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The Housewife, the Single Girl, and the Prostitute: Constructions of Femininity in Postwar American Historiography

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Marie Rowley

The Housewife, the Single Girl, and the Prostitute:

Constructions of Femininity in Postwar American Historiography

America in the two decades after World War II experienced conditions that seemed to indicate an unprecedented focus on domesticity and traditional gender roles. Couples married at younger ages, fertility rates soared, and population shifted to suburban areas all over the country. Just beneath this surface, however, a more complex discourse about gender norms was also emerging. Gay and lesbian communities began to organize, teenagers emerged as a cultural force, and young single women began to view economic independence as a legitimate goal. These contradictory forces coexisted in a culture struggling to define gender and sexuality in the anxiety-ridden era of the Cold War. Journalists, psychologists, and other experts described a crisis of masculinity in American culture and gave women advice on how best to fulfill the roles of wives and mothers. The popularity of *Playboy Magazine* and the publication of the Kinsey Reports illustrate how central sexuality was in this ongoing postwar debate. Women's sexuality in particular was tied to the larger fears gripping the nation. This essay explores how historians approach the postwar constructions of femininity and female sexuality. Some investigate the origins of the stereotypical suburban housewife model of domesticity and how it was perpetuated



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in American culture. Others address how some women modified that model for their own ends. A third group of historians is concerned with the women who resisted the domesticity model and how their femininity was constructed and understood in the discourse. Taken together, these three strands of inquiry paint a complex, nuanced picture of gender and sexuality in postwar America.

The idea that the postwar period was characterized by homogeneity, consensus, and overwhelming conservatism is deeply entrenched in popular memory and much of American historiography.¹ This view may in part be based in the contrast that emerged in the wake of the great social and cultural upheavals beginning in the mid-1960s. Even participants in the social movements of the 1960s emphasized the conservatism of the previous decades, as Betty Friedan did in her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*. In her 1994 essay “Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958” Joanne Meyerowitz notes that although “many historians question Friedan’s homogenized account of women’s actual experience, virtually all accept her version of the dominant ideology, the conservative promotion of domesticity.”² More recent historians are challenging this narrative, however, and identifying cultural and ideological roots of the women’s movement and sexual revolution in the postwar period. The works described in this essay demonstrate that not only were women’s actual

¹ See Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

² Joanne Meyerowitz, “Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958,” in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, Joanne Meyerowitz, ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 230.



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experiences rarely in line with the prescribed ideal, the ideology of gender and the cultural constructions of femininity and sexuality were neither uniform nor universally accepted.

Postwar American culture was saturated with anxieties about gender and sexuality. K. A. Cuordileone writes that when Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. identified “the crisis of masculinity” in 1958, many American men felt threatened by “a conformist mass society and the sexual ambiguity it bred.”³ Men seemed to be the focus of many contemporary authors’ concerns about shifting gender norms. However, historian Beth Bailey writes that while journalists, scholars, and social critics focused on the “crisis of American masculinity” after the war, a concurrent “crisis of femininity” was present in the discourse as well, though it was “submerged [and] unnamed.”⁴ Though anxiety surrounding women’s gender presentation and sexual expression was not referred to explicitly as often as the parallel concerns about men, this anxiety pervades the cultural landscape of the postwar period. Americans feared disorder, and one of the most frightening ideas was uncontained female sexuality. In the 1950s, Americans were just beginning to untangle the connections and distinctions between biological sex, gender presentation, and sexual orientation.⁵ Female sexual behavior, expression, and autonomy were therefore an integral part in the “unnamed” crisis of femininity.

³ K. A. Cuordileone, “Politics in an Age of Anxiety: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949-1960,” *The Journal of American History* 87, No. 2 (September 2000): 524.

⁴ Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 105.

⁵ See Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).



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Against this backdrop of the postwar fixation with gender, postwar America developed three categories of femininity, infused with sexual connotations. In the 2002 historiographical essay “Rewriting Postwar Women’s History, 1945-1960,” Joanne Meyerowitz writes that historians challenging the *Feminine Mystique* version of the postwar are taking two basic approaches. Some “explore the ideological underpinnings of the postwar domestic ideal,” while others “investigate the ways in which diverse groups of postwar women challenged, transformed, and resisted the domestic stereotype.”⁶ I argue that within these two approaches, three distinct models of postwar constructions of femininity have emerged. Some historians, building on the work of Elaine Tyler May, do focus on the influence and pervasiveness of “ideological underpinnings” of the gender conservatism of the postwar years. Others identify how some women “transformed” the ideal by creating a version of heterosexual femininity that retained many elements of the domestic ideal, such as traditionally feminine appearance, while adopting some independence and sexual autonomy. This construction of femininity may be called the modified domesticity or Single Girl model.⁷ Finally, other historians investigate the constructions of womanhood that fall outside the domestic model entirely, those who “resisted” the ideal and enacted what was culturally constructed as a deviant form of femininity. This essay will evaluate the historians using each of these models in turn and then suggest other ways to

⁶ Joanne Meyerowitz, “Rewriting Postwar Women’s History, 1945-1960,” in *A Companion to American Women’s History*, Nancy A. Hewitt, ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 382.

