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# Mud and the Water: Transcultural Explorations of Transgressive gender. Louise Bryant's From Paris to Main Street and Djuna Barnes's Three from the Earth

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## Abstract

"So I, Dr. Mathew Mighty O'Connor, ask you to think of the night the day long, and of the day the night through, or at some reprieve of the brain it will come upon you heavily...unless you have made a roadway for it," exhorts Djuna Barnes's most renowned character from the heart of *Nightwood* (1936). The critical difference between those who have and have not made a path for the night, as Dr. O'Connor continues, is in the difference between two cultures and their relationship to dirt:

"The French have made a detour of filthiness—Oh, the good dirt! Whereas you are of a clean race, of a too eagerly washing people, and this leaves no road for you. The brawl of the Beast leaves a path for the Beast. You wash your brawl with every emollient and savon, and expect to find your way again. A Frenchman makes a navigable hour with a tuft of hair, a wrenched bretelle, a rumpled bed. The tear of wine is still in his cup to catch back the quantity of its bereavement; his cantiques straddle two backs, night and day."

For Barnes living with dirt is about travelling, about navigating an hour in contrast to trying to separate, to exorcise, to wash the sin, "The American, what then?" continues the good Dr., "He separates the two for fear of indignities.." and in the end "you get crime." The inevitable outcome for American puritans who allow no place for the night, its transgressive figures and callings, is to criminalize half of the human. This crime the French avoid, O'Connor believes—by embracing rather than fleeing from the dirt of the world. In this, the most classic expression by an American expatriate of *les années folles* of the difference between the French and Americans, we see the incredible essentiality of border-crossings for the modernists. Only in the contrast between the cultures is the extent of the repression of difference evident. For Barnes and other American women writers of the 1920s, transporting oneself across borders allows one to transcend the cultural barriers of traditional womanhood, an act of becoming which resists our national ideal of scrubbing of erasure. In this paper I will examine moments of self-conscious border crossing in the works of Djuna Barnes and also of Louise Bryant, who were two of the most experimental writers of the legendary Provincetown Players in New York in the nineteen-teens, and who also spent the 1920s and 1930s in Paris, transcending heterocultural norms at great personal sacrifice. The paper will specifically focus on the American-French divide as represented in Bryant's *From Paris to Main Street* an unpublished and unperformed play which has received absolutely no previous critical treatment. It will also analyze how Bryant's and Barnes's experiences crossing borders in Paris were influenced by their unconventional lesbian relationships—Barnes's famously with Thelma Wood, the model for Nora Wood in *Nightwood*—and Bryant's with Gwen Le Gallienne, sister of American theatrical great Eva La Gallienne.

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