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MODERN SEXUALITY IN MODERN TIMES (1880s–1930s)

Elizabeth Clement and Beans Velocci

The late nineteenth century brought a profound shift in the way people thought about sexuality in the United States. Religious and legal authorities had condemned acts of sodomy for centuries, but committing them had not made you a particular kind of person. It just made you a sinner, and in some states, only if you got caught and prosecuted, a criminal. Though small queer subcultures had existed in the United States earlier in nineteenth century, these communities grew larger, became more visible, and began to produce new ways of understanding both queer sexualities and queer gender performances. After the 1870s, medical discourses from sexology and eugenics began to assert that certain kinds of sexual acts and gender transgressions made an individual a specific type of person: the “invert” or “homosexual.”¹ What had been seen in the colonial period as just an isolated sexual act became the basis for a whole identity. Together, the growth of queer communities and the rise of a medical discourse about sexuality made the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a profoundly important—and distinctly modern—era in queer US history. Historians have spent the last four decades tracking the complex story of how and why those new communities and identities developed, and why sexual identity became a central part of how we think about who we are.

The language used to describe various sexualities and genders shifted significantly during the time under study (1880–1940). At the beginning of this period, for example, the word “homosexuality” referred to gender inversion—which was *centrally* about exhibiting traits of a gender other than the one you had been designated at birth. Desire for people of the same sex represented one symptoms of gender inversion, but it was not the only or the most important one. By the end of the 1930s, though, the meaning of “homosexuality” had largely shifted toward our contemporary understanding of being attracted to people of the same sex, *whether or not* this had a relationship to gender identity. Some terms, like “queer” and “bisexual,” had very different meanings than they do today, while others, like “gay,” “lesbian,” and “transgender,” had not yet come into widespread use. Due to the instability of these terms, we have tried to use the language people used at the time when possible, rather than impose modern definitions backwards through time.

The transition from a world in which people committed acts of sodomy to one in which people belonged to categories such as “homosexual”—which historians generally call the shift

from acts to identities—came about at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of dramatic changes in the economic system of the United States.² As John D’Emilio details in “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” for most of its history, people in what would become the United States lived in rural areas and worked on small family farms. Regardless of their sexual desires, most people married because everyone needed family for economic survival. Beginning in the 1820s, however, factories brought industrialization, cheap manufactured goods, and most crucially, wage labor to America’s cities. Many people who had the freedom to move (that is, people who were not either held in slavery or confined to the newly created reservations for Native Americans) responded by leaving rural areas in search of economic opportunity. The emergence of industrial capitalism also disrupted economies in Europe and Asia, driving huge numbers of immigrants to booming US cities. By 1920, a majority of Americans lived in urban areas and worked in non-farm jobs.³

As the individual began to replace the family as the main economic unit of society, wage labor freed some white men from economic dependence on marriage and children. Men could earn wages to support themselves rather than work as part of a family unit. This allowed men attracted to other men to organize their lives around their affective and sexual desires, which some of them then began to do. It is hard to say, though, which came first. Did men with same-sex desires move to the city for the freedom, or did they move to the city for opportunities, and discover it also freed them to have sex with other men? The answer is probably both. Either way, changes in the economy shaped how Americans organized sexuality between 1880 and 1940. As D’Emilio convincingly argues, wage labor, urbanization, and freedom from family supervision brought about our modern categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality, as well as the idea that all people fit into these categories.⁴

Gendered relationships to paid labor and family authority kept a majority of women from experiencing the freedom that wage labor offered. Employers assumed that men, as fathers or husbands, supported women, and they used this reasoning to keep women’s wages to half those of men’s, which in turn raised profits by keeping wage costs low. As Alice Kessler-Harris asserts, this enormous wage gap ultimately produced women’s *actual* dependence on men. Because most women could not support themselves, much less parents or children, on the wages they earned, most women had to marry men just to survive. The sexual double standard embraced by most white Americans also limited women’s ability to organize their lives around same-sex desire. For respectable middle-class white women in the 1870s and 1880s, marriage and family precluded any opportunity to work outside the home. While the middle class subscribed to the most rigid sexual double standard, the working-class also judged women and men differently for the same sexual transgressions. Families of all classes thus remained far more invested in the sexual purity of their daughters, and exerted significantly more control over them. When combined with appallingly low wages, family investment in women’s sexual purity created a significant lag in the development of a visible lesbian community. Many women may have experienced sexual and emotional attraction to other women, but they lacked both the freedom and the financial resources to organize their lives around it. Thus, even in cities such as New York and Chicago, where communities of same-sex loving and gender transgressive men flourished, public spaces catering to women remained rare in the early twentieth century. This lack of a visible community compounds historians’ problems analyzing women’s experiences, as it means that we have far less evidence about them.⁵