⁷ This is a reference to Helen Gurley Brown’s 1962 book *Sex and the Single Girl*, which championed this version of femininity. Brown’s views and impact will be explained at greater length later in this essay.



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continue expanding and complicating the historiography and our understanding of postwar gender and sexuality.

One of the first and most influential books on women's postwar history was Elaine Tyler May's 1988 book *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*.⁸ May argues that the foreign policy concept of "containment" was simultaneously applied to private life during the Cold War period. She documents the "domestic explosion" after World War II, characterized by increased fertility rates and lowered age of marriage, and explains that these demographic factors were reflexively influenced by an attendant domestic ideology that swept American culture.⁹ In addition to an increased emphasis on family and homemaking, May identifies "sexual containment" as a key part of this conservative gender model.¹⁰ Arguing against the "sexual liberalism" of the postwar years identified by John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, May contends that the dominant ideology firmly proscribed sexuality to the confines of marriage.¹¹ May further argues that this conservative view of sexuality and gender roles was perpetuated by journalists, experts, and mainstream Americans themselves.¹² *Homeward Bound* carefully

⁸ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, rev. ed., (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

⁹ May, 5.

¹⁰ May, 109.

¹¹ May, 111. See also John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 241, where they define sexual liberalism as "an overlapping set of beliefs that detached sexual activity from the instrumental goal of procreation, affirmed heterosexual pleasure as a value in itself, defined sexual satisfaction as a critical component of personal happiness and successful marriage, and weakened the connections between sexual expression and marriage by providing youth with room for some experimentation as preparation for adult status."

¹² May, 113.



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delineates the complex, heterogeneous reality of experience from the domestic ideal, but its overall argument is that conservative gender ideology was pervasive in the postwar years. “Whether or not women and men actually conformed to the containment prescription,” she writes, “they were likely to be affected by its power.”¹³

The containment model as described by May remains a significant influence on historians of the period. For example, Lynn Spigel’s 1992 book *Make Room for TV* builds directly on May’s analysis of the culturally hegemonic domestic ideal. In her history of the social and cultural contexts and impacts of television’s early years, she writes that the medium was “welcomed as a catalyst for renewed domestic values.”¹⁴ Though she acknowledges that at times the public discourse surrounding television contained conflicting messages about its role in family life, she echoes May’s assertion that the gender ideology of the period was overwhelmingly conservative.

Two very recent works reflect the lasting impact of the domestic ideal model and its continued relevance as a site of inquiry. Caroline Herbst Lewis’ *Prescription for Heterosexuality* and Anna G. Creadick’s *Perfectly Average*, both published in 2010, explore different ways that the conservative gender ideals of the postwar period were perpetuated. Creadick analyzes the discourse of “normality” that arose in the years just after World War II and reached its pinnacle in the mid-1950s. She argues that normality became perceived as an ideal for which to strive

¹³ May, 111.

¹⁴ Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2.



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instead of a statistical average. Her description of “normative femininity” recalls the domestic image May identified in prescriptive literature of the period.¹⁵ The pursuit of homogeneity that took as its icon the reproductively capable white female also worked to enforce heteronormativity, a form of sexual containment.¹⁶ Lewis draws explicitly on the “sexual containment” elements of May’s model in her analysis of the ways the medical profession enforced heteronormativity and conservative gender roles at mid-century.¹⁷ Lewis argues for the central role of sexuality in the construction of gender roles; medical professionals maintained that only their version of healthy sexual expression in women evinced the “passive femininity” that constituted the ideal.¹⁸ By investigating the origins and the influence of the domestic ideal, Creadick’s, Lewis’, and Spigel’s books all illustrate the strain in the historiography that Meyerowitz identified in 2002 as an expansion of May’s work.

Other scholars turned their attention to the nuances and ambiguities of the domestic ideal in mass culture. Sociologist Wini Breines’ 1992 book *Young, White, and Miserable* begins with the premise that popular culture representations of femininity were “narrowly defined” but looks for underlying “gender tensions” in the messages young women of the baby boom generation received.¹⁹ Similarly, in her 1994 book *Where the Girls Are* media critic Susan J. Douglas

¹⁵ Anna G. Creadick, *Perfectly Average: The Pursuit of Normality in Postwar America*, (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 83.

