Rethinking Sexuality in the Progressive Era\textsuperscript{1}

by Catherine Cocks, School of American Research

The contemporary politicization of sexualities has deep roots in the previous \textit{fin de siècle}. Then as now, conflicts over sex acts and sexual identities were central points of articulation in a wide-ranging struggle over just how to produce, reproduce, and embody a moral and humane society. Like scholars of other western, industrialized nations, historians of the United States have identified the turn of the twentieth century as an important period of change in sexual ideology and practice. For decades, the chief framework for understanding this watershed has been a transition from “Victorian” to “modern” mores. One of the most sophisticated renderings of this transition appears in John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman’s \textit{Intimate Matters}, a comprehensive survey of U.S. sexual history. The authors identify a shift from family- and reproduction-oriented sexual practices to “sexual liberalism,” the idea that sexual preferences and pleasures stand at the center of individual selfhood.\textsuperscript{2}

In many ways, D’Emilio and Freedman’s argument is persuasive. A vivid contrast exists between a time when non-marital, non-reproductive sexual activities were illegitimate as a rule and one in which opposite-sex, non-marital, non-reproductive sexual relationships are a normative element of adulthood for a majority in western, industrial nations like the United States. Moreover, this contrast is an integral element in the larger transition from agriculture to industry and the concomitant erosion of the patriarchal family that also occurred between the early nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But the theoretical and empirical work of the past few decades demonstrates that this framework is inadequate. Exceptions to the trajectory that D’Emilio and Freedman identify abound; a splendid survey of the

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social and cultural history of sexuality, *Intimate Matters* is an excellent source of them. Crucially, such exceptions tend to police important social boundaries—gender, race, class, ethnicity, and nationality, to name just the most obvious.

Typically, historians have responded to the proliferation of contrary evidence by attributing it to social differences assumed to exist prior to and to produce variation in sexual practices. Thus, Victorianism represented the “mainstream” ideology if not practice, but “different” groups such as working-class whites and blacks, Hispanics, immigrants of various ethnicities, Catholics, rural people, and so on, either had “different” ideas about the proper practice of sex or could not adhere to Victorian values because of the onslaught of capitalism or racism or some other structural force. To a point, this practice poses an essential and now-common challenge to the longstanding ideological limits on the scope and focus of historical research, but it quickly becomes inadequate to the task of historical interpretation. If we aim to understand a transformation as broad and uneven as the rise of sexual liberalism, or a society as complex and riven with inequalities as that of the United States, we cannot rest content with a model of social structure that, like “mainstream and differences,” assumes and effaces the character of the shifting social relationships it claims to explain.

Yet discarding the idea of a twentieth-century watershed is untenable: the differences between then and now are too striking and D’Emilio and Freedman’s characterization of contemporary sexual liberalism too convincing. To formulate a more persuasive argument for why and how this change occurred, we must try to integrate the last several decades’ empirical findings into a new understanding of sex and social change in the Progressive Era rather than stringing them onto the existing story like so many appendices of interest only to specialists. In the essay that follows, I begin by showing how late-twentieth-century studies have undermined our assumptions about both Victorian repression and modern liberation. Then I argue that we need to think much more self-consciously about our models of cultural change and our categories of analysis to devise a more satisfactory alternative to the Victorian-to-modern framework.

**We Have Never Been Victorian**

The theoretical and empirical work of the past several decades has decisively undermined the orthodox vision of nineteenth-century Westerners as

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“Victorians,” fearful and cruelly repressive of sexual desires and activities. The best known of the theoretical critiques is Foucault’s demolition of the “repressive hypothesis”—the idea that the Victorians were terrible prudes who censored even their parlor furniture and the modern rebellion against them was a reassertion of natural instincts. Rather than repressing sexuality, Victorians and their successors encouraged the proliferation of discourses and institutions concerned with the management of bodies and bodily processes. The moderns’ preoccupation with sex as liberation then transformed what had been discrete acts into identities and made sexuality the very core of subjectivity. In Foucault’s eyes, both “Victorians” and “moderns” contributed to the ever-more pervasive subjection of individuals to normative discipline.5

Foucault and other late-twentieth-century theorists of sex have also argued that Victorians could not have been repressed because they had nothing to repress: No natural sexual appetites or identities exist. The social construction of sexuality is a fundamental principle of most contemporary historical research.6 Nevertheless, the assumption that consensual adult sexual activity is morally good, psychologically healthy, and politically liberating for individuals and societies persists, and for good reason. Scholars cannot cordon their research on sexuality off from ongoing movements for women’s, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender civil and political rights. In an age of resurgent biological determinism, denying the inherency of sexual desires may undermine those movements. Rejecting the repressive hypothesis is too often read as a dismissal of the very real consequences of nineteenth- and twentieth-century sexual regimes, from crippling shame and unhappy marriages to legal and physical harassment, rape, imprisonment, unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted disease, coerced sterilization, punitive castration, and lynching. Despite these dangers, endorsing a rigorous understanding of social construction and discarding the notion of Victorian repressiveness both helps make sense of empirical findings and enables us to argue powerfully for the necessity of striving for more just and livable sexual ideologies and practices, however contingent, partial, and shifting.7


6The exception to this statement are many works in the history of medicine, which I reluctantly excluded for this reason when I realized I could not possibly read everything in the time available. But see Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York, 1998); for critiques of medical and scientific research on sexuality, see Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Seeing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York, 2000), and Nelly Oudshoorn, *Beyond the Natural Body: An Archaeology of Sex Hormones* (New York, 1994).

