin de siècle*, when women are not quite yet full citizens with predictable national and other characteristics, but are on the verge of claiming that embrace of the fatherland (or motherland) implicitly through their involvement in the growing demands for suffrage. Whether or not individual women were active in this movement, the discourse around the public role of women as political agents contributed to changing the understanding of women’s civic status for everyone. And this moment of morphing identity forms the backdrop to women’s participation in Decadent movements (taken in the broadest sense) across Europe and beyond. Like certain women themselves, this movement was transnational in that it exceeded national discourses and flowed across boundaries that were still porous. Russian women were in Paris, and French women were from London or the US. If women writers did not physically travel themselves, then their works did, like those of Rachilde, whose novels were translated into Polish and whose plays were performed in Copenhagen. The transnational perspective on women writers of the turn of the century thus sheds a new light on Decadence.

Geographically dispersed, women were not all congregating in the same club, either literally or figuratively, yet they formed a fraternity of sorts, as demonstrated by the articles gathered in the pages that follow.

¹ The exact date of death of Marc de Montifaud has long remained uncertain. I am indebted to Cheryl Morgan and Mathilde Huet for establishing definitively that she died in 1912 after a long illness.

² See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991); Isaiah Berlin, 'The Bent Twig: On the Rise of Nationalism', in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 238-61; Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday: An Autobiography* (New York: Viking, 1945).

³ Honoré de Balzac, *Correspondance*, vol. I (1809-1835), ed. by Roger Pierrot and Hervé Yon (Paris: Gallimard-Pléiade, 2006), p. 539. My translation.

⁴ Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), p. 39.

⁵ This is a slight paraphrase from Emma Lazarus' sonnet 'The New Colossus' (1883), written to raise money for the construction of a pedestal for the Statue of Liberty – 'Give me your tired, your poor, | Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free'. See 'The New Colossus', in *The Poems of Emma Lazarus* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1889), p. 203.

⁶ See Erika Rand, *The Ellis Island Snow Globe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁷ For more on the life and work of Vivien, see (in French) Jean-Paul Goujon, *Tes blessures sont plus douces que leurs caresses: Vie de Renée Vivien* (Paris: Régine Desforges, 1986); and (in English) Karla Jay, *The Amazon and the Page: Natalie Clifford Barney and Renée Vivien* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

⁸ André Billy, *L'époque 1900: 1885-1905* (Paris: J. Tallandier, 1951).

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1990), pp. 42-43.

¹⁰ Christabel Aberconway, *A Wiser Woman?: A Book of Memories* (London: Hutchinson, 1966), p. 112.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976).

¹³ See George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985). 'Lesbianism was also particularly difficult to face. As an expression of female sexuality, it was ignored through most of the nineteenth century. This was not merely a "love that dared not speak its name" – it did not even have a name', pp. 90-91.

¹⁴ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 10.