Despite these limitations, we know some upper middle-class women possessed both the desire and the financial resources to avoid marriage. Most of these women were white, though there is anecdotal evidence of African American middle-class women doing so as well. However, as Linda Gordon has shown, middle-class black women involved in reform work married

at much higher rates than white middle-class women engaged in the same kinds of work. Along with pursuing college education, pairing with another woman allowed some women to become much more involved in public life without risking the accusation that they neglected their families to do so. Between the 1880s and the 1920s, the historical record is filled with women who intervened in a wide variety of public policy issues and who also remained unmarried but sustained intense, sometimes life-long partnerships with other women. Jane Addams, founder of Hull House and the profession of social work, for example, took Mary Rozet Smith as her “devoted companion.” When Addams and Smith traveled, Addams always wired ahead to hotels for a bed to share.⁶ Even though it might be tempting to claim women like Jane Addams as lesbian foremothers, the privacy afforded to middle-class white women and the sexual passivity attributed to women more generally makes it very difficult to know exactly what these relationships meant. Were they romantic, sensual, sexual, or something outside our modern relationship categories?

Asking a different question—“how did contemporaries see this ambiguous canoodling?”—offers a more satisfying answer. As these women sought increasing political power, white men opposed to changes in women’s status leveraged accusations of female masculinity and homosexuality against them to discredit their demands for meaningful employment and the vote. Before the development of homosexuality as a category, intense relationships between women had gone largely unremarked upon. “Smashes,” in which two young women courted each other, complete with passionate letter-writing, gifts, kissing, and fondling, were accepted as part of life at women’s colleges. Scholars Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Sherri Inness and Nancy Sahli argue that as women demanded more power in the public sphere and as detractors gained the language of homosexuality, intense female friendships came under increased scrutiny. Arguments that college education shriveled women’s ovaries, that a desire for the vote equaled a desire for sex with other women, or that “female sexual perverts” dominated all women’s political movements demonstrates the emerging use of women’s same-sex relationships to vilify all women’s aspirations for a larger role in society. While these women did not call themselves lesbians, and while what they did in their long-term committed relationships remains shrouded in private domesticity, by the 1920s a particularly virulent form of homophobia had emerged to contain the threat they represented to men’s political and economic dominance.

Much more sexually explicit evidence from the African American musical tradition indicates that black working-class women engaged in queer sexual practices and gender identities at the turn-of-the-century. Certainly the blues, a working-class musical genre that migrated north with African Americans in the early twentieth century, contains extensive references to same-sex sexual desire and practices. “B.D. [Bull Dagger/Bull Dyke] Woman’s Blues,” originally recorded in 1935 by Bessie Jackson (Lucille Bogan), cast butch women as financially independent and sexually desirable: “B.D. women, you know they work and make their dough. And when they get ready to spend it, they know just where to go.”⁷

Most of the songs in this tradition position same-sex desire as a part of cross-gender identification (the exception would be Monette Moore’s “Two Old Maids in a Folding Bed,” 1936). Jackson’s “B.D. woman” walks “just like a natch’l man,” while Ma Rainey’s narrator wears “a collar and a tie.” These gender-bending women desired the freedom, independence, and sexual access to women that men enjoyed. However, the songs do not identify their feminine partners as gender or sexual non-conformists, opening up the possibility that all women might find B.D. women an attractive alternative to heterosexuality. As with white middle-class women like Jane Addams, evidence from women blues musician’s lives supports not so much our modern understanding of “lesbianism,” as both sexual and gender queerness. First-person accounts of their wild parties indicate that some women blues musicians had sexual



Figure 4.1 Harlem blues legend Gladys Bentley, promotional postcard, c. 1946. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

relationships with both women and men, found women sexually desirable, and on occasion, cross-dressed either privately or in performance.⁸

If some women's relationships remain difficult to interpret today, historians agree that by 1890 big cities hosted small but visible subcultures of same-sex attracted men in working-class neighborhoods. These communities and their practices differed significantly from what we understand today as "gay." Organized around "fairies" and their interactions with other men, "gayness" or "homosexuality" in these communities involved gender inversion more than it did desire for sex with other men. As George Chauncey explains, classified as male at birth,

fairies viewed their sexual attraction to men as an outgrowth of their gender identity rather than a marker of a particular sexual “orientation.” Some fairies dressed and lived exclusively as women. Others dressed as men, but relied on flamboyant symbols like a red tie, a green suit, or plucked eyebrows to signal their femininity and sexual interest in other men. Fairies’ presence on the streets and in bars and dancehalls made them the most visible symbol of same-sex male desire. People of all classes thus came to imagine gender inversion as the primary marker of same-sex desire.