To argue, following Judith Butler, that sexuality is a historically contingent condition of subjectivity offers a more subtle and thorough-going understanding of the mutual constitution of nature and culture than the usual notion of social construction. If culture remains a costume resting lightly or tightly on a natural body, we can attack or praise particular sexual regimes for their supposed congruence with or alienation from some imagined natural drives, but we cannot perceive the fully historical and culturally specific character of the processes by which people come to “have” sexuality even as they are constituted socially in other ways. Butler’s concept of performativity directs us to examine sexuality (and other supposedly biological attributes such as race and gender) as a critical field of play for social inscription and individual selfhood, making both mobile, shifting, and historically specific. The concept allows us to escape the traps of both biological determinism and idealism and to acknowledge both structure and agency even as we assume the social construction of the self. As a result, we can question the mutual constitution of “nature” and “culture” at particular moments without losing sight of individuals. Without appeals to nature, we can nevertheless challenge the particular configurations of normative sexuality in the present moment.

Of course, methodologically historians accept some limits that the chief theorists of sexuality—philosophers, literary scholars, and psychoanalysts—do not. Although evidence of prescription and punishment is relatively abundant in the historical record, evidence of emotions, practices, and self-conceptions is scarce and difficult to interpret. This very absence is a historically specific parameter for the history of sexuality, one long understood as proof of the repressive hypothesis: if people were not repressed, why did they not leave us copious accounts of their intimacies? This question assumes that talking about sex is more natural than not talking about it, an assumption derived from sexual liberalism and one of its chief disciplinary techniques. The issue of sex in the archives requires the same attention to the contexts of the creation and preservation of historical documents that we bring to the traces of other events and states. The pervasive

York, 1993), 1-23; Jonathan Ned Katz, in Love Stories: Sex between Men before Homosexuality (Oxford, 2001), rejects the repressive hypothesis and endorses social constructionism yet also celebrates the diminishing repression that gay men face in the U.S. This position is both contradictory and absolutely necessary; the idea that sexualities are socially constructed does not mean that all are equal or equally satisfying.

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The politicization of sexuality made some silences necessary defenses. Then too, sexual acts and emotions may not have been something many people, especially the marginally literate or illiterate, wrote about, as opposed to, say, dancing, singing, joking, or wearing suggestive clothing—socially pervasive but historically ephemeral signs of sexual subjectivity. Not one but many possibilities lurk behind the silences in the historical record.9

Abandoning the lingering dissatisfaction that we are stuck in the anteroom peeping through the keyhole, hoping the principals will do it within our range of vision, we must instead consider carefully the way that sexual ideologies then and now position us as voyeurs and what this means for our research projects and results. Such evidentiary and methodological limits suggest the wisdom of both epistemological modesty and, simultaneously, the thoughtful deployment of contemporary, speculative theory. If we begin with the insights of philosophers into the contingency of subjectivity, historians may also challenge ahistorical and singular models of how people come to “have” sexuality by offering alternatives forged in colloquy with the voices and silences of the past.10

Empirically, too, the ground beneath Victorianism has disintegrated. At least as early as John S. Haller, Jr., and Robin M. Haller’s 1974 *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America*, historians have pointed out the complexity and even the sex-positive qualities of the nineteenth-century prescriptive literature on sex. This body of popular medical treatises records a lively and subtle debate about the social and personal significance of a variety of sexual practices in the context of urbanization, an emerging market economy, sharply diverging gender roles, falling birth rates, and the concomitant making of an American middle class. Most of the contributors to this debate rejected the idea of female “passionlessness,” long the linchpin of accusations of Victorianism. Yet many simultaneously portrayed women’s sexual desire as a saintly maternal love, a passion for the familial and social

9It’s worth repeating that the Foucaultian critique of the “repressive hypothesis” rejects the idea of an officially enforced silence and ignorance in the nineteenth century, not the idea that authorities sought to control sexuality by selectively silencing some or punishing certain acts. The opposite of repression is not freedom. Foucault’s point is that the official discourse produces sexuality as a normative category of subjective experience rather than represses a natural instinct. It produces and punishes deviance in the same process in which it sanctions normalcy; see Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 14-15. On the importance of listening for silences, see Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” *Unequal Sisters: A Multi-Cultural Reader in U.S. Women’s History*, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz (New York, 1990), 292-97.

10The literature of the Progressive Era and the 1920s notably often provides grist for literary scholars and philosophers interested in sexuality; Butler, for example, uses the works of Willa Cather and Nella Larsen to ground her argument in *Bodies That Matter*, 143-86. To the extent that there is any history behind such uses, it is generally a Foucault-inflected version of the transition from an anti-female Victorianism to a problematic modern sexual liberalism.
good rather than individual pleasure. Notably, women were not the only ones urged to be saintly; many nineteenth-century thinkers sought to spiritualize the lustful impulses of both husband and wife, celebrating marriage as a pure communion of spirits. As feminists beginning with Linda Gordon have pointed out, many of these works asserted women’s right to say no, even to their husbands. This negative was not at all the same as a denial of desire or sexual pleasure, although it might grow out of or lead to either one.11

Indeed, the densely-packed shelves of books on nineteenth-century and Progressive Era women’s activism long ago made clear the considerable extent to which “Victorianism” and “passionlessness” were political projects, not neutral descriptions. Middle-class white women successfully deployed the idea of the virtuous weakness of their sexual desires to assume the right and obligation to manage other people’s sexual, marital, and reproductive lives, especially those of sexually active working-class women of all races. Within the larger, white-supremacist culture that assumed the lasciviousness of women of color, African American women of the “aspiring” class took on this role in their own communities, as did a very few Native women, even as they protested racist sexual violence. The specter of an uncontrolled, and perhaps uncontrollable, female sexuality policed the lines of class and race as well as gender, a fact suggesting that the rise of sexual liberalism must have occurred in tension with twentieth-century shifts in race and class ideologies and practices.12


