

Using Case Studies in the History of Education to Teach U.S. Women's and Gender History

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Course: Women and Gender in Modern America

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Texts introducing students to women's and gender history typically emphasize how gender refers to the social meanings attached to sexual difference, which vary over time and across societies and cultures. As one of these texts explains, "Definitions of what is masculine and feminine are learned as each society instructs its members from infancy through adulthood as to what behavior and personality attributes are appropriate for males and females of that generation."¹ Given wide agreement that gender is learned, it is surprising how seldom the places and people who institutionalize learning appear in the texts used to teach U.S. women's and gender history.² Teachers are remarkably scarce in the literature, even though vast numbers of U.S. women have taught since the mid-nineteenth century.³ The reasons for this absence are not clear. Perhaps

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¹Linda K. Kerber, Jane Sherron De Hart, and Cornelia Hughes Dayton, eds., *Women's America: Refocusing the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 9–10.

²A review of the secondary sources reprinted in popular anthologies supports this observation. See Mary Beth Norton and Ruth M. Alexander, eds., *Major Problems in American Women's History: Documents and Essays* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), esp. 322–26; Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin, eds., *Women and Power in American History: A Reader* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2009); and *Women's America*, 103–16, 214–23, and 368–78. In *Major Problems in American Women's History*, one essay includes a few pages on black women teachers in early twentieth-century North Carolina. *Women and Power* has no essays concerning women and schooling. *Women's America*, the most extensive of these anthologies at more than eight hundred pages, includes an excerpted essay on black educator Charlotte Hawkins Brown and two that involve Catholic nuns. Teachers and schools figure more prominently in the literature of women's and gender history of other nations, including Canada.

³Given my review of recent anthologies, even antebellum pioneers such as Catharine Beecher and Emma Willard seem to be disappearing from the texts published for college classrooms.

teachers' social location, at the murky boundaries of the working and middle classes, has contributed to their omission from sharply defined studies of class and gender consciousness. Or perhaps the conventional association of women and teaching has deterred gender historians, following the theory that studying the margins of women's experiences better reveals the mainstream. Yet, the perceived ordinariness of the woman teacher may be especially helpful to illuminate periods of significant change in the meaning of gender.

I use the history of education selectively in my women's and gender history courses, combining it with literature from various subfields to call students' attention to how gender has changed over time. While these courses attract a range of students, they are all generally new to, or still grappling with, a conception of gender that is learned, socially constructed, and subject to change. My course, *Women and Gender in Modern America*, is part of the history, women's and gender studies, and honors curriculum in the College of Arts and Sciences at Drake University, a midsize, private university in Des Moines, Iowa.⁴ Enrolling about twenty students, the course blends a survey of women's and gender history since the Civil War with a discussion-based pedagogy. Typically, history majors compose about a quarter of the class, the rest come from the business, education, journalism, and pharmacy and health sciences schools, as well as from the arts and sciences. The course has no prerequisites except sophomore standing. Enrollment tends to skew toward women, usually about 70 percent, not far from the proportion of women in the overall undergraduate population—about 58 percent. While the student body is predominantly white, traditional age, and from the upper Midwest, this course tends to attract a slightly more diverse enrollment. Racial ethnic minority and international students usually make up about a quarter of the class. There are usually one or two parents in the class and a couple of students resuming their education after gaining work or military experience. I also sense more diversity in sexual orientation in this class than others.

One place where the history of teachers has made a deep impact on learning is in helping students appreciate the new gender normativity that developed out of the Depression and Second World War. After introducing students to women's often temporary work in the defense industries and the sexual regulation of women in the military,⁵ I ask

⁴This essay focuses on the second of a two-course, upper-division sequence: *Women and Gender in Early America* and *Women and Gender in Modern America*.

