

Introduction



Figure I.1 *Extraordinary Women*, photo album, n.d. [1918?], Box 58, Norman Douglas Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
Reproduced courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

The pictures inside the *Extraordinary Women* album at the Beinecke Library were taken on Capri in the late 1910s, a moment when the Italian island had gained an international reputation as a Decadent outpost and a haven for sexual dissidents.¹ The pictures in the album provide a

visual bridge into the complex network of intimacies fostered by this queer Arcadia in the early twentieth century. In a photograph labeled, “Checca – Mimi,” for example, the Italian baroness Mimi Franchetti stares brazenly into the camera half-smiling (Figure I.1). She might be about to laugh. She is wearing a masculine suit jacket and tie with a long pleated skirt. Beside her is the wealthy Australian Francesca “Checca” Lloyd in a bold striped coat and a high-waisted polka dot skirt. She gazes archly at her beloved Mimi’s profile. During this period, Checca and Mimi lived together at the Hotel Quisisana. According to James Money, “Checca was hopelessly in love with Mimi, but so were other women. . . . There were frequent quarrels – [they were seen] at the Quisisana throwing bottles at each other – and separations, interspersed with reconciliations and rare periods of harmony.”² One wonders what underwrites Checca’s sidelong glance in the photograph. Is this a “period of harmony” or of quarrels? Is she amused with or suspicious of the striking woman standing beside her? Checca appears enamored in this picture but at the same time somewhat haunted and uncertain. On a later page, Mimi poses in a series of pictures beside the much younger and taller “Baby,” the daughter of the Russian Principessa Helène Soldatenkov (Figure I.2). Baby was also, according to Money, “conquered by Mimi.”³ Mimi wears her customary suit jacket and tie while Baby wears a girlish white dress. Baby smiles awkwardly in one photo. In another, she gazes down at the ground, her hands thrust into her pockets. Mimi is again mischievous and brazen, close to laughter, teasing the photographer, crouching playfully on the ground. How does the younger Baby feel beside this charismatic figure who seems to own the space within each picture? In another photograph within the same series, Checca has moved into the frame, and Baby appears more solemn.

Each page of the *Extraordinary Women* album moves the viewer into closer contact with the friendships, flirtations, and romances that connected the members of Capri’s lesbian community, who are seen posing together on balconies, in restaurants, and on beaches, in swimsuits and Pierrot costumes, wearing bowties with long flowing skirts, in straw hats and bathing caps. The women pose smiling in the sand and beside canoes, in large groups with their arms locked together, staring up into one another’s faces or out into the Tyrrhenian Sea (Figures I.3 and I.4). The playful group photographs and the snapshots of amateur performances, beach scenes, and dinners evoke the family vacation album, calling the viewer to, as Marianne Hirsch has described it, feel family, to sense the affective ties between the figures laughing, smiling, and holding on to one



Figure I.2 *Extraordinary Women*, photo album, n.d. [1918?], Box 58, Norman Douglas Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
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another.⁴ The images speak together about the network of love and desire that brought these women to Capri and into connection with one another, that made them into a community and at times endangered that community's stability.

The cosmopolitan crew of women in these photographs are the figures upon which the popular British writer Compton Mackenzie based the characters in his satirical novel *Extraordinary Women* (1928). Mackenzie represents the island as a perpetually shifting terrain of outrageous flirtations. While Compton and his wife Faith lived squarely in the midst of this community, Compton's novel works to distance the couple from the complex grid of intimacies on Capri, treating the women under discussion with a "sarcastic edge" that Jamie James attributes "to the fact that his wife had a lesbian affair while they were living on Capri."⁵ The album, however, aggressively collapses that distance by also including pictures of



Figure I.3 *Extraordinary Women*, photo album, n.d. [1918?], Box 58, Norman Douglas Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
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both Faith and Compton, insisting that they too belong within this space and among the intimacies represented in the album. Faith is, as the album indicates, one of Capri's extraordinary women, a haunting beauty in a headscarf with an umbrella resting on her shoulder as she gazes down the rocky shoreline of Capri (Figure I.4). And Compton seems very much to belong here as well, amidst the women he sends up in his novel, as he crouches beside his androgynous twin Mimi, the two wearing matching bowties with their heads cocked at the same angle (Figure I.5). The *Extraordinary Women* album undercuts the arch derision of its companion novel, highlighting Faith and Compton's kinship with this sexually dissident circle.