Equally well known is that many of yesterday’s pinch-faced prudes, today Foucaultian dominatrixes, had passionate crushes on and sometimes sexual relationships with their female seminary and college classmates. Many created alternative families and communities of women that aided rather than hindered their secular ambitions. Their choices reflected not only a feminist rejection of marital dependence but also a deep satisfaction in dedicating themselves to the care of others in a way that transcended the submission to male authority and bodily reproduction that marriage entailed. At stake was not a denial of natural urges naturally expressed in opposite-sex intercourse—or even the sublimation of same-sex passions—but the successful transmutation of the desires proper to nineteenth-century white, middle-class femininity into a personally satisfying, socially acceptable alternative to marriage and motherhood. In this light, nineteenth-century female reformers’ insistence on restraining men’s desires rather than asserting women’s seems less a prudish expression of “Victorian” values than a clear-eyed decision about how best to achieve their aims in work and love in an imperfect world. Tellingly, early twentieth-century sex educators found to their dismay that the moral some young women learned from lectures on the double standard and sexually transmitted disease was not premarital chastity and post-marital fidelity but the inadvisability of intercourse with men under any circumstances.¹³


one would expect to be most Victorian—negotiated a range of physical intimacies short of coitus before marriage throughout the nineteenth century. Engaged men expected their fiancées to act as their consciences, to restrain desires men experienced simultaneously as too strong and an essential expression of manhood. Women only reluctantly abandoned courtship for marriage, fearing the loss of their parents’ protection and knowing that wedlock required them to relinquish their right to refuse sexual advances and other husbandly demands. As the veto-wielding partners in pre-marital sex play, surely few brides doffed their wedding dresses as naïve as modern jokes about Victorian ladies supposed. Surely many grooms were well-prepared for women’s interest in controlling sexual activity and fertility and, having delayed marriage in order to achieve economic stability, shared it to a considerable extent.14

Indeed, Carl Degler and Linda Gordon years ago argued that sexual restraint played a significant role in the steady decline in the U.S. birth rate between 1800 and 1940. But it was not all about abstinence, even among the white middle class. Prescriptive literature, advertisements for contraceptives, and Clelia Mosher’s pioneering survey of married, white women’s sexual experience suggest that many nineteenth-century couples practiced withdrawal, the rhythm method, and spermicidal douching. In the twentieth century devices such as condoms, vaginal sponges, and diaphragms became more popular. Despite the illegality of contraception and vigorous attempts to suppress it, such items remained widely, if euphemistically, available, and juries often refused to convict indicted sellers. Although most states made abortion a crime in the 1870s, it remained a common form of birth control for married couples into the early decades of the twentieth century, especially among people who could not afford contraceptive devices or obtain a prescription for them from a physician.15

If those most likely to be Victorian were not, locating the social and temporal origins of “modern” sexual mores has also become nearly impossible. Once the bold, fun-loving, big-hatted and brightly dressed girls who frequented the dance halls and openly challenged the middle-class ideal of female sexual passivity embodied for their contemporaries and historians a Progressive Era revolution in sexual mores. But historians have depicted in


considerable detail the tight limits on women's autonomy in this period: low wages, a narrow range of available jobs, the sexual double standard, broad police powers, and increasingly draconian laws that made every woman in the street liable to be accused of prostitution. These circumstances and the prevailing assumptions about men's sexual needs meant that working-class women, like middle-class engaged women, constantly bartered with men for social goods in return for access to their bodies. Rejecting or unable to realize the idealized female communities of reformers, such women inaugurated what physicians came to call "heterosexuality" by playing this inequitable system for all the pleasures it would yield. But if this was a "sexual revolution," it's not clear that anyone won. Rather, the old barter took on new forms and the balance of power shifted slightly. At the same time, the new association of freedom with heterosexual relationships and the "discovery" of the lesbian by physicians and prison administrators began to delegitimize female couples and communities.\(^\text{16}\)

The political history of sex radicalism and vice reform also suggests the inadequacy of the Victorian-to-modern transition. Some of the nineteenth-century "radicals" who published information about sexuality, reproduction, and how to enjoy the former without risking the latter made quite a good living at it, begging the question of just how far from "mainstream" they could have been. Between the 1870s and 1917, states and the federal government enacted new and enforced old laws against contraception, abortion, sexually explicit publications, and prostitution. When police proved reluctant or ineffective, non-governmental organizations assumed broad extralegal powers to suppress all four. In short, the Progressive Era witnessed not the defeat of once hegemonic principles of sexual restraint but the brilliant success of an increasingly radical social purity movement in curbing an active trade in anatomical knowledge, health advice, and birth control devices. Between the 1890s and 1917, the campaign against prostitution also enjoyed tremendous success, at least in closing tacitly sanctioned red light districts, if not in lessening the sale of sex or addressing reasons why men bought and women sold it.17

Yet, like many social movements, this one contained many factions and appealed to groups with contradictory agendas. Whereas women’s rights activists sought to enforce marital monogamy on men and preferred to rehabilitate sex workers for proper domestic life, police chiefs, city councilors, and state legislators favored punishing sex workers with criminalization, jail time, fines, harassment, and segregation. Some physicians favored scientific sex education and public health campaigns, but others sought to bar any public discussion of sexual practice and morals. Unsurprisingly, in what seemed to some its moment of triumph, the social purity movement began to disintegrate. Feminists staged highly visible demands to legalize contraception, and on the few occasions when it was available, hundreds of married, working-class women spent hours on line with their children to obtain it. The institutionalization of eugenics in academia, hospitals, and reformatories and the enactment of laws permitting compulsory sterilization advanced the notion that the real social problem was not fornication but low-quality children. Margaret Sanger’s evolution from sex radical to popular prophet of medically-managed, eugenic sexual liberalism after the First

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17 Hal D. Sears, The Sex Radicals: Free Love in High Victorian America (Lawrence, KS, 1977), 183-203; Gordon, Woman’s Body, Woman’s Right; Horowitz, Rereading Sex; Reagan, When Abortion Was a Crime; Rosen, The Last Sisterhood; Hobson, Uneasy Virtue; Langum, Crossing Over the Line. Some male prostitutes existed, and some boys bartered sex for social and economic support, but the vast majority were female, and female prostitution was the focus of social concern and reform efforts; see George Chauncey, Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940 (New York, 1994): 141-45.
World War epitomizes a shift that cannot easily be characterized as wholly oppressive or wholly liberating. The questions “for whom?” and “under what circumstances?” loom large.