In 1916, a self-described fairy named Loop-the-loop posed for a portrait later published in the *American Journal of Urology and Sexology*. After giving an interview in male attire, Loop-the-loop donned a dress, stockings, and wig and told the doctor, “Ha! I feel more like myself now.”⁹ As Loop-the-loop’s obvious preference for women’s clothing shows, fairy identity had more to do with gender than it did with what modern readers might think of as sexual orientation, which poses interesting questions of interpretation. While fairies can be seen as “gay,” they can just as easily be read as transgender: people who did not conform to the gender identity they had been assigned. Of course, fairies lived at a time before today’s categories existed. It would be more accurate to say that fairies were neither gay nor trans but rather, simply, fairies. Working-class neighbors clearly recognized fairies as a third gender category and tolerated them in their midst, but that is not to say that they accepted them. Being a fairy involved giving up masculine privilege, something unthinkable to the majority of working-class people. The identity of fairy could allow one to express queer gender or desire, but also positioned the person as effeminate and thus subordinate in working-class society. This left fairies subject to harassment, rape and other violence ordinarily directed at women.

The identity of fairy crossed ethnic and racial boundaries. Native-born whites, immigrants, and African Americans all took up the identity of fairy, and the identity interacted in contradictory ways with white supremacy. In the 1920s, drag balls in African American neighborhoods such as Harlem drew thousands of people, including black and white fairies and black and white spectators. As Chad Heap has argued, white slumming in black neighborhoods upheld white supremacy because the location of these interracial balls in black neighborhoods upheld racist images of African Americans as “primitive” and prone to perversity. However, George Chauncey points out that balls also gave black spectators the unusual opportunity to watch, and by extension, judge, the behavior of white fairies. Balls thus both upheld and undermined white supremacy.

The Harlem Renaissance, an outpouring of black artistic production in the 1920s, highlights the ambivalent relationship of the African American community to queerness. As the discussions of blues musicians and drag balls have shown, working-class black communities tolerated open expressions of sexual and gender difference, at times even celebrating it in lyrics and performances. However, nationally, the small black middle-class chose a strategy of empowerment that historian Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham has labeled “the politics of respectability.”¹⁰ The politics of respectability emphasized embracing middle-class sexual and gender values to deny racist sexual stereotypes about African Americans and thus prove their worthiness of the citizenship rights (most obviously the right to vote) that had been lost by most blacks in the 1890s. Or, to put it another way, the politics of respectability strategically deployed the performance of middle-class sexual and gendered values for explicitly political purposes. When W.E.B. Du Bois and other race leaders supported a blossoming of the black arts in the 1920s, they explicitly encouraged artistic expression as a form of propaganda about black worthiness for political rights. This led the NAACP’s magazine the *Crisis* (which Du Bois edited) and other black publications to call for art that presented African Americans as embracing middle-

class sexual values.¹¹ Queerness, by definition, violated the positioning of blacks as respectable citizens unjustly deprived of their civil rights. Despite the fact that a significant number of the artists involved in the Harlem Renaissance embraced queer sexual and gender styles, older and more conservative leaders like Du Bois and Alain Locke attempted to repress representations of queerness in the art they sponsored. As scholars such as A. B. Christa Schwarz and Eric Watts argue, discussions of queerness still happened, but need for patronage from black political elites and their white allies made it hard for black artists, regardless of their sexual identities, to represent queerness.¹² Divisions of class, and classed strategies of empowerment, then, marked “queerness” as dangerous to black aspirations for full citizenship, and limited positive depictions of the queerness so obviously present in Harlem and other centers of black life.¹³

Regardless of race, age and class position mattered a great deal in whether, and for how long, men might take up the role of fairy. Though most fairies came from the working class, some were middle class. Middle-class fairies, however, took great care to reveal their feminine mannerisms only in working-class settings, which is to say, like whites visiting Harlem in the 1920s, they went slumming. Unlike the working class, the middle class had no sense that people could exist in the space between male and female, and no tolerance for femininity in men. Middle-class men would also have paid a high professional (and thus financial) price for openly presenting as fairies. Young, working-class fairies, on the other hand, often made their living through sex work, which allowed them to express their gender identity while earning wages higher than those they would have earned as working-class men.¹⁴ Some fairies took on the identity permanently, but most lived as fairies only temporarily because outward femininity represented the only visible template for structuring male-male sexual desire. Once they had found a community of like-minded men, many abandoned fairy style, especially in public, though they might “camp it up” in gay settings. The older fairies got, and/or the more middle-class their position, aspirations or job prospects, the more likely they were to shed their fairy identity and project a public gender presentation closer to normative masculinity.

