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Peter Cryle and Christopher Forth, eds., *Sexuality at the Fin de Siècle: The Makings of a "Central Problem."* Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008. 201pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (hb) ISBN: 0874130379.

Review by Sandrine Sanos, Texas A & M University – Corpus Christi.

In the last part of his first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault reminds us that “sex is the most speculative, most ideal, and most internal element in a deployment of sexuality organized by power in its grip on bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures.” Tying together body and identity, sex allows the individual to become intelligible to itself, at the intersection of disciplines and regulations.[1] The edited volume, *Sexuality at the Fin-de-Siècle*, is firmly dedicated to pursuing Foucault’s project. Taking its cue from noted sexologist Havelock Ellis’s claim that “sexuality is the central problem of life,” it offers a range of short, erudite, and engaging essays. Each revisits figures (Jean-Marie Charcot, Ambroise Tardieu, Richard Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis) and themes familiar to scholars of the nineteenth century—hysteria, hermaphroditism, homosexuality, perversion—while also exploring seemingly “minor” topics in histories of the body—spasms, digestion, excretion. In doing so, this collection of nine essays (and one afterword) self-consciously situates itself as a Foucauldian exercise, and seeks to explore and question the central place that sex has come to occupy in our understanding of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Europe. Straddling the fields of cultural and intellectual history, as well as the history of science and medicine, many of its essays do not wish to take the *fin-de-siècle* as a self-evident period, nor do they claim to “prove” Foucault’s periodization. Instead, many essays emphasize the radical unfamiliarity of this period that has, by now, been productively and richly documented, and the ways regimes of knowledge and power were hardly fixed but “in the making” as the collection’s title suggests.[2]

The editors’ introduction thus offers a manifesto of sorts, positing itself as a critique of the ways in which the field of the history of sexuality has evolved in the last decade.[3] Following David Halperin’s critical insights, Peter Cryle and Christopher Forth argue that their “purpose is reflexive and revisionist.” They do not intend to recover an already-present and seemingly transparent archive of sexual taxonomies, but instead question Ellis’s claim that sexuality figured at the center of European (and human) life. Such a vision was not “innocent” but required “insistent cultural work [around] competing views [...] about what counted as “life” for individuals and society at large at the end of the nineteenth century” (p. 14). In order to explore the specifically *fin-de-siècle* discursive placement of sexuality “at the center of human life,” three thematic sections organize the volume, examining the specular economy that made sexuality central, the proliferation of “symptoms and problems” that helped center it and, finally, the ways in which the self was defined through a complex articulation of sex and body (p. 14). Each essay, in turn, explores how the *fin-de-siècle* constituted, as Foucault has suggested, a time of “overlappings, interactions, and echoes.”[4]

The essays in Part I illuminate the instabilities inherent in the production and representation of sexualized bodies in late nineteenth-century Europe. Bodies were invented and consumed in a visual economy that figured at the crossroads of public and scientific discourse, popular entertainment, consumerism and voyeurism.[4] The first two essays examine the now-familiar topic of hysteria, that

quintessentially fin-de-siècle ailment which helped consecrate French neurologist Charcot's career, and that scholar Georges Didi-Huberman has brought back to light.<sup>[5]</sup> Elizabeth Stephens' essay on the photographic taxonomies of "freaks" and "hysterics" displayed in popular anatomical museums and medical institutes in France and the United States argues that a reconceptualization of corporeality took place in the late nineteenth century. The shift taking place at the intersection of the public and the professional, health and entertainment, reveals how the act of documenting the surface of "non-normative" (female) bodies did not solidify them but signaled their very disappearance in a changing epistemological regime. She traces the ways in which these photographs "did not record," but rather "invent(ed)" the very bodies they sought to examine, and how they were produced for voyeuristic consumption (pp. 25-26). The freak became the disabled body while the hysteric was in the process of disappearing as a diagnostic category. Similarly, Jonathan Marshall examines the spectacle of Charcot's photographs of female hysterics. His analysis of what he terms "the theater of desire" also reflects upon the logic embedded in the photographic documentation of hysterical bodies. Marshall focuses on the performativity inherent in these visual signifiers in order to point to the manner in which hysterical symptoms operated within a sexed economy of knowledge, at once disavowing and decontextualizing the sexual nature of hysteria where the hysterical body became "a theater of the inchoate body," never fully stabilized and in need of constant reiteration (pp. 57-58).

The spectacle of perversion is a common motif, and Gabrielle Houbre's essay revisits another familiar theme, that of the status of hermaphrodites within medical, social, and public discourses. Houbre argues that, while confusion and ambivalence traversed much of the medical literature that proliferated in late nineteenth century, hermaphroditism became a paradigmatic case because it challenged the uncertain foundations of sexual difference (p. 62). She examines Ambroise Tardieu's treatise on the tragic story of Alexina B as one example of the ways in which the "dissident body" of the hermaphrodite posed important problems to doctors, scientists, as well as sexologists and psychoanalysts because it represented "the ultimate event of a much-feared confusion of the sexes," at a time when women and feminism were a subject of anxieties (p. 63). Here again, photography played a crucial role as it became an essential instrument of the medical apparatus designed to pry open the surface of the body and reveal its "true nature." Like the photographs of "freaks" and hysterics, these served a paradoxical function: often of the lower-classes, they borrowed their visual codes from the anthropomorphic photographs "adopted in 1882 by the police" (p. 67). Because of their scientific aim, these photographs were never labeled pornographic, instead producing a delinquent and perverse hermaphrodite personage made familiar "as the victim of biological disfigurement" (p. 70).