The demographic and legal evidence of plentiful non-reproductive sex between 1800 and 1930 and the simultaneous triumph and failure of social purity in the Progressive Era pose serious questions for historians of sexuality. How can we make sense of the gap between law and politics—ideology, if you will—and what people seem to have been doing—their practice? Hypocrisy can only explain so much. Existing research suggests rather that a much wider range of sexual mores and practices existed than we have incorporated into our model of sexual change. In her 2002 work Rereading Sex, the most recent overt challenge to the idea of a Victorian nineteenth century, Helen Horowitz argues that there were not one but four sexual cultures, and these cultures competed against each other for public approval or at least official toleration. Her argument and the extensive evidence she amasses should compel us to jettison the idea of Victorianism and the consequent scheduling of a sexual revolution at the turn of the twentieth century. Instead, we need to situate the era and its discontents in an ongoing, multilateral series of negotiations among shifting bands of unequals.

An equally important and perhaps more obvious way to criticize the model of a singular “American” sexual culture in transition from repression to liberation is its neglect of differences of class, race, region, ethnicity, religion, and so on in favor of taking the published expressions of a minority of white, urban, northeastern, middle-class cultural critics as embodying U.S. sexual norms. But “neglect” is not really the right term for the skewing of the field. Work on the sexual ideologies and practices of people regularly acknowledged never to have been Victorian is not rare, and it increases daily. To cite a particularly critical example, enslaved black Americans were at the mercy of their white masters’ desires and controlled neither their sexual nor their family lives. After emancipation, white supremacists deployed rape, sexual torture, and lynching under cover of a grotesque


19Horowitz, Rereading Sex; she details the four tendencies on pp. 5-7.
vision of African American sexual rapacity in their successful campaign to reassert political and social control in the South. Although the myth of black depravity wounded southern African Americans worst, it had ramifications throughout turn-of-the-century society, affecting everything from imperial policy in Puerto Rico to the understanding and punishment of sex across the color line in girls’ reformatories. Racial fears and sexual ideologies were intimate bedfellows at the turn of the century.²⁰

On another front, well into the early twentieth century mining, railroad, and lumber companies employed large numbers of transient male laborers on the North American frontier and attracted somewhat smaller numbers of transient female sex workers. The rural migrants flooding the industrial cities from other states and countries were predominantly male and unmarried or far from their wives. Many patronized sex workers, themselves predominantly the native-born daughters of immigrant parents. Sexual liaisons between adult male laborers and young girls and boys were not unusual, nor were they always considered criminal or deviant until the campaigns to raise the age of consent for girls and the construction of homosexuality as a perversion in the late nineteenth century. Not a few poor women—single, married, abandoned, or divorced—prostituted themselves or housed sex workers to survive bad times.²¹ All of these stories are familiar to us, but somehow we have not let them disturb our assumption of a Victorian nineteenth century. Nor have we successfully integrated them into our portrait of the emergence of a “modern,” sexually liberal norm in the twentieth century.

If We’re Not Talking about a Revolution

Given all of this subtlety, nuance, and contradiction, is it possible to construct a general argument about the trajectory of sexual history in the United States in this period? The answer may well be no, at least not for the Progressive Era. We might do better, as many scholars of the nineteenth


²¹For examples, see Peter Boag, Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest (Berkeley, 2003), 1-86; Wood, Freedom of the Streets, 132-57; see also Karen Dubinsky, Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880-1929 (Chicago, 1993).
This newspaper article concerning the proposed abolition of a Washington, D.C., red light district highlights the divide between women reformers, such as physician Kate Waller Barrett (pictured here), and male officials over how best to eliminate prostitution.

century have done, to locate these years within a much larger time frame as a moment in a centuries-long, uneven, and much-contested transition from mostly rural, agricultural to mostly urban, industrial social arrangements. This more capacious periodization of a “sexual revolution” must incorporate the same careful attention to the unevenness of structural change and the decisive roles played by individuals and social movements that specialized monographs often show. Even more important, abandoning the idea of an early-twentieth-century revolution requires us to think more explicitly about the models of cultural change that inform our interpretations.

Decades ago, Kathy Peiss critically examined and rejected the notion that working women’s sexual culture “trickled up” to transform prudish Victorians; nor did she find the “trickle down” model persuasive. How then, did changes happen and spread?

Already existing research begins to ask just this question by foregrounding not a single class’s or gender’s experience but the multiple social boundaries that sexuality helped to define and in turn was defined by. This focus enables us to see more clearly the extent to which sexual change emerged, ungainly and amorphous, out of battles over social order and disorder among shifting social groupings on shifting sands. Too often these comparisons remain implicit, as in the portrayal of rural or regional experiences in light of a national “norm” that more accurately reflects northeastern, urban, middle-class, white, published ideals. An entire subspecialty of Progressive Era women’s history addresses cross-class conflict—or occasionally cooperation—among women around issues of sexual behavior. Yet the assumption that the older, better-off, sometimes professionally trained, typically white women were Victorian and their younger, working-class, relatively uneducated women, often of ethnic or racial minority groups, were the heralds of heterosexual liberation tends to prevent us from recognizing the extent to which the parties brought to their interactions equally traditional, equally modern notions about bodies and physical intimacies. In 1900, a woman’s decision to say no to opposite-sex intercourse was in some important ways more radical than the decision to say yes.