⁵Karen Tucker Anderson, "Persistent Discrimination Against Black Women During World War II," in Norton and Alexander, *Major Problems in American Women's History*, (3rd ed., 2003) 366–73; and Leisa D. Meyer, "Creating G.I. Jane: The Regulation of Sexuality and Sexual Behavior in the Women's Army Corps during World War II," *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 3 (Autumn 1992), 581–601.

students to grapple with the pervasiveness of gender regulation in women's lives by focusing on more commonplace, home-front pursuits such as teaching and playing sports. To do so, I have created a "case" that pairs an article on gender and sexuality in teaching by Jackie Blount and an excerpt of Susan Cahn's study of homophobia and women athletes.⁶

The schoolroom and the athletic field are spaces that students often think they know well, but after reading Blount and Cahn, students begin to see how those spaces changed over time and in ways that were newly and surprisingly repressive for women at mid-century. Since students generally subscribe to commonly held assumptions that women's paid work and participation in sports represent progress and that increasingly permissive gender and sexual practices have replaced traditional patriarchal and heteronormative ones, they are often intrigued by counterintuitive findings. The pairing of Blount and Cahn helps them think carefully about what was happening at mid-century and how changes in gender became implicated in the development of a repressive era. By deepening their understanding of this period in recent history, it also helps them make sense of shortcomings they see in the world today. For some, the case provides new insights into why struggles to expand women's rights and opportunities, begun more than a century ago, have not produced greater change. For others, it helps them make sense of why their grandmothers or great grandmothers may have led lives more restricted than those of the "new women" we learn about from the turn of the century. Casting light on some of the roots of social prejudice against homosexuals, the case study also facilitates thinking about why their generation's views on homosexuality tend to differ from those of older Americans.

A recurring theme in this course is to question what appears "natural" about gender practices. Blount's article enables me to engage students in a conversation about the social construction of gender that is concrete and relatable. Offering a direct, succinct account of the history of teaching, Blount's article helps students see that women were not "naturally" attracted to teaching, but rather an array of changing economic needs, political concerns, and social objectives alternately

⁶Students are assigned Jackie M. Blount, "Manly Men and Womanly Women: Deviance, Gender Role Polarization and the Shift in Women's School Employment, 1900–1976," *Harvard Educational Review* 66, no. 2 (Summer 1996), 318–39; and Susan K. Cahn, "'Mannishness,' Lesbianism and Homophobia in U.S. Women's Sports," in Linda K. Kerber and Jane Sherron De Hart, eds., *Women's America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 508–17. Blount has published a monograph, *Fit to Teach: Same-Sex Desire, Gender, and School Work in the Twentieth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), but the "Manly Men" article introduces undergraduates to the topic very effectively. Together with the excerpted Cahn essay, it also reflects the amount of reading I can expect students to complete for a single class period.

encouraged certain women into teaching and discouraged others at different times in American history. I urge students to analyze claims that things have “always been that way.” As they learn in the first line of Blount’s article, women were not the majority of teachers before the Civil War. Likewise, they learn from Cahn that success on the baseball diamond has not always subjected women to suspicions of homosexuality. If they find evidence that seemingly timeless practices, like the gendering of occupations or the stigmatizing of certain sexual activities, have not always existed, then perhaps by studying the history of those practices they can reveal who benefitted and how. A related example would be learning about how reproductive practices and prohibitions have changed. Armed with an understanding of how and why such changes took place in the past, they can better assess whether those practices, which once seemed so natural, need revision to serve a more just future.

A long historical view of shifts in women’s school employment and representations of women athletes also exposes flawed assumptions about progress. Blount and Cahn help students trace historical changes across nearly a century in these two realms of women’s experiences. The students become acutely aware that the feminization of teaching and subsequent backlash against single women teachers took place over a surprisingly short period of time. The dramatic shift to employ married women, after decades of discriminating against them, piques students’ curiosity, precisely because it follows so many publicly expressed concerns about the wrong kinds of role models in schools and new revelations about female sexuality. Cahn’s timeline of changing perceptions of athletes complements Blount’s. Students learn how some tomboyish behaviors became understood as part of the new womanhood, but Americans’ perceptions of women’s athleticism shifted from an expression of healthy independence to a manifestation of “mannishness” in the 1930s. Engaging in masculine pursuits became understood as a challenge to already endangered masculinity and contributed to the Depression-era notion that independent women made poor partners in marriage. A much more extreme homophobia emerged in the postwar era with hostile attacks against “mannish” women, perceived as menaces to American youth and national strength.

