

Reading Guide – Creating, Containing, and Resisting “Normal” in Cold War America

During Session 6 we launch into week 2 of the third unit of the course, “Locks and Dams: Creating and Policing Boundaries, 1920-1960.” Last week we examined change over time in the ways institutions (and especially the military) understood and regulated sexuality. This week we continue that conversation into the postwar era. As you read this week, pay close attention to the ways various historical actors discuss “normal” sexuality and gendered behavior. How was “normalcy” defined, and what made it appealing? Finally, what strategies did people use to resist and contest it?

As always, try to keep in mind the “Three Cs” of historical thinking: context, continuity, and change. What historical contexts helped shape American thinking about gender and sexuality during the post-WWII era? What continuities and enduring themes from previous weeks do you notice? What changed during this period? What was new, or different?

Required Texts

- Elaine Tyler May, “Explosive Issues: Sex, Women, and the Bomb,” in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, May, ed. (1989) 154-168.
- Sarah Igo, “Surveying Normal Selves,” from *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (2007) 191-233.
- Craig Loftin, “Unacceptable Mannerisms: Gender Anxieties, Homosexual Activism, and the Swish in the United States, 1945-1965,” *Journal of Social History* 40: 3 (2007), 577-596.
- Joanne Meyerowitz, “Transforming Sex: Christine Jorgensen in the Postwar U.S.,” *OAH Magazine of History* 20:2 (March 2006) 16-20.
- “Alfred Kinsey Reports on Americans’ Sexual Behavior, 1948-1953,” in *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality*, Peiss, ed. (2002) 368-373.
- “Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts, 1950,” in *Documenting Intimate Matters: Primary Sources for a History of Sexuality in America*, Foster ed. (2012) 144-147.

Questions to Consider

Elaine Tyler May is an historian of the postwar era. The essay we read by her this week explores connections between Cold War political ideology, gender, and family life. Why, according to May, did so many Americans rush into marriage and childbearing after WWII? What role did experts play in helping shape trends like early marriage and rising birthrates? What does May mean by the term “sexual containment,” and why did some Americans think it was necessary?

Sarah Igo is a cultural and intellectual historian. Her book, *The Averaged American*, traces the history of social surveys and polling in the twentieth-century US. The chapter we read this week from her book focuses on Alfred Kinsey, one of many “experts” who achieved fame and authority during the postwar era. How, according to Igo, did Kinsey justify his research, and what strategies did he use to claim expert status? Why did Kinsey choose to include some Americans, and not others, in his published studies? After learning about Kinsey, how would you describe his project’s relationship to “normal” sexual behavior? Did his studies challenge “normal”? Create it? Something else?

Craig Loftin is an historian of 1950s and early 1960s gay and lesbian activism (sometimes referred to as “homophile” organizing). In “Unacceptable Mannerisms” he examines how ideas about gender – and especially masculinity – shaped homophile politics. Why, according to Loftin, did authors and readers of magazines like ONE think “swishes” were a problem? What consequences (both positive

and negative) does Loftin associate with the increased visibility of homosexuality in American culture during this era?

Joanne Meyerowitz is a familiar figure from week one. In her short article assigned this week she examines the life and celebrity of Christine Jorgenson. What, according to Meyerowitz, made Jorgenson's story attractive to postwar Americans? Knowing what we know about "sexual containment" (from May), and the atmosphere of fear and repression surrounding homosexuality during this era (from Loftin), how can we account for Jorgenson's celebrity, and the initially warm reception she received from the public? What role does science play in Meyerowitz's account? How about law?

The two primary sources assigned this week are discussed repeatedly in the other assigned readings. As you read selections from Kinsey's studies and "Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government," pay close attention to language and tone. What recurring themes and patterns do you notice in these documents? Looking forward to your Short Paper (During Session 6), attempt a "practice analysis" of one of these sources. How do these documents challenge, complicate, or clarify the claims made by May, Igo, Loftin, and Meyerowitz?

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