22Peiss, Cheap Amusements, 8.
23Ann R. Gabbert, “Prostitution and Moral Reform in the Borderlands: El Paso, 1890-1920,” Journal of the History of Sexuality 12 (October 2003): 575-604, largely assimilates this atypical city to the national “norm”; more persuasively, Sharon R. Ullman, Sex Seen: The Emergence of Modern Sexuality in America (Berkeley, 1997); Boag, Same-Sex Affairs; and Wood, Freedom of the Streets, locate the cities of Sacramento, Portland, and Davenport within mobile circuits of labor, commercial amusements, and newly emerging ideas about sex, sex work, class, and gender. On cross-class relations among women, see Alexander, The “Girl” Problem, and Kunzel, Fallen Women, Problem Girls. Martha Hodes, ed., Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History (New York, 1999), foregrounds the comparative not only by examining relations across the color line but also by including essays on a wide range of social groups.
Making the comparison explicit are recent works that emphasize the extent to which allegations of insufficient sexual modesty, respect, or self-control pervaded efforts to demarcate racial, class, ethnic, gender, regional, and even international hierarchies. Such work highlights the extent to which understanding sexual ideologies as political projects renders the Victorian-to-modern transition incoherent. Take, for example, some recent work on the aspiring class of African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Just as white Southerners used the myth of black sexual rapacity to justify the violent imposition of Jim Crow, African American “race men” and “race women” insisted on a particularly stringent version of gender, class, and sexual respectability as a central element in their campaigns for social justice. Promoting this ideology was hardly “Victorian”: it constituted a highly self-conscious response to thoroughly modern circumstances, and it left plenty of room for eugenics and other “modern” ways of imagining the relationship between bodies and society. This story, and the result that both white and black middle-class Southerners today remain less accepting of sexual liberalism and non-marital, non-reproductive intimacies, especially same-sex relationships, than Americans of other regions and backgrounds, underscores the necessity of reformulating our understandings of cultural change across the inequities that bind and often motivate political action.\(^{24}\)

Existing works also strongly suggest that modern notions about the importance of opposite-sex intercourse grew out of a much older body of thought and associated practice that Horowitz calls “vernacular sexuality.” This hearty endorsement of sexual pleasure and insistence on the necessity of sex for men on male terms defined the experiences and outlook of many people, likely a majority, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Certainly it provided the rationale for an expansive realm of “sex work” with vaguely defined borders. Emerging middle-class notions of female

virtue challenged it directly with only partial success. Many working-class girls engaged in sexual barter beginning at a young age, and marriage was often simply a long-term bargain of the same sort. Not a few judges—well-established, middle-class and elite white men—rejected rape accusations in the belief that girls and women routinely seduced men in the expectation of enriching themselves at their partners' expense. In this context, the turn-of-the-century “treating” culture hardly represented a radical break with the past. Rather, the growing, if fragile, autonomy of women and both the woman rights and feminist challenges to the double standard altered the terms on which women and men bargained.25

Recognizing the pervasiveness of vernacular sexuality in the nineteenth century directs us to reexamine some assumptions about the relationships of ethnicity, gender, rural-urban differences, and class to sexuality that sustain the usual argument about the causes of sexual change in the early twentieth century. What little we know about the sexual practices and beliefs of minority populations in relationship to their social location in the U.S. is deeply entangled with the contrary, and often implicit, assumptions that non-Anglo-Saxon peoples were both more comfortable with sexuality and more likely to enforce “traditional” customs that severely curbed women's freedom, including their sexuality, while allowing men free rein—Italians are the paradigmatic example here. Implicit in such arguments is the assumption that all “Americans” were “modern,” that is, sexually liberal and egalitarian, an assumption that even a casual glance at the evidence will not sustain. Moreover, some immigrants brought with them radical notions of sexual individualism and even the equality of the sexes, reinvigorating a native, nineteenth-century anarchist critique of opposite-sex relations, especially marriage.26

It is also important to take account of the fact that men challenged the role of patriarch in organizing sexuality as much as women did at the turn of the century, albeit with different motives and in less overtly political ways. Many working- and middle-class men rejected or delayed marriage and


fatherhood in this era. Exercising the jocular misogyny of blood sports, heavy drinking, and prostitution (Horowitz’s vernacular sexuality again), some bachelors celebrated their state by defining masculinity as the rejection of patriarchal obligations, though not its prerogatives. Some began to construct new identities and communities around same-sex sexual activities in cities and towns; others participated in forming contemporary heterosexuality by picking up “charity girls” in dance halls and movie theaters. New York City’s bohemians were only the most articulate translators of this rather old tradition into a new language inflected by feminism. The sad fate of many bohemian marriages, undertaken with grand hopes for egalitarian joys both intellectual and sexual, dramatizes the limits of the feminist reinterpretation of the masculinist vernacular in the Progressive era.27

Of course, neither feminists nor bachelors seriously undermined marriage. Most men and women of all classes and races married at some time in their lives and conceived of themselves more or less contentedly as husbands and fathers or wives and mothers. Indeed, another bit of evidence against a simple transition from reproductive to non-reproductive sexualities is the very persistence of marriage. This venerable institution continues to thrive in the early twenty-first century not only because women still earn less than men and bear the greater part of the burden of childcare and housework but also because of its power to connect individual pleasures with social, if not physical, reproduction. No other institution brings with it such full legal and customary rights to commit to and care for other people.28

Although U.S. sexual history remains skewed toward large cities, especially New York, a growing number of scholars have studied small towns and rural areas. Such work offers a plethora of relevant but contradictory evidence: regional cultural differences remain salient, yet the burgeoning mass commercial amusements, especially the movies, were available in some measure just about everywhere, shipped over extensive heavy and light rail lines that as easily transported people. Indeed, the high degree of transience and large scale migration from rural areas to cities (often across national


