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Abstract

Review of Melanie C. Hawthorne. *Women, Citizenship, and Sexuality: The Transnational Lives of Renée Vivien, Romaine Brooks, and Natalie Barney*. Liverpool UP, 2021. 167 pp.

Keywords

Renee Vivien, Romaine Brooks, gender, sexuality, Natalie Barney

Melanie C. Hawthorne. *Women, Citizenship, and Sexuality: The Transnational Lives of Renée Vivien, Romaine Brooks, and Natalie Barney*. Liverpool UP, 2021. 167 pp.

Melanie C. Hawthorne's latest monograph uses two writers, Renée Vivien and Natalie Barney, and a painter, Romaine Brooks, to rethink understandings of nationality and sexuality predicated on a male subject. Hawthorne is interested in how women, denied independent claims to citizenship, complicate the "isomorphic thinking" (37) that structured Western approaches to nationality and sexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when these reproductive orders congealed into typologies reinforced by legal frameworks. Stated otherwise, Hawthorne genders histories of nationality and sexuality, her analysis informed by some predictable touchstones (among them Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, George Mosse's *Nationalism and Sexuality*). To the extent that their citizenship was long adjudicated by proxy, women operated in contingent relation to the "national-sexual nexus" (11), their status dependent on patrilineal and marital alliances. The significance of Vivien, Brooks, and Barney lies in how they navigated such constraints, and Hawthorne persuasively contends that these women's provisional relationships to nationality heightened their sense of sexual possibility.

In accessible prose enlivened by the occasional pop culture reference (a scene from the sitcom *Ellen* is read as indicative of a contemporary shift in understandings of national and sexual "types") and by an excavation of her own transnational life, Hawthorne tracks the interwoven histories of gender, sexuality, and nationality into our present, with its heavily-policed borders and resurgent nationalisms. Echoing the interrogation of geographically-bounded paradigms enacted by "transnational turns" in literary and cultural studies, Hawthorne's reading of Brooks and Barney, in particular, posits women's negotiations of sexual and national categories as central to modernist cultural production that "enabl[ed] lesbians to see themselves transnationally" (103).

The book's first chapter takes Oscar Wilde as emblematic of nationality's availability as a signifier of men's sexuality in late nineteenth-century Europe. Citing the concurrent development of sexual "types" and modern understandings of nationalism, Hawthorne excavates the era's "cultural geography of sexual orientation" (19)—specifically, the ways in which consolidating national identity was premised on conflating male homosexuality and foreignness. Wilde's legal persecution is thus viewed through his use of the legibly foreign to signal queer identity as he moved between France and Britain. Incidentally, readers interested in the history of sexuality will appreciate Hawthorne's approach to terms like "queer," which attends to their historicity while reminding readers that they, too, have transnational trajectories. *Homosexuel*, for instance, was viewed as a German

loan word in late nineteenth-century France—a linguistic indexing of foreignness that anticipates contemporary polemics around so-called “gender theory” (a term whose French detractors often leave it untranslated, thereby emphasizing its supposed Americanness).

Chapters two, three, and four are devoted to Vivien, Brooks, and Barney, respectively. While each has scholarly and pedagogical merits of its own, the fullness of these chapters emerges relationally. Their internal resonances owe much to biography: Vivien, Brooks, and Barney were all born in the 1870s and united by race and class privilege. They were also affectively and sexually involved with one another at various junctures—connections that allow Hawthorne to trace transnational developments in lesbian discourse through these women’s overlapping social circles, anchored in part by Barney’s Parisian literary salon. Moreover, Vivien, Brooks, and Barney were, by virtue of class status, professional achievements, and advantageous connections, able to travel internationally and reside as denizens of other nations (notably France). Nonetheless, Hawthorne suggests that national belonging was never a categorically straightforward proposition for women, even those who could, to a degree, fashion their sense of nationality as it suited them. Instead, the “transnational lives” of Brooks and Barney, in particular, reveal the constraints women faced as they negotiated their relationships to nationality and sexuality, often through men. Hawthorne pays specific attention to how marriage determined women’s citizenship claims in the early twentieth century, as was the case with the American Brooks who, having married a British man, became subject to the U.S.’s Expatriation Act of 1907. Yet for Hawthorne’s professed concern with the impositions placed upon women’s transnational existence, her choice of subjects, whose lives and professional trajectories were facilitated by wealth, inevitably circumscribes what such impositions entailed.

Still, Hawthorne is intentional about approaching Vivien, Brooks, and Barney as women conditioned by privilege. Drawing on her previous scholarship, for instance, she shows how orientalist fantasies, implicated in discourses of nationality and sexuality, were available to white women like Vivien. Particularly engaging is Hawthorne’s analysis, in chapter two, of the posthumously published *Lettres de Renée Vivien à Kérimé* (‘Letters from Renée Vivien to Kérimé’), an ostensible collection of letters from Vivien to a Turkish lover, the wife of a prominent diplomat. Expanding on Simone Burgues’s work, Hawthorne argues convincingly that the collection, initially published as one half of an epistolary exchange, is actually a fiction that manipulates orientalist narratives of sexual conquest. In Hawthorne’s account, Vivien’s crossing of frontiers, real and imagined, becomes particularly useful for thinking nationality and sexuality at a historical juncture—the turn of the twentieth century—when certain women could

inhabit these categories expansively, in ways that nonetheless relied on patriarchal tropes.

Unlike Vivien, who died in 1909, Brooks and Barney lived well into the twentieth century, their transnational trajectories shaped by the increased regulation of nationality catalyzed by World War I. The aftermath of this war forms the basis of an “interchapter” that disrupts *Women, Citizenship, and Sexuality*’s biographical progression and attests to its structural inventiveness, mobilized most strikingly in a concluding “Afterword and Timeline” whose interwoven strands are printed on facing pages. Half partially autobiographical account of nationality and gender’s present-day imbrications, half selective timeline of twenty-first-century flashpoints around citizenship, the result is somewhat disjointed, doubtless by design. And though the reader largely loses sight here of Vivien, Brooks, and Barney, they are reminded once more of the sweeping stakes of national and sexual belonging, rendered inescapably urgent.

Women, Citizenship, and Sexuality will appeal to literary scholars and cultural historians interested in sapphic modernism. Historians of gender and sexuality will likewise appreciate the gendered frame through which Hawthorne approaches nationality and sexuality as functionally analogous discourses whose ideological configurations persist into the present.

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