A second set of essays (from parts II and III) reinserts sexuality within a history of the body, in order to emphasize the contingency of the body and its relationship to the constitution of European subjectivity. These provocative essays focus on what they identify as symptoms of a particular *fin-de-siècle* reconceptualization while stressing the radical strangeness and discursive uncertainty of these bodily functions. Cryle emphasizes the productive ambivalence of that "convulsive gesture" found in both hysteria and epilepsy, the spasm (p. 37). The confusion inherent in that physical symptom illustrates the ways in which the diagnostic categories of "hystero-epilepsy" were marred by a theoretical imprecision. The proliferation of the spasm in a "wide range of bodily places" as well as in a wide range of discursive sites—from medical literature to fiction and popular entertainment—was made possible, according to Cryle, because it encompassed both pain and pleasure, "providing a privileged site for that striking convergence of the pathological and the erotic which, for the late nineteenth century, seems actually to define the domain of the sexual" (p. 82). Through its "polyvalence," it made visible the imbrication of material and social, body and psychology. Exploring how the spasm appears in fiction and novelistic essays, Cryle thus highlights how the spasm bound sexuality to the production of the self (p. 82).

An especially intriguing essay is Alison Moore's focus on excretion. Moore calls for a consideration of excretion as a central thematic component of *fin-de-siècle* discourses of urban planning, medicine, literature, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and ethnography (p. 136). These constituted a "milieu in which

excretion was a pervasive field of meaning through which concerns about social progress, colonial prowess, class, and sexuality were imagined" (p. 129). Moore turns to the canonical "fathers" of sexology and psychoanalysis, Krafft-Ebing and Freud, to show how they considered excrement *alongside* and *within* sexuality. Rather than relegating these comments to the margins, she argues they reveal how excretion served to harness productively anxieties regarding modernity, capitalism, and civilization. Just as Freud argued "anality must be sublimated" for the proper regulated bourgeois self to emerge, the category of coprophilia which Krafft-Ebing declared a "sexual perversion" associated with the "degenerate, hereditary, tainted individual" became the symptom of a precarious process of civilization (pp. 127, 134, 130). Coprophilia appeared as the ambivalent product of bourgeois modernity, "both retrogressively degenerate and modernistically decadent," escaping the proper social regulation of the self that would contain the uncertainties of the civilizing process (p. 131). At the same time, coprophagy—a popular ethnographic topic—served to mark "primitive" populations as atavistic and archaic, "both cause and symptom of their inability to progress" (p. 133). Thus, sex and excrement defined the "civilized, colonizing, and in particular bourgeois body" in the *fin-de-siècle* (p. 126).

In his essay on "dietetics," Forth reflects upon the relationship between the body and identity, troubling its traditional arrangement. He argues that the "centering" of sexuality necessitated the marginalization of other self-fashionings of the body, notably diet and dietetics. Like Moore, Forth turns to Havelock Ellis' seemingly marginal remarks regarding the "nutritive region" and explores his contention that the digestive system was related to sexuality, since both "sex and hunger are sensual appetites [...] that demand satisfaction" (pp. 140-141). He argues that "dietetics" constituted a "technique of the self" (p. 143) as they fit within the broader rubric of hygiene which, by the nineteenth century, was understood to constitute an "important form of self-knowledge and introspection," and a daily practice (pp. 143, 148). Dietetics was a "new discourse [...] produced subjects who were at once its targets and effects" (p. 151) and became the occasion for an emphasis on the individual (an "ethical and aesthetic object") as the self-regulating foundation of a civilized social order (p. 152). Homosexuality and primitiveness, as well as obesity and neurasthenia, could therefore be explained as the products of individual deficiencies.

As might be expected, several essays focus on the aberrant and perverse bodies that occupied much of the European imagination: the hermaphrodite, the homosexual, the non-western woman. Though their approaches differ, their thematic continuity is evident as they reveal the ways in which sexuality was imbricated in the delineation of the social. The sexed bodies under scrutiny helped produce a regime of knowing where civilization, difference, and the self were mapped out in a tenuous and always uncertain configuration. This is the question explored by Heike Bauer who shows that the bodies of non-western women marked the racialization of western sexuality, for "women functioned as a kind of historical metaphor, providing an emblematic link between 'primitive' and western societies, between states of premodernity and modernity [...]" (p. 94). Turning to Krafft-Ebing, she argues civilization was central to emerging European sexological discourses as they borrowed from the new disciplines of ethnography and anthropology. In many of these texts, including Krafft-Ebing's, the sexual body was racialized thus reaffirming the role of social regulation in harnessing instinct and "nature." The discussions of female same-sex acts in colonized territories and the punishment meted out to these women reinforced notions of European progress and modernity, classifying western instances of degeneration as "aberrations" unlike those non-western "primitive" societies (p. 99).