28 Margaret Marsh, “Suburban Men and Masculine Domesticity, 1870-1915,” and Robert L. Griswold, “Divorce and the Legal Redefinition of Victorian Manhood,” in Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America, ed. Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen (Chicago, 1990), 111-27 and 96-110, respectively; Griswold explicitly argues that not feminism but a reconfigured patriarchy governed changes in husbands’ prerogatives. See also Stansell, American Moderns, 225-308; Peiss, Cheap Amusements, 21-29. Except for the equivocal evidence in Mosher’s survey that twentieth-century, middle-class, married white women enjoyed sex more than their nineteenth-century sisters, we know little about how an emergent sexual liberalism translated into marital relations; see Stearns and Stearns, “Victorian Sexuality,” and Lunbeck, “New Generation.” On the structural imperatives supporting heterosexuality, including marriage, see Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” in Intimacy, ed. Lauren Berlant (Chicago, 2000), 311-30.
boundaries) in this period should prevent us from drawing firm lines between city and country, rural and urban folk. The legendary safety and conservative morality of small towns and farming regions existed mostly in the minds of ideologues and politicians, not the experience of residents.  

If we cannot assume a straightforward transfer of metropolitan sophistication to the backward hinterland via movies called “Scenes through a Key Hole,” we should also question the usual assumption that mass culture, as it became respectable in the early twentieth century, brought the healthy bawdiness of the working class and/or ethnic and religious minorities to a repressed white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant middle class. Given all the evidence that a powerful vernacular sexuality persisted across class lines despite the best efforts of single-standard advocates of all political stripes, the sexual innuendo of vaudeville and film cannot represent the entertainment reflex of a particular class, much less ethnic group—or even gender. If we conceive of the striptease, that staple of early twentieth-century burlesque, vaudeville, and film, as a condensed, stylized enactment of the sexual barter at the core of treating culture, its simultaneous popularity and notoriety become intelligible without embedding it in static class, ethnic, or gender oppositions. Similarly, the success of cross-dressing acts, especially female impersonators, suggests just how titillatingly important were speculations on the proper relationship among gender, sexuality, and sexual anatomy in these years. The political valence of such acts certainly differed greatly from the melodramas of the social purity crusade, but both treated similar questions and drew on overlapping audiences. To label such performances as “mod-

29 Many of the best-known and agenda-setting works cast Manhattan as epitome and bellwether for the nation: Horowitz, Rereading Sex; Timothy Gilfoyle, City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920 (New York, 1992); Christine Stansell, City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860 (New York, 1986); and American Moderns; Peiss, Cheap Amusements; and George Chauncey, Gay New York. A few examine other large cities: Meyerowitz, Women Adrift, on Chicago; on San Francisco, Nayan Shah, Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown (Berkeley, 2001), 77-104; Alecia P. Long, The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920 (Baton Rouge, LA, 2004), on New Orleans; Wheeler, Against Obscenity, on Minneapolis. Earlier works, such as Haller and Haller, The Physician and Victorian Sexuality; Degler, At Odds; Gordon, Woman’s Body; Rosen, Lost Sisterhood, claim national scope, and Hobson, Uneasy Virtue, offers an international comparison. A growing number of works now treat smaller cities, including Ullman, Sex Seen, on Sacramento, California; Boag, Same-Sex Affairs, on Portland, Oregon; and Wood, Freedom of the Streets, on Davenport, Iowa. On the rural South, see John Howard, Men Like That: A Southern Queer History (Chicago, 1999), and Ted Ownby, Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920 (Chapel Hill, NC, 1990), work on other cities and rural areas exists in the periodical literature. See Dubinsky, Improper Advances, 143-62, on perceptions and reality of sexual safety in rural Ontario, Canada.

ern” and therefore radically different from the concerns of a “Victorian” reform tradition contradicts the evidence and obscures the continuities in class, race, and gender politics across the turn of the century.

For the same reasons, we need to pay more attention to the contingency of class and class differences. Existing studies frequently use class as a constant in a praiseworthy effort to make the research finite and the conclusions credibly well-grounded. One result has been the publication of many excellent works portraying either working- or middle-class youth in their separate pursuits of happiness as the agents of sexual liberalism. (For the sake of clarity, I bracket the issue of age here, but see below.) The spark of revolution ignited in either urban dance halls or the back seats of small-town automobiles, or perhaps both, but we are left with no idea whether or how these ostensibly separate fires had a common cause or eventually joined in a general conflagration. Yet class differences in the early twentieth century, although critical, were never immutable and frequently ambiguous in practice. Further, the geography of sexual change repeatedly maps places—amusement parks, dance halls, movie theaters—where people mixed across class lines. Without thinking seriously about causality and the fit between our categories of analysis and the evidence, we cannot formulate plausible alternatives to the “trickle up/down” models that caricature a complex social field and too easily relapse into a transition from repression to liberation.31

If “heterosexuality” has deep roots in a longstanding vernacular sexuality, what of its twin, homosexuality? Researchers tell a complex, geographically and socially uneven story of simultaneous identity- and community-formation, increasing social persecution, and the delegitimization of a range of same-sex emotional and physical intimacies. Although Foucault’s insight into the medical and psychiatric construction of “the homosexual” at the turn of the twentieth century remains important, historians have found considerable evidence of a diverse range of same-sex subjectivities and relationships before and after that watershed and shown that self-identified “inverts” played a key role in generating the official discourse. Not surprisingly, scholars of same-sex acts and identities are much more sensitive to the historical nature of what counts as sex and how intimate practices become part of individual subjectivities than historians of opposite-sex relations have been. The unevenness with which recognizably “modern” “gay” or “lesbian” identities and communities emerge in these studies should encourage a sim-