¹⁶ Creadick, 20.

¹⁷ Carolyn Herbst Lewis, *Prescription for Heterosexuality: Sexual Citizenship in the Cold War Era*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 4.

¹⁸ Lewis, 38.

¹⁹ Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), ix, 1.



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describes a “media-induced schizophrenia” in young women who grew up in the 1950s.²⁰ Both authors argue that despite the apparently overwhelming message that women should be passive and domestically-inclined, young women could find in the mass media alternative images of femininity that challenged that model. These authors’ investigations of the postwar mass media reveal roots of the feminist consciousness of the 1960s and 1970s under the surface of the tranquil domestic ideal of the 1950s. The varied meanings and uses of the dominant ideology they identify form a foundation for historians who investigate femininity that evinced a modified form of domesticity.

One site of inquiry into the modified domesticity model is through the uses of gender roles and sexual expression in the emerging teenage culture. Beth Bailey’s *From Front Porch to Back Seat* was one of the first works to thoroughly examine the ways the conservative gender ideology was communicated in real women’s lives and the ways they interpreted it for themselves. The postwar preoccupation with gender was translated into the relatively new world of dating via advice manuals, schools, parents, and other authorities who developed an elaborate system of gender etiquette in an attempt to control teenagers’ sexuality. The rigidly defined etiquette of gender performance was in turn used by teens as “a tool in the struggle for power within the courtship system.”²¹ The ideal feminine behavior, in line with the containment model of femininity, was passive submission. Teenage girls could use this to their advantage, however,

²⁰ Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, (New York: Times Books, 1994), 19-20.

²¹ Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch*, 115.



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by performing their roles so perfectly that their dates felt their own masculine performance to be lacking. Bailey argues that middle-class white teenagers embraced the “essentially conservative system” of gender even as their demands for independence inherently challenged it.²² By engaging in gender based and sexually charged dating rituals, young white middle-class women upheld the ideal in some ways while tearing it down in others.

Bailey revised some of these arguments in her 1999 book *Sex in the Heartland*, which looked for roots of the sexual revolution in the ideas and experiences of mainstream Americans in Lawrence, Kansas. Bailey argues that dating was a site of power struggle, not just between men and women, but also between youth and authority figures. Young men and women, with a consciousness of themselves as a distinct category for the first time in the postwar period, constantly challenged the boundaries of acceptable sexual behavior. Authorities, such as the administration at Kansas University and countless other universities across the country, responded by creating elaborate rules and regulations to govern young people’s behavior. These rules, such as curfews, were consistently skirted by rebellious youths, and the result of this ongoing power struggle was a redefinition of sexual misbehavior—the range of “normal” behavior expanded to include anything that was heterosexual and consensual.²³ This redefinition and constant power struggle gave women a new range of sexual expression that could be explored while still upholding the traditional feminine ideal. Together, Bailey’s books illustrate

²² Bailey, *From Front Porch*, 117.

²³ Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 75.



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one variation in the modified domesticity model. If acceptance of the domestic ideal is viewed as a spectrum, the young women in Bailey's two studies would appear on the more conservative end, but their expressions of sexual autonomy represent a form of challenge to the ideal nonetheless.

Jennifer Scanlon's 2009 biography of Helen Gurley Brown further explores the roots of the modified domestic femininity she championed. Scanlon argues that Brown and her Single Girls were "lipstick feminists" who "refus[ed] to give in to the dictates of postwar domesticity."²⁴ Women's liberal sexual expression was a key element of Brown's perspective, a position she shared with mainstream feminism. However, her views diverged with theirs on the issue of traditional femininity. Brown did not see liberal sexual expression and a conservative model of femininity as incompatible. The Single Girl's sexuality and feminine performance struck a middle ground between the emerging sexual revolution and the sexual containment ideology of the postwar period. The success of *Sex and the Single Girl* in 1962 illustrates how widespread this middle-ground version of femininity had become since World War II. Brown's life and book, Scanlon argues, show that "the fissures in the postwar domestic formula always existed side by side with the formula."²⁵ Like Breines' and Douglas' studies of mass culture and Bailey's analysis of teenage dating practices, Scanlon's history of the Single Girl complicates the narrative of postwar domesticity. The Single Girl version of femininity challenged the

²⁴ Jennifer Scanlon, *Bad Girls Go Everywhere: The Life of Helen Gurley Brown*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), x-xi.

²⁵ Scanlon, 69.



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mainstream sexual containment more aggressively than Bailey's teenagers, but it still retains essential elements of domestic feminine behavior and performance.

