"My Queerness Isn’t a Vice": Sapphic Soirées on the Left Bank of "Paris-Lesbos"

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Résumé

For many nineteenth-century American women who felt threatened by an impending heteronormative future of marriage, children and the stultifying drone of domesticity, Europe offered a space of queer freedom that could not be found at home. Karla Jay frames France in particular as "at once an adventure and an escape from middle-class American Philistinism," underlining how "writers went to Paris for its relaxed moral atmosphere as compared to the Puritanism of the United States".1 Shari Benstock writes of the "women of the left bank," an expatriate group of women in which lesbianism was not only accepted but celebrated. These left-bank lesbians were active in the literary scene, either as writers, booksellers, publishers and journalists. Perhaps one of the most radical figures in this group was Natalie Clifford Barney, an American heiress who first moved to Paris in 1883. According to the poet (and Barney's lover) Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, Barney was an "American who speaks our language with no accent, who writes with a prodigious virtuosity, who is not wholly French and who is no longer wholly American, which allows her to be a bit foreign everywhere."2

This paper explores Barney as a Transatlantic figure who straddles American-French identities in order to forge an unapologetically queer identity within spaces of "lesbian" liminality. It will take into consideration Barney's evocation of Sappho, her use of the French language in her writing and the geocritical position of her rue Jacob salon in Paris in order to question how she actively "queered" the city from the end of the nineteenth century until her death in 1972 at the age of ninety-five.


Mots-Clés: literature

*Intervenant