Fairies most frequently sought sex with masculine men, called variously “normal,” “jam,” or “trade.” Most Americans today identify sexuality as being about object choice (that is, who you want to have sex with) rather than gender performance. At the turn-of-the-century, though, gender performance mattered far more than object choice: men who had sex with fairies remained “normal” as long as they presented as masculine and took the penetrative role in sex. In fact, these men tended to view women, fairies, and sometimes younger men, as interchangeable. Their masculinity lay in their role, enacted through domination and/or penetration of women, fairies, or boys rather than in the assigned sex of the bodies they penetrated. Interestingly, these rules applied even to men who persistently preferred sex with fairies. For example, the fairy Loop-the-loop’s partner, who consistently took the normatively masculine “active part” in their relationship, received the author’s approval in the *American Journal of Urology and Sexology* article as an “intelligent young man” who “presented himself tidily in uniform.”¹⁵

Rapid industrialization the 1880s and 1890s fueled the emergence of a related set of practices, particularly among transient male laborers known as hobos. In this stage of capitalist development, the economy depended on large pools of male labor that it could dismiss at will. In eastern cities men worked casually in construction and shipping. In the west they worked in mining, fishing, and lumber. All of these jobs provided poor wages to the young, unmarried men who moved from work site to work site and lived in all-male environments in flop houses and man camps. In hobo culture as well as in other same-sex environments such as prisons, men organized sex by age. Older men called “wolves” or “jockers” provided protection, resources and guidance for young men and boys, called “lambs” or “punks,” in exchange for sex and other domestic services. In these situations, the young men did not need to be—and

most often were not—effeminate, but the provision that the older man be masculine and take the penetrative role remained. Peter Boag argues that western cities such as Seattle and Portland that relied heavily on extractive industries had a much smaller fairy culture than in the east. In addition, both Boag and Nayan Shah have found that in the west reformers and police associated same-sex sexuality with the assumed “perversity” of racial minorities—particularly Asian men, despite the fact that police raids in cities in the Pacific Northwest entrapped men of all races as they solicited sex with other men.

Although gender inversion served as the dominant symbol of male-male sexuality in the early twentieth century, and transient culture required an age-based power difference for acceptable male-male relationships, some men rejected the idea that their desire for other men necessarily marked them as feminine. Describing themselves as “queers,” by the 1920s and 1930s these largely middle-class men pioneered our modern understanding that object choice rather than gender identity defines “homosexuality” or “gay identity.” As noted earlier, middle-class men who desired other men risked their class status, income, and family connections if they marked their desire for other men publicly. Some queer men looked down on fairies, and blamed fairies’ visibility and flamboyant behavior for the hostility that society exhibited towards all men who desired each other. Many queers also viewed their love of other men as part of a masculine and noble tradition, or as an expression of egalitarian modernity, rather than a sign of innate femininity. As Chauncey explains, this denial of gender inversion as the basis of their desire, however, did not preclude many queers from developing an effete style involving an embrace of the arts and upper-class culture, which many in the working class viewed as effeminate (see Figure 4.2). It is understandable how outsiders might conflate fairies and queers, but people who identified this way saw themselves as very distinct from each other. It would take sexology and the emergence of modern heterosexuality to bring all forms of same-sex sexual activity into the singular category of modern homosexuality.

Across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, US culture and sexual science increasingly identified heterosexuality with physiological, psychological and social “normalcy” and proper gender adjustment. Gender historians like to joke that masculinity is always in crisis, but the early twentieth century marked a time when white middle-class men did have a lot to be anxious about, and the emerging category of “heterosexual” offered a solution for these problems of masculine identity. The woman’s suffrage movement and women’s demands to participate more fully in paid labor threatened the male exclusivity of political participation and employment, which, some feared, blurred the line between men and women. At the same time, trade unions and urban political machines made up of working-class immigrant men challenged middle- and upper-class white men’s power. As birth rates among the white middle class declined, large-scale immigration produced an increasingly diverse and populous society, which led some to fear Anglo “race suicide.” While the end of Reconstruction and the emergence of Jim Crow reasserted white supremacy in the South, mass migration of African Americans to the north fueled white fears of slipping dominance. Finally, the closing of the western frontier served as a perceived death knell for the rugged (white) masculinity that many viewed as a core quality of US vitality. In reaction to these intertwined phenomena, as Kevin Murphy and Gail Bederman explain, middle-class white men began to define proper, normal “manhood” not broadly in terms of the power and privileges they exercised but instead much more narrowly through sexual object choice, a cool but tough emotional style, athleticism, and hard bodies. As the old race and gender order seemed to crumble around them, they looked to the burgeoning authority of science to uphold the hierarchies of gender, race, and class from which they had always derived their power. Sex and sexuality became powerful tools in this defense.

Read: "Swinging Wide"—the Woman's Angle, by Juanyta Clivette

BREVITIES

America's First National Tabloid Weekly

Vol. III, No. 7

New York, December 14, 1931

Price 15 cents

SIN IN THE SUBURBS

Coal Town Whoopee Within Few Hours Ride
From Great White Way Luring Playboys of N. Y.

HOTCHACHA

See Page 2

Ten Dollars Pays All From Likker
To Women in Mountain Villages

NO DIFFERENCE



"But this is exclusively a woman's hotel!"
"Well!"