Elizabeth Fraterrigo further articulated the rationale behind the modified domesticity model in her 2009 book about *Playboy* magazine. The type of woman constructed by *Playboy*, Fraterrigo writes, "did not oppose traditional notions of femininity and domesticity so much as she deployed those attributes outside the context of home and family by enacting a different sort of 'working-girl' femininity."²⁶ The Playboy bunny and the Single Girl challenged the sexual containment aspects of the dominant gender ideology, but upheld the passivity and submissiveness that the dominant ideology ascribed to proper femininity. This echoes Bailey's findings from *Sex in the Heartland*; young women were pushing the boundaries of acceptable femininity but were careful to not push too far. Though the modified domesticity model continued to uphold some of the conservative elements of the containment ideology, it does show that the latter was not monolithically dispensed nor universally accepted.

Other historians working with the modified domesticity model explore ways that this discourse was created. For example, Susan K. Freeman's 2008 book *Sex Goes to School* argues that sex education classes in the postwar period were shaped by normative gender assumptions, but a more complicated discourse emerged as students discussed the information in classes or among themselves. She stresses that many educators and the students themselves "acknowledged

²⁶ Elizabeth Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 105.



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variability in accepted standards of femininity and chastity.”²⁷ Though the material of these classes advocated conservative beliefs about heterosexuality and gender roles, the act of educating young women about their own bodies and sexuality, and encouraging them to openly discuss these topics led to an increased sense of autonomy. Like Breines, Douglas, and Bailey, Freeman specifically identifies roots of the sexual revolution and women’s liberation movement in the 1950s. She argues that the sex education classes public schools offered in the postwar period opened the “possibilities for questioning sexual and gender norms” that would come to fruition as the young women in those classes entered adulthood.²⁸

The postwar period can only be understood in connection to an understanding of the cultural and social context of World War II. Elaine Tyler May argues that the domestic ideal of the postwar period was tied to past doubts, fears, and instability of the war as well as the contemporary paranoia of the Cold War.²⁹ The modified domesticity model also has some roots in wartime America. For example, Maria Elena Buszek’s study of the pin-up girl as a feminist icon argues that the classic pin-ups of World War II represented a “subversive model of female sexuality” that combined “conventional beauty, blatant sexuality, professional independence, and wholesome patriotism.”³⁰ As much as Rosie the Riveter symbolized women’s changing place in American labor during the war, the pin-up represented a shift in sexual mores. The seismic

²⁷ Susan K. Freeman, *Sex Goes to School: Girls and Sex Education before the 1960s*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), xi.

²⁸ Freeman, 101.

²⁹ May, 1.

³⁰ Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006),



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cultural shifts of wartime encouraged challenges to gender norms and ideology. Some turned to a narrow, conservative definition of gender roles, while others embraced a version of femininity that encompassed elements of domesticity with a newfound sexual liberalism. The wartime pin-up could be seen as a forerunner to the Single Girl model of feminine sexuality.

Female sexual expression or gender presentation that fell outside the heterosexual norm was constructed in popular discourse as deviant femininity. The framework for this construction is most clearly explained in Donna Penn's 1994 essay, "The Sexualized Woman: The Lesbian, the Prostitute, and the Containment of Female Sexuality in Postwar America." Though Penn acknowledges the overarching ideology of containment as it applied to female sexuality, as described by May, she is less concerned with the shape of that ideology or the way it was discursively enacted and more with the construction of the "other" against which it was formed. Deviant femininity was constructed to "define, bind, and contain the so-called norm."³¹ The domestic model of femininity describes the so-called "normal" woman; Penn reconstructs how "abnormal" women were perceived in postwar America.

Penn identifies the lesbian and the prostitute as two archetypes that epitomized deviant femininity in American culture, and explains that they were linked by the danger perceived around their sexuality. Though seemingly distinct categories, the link between lesbians and prostitutes was that they both served as "symbols of female sexual desire, female sexual excess,

³¹ Donna Penn, "The Sexualized Woman: The Lesbian, the Prostitute, and the Containment of Female Sexuality in Postwar America," in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 360.



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uncontained female sexuality, and therefore female sexual deviance and danger.”³² In the Cold War climate of fear and uncertainty about the meanings of masculinity, female sexuality was viewed as potentially dangerous or subversive. Penn argues that despite the pressure to conform to the domestic ideal and the cultural backlash that demonized them, both categories of deviant women “aggressively and publicly carved out an alternative meaning from the dominant code.”³³ The histories of both lesbians and prostitutes present a challenge to the idea that the domestic containment model of femininity and female sexuality wholly dominated postwar culture.