I developed a timeline exercise to take advantage of the long historical perspective offered in these sources. Working in small groups, I ask students to place four concepts from the readings on a timeline: (1) the Victorian era, (2) the new womanhood, (3) the crisis of masculinity, and (4) the new gender conservatism. This part of the exercise initiates small group conversations about what kinds of experiences constituted each period, when those periods roughly began and ended, and the extent to which they overlapped. I also ask them to record in a few bullet

points under each of the four periods some of the experiences they discuss. After students have mapped these periods onto the timeline and fleshed them out a bit, I then ask them to draw on what they've learned to explain the shifts. This encourages them to think broadly about historical developments that may have contributed to the development and waning of new womanhood, the growing crisis of masculinity, and the intensifying gender conformity. The timelines that students produce call their attention to causation and consequences and prepare them for a historically informed discussion of the new gender conformity.

Using the timelines, we then zoom in on the 1940s and 1950s, where students usually see a meaningful convergence in the experiences of teachers, athletes, and the military women they have already studied. All three groups confronted new forms of gender surveillance and regulation, often leading them to conform or overcompensate in their performance of femininity, so as not to attract unwanted attention from superiors or members of the public. Military women no longer appear to be outliers; when viewed alongside teachers and athletes, their wartime experiences appear more like harbingers of change. Cahn also includes a discussion of the regulation of femininity among African American women athletes, raising the opportunity for students to consider how the new gender conformity may have been experienced differently by different women. When I ask students to return to their timelines and analyze these postwar experiences in the context of the longer historical continuum, students generally remember how a range of early twentieth-century women of various races and classes derived pleasures and sometimes rewards for flaunting gender norms. In contrast, at mid-century, they can see how newly erected institutional and ideological boundaries diminished the chances of reward and significantly increased the likelihood of being denounced as deviant. At a time of heightened fears about communism and the blurring of gender roles in the Soviet Union, members of each of these groups of nonconforming women could be criticized for failure to marry and procreate. Unmarried teachers, however, were especially vulnerable to suspicions of influencing their pupils to reject heterosexual marriage and possibly to become homosexual too. When students appreciate the hostility of the postwar gender climate and the extent of its impact on seemingly ordinary white women who taught, they may better understand why individual women's agency was not as bold and daring as they sometimes wish.

While the postwar era is not my research interest, I have come to consider it critical to students' understanding of the twentieth century. I used to feel uneasy when students made claims that the postwar era regressed to nineteenth-century Victorian ideals. Like the historian

Stephanie Coontz, I wanted students to pay more attention to context, to analyze how the Great Depression, Second World War, and Cold War may have shaped a new and different gender system.⁷ Blount's essay helped me confront this problem with some persuasive counterfactual reasoning. Calling attention to Jane Addams and Ella Flagg Young, Blount points out that self-dependent, nonconforming women might have been considered strong-minded and even a little odd at the turn of the century, but they could lead meaningful, effective public lives. Lingering Victorian gender norms raised some reservations about their decisions to live outside patriarchal families, but they were not attacked as dangerous menaces to society and national security. To the contrary, Addams and Young were esteemed for their professional work and public activism, even earning Addams widespread acclaim as "Saint Jane." In class, I ask students to hypothesize about how effective these women leaders would have been in 1950. While some express faith that they would have been effective in any environment, more tend to voice doubts. Many are willing to question whether Addams would have been regarded as saintly had she been publicly active and living with Mary Rozet Smith in 1950. Having read Blount and Cahn, they better appreciate how gender and sexual regulation in the postwar period may have constrained women's agency. At a broader level of learning, I think this counterfactual exercise leaves some students thinking that historical context matters more than they previously thought.

