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**David Caron**, *AIDS in French Culture: Social Ills, Literary Cures*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001. ix + 204 pp. \$50.00 U.S. (cl.) ISBN: 0-299-17290-2 and \$19.95 U.S. (pb.) ISBN 0-299-17294-5.

Review by Andrew Aisenberg, Scripps College.

In his smart and lean book, *AIDS: Social Ills, Literary Cures*, David Caron provides a provocative—some might say outrageous—explanation for the spread of AIDS in France. Caron blames the initial inactivity of government and scientific officials in combating the disease on the French model of the nation. In Caron's view, a nation grounded in the universal integration of individuals could neither recognize the needs and suffering of a gay community nor heed its call for action. Indeed, Caron argues, the gay community could only be understood as a threat to the viability of a nation "resulting from the convergence of free individual decisions to live together" (p. 151). While the perception of homosexuality as a threat to the French nation existed long before the advent of the AIDS epidemic, the association of gays with this deadly disease gave that threat a new and grave import, made evident (according to Caron) in the metaphorical conflation of the gay community with the virus itself. To combat this cause of AIDS, Caron offers a cure: a "radical change in France's definitions of citizenship and nationhood...a radical alteration of the republican model of universal integration."(p.150)

Whether readers will find this argument not only provocative or outrageous but credible as well (and I think it is) depends upon whether they are convinced by Caron's theoretical framework. That framework, which draws upon the intersection of cultural studies and queer theory, emphasizes the metaphoricity of disease. By metaphoricity, Caron intends us to see medicine, literature, and politics not as discrete fields, but rather as interdependent parts of a representational system that produces the nation through a series of differentiations including (but not limited to) health/disease, self/nonself, heterosexual/homosexual. Medicine provides two models for thinking about the heterosexual/homosexual opposition upon which the possibility of national cohesion depends. The first is a "virological" model, which presents homosexuality as an external threat to the nation's existence. The second model is "immunological," identifying homosexuality as evidence of the nation's constitutive propensity to illness. The fact that these two models exist side-by-side, and are often interchanged, in discussions linking sexuality, illness, and the nation attests to the strategic political value of medical statements (as opposed to their capacity for revealing the "real" biological causes of national degeneration.)

It is Caron's contention that we cannot understand anything about AIDS, including how scientists approached an understanding of its etiology or why the concerns articulated about the gay community were not heard, without first considering the "structural" connections between nation, homosexuality, and medical knowledge. Caron helps us in this endeavor by providing critical distance. This distance comes in the form of chronology, which should not be confused with history. Caron locates the origin of medical constructions of homosexuality in the Third Republic preoccupation with degeneration. He

notes the national anxiety produced by the dual challenges of France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune. But his investigation of how the Third Republic dealt with that anxiety is limited mainly to the analysis of one text, Emile Zola's *La débâcle*. Caron approaches Zola's novel as an effort in "healing:" a rhetorically constructed French community, damaged by external and internal battles, is salvaged through a textual articulation of the real enemy: the "homosexual." "Homosexual" because, as Caron readily admits, the construction in this context is symbolic. Whether the topic is Napoleon III's effeminacy, the assumption of power by the Empress Eugénie, or the homosocial relationship between the soldiers (Maurice and Jean), Zola's narrative strategy remains constant. It addresses problematic questions about the constitution of the French nation exacerbated by the war and the Commune, including "loss of will" and depopulation, by deplacing them upon "the homosexual." The latter assumes the role of the "anti-national," "anti-social" threat that accounts for the experiences (among others) of France's civil and international conflicts.

But Caron is quick to point out the ambivalence of Zola's construction of homosexuality. He finds evidence of this ambivalence in Zola's affection for the relationship between the novel's two main characters, Maurice and Jean, as well as the author's willingness to let Maurice speak as a "subject." In Caron's view, Zola's affection reveals the fluidity and possible dissolution of the oppositions heterosexual/homosexual, subject/object, health/disease, which in other circumstances had grounded the existence of the nation. In the second and third parts of the book, Caron pursues the implications of the reconfiguration of these binary oppositions for a new politics. Such a politics, he proposes, would link writing to a reconceived nation based upon connection, not difference. He begins with Jean Genet's 1949 autobiographical novel *Journal du voleur*. Caron effectively shows the way in which Genet presents himself as a speaking degenerate, a homosexual and criminal who, by implicating authority figures like customs officials in sex and schemes, exposes the interdependence of self/other, inside/outside, etc. (Anyone who has read Genet's moving and subversive recounting of his crossing the Czechoslovakia/Poland border will appreciate Caron's evaluation of Genet as someone who, through writing, subverts a politics based upon the positing of binary oppositions). After a brief chapter on "AIDS Discourse in France and the United States," Caron devotes a chapter to the writings of Hervé Guilbert. In a way similar to his analysis of Genet's *Journal*, Caron effectively demonstrates how Guilbert's video and written testimonies of his battle with AIDS work to destabilize the dichotomies of health/disease, heterosexual/homosexual, self/other that had prevented the possibility of a humane, compassionate, and politically progressive address of the disease and the recognition of homosexuality more generally in France. Skeptical readers who assume that cultural studies and theory in general deal with "representations" at the expense of "reality" will be hard pressed not to appreciate—and be moved by—Caron's insights into the political significance of Guilbert's representational activism, whether it be Guilbert's insistence on wearing a doctor's hospital gown during his hospitalization, setting up a video camera that records his medical examination (thereby refusing the inevitability of conventional representations that present the doctor as subject and the gay person with AIDS as object), or refusing to provide an accounting of his experience with AIDS in narrative form.

No doubt, Caron's analyses of these texts will be familiar to some readers. Others might have hoped, as I did, for more of a focus on the scientific discourses that assumed a part of the overall representational system that grounds Caron's analysis of the links between disease, homosexuality, and the nation. These quibbles aside, Caron has written a powerful and important book. Caron's impressive ability to combine in-depth textual analysis with broad theoretical approaches and timely political issues makes his book compelling reading for historians of France, medicine, and sexuality alike.

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