Beyond Penn’s essay, the history of prostitution in postwar America is largely absent from the historiography. However, examining how prostitutes were portrayed and perceived in wartime America may give an indication of their status after the war as well. In her 2006 book about the connections between courtship, treating, and prostitution in the first half the 20th century, Elizabeth Alice Clement describes how the US Government altered the cultural discourse on deviant feminine forms during World War II.³⁴ Propaganda posters warned servicemen to avoid prostitutes, pick ups, and victory girls, thereby including all women who have sex with soldiers under the mantle of ‘bad women.’³⁵ The pin-up girl exhibited a sexually available form of femininity, rooted in the domestic ideal and seductive but non-threatening. By contrast, the prostitute or victory girl was portrayed as dirty and diseased; her sexuality was

³² Penn, 359.

³³ Penn, 375.

³⁴ Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love For Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 243.

³⁵ Clement, 258.



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understood to be aggressive and indiscriminating. Though the cultural representations of these women were unflattering and emphasized their deviance from an idealized norm, the numbers of prostitutes and victory girls during World War II illustrate how some women challenged the dominant gender ideologies of the time.

Marilyn Hegarty further explores the regulation of female sexuality and construction of deviant femininity during World War II in her book *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes*. She argues that in the context of wartime fears of the disruption of traditional gender systems, “female sexuality seemed particularly dangerous.”³⁶ In this state of uncertainty, the sexually alluring woman and the sexually dangerous woman appeared at times in contrast to each other and at other times became conflated. Framing women’s labor in characteristically domestic terms could control the mobilization of women in the war industries, but a similar expansion of women’s sexual behavior and opportunities seemed to cross a line into male prerogative. Hegarty explains that the “patriotute” exemplifies the “paradoxes inherent in an attempt to enlist women’s sexuality in support of the war effort while simultaneously trying to keep women’s sexuality under control.”³⁷ The culture condoned the use of female sexuality as a morale booster for the soldiers, as evidenced by the widespread organizing of USO dances and acceptance of the image of the pin-up girl. On the other hand, society maintained a deep mistrust of female

³⁶ Marilyn Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality during World War II*, (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 2.

³⁷ Hegarty, 158.



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sexuality, particularly among women who exercised the greatest deal of agency with their bodies.

Hegarty also describes the connection between prostitutes and lesbians. As the wartime fears of gender disorder and sexual chaos flourished, constructions of deviant female sexuality were overlapping and ill-defined. The slander campaigns against the Women's Army Corps are an example of this conflation of deviant femininities. These women were seen as directly challenging gender norms and therefore came under scrutiny for instances of lesbianism, prostitution, promiscuity, or some combination of the three.³⁸ This reinforces Donna Penn's assertion that prostitute and lesbian were equivalent categories in the postwar. Penn also proposes that the newly increased visibility of lesbian subcultures was a factor in their postwar cultural representations as dangerous women; perhaps the focus on prostitutes during the war had a similar effect on creating a backlash against them after the war.³⁹

The other "sister of the sexual underworld" in Penn's formation is more represented in postwar historiography.⁴⁰ Lesbian history by scholars such as Lillian Faderman, Elizabeth Lapovsky-Kennedy and Madeline Davis, and Marcia M. Gallo offer important examples of another form of deviant femininity. Prostitutes and lesbians "shared a culturally defined space as sexually defined women," but that cultural construction was debated and contested among the

³⁸ Hegarty, 89.

³⁹ Penn, 359.

⁴⁰ Penn, 359.



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women themselves.⁴¹ Though the dominant culture defined their femininity as outside the norm because of a perceived threat centered in their sexual autonomy, lesbian communities created versions of femininity for their own uses and identities.

The primary method of describing and understanding lesbian femininity or gender presentation in the postwar period is through the use of the butch/femme dichotomy. In *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, Lillian Faderman argues that without existing role models, lesbians in the 1940s and 1950s adapted their gender presentations to the dominant “heterogenderal pattern” present among both heterosexuals and the male homophile community.⁴² She also acknowledges, however, that to many lesbians these gender roles were more complicated. Femmes in particular present a complex challenge to the formulation of postwar femininity; their attraction to a “rebel sexuality” distinguished them from the heterosexual women with whom they were basically identical in outward appearance.⁴³

Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis write that although butch/femme roles “derived in great part from heterosexual models, the roles also transformed those models and created an authentic lesbian lifestyle.”⁴⁴ By publicly incorporating elements of traditional masculinity, butch lesbians were enacting a form of prepolitical resistance; presenting traditionally feminine style and behavior while partnered with a masculine woman was a

⁴¹ Penn, 369.

⁴² Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 167.

⁴³ Faderman, 171.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 6.