The acts that brought the album into existence – the posing of individuals and groups for the pictures, the selection and arrangement of images, the inclusion of pictures of Faith and Compton in the album – are acts



Figure I.4 *Extraordinary Women*, photo album, n.d. [1918?], Box 58, Norman Douglas Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
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that fostered belonging and connection. This collective labor generated an object that, as Elizabeth Freeman notes in her discussion of group photography and the making visible of queer history, “[sutures] kin relations.”⁶ It is unclear who first assembled this album, nestling images of Faith and Compton amidst the pictures of Mimi, Checca, and Baby, or who had this copy made, as the album in the Beinecke is a photographic reproduction of an original housed at the Centro Caprense Ignazio Cerio Library. The original is untitled, but someone also made a choice to print the title *Extraordinary Women* on the spine of the reproduction, tying the object explicitly to the novel it subtly contradicts. These are a set of steps that close the space the novel seeks to put between the Mackenzies’ marriage and the community on Capri, acknowledging Faith and Compton’s kinship with the figures that *Extraordinary Women* lampoons. The novel and the album taken together are a set of artifacts that function



Figure I.5 *Extraordinary Women*, photo album, n.d. [1918?], Box 58, Norman Douglas Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
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as a rich reflection of the Mackenzies' life on Capri in the teens, when they opened their marriage into the island's queer community, conducting affairs and flirtations with its members, and remade their union into something at once more porous and resilient. The individuals that Compton satirizes in *Extraordinary Women* operated, during the 1910s and 1920s, as a part of their marriage. They were, for a period of time and in a sense, their family. As hard as Compton might have worked to establish a boundary between his own domestic scene and the queer networks that he represented in his campy, detached novel, the album razes that boundary, making them members of, rather than simply witnesses to, the complex web of intimate relations on Capri. The album speaks, in a slightly different register than the novel for which it is named, to the affective work Faith and Compton conducted on Capri, which had to do with remaking their marriage so it could incorporate other people

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and other intimacies, temporarily absorbing the island's queer coteries into their union. It resembles a family album because it tells us about a form of kinship that we might not be able to see were we to rely solely on public documents like the novel that it illustrates.

The *Extraordinary Women* album also resembles a family album because of the way it was kept and transmitted. Group photographs, Freeman argues, can “function as tangible evidence of queer life for those who privately collect and preserve them” and, in the way that they are “handed down generations or across the boundaries of household,” they “[establish] connections similar to the ones they [represent].”⁷ Freeman’s insights concerning the role that the collecting and transmission of group photographs perform in the construction of queer community should draw our attention to questions of provenance when considering an object like this one. This album is part of a collection at the Beinecke devoted to Norman Douglas, the early twentieth-century travel writer and novelist to whom Compton dedicated *Extraordinary Women* and whose “magic” conversation first sent the Mackenzies to Capri.⁸ Douglas was one of Capri’s queer refugees, drawn to the island’s reputation for sexual permissiveness. (In Paul Fussell’s words, he “fled [England] during the war to avoid persecution for kissing a boy.”⁹ He had been charged with indecent assault after the boy in question complained to the police and spent the remainder of his life, save a brief time in London during World War II, effectively living in exile in Italy and France.) He was an extremely close friend to the Mackenzies and a guiding spirit of queer life on Capri in the early twentieth century. As Rachel Hope Cleves notes in her recent biography of Douglas, while “today almost all of Douglas’s sexual encounters with children and youth would be defined as assaults, both in law and in public opinion,” during the early twentieth century, Douglas’s pagan and hedonistic philosophy “appealed to a lot of sexual nonconformists, not just pederasts,” and he “attracted many pathbreaking queer and feminist women who regarded him as a sexual role model.”¹⁰ The novel for which the album is named is in many ways a tribute to him, and he and his writing had much to do with the attraction Capri held for the “extraordinary women” within its pages, so it makes sense for these photographs to be located in this collection. But the route the Norman Douglas Collection took to the Beinecke is just as meaningful in terms of illuminating innovative kinship formations among the cosmopolitan network of authors and artists on Capri.

At the end of Norman Douglas’s life, he was cared for by a set of queer modernists, an operation funded by the modernist patron Bryher

(Annie Winifred Ellerman, 1894–1983). Bryher was the child of the multi-millionaire Sir John Ellerman and, as Susan McCabe argues, used this wealth to play a “‘husband’ role in curating modernism.”¹¹ While remembered most often today as the lover of the modernist poet H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), Bryher was also very close with Faith Mackenzie and with Douglas. After divorcing the Scottish writer and filmmaker Kenneth Macpherson, Bryher purchased a home on Capri for him and his partner, the Welsh photographer Algernon Islay de Courcy Lyons, asking that they take Douglas into this home until his death in 1952. Bryher constructed from inherited wealth and intimate connections a resting place for an aging friend. Upon Douglas’s death, Macpherson received a set of Douglas’s papers, and he then left the entirety of his estate, including the Norman Douglas collection and the *Extraordinary Women* album, to Lyons. Lyons, in turn, passed the material to Manop Charoensuk, a younger Thai man who had been Lyons’s companion and adopted son at the end of his life, and Charoensuk then sold the collection to Elysium Press, from which the Beinecke purchased this material in 2008. The album’s movements make visible an entire chain of queer, Decadent, and modernist connections, and its survival has relied upon innovative systems of care, kinship, and property transmission. It is available to consult in the Beinecke Library because of its queer modernist genealogy and as a result of alternative modes of intergenerational nursing, community archiving, and inheritance.¹² The *Extraordinary Women* album, which highlights the fascinating web of affiliations that altered the Mackenzies’ marriage, also tells a story about the queer transgenerational and transnational connections that persisted on Capri long after their departure. These connections extended beyond the island that fostered them, forging alternative networks of love, care, and historical transmission that the survival of the *Extraordinary Women* album brings to light.