By HORACE HEELEY

(Who Has Seen All and Known All)

The bright bulbs of Broadway are being over-shadowed by the dim little lights on the Main Stems of Eastern Pennsylvania towns, and hundreds of New York sin shoppers are flocking to the wooded mountains to do their sinning and their shopping early.

Coal Holes

Thar's more than coal in them thar mountains. The sinnin', ginnin' and wimmin' in those little coal town hot spots make the supposed notorious Great White Way seem like the well-known sawdust trail at a revival meeting. And, best of all for the playboys and the payboys who have been taking it on the chin along New York's Tinsel Alley, it all comes cheap and they're sure of a square deal from the merry mountaineers. You pay for what you get and you get what you pay for.

West of New York

Starting at Reading and going as far north as Wilkes-Barre, vice in all of its branches—from dinky, dirty speakasies to elaborate palaces of iniquity—is spreading like garweed.

Dirty, grimy coal miners literally rub shoulders with the well-dressed thrill seekers of New York and Philadelphia. Hundreds of beautiful girls go from the arms of a rough, uncouth native to the suave, debonaire Big Town Charley.

But, as one Broadway blade put it:

"Why should I spend \$50 for a night on Broadway and end up with nothing but a headache and minus my watch, to boot, when I can get the 'works' in Reading for a fin or two?" And hosts of other joy seekers seem to agree with him.

Rivaling, if not exceeding the combination sin spots of the gold rush days, the entire region is littered with all sorts of joints. There are places where you can just drink; there are places where you can just gamble; there are places where you

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Figure 4.2 A flamboyant pansy tries to check into a women's rooming house.

Broadway Brevities comic, December 14, 1931 (scan courtesy of Will Straw).

Ironically, sexology, the scientific study of sex, initially began in Europe in the 1860s, not as a way to maintain hierarchies but instead as a way to explain and protect men who desired men. Karl Heinrich Ulrichs developed the first medical categories for men attracted to other men to describe himself. Ulrichs had no formal medical training, but turned to science after being barred from practicing law following an 1854 "unnatural fornication" conviction.

Ulrichs published a series of essays throughout the 1860s proposing a theory that “urnings”—people with male bodies and female souls—constituted a third sex with both masculine and feminine characteristics. Ulrichs argued that urnings should not be punished, because though they had male bodies, their female souls made their desire for other men natural, rather than sinful or criminal. Enormously influential among later sexologists, Ulrichs’ work helped enshrine gender inversion as the primary marker of homosexuality. Although the 1870s and 1880s witnessed vigorous debates over the causes, significance, and possible treatments for homosexuality and inversion, Jennifer Terry explains that these debates took on an increasingly negative analysis and tone. Even as they drew on Ulrich’s framework, by 1900 most European scientists largely agreed that homosexuality represented either a disease or evolutionary degeneration.

From the 1880s through the 1930s, the sexological category of inversion covered a range of gender non-normative bodies, behaviors, and identities, of which same-sex sexual object choice was only one.¹⁶ Inversion might manifest in transvestitism, and Peter Boag explains that cross-dressing served as a primary marker of inversion in US sexological writings. Europeans began experimenting with surgery and hormones by the 1910s, in an attempt to treat gender inversion. Unsurprisingly, the ambiguity and slippage in the term “inversion” rendered the category less than useful, since so many falling into its diagnosis did not express all of its constitutive elements. As sexologists from the 1910s through the 1940s increasingly came to split gender inversion into homosexuality (object choice) and what they would later call transsexuality (gender identity), as Joanne Meyerowitz shows, surgery and hormones became the solution to gender difference. Even within the scientific literature, the distinction between homosexuality and gender inversion was never complete, however, which led, by the 1930s, to hormonal therapies to attempt to treat homosexuality as well.

In US sexology during the 1910s and 1920s, white middle-class male doctors adapted European theories about gender inversion to their own specific social and political environment. As Jennifer Terry and Peter Boag explain, these men saw America as an exceptional experiment, where people of European descent had, at least until 1900, avoided the mistakes Europe had made in modernization, urbanization, and industrialization. To prevent the corruption and sexual deviance that they believed had overtaken Europe (after all, those German sexologists must have gotten their research subjects from somewhere) as Julian Carter elaborates, Americans used the study of sex as a way to uphold a white, middle-class system of gender and race as their country also industrialized and urbanized. Arguing that the subordination of women to men and non-whites to white was natural, timeless, and rooted in biology, middle-class white male doctors used sexuality, and specifically the sorting of people into “normal” and “abnormal” categories of sexual identity and behavior, as one way to uphold patriarchy and white supremacy.