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femme's act of resistance. While some women explained these roles in the terms of gender essentialism that formed the basis of the conservative postwar gender ideology, others were not comfortable embracing essentialism. Kennedy and Davis explain that these women created alternate explanations for the creation of their gender and sexual identities, demonstrating the way that the lesbian community challenged the dominant version of femininity in the 1940s and 1950s.⁴⁵

While these excellent histories of lesbian life reconstruct how femininity was viewed and structured within lesbian communities, Robert J. Corber's *Cold War Femme* focuses on how the dominant discourse constructed lesbians through cultural representations of them.⁴⁶ He analyzes several films and film stars of the Cold War era to assess how coded messages about lesbian identity were communicated to the audience through words, appearance, and actions. He argues that through World War II the common understanding of homosexuality was inexorably bound with notions of gender performance, but that this understanding began to shift during the Cold War era to encompass the figure of the femme lesbian, defined more by her sexual object choice than her gender presentation. Corber argues that this ultimately led to the destabilization of the traditional femininity of the postwar. The cultural construction of the femme lesbian was more

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, "The Reproduction of Butch-Fem Roles: A Social Constructionist Approach," in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons, eds., (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 253.

⁴⁶ Robert J. Corber, *Cold War Femme: Lesbianism, National Identity, and Hollywood Cinema*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).



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threatening to mainstream America because her gender presentation made her indistinguishable from a heterosexual woman who adhered to the domestic ideal.

As the differing views on the nature of the butch/femme dichotomy outlined in these two works illustrate, the understanding of how lesbians fit into the postwar discourse on femininity remains complex. Faderman's interpretation suggests that the lesbian community adopted the butch/femme model for lack of other options, while Kennedy and Davis would seem to suggest that adhering to butch/femme roles was a choice many working-class lesbians made as a subconscious form of resistance and a useful way of organizing their communities. Even among the politically and socially conscious lesbian organization, the Daughters of Bilitis, the relationship between female sexuality and gender was contested and complex. Marcia M. Gallo describes the results of a questionnaire the DOB sent to its members in 1958 wherein some members identified as masculine, some as feminine, and some as neither, "reflecting the recurring debates within DOB over the popularity of the gender-based roles for lesbians."⁴⁷ Though the rigidity of this dichotomy began to break down in the 1960s and 1970s, its prevalence in the postwar period provides a window into a unique form of deviant femininity. In the larger context of the fear of sexual chaos embodied in female sexual agency in the postwar period, lesbians' embrace of the butch/femme dichotomy can be interpreted as both an indicator

⁴⁷ Marcia M. Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement*, (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006), 53.



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of the preoccupation with gender in American culture and a challenge to the hegemonic domestic model of femininity.

Another form of female deviancy was constructed around abortionists and their clients, as described in Rickie Solinger's 1994 essay "Extreme Danger: Women Abortionists and their Clients before *Roe v. Wade*." Just as prostitution and same sex desire were socially constructed, women who chose to terminate their pregnancies were subject to the same cultural forces that defined them in relation to the idealized norm of heteronormativity and especially impetus to marry. Women accused or tried for illegal abortions in the postwar years served as examples of "multiple deviants"—they had defied the idealized sexual order by conceiving out of wedlock and by terminating the pregnancy they demonstrated an independence that overstepped the bounds of ideal passive femininity.⁴⁸ Motherhood was viewed as a woman's natural role, and therefore a woman who sought an abortion was seen as "a female of easy virtue and as a sexualized, but de-feminized, not-mother."⁴⁹ Through the experiences and the cultural representations of women who received abortions in the postwar period, historians can begin to understand how the category of deviant femininity could apply not just to prostitutes and lesbians, but any woman who challenged the gender and sexual order too much.

Abortionists and their clients transgressed the conservative gender order in a way similar to another representation of deviant femininity: the nymphomaniac. Carol Groneman's 2000

⁴⁸ Rickie Solinger, "Extreme Danger: Women Abortionists and their Clients before *Roe v. Wade*," in *Not June Cleaver*, Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., 345.

⁴⁹ Solinger, "Extreme Danger," 347.



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book *Nymphomania* provides another glimpse of the way heterosexual women who demonstrated sexuality that defied the containment model were perceived. Chronicling the medical and psychological professions' explanations for nymphomania over time, Groneman argues that in the postwar period the nymphomaniac was constructed in terms borrowed from Freudian psychoanalysis and reflecting the period's preoccupation with gender norms. The experts argued that the nymphomaniac, like the lesbian or the abortion client, had "rejected" her innate femininity, which could lead to divorce or even prostitution.⁵⁰ Groneman's and Solinger's studies reinforce and expand Penn's arguments; the lesbian, the prostitute, and other sexual deviants were all "sexually defined women" outside the realm of "normal" femininity.⁵¹

Building on the foundation of the previous historians, one way that the historiography can expand is by incorporating all three frameworks of femininity in analyzing postwar culture. For example, in her 2005 book *American Sexual Character*, Miriam Reumann reconstructs the discourse around female sexuality broadly. She explores how postwar Americans' concerns with national character were shaped by sexual anxieties, particularly as they were described in the Kinsey Reports. When *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* was published in 1953, it sparked even more controversy than its predecessor had five years earlier. Reumann argues that it called into question long-standing assumptions about "normal" female sexuality or the naturalness of the conservative model of femininity. Ultimately the publication of the Kinsey Report and the

⁵⁰ Carol Groneman, *Nymphomania A History*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2000), 81.