The effectiveness of this case study probably also stems from how the scholarly work builds on students' familiarity with popular culture. Students almost always raise the 1992 film *A League of Their Own* as supporting evidence of the era's intense conformity. Although the film is older than most of my students, they seem to have watched it more times than me. Students remember the ball players' initial resistance to short dresses as uniforms, recognizing the league's preference to sexualize players' appearance rather than protect their skin when sliding to home plate. They offer the film's depiction of charm school and instruction in hair and makeup as practices of gender regulation that Cahn's research affirms. Some also recall individual characters expressing private concerns that liking to play baseball somehow made them less womanly. Although the film stops short of exploring homophobia, it supports several of Cahn's claims, and it arouses students'

⁷Stephanie Coontz argues that the "traditional" family of the 1950s was a qualitatively new phenomenon." I attempt to help students reach a similar conclusion about the postwar gender system. See Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 25.

empathy for the historical actors they read about in Cahn.⁸ Together with Cahn's research, the film seems to prepare students to grapple with Blount's claims about how fears of gender deviance reconfigured the composition of the teaching force. Persuaded that baseball players had to perform femininity in order to play, students are better able to imagine unmarried teachers being at risk if they did not perform femininity as convincingly as administrators expected.

I suspect the very ordinariness students attribute to the teachers and athletes in this case study may elicit deeper empathy, both for the women and the extraordinary circumstances of the postwar United States. Before I arrived at this pairing of Blount and Cahn, I found it challenging to convey to students the extent of postwar gender regulation. Historical studies of women's work in defense industries and the military may be difficult for some of my undergraduates to relate to. I sometimes wondered if the repressive changes those studies describe came across as isolated experiences that happened to women unlike my students, who are, like me, mostly of the white middle classes and more likely to pursue work in the professions, education, and service industries. Since I've included this case in this course, I've noticed my students seem to identify with the historical actors more readily than they do with military and defense industry workers. Perhaps they identify with the teachers and athletes in this case because they represent women with desires most young people share: to be self-supporting, enjoy some social and sexual freedoms, and play sports. Perhaps it is the expanded range of actors that enables students to grasp how repressive the postwar gender system became for a whole generation of women. Or perhaps they imagine me, a past teacher, or maybe their future selves, subjected to career-destroying suspicions and removed from schools for exercising what they consider personal choices about appearance, behaviors, relationships, and individual freedoms to delay or forego marriage and/or parenthood.

Whatever the reason, I find this case study has better prepared my students to examine how a range of U.S. women had to negotiate the pervasiveness of gender regulation and the moral panics surrounding homosexuality during the postwar era. As a consequence, they can often articulate a more nuanced, historical understanding of why Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* resonated so deeply with readers in the 1960s. In their reflection papers, students often write about this case study as a formative moment in their learning that enabled them to see how the "new woman" of the turn of the century did not travel

⁸This creates an opportunity to discuss using contemporary films as secondary sources in need of corroborating evidence and to remind students about sourcing their evidence.

a straight line from first- to second-wave feminism. Rather, as more careful historical thinkers, they recognize how multiple developments intersected to foreclose the possibility of such a clear line of causation, including concerns about white “race suicide,” growing awareness of human sexualities, the problems of self-supporting women during the Great Depression, the temporary employment of women to replace the human resources claimed by the Second World War, and Cold War concerns about communism and the Soviet Union.

Helping students historicize the gender and sexual normativity of the postwar era is one of the virtues of this case study. Students actively want to continue our conversations about how they see homophobia persisting in schools and other venues. They also want to examine the differences they see between their experiences and those Blount and Cahn describe. Same-sex marriage has been legally recognized in Iowa since 2009, which may account in part for why some students are comfortable discussing gay rights and oppressions. Yet, even students whose views on gay rights are more conflicted have spoken positively about how the case study expanded their understanding of the historical sources of stigma attached to homosexuality.

One of the shortcomings of this case study, however, is engaging the intersectionality of race and sexual orientation in the postwar period. Cahn’s work offers one avenue to begin this discussion, but the complexity of the topic warrants more class time and further sources. And as far as I know, those sources would have to come from outside the history of education.⁹ Instead, I have constructed other cases to explore postwar intersections of race and gender in the classes immediately before and after this one, focusing on workplace discrimination and civil rights activism. I have accepted this trade-off because the case study has proven so generative of deep learning about the history of heteronormativity. For the undergraduate population I teach, this focus on historicizing postwar homophobia, and using the history of teachers to do it, strengthens students’ grasp of gender as a powerful force in twentieth-century America.

⁹Blount does not analyze the impact of race and sexual orientation in *Fit to Teach*.