31Peiss, Cheap Amusements, is among the few who raise the question explicitly; Lunbeck, “A New Generation,” 540n2, notes the lack of information about sexual change in the working class; Beth Bailey, From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America (Baltimore, 1988); see also Erenberg, Steppin’ Out; Meyerowitz, Women Adrift; Chudacoff, Age of the Bachelor; and, for the 1920s, Paula Fass, The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s (New York, 1977).
ilar attention to variation in studies of the emergence of self-conscious heterosexuality.32

For example, John Gustav-Wrathall’s study of same-sex relationships in the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) suggests that changing notions of appropriate inter-generational relationships played a significant role in the emergence of contemporary sexual categories. One of the earliest responses to the increasing autonomy of young men in the mid-nineteenth century was the founding of single-sex, inter-generational associations such as the YMCA. Here, older men could stand in for absent fathers in directing young men’s affective and sexual desires toward the proper modes of social and physical reproduction. In the twentieth century, the loving relationships between older and younger men—so long the organization’s reason for being—became suspect. The emotional, sensual, and sometimes sexual pleasures they involved came to be marked as “homosexual” rather than the proper expression of inter-generational, same-sex love. A similar shift may have occurred among women, as younger women criticized their woman-oriented elders as dull and prudish and an eroticized mother-daughter bond became less visible, if not less common, in women’s relationships with each other. Surely such a shift in cross-age relations also shaped heterosexuality, given its formation in the context of growing age segregation and a new cult of youth.33


33Gustav-Wrathall, Take the Young Stranger, 70-115; Vicinus, Intimate Friends, 113-42; Gott, Gronnind, 143-74. Most scholars take the role of youths in pioneering sexual change for granted, assuming the power of natural urges among adolescents. Given social expectations that young people, especially men, would be sexually curious and should properly be seeking marriage partners, it is not surprising to find plentiful records of adult anxieties about youth sexual practices and fond or guilty accounts of pre-marital activities. However, much evidence suggests that married couples determined to limit childbearing contributed far more
Another way to break out of the Victorian-to-modern paradigm is to place U.S. history not simply in relationship to metropolitan, middle-class Britain or domestic middle-class projects (as the very term “Victorian” demands), but also in the world of violently expansive capitalist empires that characterizes the era. Like the agents of other imperial powers, Americans attempted to reform and manage the sexualities and reproduction of people in U.S. dependencies from Hawai‘i, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines to the newly created Indian reservations and the U.S.-Mexico border—not to mention providing condoms to U.S. soldiers and sailors and treating them for syphilis and gonorrhea. For many in the imperial nations, the ongoing battle over the shape and content of sex and gender systems at home was one critical front in a global war between the modern and the traditional, white people and people of color, the civilized and the primitive. Recognizing the thoroughly political character of these battle lines forces us to acknowledge that the idea of a Progressive Era sexual revolution is, among other things, a stratagem for making invidious distinctions between “us” and “them”—though the membership and aim of each army varied according to the strategist.34

Notably, in the opening decades of the twentieth century, activists opposed to racism and colonialism, artists and authors, and tourist businesses began to cast domestic minorities and colonized peoples as psychic and sexual resources for metropolitan whites. The very same sexual “primitive-ness”—irregular opposite-sex partnerships, easy divorce or none at all, high rates of fertility, sexually expressive dance and music—that imperial officials sought to eliminate among natives and non-whites powerfully attracted a growing number of well-to-do, mostly white travelers to Harlem, Havana, and Honolulu. Though steeped in the rank racism of the era, the artistic and tourist enterprises nevertheless opened up new political possibilities by valorizing a colorful, colonial sensuality and sexuality in contrast to a white, middle-class, official Victorianism. Here, as much as in the sexual bargains driven in dance halls and the strange fruit hanging from southern trees, can be found the roots of modern sexual liberalism and its unfulfilled promise to sexual change than unmarried youth. In any case, we should be as attentive to the social construction of age as we are of other categories.

of egalitarian joys.35

**Unanswered Questions**

In short, the mechanisms of sexual change at the turn of the century remain uncertain. We know some of the major contributing forces, but we do not know how they interacted or how the process unfolded across shifting terrains of class, race, gender, sexuality, region, religion, and so on. Acknowledging, first, the vast numbers and social categories of people for whom Victorianism is a totally inappropriate descriptor, and second, the centrality of conflicts over the nature and management of sexuality to both nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideologues, movements, and governments makes impossible any neat transition from one to another regime. We must begin to locate social groups in relationship to others and explore the shifting boundaries of social groupings and categories instead of positing a mainstream and explaining deviations from its expressed ideals as a form of difference. Differences are not themselves sufficient explanations. Rather, they represent historically specific and contingent conditions, expressions of both structure and agency at a particular moment.

Perhaps, as historians have long assumed, the white, urban, northeastern, Protestant middle class did exercise hegemony over other Americans in the arena of sexuality. This group's anxiety over and oft-published plans for properly regulating marital relations, commercial sex, masturbation, and other practices certainly found institutional, medical, and legal form in ways that directly and sometimes drastically affected people outside of this small cohort. The dominance of the local, state, and federal governments by white, Protestant, middle-class and elite men and the growing semi-official power of white, Protestant, middle-class women are facts of great importance to this story. Nevertheless, the relative scarcity of unpublished evidence about sexual ideals, circumstances, and practices, the plethora of competing views in the published works, and the persistent historiographical bias toward portraying this minority as the nation writ small should make

us ask the question instead of automatically casting this class as “mainstream.”