⁵¹ Penn, 369.



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public fervor it provoked meant that “the gulf between women’s prescribed social and sexual roles and their actual desires and behaviors could no longer be ignored.”⁵² Like Breines, Freeman, and other historians, Reumann finds roots of the cultural shifts of the 1960s in the 1950s. The publication of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* was a contributing factor in the destabilization of traditional gender norms in the following decade.

Reumann’s work complicates the understanding of postwar constructions of femininity and sexuality by investigating the ways they were constructed. Her work is not built on one of the three models of femininity I have identified, but instead works to reconstruct the cultural context in which all three co-existed. Though the Kinsey Reports themselves questioned the universality of the domestic containment model, the harsh response from some critics supports the idea that this ideology held considerable power. However, the Single Girl and the female deviant found some vindication in the Kinsey Reports, and the fact that many Americans began to embrace a scientifically-founded sexual liberalism after their publication gives weight to their presence in the spectrum of postwar American ideology. Reumann’s book illustrates how complex and nuanced postwar gender and sexual ideology truly was.

Another work that incorporates multiple frameworks in its depiction of postwar femininity is Rachel Devlin’s 2005 book *Relative Intimacy: Fathers, Adolescent Daughters, and Postwar American Culture*. Devlin argues that the crisis of femininity of the postwar period was

⁵² Miriam G. Reumann, *American Sexual Character: Sex, Gender, and National Identity in the Kinsey Reports*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 87.



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a significant factor in reshaping the meaning of the father-daughter relationship. She writes that as experts became increasingly fixated on the category of “wayward girls,” they responded by “establishing the father as the sexual focal point of female adolescent psychology.”⁵³ Devlin challenges postwar American historiography in two principle ways. First, she complicates the narrative of the emerging teenager culture that focuses primarily on young Americans’ newfound independence. Books like Bailey’s *From Front Porch to Back Seat* take this as a primary assumption, but Devlin’s work illustrates that close ties to family authority continued to shape young women’s lives and sexualities. Secondly, Devlin describes her work as revising the domestic containment model of postwar femininity that stressed conservatism and silence. The postwar preoccupation with the erotic dimensions of the father-daughter relationship, she argues, illustrates a site of change and negotiation in America’s sexual culture.

While some historians are beginning to unravel the ways in which sexuality influenced the constructions of femininity in the postwar era, other historians are investigating the ways in which race and class further complicate the narrative. Much of the current literature focuses on the lives and cultural context for the white middle class. Historians like Beth Bailey carefully point out that their studies are focused this way because of the nature of the available sources and the larger context of postwar women’s historiography.⁵⁴ There are several recent examples of ways that race can be incorporated as an important element of gender construction, however. The

⁵³ Rachel Devlin, *Relative Intimacy: Fathers, Adolescent Daughters, and Postwar American Culture*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 3.

⁵⁴ Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 11.



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following examples utilize the three categories of postwar femininity outlined in this essay, while also accounting for the influence of race on the construction of those categories.

Wini Breines' *Young, White, and Miserable* works with the domestic femininity model and is notable for explicitly focusing on how race influenced the construction of white female identity. Breines outlines the postwar preoccupation with issues of race and concludes that this both mirrored and shaped the concurrent preoccupation with gender. As Breines explores the avenues that young white women took toward nonconformity, a key element she identifies is their identification with "black music and difference."⁵⁵ The ideal version of femininity was not just passively domestic but also conspicuously white; young white women who did not feel an affinity for that model embraced ways to differentiate themselves from it. Similarly, Rachel Devlin's *Relative Intimacy* is primarily concerned with the culture of the white middle class, but also includes race as a site of identity-formation in young women. By contrasting the cultural depictions of the father-daughter relationship of the white middle class and the African American middle class, her study gives a clear example of the way race, class, and gender overlapped in postwar American culture.

In her 2007 book, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age*, Susan K. Cahn places adolescent female sexuality at the center of her study of the American South. She argues that the sexual agency of both white and African American girls worked to "unhinge the established coupling of race and sex that fortified the power of white elites and a growing middle

⁵⁵ Breines, 19.