Last, both Michael Wilson and Carolyn Dean focus on the figure of the homosexual in *fin-de-siècle* France, albeit to make different arguments. Wilson explores the imaginative rendering of the figure of the "pederast" in popular fiction. He argues that, though confined to the margins of narratives and still portrayed as the embodiment of a whole set of social ills and deviance, these characters were still granted the possibility of an "interior life" (pp. 114-115). For Wilson, these "contradictory and inconsistent" portrayals helped make the figure of the pederast an intelligible one that became, paradoxically, more familiar (p. 120). In her essay, Dean departs from conventional accounts of the late

nineteenth-century homosexual identity that stress the possibilities offered by tolerance even if defined as deviant. Instead, her interest lies in what she terms the sadistic fantasies embedded in *fin-de-siècle* discourses of tolerance and emancipation. She argues that few scholars have explored “the phantasmatic violence implicit in social regulation” that actually served to exclude those abject figures of liberal politics while allowing their recognition (p. 158). Because homosexuality functioned as an “open secret,” that was at once “privately permissible, and yet unspeakable” (p. 160), this epistemological regime allowed the binding together of revulsion and attachment onto the figure of the homosexual. In fact, borrowing from Arendt, she suggests that homosexuality and Jewishness served similar functions in the French context for they “marked the impossible humanity of those whose survival depended on how well they performed their disappearance” (p. 162). Such discursive articulation allowed heterosexuality to be more firmly secured as the foundation of the state and its citizens since those—homosexuals, Jews—representatives of otherness could not belong to normative citizenship. Thus, she argues, by the interwar years, “heterosexuality became a synonym of the good citizen” (p. 164). In keeping with her recent work, Dean shows how difference haunts the political discourses of emancipation, inclusion and tolerance that have been instrumental to the constitution of European political modernity and of French citizenship.[6]

As Foucault famously posited, “at the juncture of the “body” and the “population,” sex became a crucial target of a power organized around the *management of life* rather than the menace of death” thereby allowing for biopolitics to emerge and take hold.[7] Considering the editors’ avowed desire to question the centrality of sexuality and consider the “heterogeneous elements that make up life,” it is surprising that these particular insights do not frame more openly the questions explored by these essays. While some of the essays strikingly and productively engage these “heterogeneous elements,” readers will, at times, feel that some of the issues raised here have already made their way in the critical apparatus that historians routinely deploy. Additionally, if, as Ann Laura Stoler (and many other scholars) have shown, “race and sexuality” were ordering mechanisms” of European bourgeois society, one might have wished for a more systematic consideration of the ways in which liberal bourgeois subjectivity was constituted through the production of categories of “abject” bodies, as Dean suggests, at once seductive and repulsive.[8] How might the articulation of difference, modernity, and civilization help reflect upon the articulation of sex, life, and the law at this particular temporal juncture?[9] Another (minor) regret might be that, while many of the collection’s essays claim to speak of a particular European configuration, the focus remains firmly on France and, to a lesser extent, on Britain and Germany. This is, of course, of interest to historians of France, but the inclusion of recent scholarship on Central and Eastern Europe might have broadened the scope of this otherwise engaging volume, and furthered its avowed claim to examine the “internal tensions” at work in the writing of histories of sexuality (p. 10).[10] Still, this collection is a welcome addition to the field, and it is testament to its wide-ranging scope that it raises provocative questions while offering a snapshot of the state of the field.

## LIST OF ESSAYS

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Part I: Displaying and Examining the Sexual Body

Elizabeth Stephens, “Anatomies of Desire: Photographic Exhibitions of Female Bodies in *fin-de-siècle* Anatomical Museums”

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## NOTES

[1] Michel Foucault, Part Five: "Right of Death and Power over Life," in: *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 155.

[2] There is a rich historiography on the period: Mikulas Teich & Roy Porter (eds.) *Fin de Siècle and its Legacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Sally Ledger & Scott McCracken (eds.) *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Christophe Charle, *Paris Fin de Siècle. Culture et Politique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1998); Tamar Garb (ed.) *Bodies of Modernity. Figure and Flesh in Fin-de-Siècle France* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1998); Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Mary-Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts. The New Woman in Fin-de-siècle France* (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago: University Press, 2002); Christopher Forth, *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

[3] The collection appears to have emerged out of a 2005 conference of the same title organized at the University of Queensland's Center for the History of European Discourse, where three of its contributors are located (Peter Cryle, Alison Moore, and Elizabeth Stephens).

[4] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 149.

[5] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003).

[6] Carolyn J. Dean, *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality and Other Fantasies in Interwar France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[7] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 147. Italics are mine.

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[8] Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire. Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995).

[9] For an instance of this kind of intellectual and cultural history, see: Judith Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France, 1870-1920* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).

[10] See, for instance, Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness. Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994); and more recently, Tracy Matysik, *Reforming the Moral Subject: Ethics and Sexuality in Central Europe, 1890-1930* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008)

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