

Reading Guide – Regulating Sexuality During the Jazz Age, Depression, and War

In Unit 2 we examined the 1900-1920 period, an era characterized by a loosening of restrictions on sexual expression and sexual identities, and an expansion of opportunities for individuals to challenge previously rigid gender binaries. This week we begin Unit 3 of the course, “Locks and Dams: Creating and Policing Boundaries, 1920-1960.” The middle decades of the twentieth century differed significantly from the tempestuous period we studied in Unit 2. After American women achieved the vote in 1920, the nation witnessed an extended period of contraction in the realms of sexual freedom and expression. During the 1920-1960 period, a variety of American institutions launched new campaigns to tighten controls over sexuality, and to create and police new boundaries around sexual and gender identities.

During Session 5 we will focus on a period that spans from the 1920s to the 1940s. The readings that cover this era are divided into three thematic/chronological eras: the Jazz Age (late 1910s-1920s), the Great Depression (1930s), and WWII (1940s). As you read this week (and next week), pay close attention to the ways in which new boundaries were constructed, and the roles played by institutions in policing gender and sexuality.

[Note: This is one of very few “firehose” weeks for the course. Several of the readings this week are “conceptually dense,” by which I mean there are lots of IDEAS in there! This is exciting, but I understand that it is a lot to chew on for a single week. Be patient, and do your best. One strategy you might consider as you attempt to hold the various ideas together is to focus on the *main argument* of each piece, rather than the specific details their authors use to bolster their claims with evidence. What is Simmons, Canaday, or Chauncey *really* trying to say? Introductions and conclusions are good places to find these intentions stated clearly and directly ☺]

Required Texts

- Christina Simmons, “Modern Sexuality and the Myth of Victorian Repression” in *Gender and American History Since 1890*, Melosh, ed. (1993) 17-36.
- George Chauncey, “Christian Brotherhood or Sexual Perversion?: Homosexual Identities and the Construction of Sexual Boundaries in the World War I Era,” *Journal of Social History* 19 (1985) 189-212.
- Alice Kessler Harris, “Designing Women and Old Fools: Writing Gender into Social Security Law,” in *Women’s America: Refocusing the Past*, Kerber, ed. (2004) 435-446.
- [OPTIONAL] Ruth Milkman, “Women at Work: The Sexual Division of Labor during WWII,” in *Women’s America: Refocusing the Past*, Kerber, ed. (2004) 466-477.
- Margot Canaday, “Building a Straight State: Sexuality and Social Citizenship Under the 1944 G.I. Bill,” *The Journal of American History* 90:3 (2003) 935-957.
- Mabel Hampton, “Lesbian Life in the 1920s and 1930s,” in *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality*, Peiss, ed. (2002) 345-346.
- Maya Angelou, “Harder Times for Black Americans,” in *Modern American Women*, Ware, ed. (1989) 218-221.

Questions to Consider

The Simmons and Chauncey texts cover the period spanning from WWI to the 1930s. Both emphasize the emergence of “types,” or categories, that were used to define, construct, and contain sexual behaviors and identities. Simmons focuses on what she calls “the myth of Victorian repression.” What does she mean by this? What was the ultimate function of this myth, according to Simmons? Chauncey examines a slightly earlier period than Simmons, and is also interested in types. What kinds of difficulties did naval investigators encounter when attempting to draw boundaries around sexual relationships, acts, and identities? How, according to Chauncey, did sexual subcultures interact with institutions like the church and the military when it came to defining these boundaries? Read the Mabel Hampton primary source alongside Simmons and Chauncey – what similar themes do you notice?

The Kessler-Harris and Canaday texts cover the 1930s and 1940s – and the role of gender, race, and sexuality in shaping social policy and legislation. Both authors are especially interested in how assumptions about these categories, and the people whom they described, led to long-lasting inequalities and exclusions in American society. Kessler-Harris, like Simmons and Chauncey, is interested in categories and classifications. How did racial and gendered definitions of “work” and “workers” get written in to Social Security law? How about “dignity” and “dependence”? Canaday’s article on the 1944 G.I. Bill pursues similar questions, but with a more clearly defined focus on sexuality. What does she mean when she writes, “the military used the G.I. Bill to build a closet within federal social policy” (p956)? How did this closet work to exclude women, as well as homosexuals, from federal benefits? Read the short Angelou primary source with Kessler-Harris – Angelou’s experiences during the Great Depression confirm, and offer a human face to, Kessler-Harris’ claims about exclusion.

I have marked the Milkman reading optional. If you have time to take a look, please do so – but I will summarize and discuss her claims about WWII-era “sex typing” in the workforce and the segregation of “men’s” and “women’s” jobs in class.

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