With significant numbers of women of all races agitating for the vote by 1900, sexologists and social commentators used the concept of gender inversion to explain away women’s demands for expanded access to political power and meaningful work outside the home. As we have discussed, scientists coded women’s demands for social power as sexual inversion. James G. Kiernan, a prominent American sexologist, noted in a 1914 article that his colleagues did not “think every suffragist an invert,” but regarded “the very fact that women in general of today are more and more deeply invading man’s sphere” as “indicative of a certain impelling force [sexual inversion] within them.”¹⁷ Normal, healthy women, American sexologists argued, happily submitted to men’s authority, thus defining “normal” femininity as a cheerful acceptance of men’s legal and physical dominance in both family and society.

Sexologists further pathologized inversion by framing it within the simultaneously developing theory of evolution. As Lisa Duggan explains, biologists, anatomists, and anthropologists working in the 1880s and 1890s agreed that significant differences between men and women (for example, characterizing men as “aggressive” and women as “passive” and thus “opposites” of each other) and women’s subordination to men signaled higher stages of evolutionary progress. Because doctors regarded some degree of gender inversion as the primary cause of same-sex desire, they viewed homosexuality among whites as representative of either arrested development (getting stuck at a particular stage) or degeneration (actually moving backwards, and becoming less racially fit), and as such, a threat to the “white race.” At the same time, Siobhan Somerville notes, race scientists determined the “primitivism” of their African American subjects, based particularly on the bodies of women, which they frequently compared to the bodies of white female inverts (that is, lesbians). American sexologists combined ideas about race and sexual inversion while working to uphold white supremacy in the aftermath of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow. Homosexuality, then, became a way that scientists identified racial inferiority, and vice versa.

Duggan draws on evidence from both sexological and newspaper sources to show how white men imagined both black men and lesbians of all races (envisioned as masculine inverts) as threats to the white family who would steal “normal” white women, corrupt them, and sully the purity of the white race. American sexology thus not only drew on the existing European racialization of sexual inversion through ideas about race and evolution, but also modified it to fit a distinctly American agenda of segregation and defense of white racial purity. Armed with this framework of racialized homosexuality, sexologists set to work naming any breach in gender norms pathological, and simultaneously created a group of “normal” heterosexual people who performed gender, race, and class correctly.

The so-called closing of the American frontier in 1890 also spurred racialized concerns about sexuality, as Peter Boag explains. In the American imagination, if not in lived reality, the frontier preserved proper roles for men and women and reinforced masculinity in particular. The end of the frontier plunged America into modernity, and as a result, threatened to emasculate the nation. Framing the frontier as a place of normative masculinity masked the ways in which it teemed with gender and sexual diversity (as is underscored in Clare Sears’ chapter in this volume). Sexologists sought to cordon this diversity off by juxtaposing the supposedly proper gender roles of settler colonialism with the inferiority of Native American sexual and gender deviance. Certainly, many (though not all) tribes allowed for what are today called “two-spirit” people in between or outside the categories of male and female, and often afforded them respect and spiritual power. Perhaps more importantly, many Native American families organized themselves according to different gender principles than Anglo families. Matrilineage, female authority over land and agriculture, and significant related political and economic power for women all violated Anglo gender norms. Mark Rifkin shows how advocates of white US settler colonialism had long justified war, missionary work, schooling, and the outright seizure of land, through references to the “wrongness” in the ways Native Americans organized gender and sexuality. Sexology became yet another tool in this arsenal.¹⁸

Assertions about the inherent morality of white, middle-class people fueled even more splitting in the classifications of homosexuals. Researchers tended to lump white, middle-class homosexuals into what they called the “true” invert group. Not surprisingly, sexologists saw pathological attraction to people of the same sex among the white middle class as a private, individual problem, best dealt with through treatment rather than punishment. Jennifer Terry explains that through a differential diagnosis for what was largely the same behavior, sexologists tended to

view homosexuality among people of color and the working class as willfully immoral and criminal. White middle-class homosexuality, then, could be explained away as an aberration from the norm, while anyone else's same-sex desire defined the abnormality and inferiority of their entire group.

Like homosexuality, heterosexuality had to be invented, and it emerged specifically through the production of a "normal" category against which to compare supposedly deviant sexualities. In order for writers like Krafft-Ebing to determine which desires and behaviors counted as diseased they had to delineate the existence of a properly expressed sexual instinct. Initially they defined "normal" sexuality as reproductive, but later, with the rise of companionate marriage, they shifted to defining it as involving different (or as they would put it, "opposite") sexed people. Though most sexologists argued for immutable differences between heterosexual and homosexual people, and thus, rejected the idea that people could move between these categories, heterosexuality quickly began to appear fragile, difficult to achieve or maintain. Sigmund Freud, for example, proposed that each individual had to actively achieve normality through the repression of perverse instincts, and that development could easily go awry during childhood and adolescence. Constantly under siege from the threat of perversion, heterosexuality had to be protected and enforced. New fields such as child psychology and the burgeoning juvenile justice system developed to target problem behaviors and guide American youth on the path towards proper expressions of masculinity or femininity, culminating in heterosexual marriage and childrearing. Only through this process of maturation could white, middle-class American civilization survive and progress. Indeed, the American eugenics movement rapidly took up these ideas in the hope of guiding the healthy growth of the nation by controlling who could and could not reproduce.