This album is the archival object with which I want to begin because it embodies many of the key preoccupations of this project. This is a book about queer experiments in affiliation as performed by individuals who saw themselves as part of a Decadent tradition and who operated within cosmopolitan networks.¹³ The queer community on Capri, as I will demonstrate, had much to do with the Decadence of the fin de siècle, and the cosmopolitan, sexually dissident circle with which Faith and Compton mingled on the island was drawn there because of Capri’s reputation in the wake of the Wilde trials as a refuge from moral policing, a space apart that sheltered queer subjects from across the globe. The Decadence of this community, along with its cosmopolitanism, played crucial roles in its

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development of innovative thinking about affiliation. I begin with this album and the novel for which it was named because I am interested in the literary works and artifacts that were produced in concert with the construction of novel ways of enacting kinship and marriage by Decadent figures in the twentieth century. I want to look at the texts, objects, and lives these figures made as they thought through the process of making connection new. In disinterring evidence of the affiliative experiments performed by cosmopolitan individuals with ties to Decadence in the early twentieth century, I have had to turn to an archive of disparate private materials – to diaries and correspondence along with photo albums and unpublished manuscripts, personal libraries, and long-concealed confessional narratives. These, in turn, like the *Extraordinary Women* album, make sense, make meaning, make theories of kinship and connection visible when placed in conversation with the more public-facing projects – novels, banners, speeches, translation projects, sculptures, and engravings – generated by the figures under discussion.

The production and preservation of the *Extraordinary Woman* album was enabled by the very modes of transhistorical queer and aesthetic affiliation with which I am preoccupied in this project. These acts emerged from the contact between post-Victorian Decadents and camp modernists on Capri, which facilitated the handing down of the album through a network of individuals who shared a set of tastes and a commitment to unconventional desires and domestic arrangements. The album, like each of the chapters that follow, reveals literary historical networks that operated across the Victorian/modern divide. *Queer Kinship after Wilde* builds on the work I did in my first book, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence*, in unearthing further evidence of the persistence of Decadence into the twentieth century. In this case, I contribute to the ongoing effort to render the Victorian/modern divide more porous by demonstrating that theories and practices often conceived of as “Victorian” played a rich and vital role in conversations about affiliation long after the century turned.¹⁴ I perform this work in conversation with the new modernist studies and with Victorian studies scholars whose reach has moved further and further into the modernist period with the hopes that, by attending to the rich interplay between and coexistence of Victorian and modernist aesthetic codes, we may begin to get a richer picture of the long reach of the nineteenth century as well as the aesthetic and political complexity of the early decades of the twentieth century.

The individuals under discussion in *Queer Kinship after Wilde*, like the Mackenzies and the members of their community on Capri, thought and

operated within queer, transhistorical networks, and they are all in a sense a part of one larger network, a group of authors and artists who distanced themselves slightly from the modernism of the early twentieth century by linking themselves to the Decadent past. While Oscar Wilde's reputation suffered in the years following his trials for "acts of gross indecency," during the modernist period, a certain subset of individuals interested in radically rethinking kinship and connection turned very purposefully back to his work and the Decadent tradition with which he was associated. The community on Capri is only one example. Wilde's son Vyvyan Holland brought much of his father's thinking into his innovative construction of an alternative family for himself following the death of his parents and brother. The modernist aesthete Harold Acton relied upon the thinking of Vernon Lee as he worked to extricate himself from his biological family and the pressure to marry and reproduce. Eric Gill's sculptures read as modernist, but his vision of eroticized kinship was informed by queer Decadent Catholicism as practiced by Michael Field and the Decadent poet and priest John Gray. For many of the members of this loosely connected group of bohemian aesthetes and Decadent modernists, the turn to the *fin de siècle* made clear their ties to sexual dissidence as well as their desire to think beyond the masculinist modernism of the period. It placed them slightly out of sync with Eliot and Joyce and Hemingway and Pound and placed them right in rhythm with one another. As Elizabeth Freeman argues, in conversation with Heather Love, "the stubborn lingering of pastness . . . is a hallmark of queer affect: a 'revolution' in the old sense of the word, as a turning back."¹⁵ This is the affect that underwrites the network I examine here, a network of "denizens of times out of joint" whose affiliation with the recent past marks them as distinct from more prominent and well-known strains of twentieth-century modernism, such as Bloomsbury.¹⁶ As Christopher Reed has suggested, Bloomsbury could be understood as another locus of innovative ideas about affiliation, intimacy, and home life. However, while Reed stresses Bloomsbury's "alienation from mainstream modernism," the Bloomsbury subculture is much more intimately tied up with high modernist practices and aesthetics than the network upon which I am focusing, a network rooted firmly in the Decadent past.¹⁷ The recurring figures here, surfacing repeatedly in the margins of my chapters and knitting them together, are the Sitwells, Ronald Firbank, Robert Ross, Reggie Turner, Carl Van Vechten – the lingering specters of the Yellow Nineties along with the Decadent modernists of the new century. A shared sense of what Freeman refers to as "temporal drag" weaves a web among this circle of queer and Decadent