

Week 6 – Reading Guide – Regulating Sexuality and Gender through 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.

In our Week 6 class meeting we will focus on a period that spans from the 1920s to the 1940s. The readings that cover this period 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 a variety of institutions in policing gender and sexuality.

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.
- Mabel Hampton, “Lesbian Life in the 1920s and 1930s,” in *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality*, Peiss, ed. (2002), 345-346.

NOTE: We will watch the film *Coming Out Under Fire* (1994), which examines the lives and experiences of gay and lesbian veterans who served in WWII, in class.

Questions to Consider

The Simmons, Chauncey, and Harris texts cover the period spanning from WWI to the 1930s. Each emphasize the emergence of “types,” or categories, that were used to define, construct, and contain sexual behaviors and gender 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, 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?

The Kessler-Harris reading is dense, but worth your time and attention. In this excerpt from a larger book, Kessler-Harris addresses a different kind of boundary construction. What kinds of assumptions, categories, and classifications did policy makers draw on in the 1930s when crafting Social Security legislation? Who or what, according to Kessler-Harris, drove these decisions? What were their consequences?

Read the Mabel Hampton primary source alongside Simmons, Chauncey, and Harris – what similar themes do you notice?

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