As American sexologists sought to create neat hierarchies that emphasized the normal, they found more homosexual behavior among those understood to be white heterosexuals than they had anticipated. Homosexuals were supposed to be specific *types* of people, a small minority, aberrations with odd affect and style. Just as inversion could not hold all those supposedly categorized within it, the splitting of individuals into homosexual and heterosexual categories created a fundamentally unstable system, because scientists had to account for the huge numbers of apparently heterosexual people who engaged in same-sex sex under certain circumstances, such as in prisons (as Kunzel shows), communities of migrant laborers (as Boag and Shah show), the military (as Chauncey shows), and in adolescence (as Sahli, Inness, and Romesburg show). Sexologists responded by placing homosexuals into two groups: those who were truly mentally ill or degenerate and those who were just immoral. Or, to paraphrase Jennifer Terry, those who were born that way and those who had caught the gay. Thus, even as sexologists created a strict binary between homosexual and heterosexual, invert and normally gendered, they had to invent "tendencies," "phases," and "situational homosexuality" through which otherwise "normal" people still engaged in same-sex sex activities and gender transgressive behaviors. These moves allowed researchers to insist that there really was a stark line between heterosexual and homosexual, even when their own data indicated there was not.

Policing sexuality served as another way of clearly marking acceptable and unacceptable sexuality, though it of course reveals again that preserving the supposedly "natural" category of heterosexuality required significant state resources. Between 1880 and 1930, the federal government in the United States remained weak, and most regulation of queer sexuality and queer gender performance occurred at the local level. Rather than use sodomy laws to persecute homosexuality specifically, local law enforcement often arrested queer people on the basis of anti-prostitution, alcohol, or public disturbance statutes. In San Francisco in 1917,

for example, vice crackdowns focusing on prostitution decimated the Barbary Coast district, where female impersonators and other gender-transgressive sex workers and entertainers had previously drawn massive crowds.

When the federal government did step in to regulate sexuality in this period, it also avoided using sodomy laws, and instead relied on other means to persecute queer people. During the early years of the twentieth century, the Bureau of Immigration, for example, refused entrance to people exhibiting indeterminate sex characteristics, including male prostitutes and people with ambiguous genitalia (those today called intersex), on the basis of their likelihood to become a “public charge” and need financial support from the state, rather than on the basis of perverse sexual acts. This policing came within a larger push to create safer public spaces for middle-class families and resulted in the broad regulation of the working-class. Unlike what would come in later decades, vice reform did not constitute a concerted attempt to target queerness. It was only during World War I that social reformers and police began to focus on homosexuality itself, imagined as a wartime problem imported from decadent Europe. Convictions for homosexual solicitation in New York increased eightfold from 1916 to 1920 as anti-vice societies deliberately investigated queer communities. Because reformers saw homosexuality as distinctly related to the war, though, their anxiety about policing it dropped off again as Americans regained a peacetime sense of normalcy, and as enforcing Prohibition became reformers’ primary concern.

By the 1930s, the economic crisis of the Great Depression prompted the New Deal, and a new federal commitment to intervening in the sexuality of its citizens. Catastrophic rates of unemployment across the country spurred anxieties that men would abandon breadwinning as an ideal form of masculinity they were unlikely to be able to realize. The government feared that men would turn to the hobo lifestyle and the accompanying sexual perversity of transience. This fear was not unwarranted—rates of marriage and childbearing dropped precipitously during the Great Depression as men and women faced extreme difficulty supporting themselves, much less spouses and children.¹⁹

In *The Straight State*, Margot Canaday details how the government responded to the massive migration of unemployed men and boys by enacting economic relief programs that supported a model of heterosexual family characterized by male breadwinners with dependent wives and children. For example, the young men who joined the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) had to name a dependant who received a portion of their monthly earnings. Government officials characterized this requirement as teaching otherwise rootless young men responsible heterosexual masculinity. The Social Security Act also provided extra benefits to support the wives of married men. Thus, while the federal government acted to shore up men’s power within families, it did so, at least initially, by rewarding favored heterosexual expression, rather than by explicitly punishing homosexuality. In incentivizing heterosexual marriage, the state constructed an appealing closet, which encouraged all people, regardless of their sexual desires, to embrace at least the appearance of heterosexuality. As a result, plenty of people with same-sex attraction married in this period. In the coming decades, the federal state would use its increasing powers to enforce the new heterosexual/homosexual binary that had emerged at the turn of the century and to punish those on the homosexual side.