Consider, for example, the ability of the city fathers of Davenport, Iowa, to flout state laws regulating alcohol and prostitution for years at a time. Juries routinely refused to convict the purveyors of condoms and diaphragms that Anthony Comstock so perseveringly brought before them. Renowned temperance leader Frances Willard and race-baiting politician Cole Blease agreed on the necessity of lynching black men in defense of white women’s virtue. African American activist W. E. B. DuBois exhorted readers of *The Crisis* to participate in breeding a better race even as many black women quietly curbed their fertility. Many middle- and working-class men and women defined sexual normalcy in terms of the participants’ status and gender role rather than their genitalia. With an eye to their income and ambitions, millions of married couples found ways to avoid conceiving children and necessarily began to rework the meanings of marriage and opposite-sex relations. However unsettling for our understanding of the “Victorian” era it may be to acknowledge this multitude of jostling, often contradictory sexual practices and beliefs, doing so makes the emergence of sexual liberalism at once more explicable and less revolutionary.

One of the foremost questions raised by the variety of what we do know is what the boundaries of “sex” itself are. To do the history of something called sex, we must have some idea of what it is, but we must also be aware that it is historically and contextually contingent. The physical act of coitus may or may not be the most important thing about “sex.” The construction of that event as the most intimate of acts, definitive of, for example, marital relations or sexual deviance, is itself a historical fact that we must investigate. Whether people actually experience genital contact as the most intimate of interpersonal acts is another version of the same question. If many Progressive Era men and women experienced sex as the outcome of more-or-less pleasurable, more-or-less consensual barter, what did that mean for their understanding of their relationship and the act, not to mention our understanding of sexuality and sexual “revolution”? We should take seriously those nineteenth-century reformers who worried about the debauching effects of the big city, even if we do not share their politics. The glittering world of ready sex, liquor, and amusements that they so feared really existed, and its many devotees and employees publicly ridiculed bourgeois patriarchal values, as well as the newer ideas of female passionlessness and the spiritualization of sex, especially for men.36 The premium that the prescriptive literature put on same-sex friendships and emotional commitment in opposition to physical attraction must be understood in this context as well.

36Wood, *Freedom of the Streets*, offers a particularly effective portrayal of this social outlook.
as that of evangelical movements, the emerging nuclear family, falling birth rates, and middle-class white women's political activism.

What we know about the construction of twentieth-century gay male identities also raises interesting questions about historical shifts in sexual practice and the boundaries of bodily intimacy. The early twentieth-century discovery of lively groups of male homosexuals practicing, not the anal and interfemoral penetration long typical of cross-class and often inter-generational male same-sex practices, but fellatio among middle-aged and young men of a similar class in some ways inaugurated the official recognition and persecution of homosexuality in the U.S. Calling fellatio "the twentieth-century way," these men winked knowingly at the widespread, self-consciously "modern," but unacknowledged practice of non-reproductive sex among opposite-sex couples. Notably, even the most extreme of nineteenth-century sex radicals had condemned oral sex, particularly fellatio, and many prostitutes refused to perform it. We might ask whether such practices, like abortion, earned so much flaming prose not because they were rare, but because they were increasingly common.37

The complexities of defining "sex" between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries suggests that the history of sexuality should be—and indeed it increasingly is—part of a more capacious history of bodies, bodies with gender, race, class, and other characteristics as well as sexuality. This history locates sexuality in relation to other aspects of embodied experience and examines the articulation of sensual, affective relations with the act of intercourse (however defined at that time and place) rather than assuming it. For example, certain kinds of bodily and household cleanliness took on growing power as markers of class, ethnic, and racial difference at the same time that some rejected the longstanding Christian association of sexual intercourse with bodily excess, sin, dirt, and disease. Scholars of sex education have pointed out a strong, if ambivalent, relationship between germ theory and an increasingly normative heterosexuality.38

And what about religion? Evangelical and other forms of Christianity occupy center stage in studies of nineteenth-century sexual ideology, and for good reason. Arguments positing a sexual revolution at the turn of the century take as their context the undeniable spread of more "liberal" forms of Christian doctrine and the growing importance of science and medicine


in defining sexual norms. But the assumption that science triumphed over religion in this realm as in so many others is unwarranted, and not only because of the twenty-first-century political power of conservative Christians. Studies of the Progressive Era YMCA and the camping and scouting movements demonstrate that Christianity played a key role in the rethinking of bodies, health, femininity and masculinity, and courtship and sexuality at the turn of the century. In the same years, “New Thought” advocates attracted thousands of converts in part by redeeming women’s desire from its obliquity in orthodox Christian theology. Both religion and science offered then and continue to offer today languages and arenas in which people debate ideas about the relationships among humans, animals, and the divine that are often inextricable from arguments about the nature and purpose of human sexuality.39

The study of sexuality has produced sophisticated scholarship that illuminates not only its immediate subject but also the epistemological bases and evidentiary constraints of research in the humanities and social sciences. But the current faddishness of such studies brings its own dangers. Contemporary work tends to equate desire with sex and simultaneously to use desire as a more hip, psychoanalytically informed version of the older “agency.” The new term has the advantage of rejecting the notion of a rational, autonomous actor in favor of a more complex subject, one with a psyche and a gender as well as the ability to reason. Yet too often the effect of the substitution is to make all desires sexual and all sexualities about something else altogether, usually power.40 A laudable effort to overcome the longstanding denial of the social importance of sexuality and to highlight the erotics of power, this move nevertheless tends to detach sexualities from bodies and make desire a free-floating verity that all studies must confirm. The conflation of sexual desire with all desires tends to naturalize sexual liberalism—the idea that sexuality is definitive of selfhood—instead of historicizing it. Without denying, spiritualizing, or naturalizing sex, we should question why it and bodies have suddenly become so fashionable and what political projects we serve by studying their histories.


40 Satter, *Every Mind a Kingdom*, is a good example. The conflation is at once a strength of her study—women don’t just seek sexual satisfaction, they seek power—and a weakness; she doesn’t address sexuality or the problem of the body for women as directly as she might.