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class.”⁵⁶ Like Beth Bailey, Cahn analyzes the role of dating and sexual behavior in the youth culture that emerged in the postwar decade. However, she includes differences of race and class in her study, concluding that “the sexual culture of mid-century high schools was not uniform or pervasive, but rather existed to different degrees in different settings.”⁵⁷ A new sense of sexual autonomy among young women was a commonality across all races, classes, and locations, however. Cahn echoes Breines, Douglas, and others who locate the origins of the cultural revolutions of the 1960s in developments of the immediate postwar period; in the context of the South, however, issues of race form the primary concern. Cahn ultimately argues that parental concerns about teenage sexuality informed the battles surrounding school desegregation in the 1950s and 1960s; the specter of interracial sex among teenagers shaped the political and social unrest of the period. Cahn’s book, like Bailey’s work, is situated in the modified domesticity model.

One way that historians have begun pulling apart the connections between race, class, gender, and sexuality is through investigating single motherhood in the postwar period. Rickie Solinger’s 1992 book *Wake Up Little Susie* first highlighted the distinct ways that illegitimacy was constructed in racial terms.⁵⁸ She explores the reality of this intersection of race and sexuality as it impacted women’s lives and public policy. Regina Kunzel’s 1994 essay “White

⁵⁶ Susan K. Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 10.

⁵⁷ Cahn, 222.

⁵⁸ Rickie Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race before Roe v. Wade*, (New York: Routledge, 1992).



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Neurosis, Black Pathology” further develops the connection between race, gender, and sexuality in the construction of illegitimacy. She argues that in this period “out-of-wedlock pregnancy functioned as a language through which people might contain, contest, and resolve issues of social change and sexual and racial conflict far broader than the issue of illegitimacy.”⁵⁹ White illegitimate pregnancies were a sign of mental illness, while black women who became pregnant outside of marriage were considered “culturally deviant.”⁶⁰ *Wake Up Little Susie* and Kunzel’s essay are connected to Solinger’s work on abortionists and their clients. Out-of-wedlock pregnancy was obviously understood differently based on whether it was carried to term or terminated; these works show how race influenced the construction as well. It also connects young, black, unwed mothers to other female “deviants” of the postwar period, such as lesbians and prostitutes. Further work can be done to elaborate on this connection between race and other forms of female deviancy, beyond the “language” of out-of-wedlock pregnancy.

Catherine S. Ramirez further complicates the understanding of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the postwar by breaking down the black/white dichotomy. In her 2009, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit*, Ramirez investigates the history of *pachucas*, Mexican American women who participated in the zoot suit style and culture. She argues that the *pachuca* style of dress and grooming “was construed as a sign of an aberrant femininity, competing masculinity, and

⁵⁹ Regina Kunzel, “White Neurosis, Black Pathology: Constructing Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancy in the Wartime and Postwar United States,” in *Not June Cleaver*, 322.

⁶⁰ Kunzel, 323.



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homosexuality.”⁶¹ *Pachucas*, then, provide another example of deviant femininity, like lesbians, prostitutes, and black unwed mothers. As in Cahn’s study, the cultural context of Ramirez’s work is a period of intense fears about “the instability of class, race, and gender categories, nonnormative sexualities, juvenile delinquency, and sedition,” though the demographic factors of the west brought those fears into focus on working-class Mexican American culture.⁶² *Pachucas* offer another clear example of the ways that race, class, and sexuality intertwined in the cultural manifestations of gender expectations and performance in mid-century America. Ramirez’s book also offers a valuable addition to the growing literature that challenges the assumed dominance of the postwar domestic ideal.

The work of the historians presented in this essay represents a growing and important strain in the historiographies of women’s history, postwar history, cultural histories, and histories of sexuality. The diversity of subjects and arguments they represent illustrate the depth of the field and point the way toward new areas of inquiry. Creadick’s and Lewis’ books demonstrate that the domestic ideal was perpetuated in many more ways than the family sitcom that is usually cited as the source of that image. Cultural historians can continue to pull apart the gendered messages of different aspects of postwar life. Fraterrigo’s book demonstrates how constructions of modified domestic femininity can be analyzed through comparison with constructions of masculinity. The ties between the parallel crises of masculinity and femininity deserve further

⁶¹ Catherine S. Ramirez, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), xvii.

⁶² Ramirez, 57.



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scrutiny. The authors exploring deviant femininity illuminate often over-looked elements of postwar culture, while also raising intriguing questions about other ways female sexuality that fell outside the prescribed norm was portrayed and understood. More work is needed on prostitution after World War II, for example. Finally, the full implications of race and class on the construction of gender is only beginning to be understood. These categories can be applied to all the frameworks of femininity to enrich our understanding of postwar culture and its continued impact today. The postwar period continues to be relevant to American society and culture, and historians have the opportunity and the obligation to increase our understanding of its complex legacy.

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