By the 1930s, the homosexual and heterosexual had each become a type of person. The rise of wage labor spurred the growth of communities and identities centered around same-sex desire and gender diversity. As these communities became larger and more visible to outsiders, sexologists began to conduct research into them, as well as in prisons and mental hospitals. Sexologists took what they found and fashioned the homosexual/heterosexual binary to shore

up the faltering gender, race, and class hierarchies. Science's framing of inversion, homosexuality, and heterosexuality reinforced existing power relations, and eventually provided the state with new ways to police people's sexual and gendered behavior. In turn, this allowed the state to enshrine the new concept of "heterosexuality" as an ideal for all citizens. However, queer communities continued to grow, and by the late 1940s, these communities began to resist state repression.²⁰ From the 1880s through 1940, gay identities emerged and helped produce gay communities. By the end of World War II, these communities began to create a political movement as they faced the increasingly dangerous federal state bent on actively shaping the intimate lives of its citizens.

Notes

- 1 Michel Foucault famously argued that in the European context after 1870, "the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species." Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990 [1978]), 43.
- 2 For an extended discussion historicizing queer identities, see, in this volume, Jen Manion, "Language, Acts, and Identities."
- 3 For the long history of urbanization and queerness, see, in this volume, Kwame Holmes, "An End to Queer Urban History?"
- 4 Also see, in this volume, Sara Smith-Silverman, "Labor."
- 5 For romantic friendships in the earlier nineteenth century, see, in this volume, Rachel Hope Cleves, "Revolutionary Sexualities and Early National Genders (1770s-1840s)" and Clare Sears, "Centering Slavery in Nineteenth-Century Queer History (1800s-1890s)."
- 6 Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 25.
- 7 For discussions of same-sex desire expressed in blues music, see Maria Johnson, "Jelly Jelly Jellyroll: Lesbian Sexuality and Identity in Women's Blues" *Women and Music* 7 (December 2003): 31-52; Jana Evans Braziel, "Bye, Bye Baby: Race, Bisexuality, and the Blues in the Music of Bessie Smith and Janis Joplin," *Popular Music and Society* 27, no. 1 (2004): 3-26; Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1999).
- 8 Braziel, 9-11.
- 9 R. W. Shufeldt, "Biography of a Passive Pederast," *American Journal of Urology and Sexology* 13 (1917), 460.
- 10 Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1993) 185-230. See also, Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). Queer scholars have also taken up this analytic tool when discussing pre-Stonewall queer activism. See Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian And Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004).
- 11 For discussions of Du Bois and other African American leaders interest in using art as a form of propaganda to combat racism, see A. B. Christa Schwarz, *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2003), 29-32 and Thomas H. Wirth, ed., *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 47-8.
- 12 Eric King Watts, "Queer Harlem: Exploring the Rhetorical Limits of a Black Gay 'Utopia,' in *Queering Public Address: Sexualities in American Historical Discourse*, ed. Charles E Morris III (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 174-194.
- 13 For a fun and sexually explicit discussion of queer Harlem, see James F. Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 11-42.
- 14 See George Chauncey, *Gay New York* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), Chad Heap, *Slumming* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), and Don Romesburg, "'Wouldn't a Boy Do?': Sex Work and Male Youth in Early 20th-Century Chicago," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 367-392. Despite being morally despised, prostitution also paid better than all women's work,

- and most work available to working-class men. See Elizabeth Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).
- 15 Shufeldt, 456. This system in which men can maintain their “normal” masculinity as long as they take a penetrative role in sex has persisted in a number of communities. Even today, sex between men in prison, for example, configured through these roles, can remain acceptable within the bounds of masculinity. Sociologist Tomás Almaguer argued that in the 1980s and 1990s, for Mexican and Latin American sexual systems, and by extension among Chicano men in the United States, an active/passive distinction continued to be more important than a gay/straight binary. See Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Tomás Almaguer, “Chicano Men: A Cartography of Homosexual Identity and Behavior,” *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993): 255–273.
 - 16 For an extended discussion of sexual categories and medicalization, see, in this volume, Katie Batza, “Sickness and Wellness.”
 - 17 James Kiernan, “Bisexuality,” *Urologic and Cutaneous Review* 18 (1914): 375. For more on bisexuality in sexual categorization and as a historical analytic, see, in this volume, Loraine Hutchins, “Bisexual History: Let’s Not Bijaack Another Century.”
 - 18 See also, in this volume, Eithne Luibhéid, “Queer and Nation”; Nayan Shah, “Queer of Color Estrangement and Belonging.”
 - 19 Walter LaFeber, Richard Polenberg, and Nancy Woloch, *The American Century: Volume 1: A History of the United States from 1890 to 1941* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2013), 155.
 - 20 For the development of LGBT organizations, see Marcia Gallo, “Organizations,” and for the unfolding of community and political development from the 1940s to the 1960s, see Amanda Littauer, “The Apex of Heteronormativity,” both in this volume.

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