

Chapter 13

The Liberal 1950s? Reinterpreting Postwar American Sexual Culture

Joanne Meyerowitz

For more than twenty years now, historians have written about the sexual conservatism of the postwar United States. In her 1988 book *Homeward Bound*, Elaine Tyler May drafted the outline of this now-common interpretation. May borrowed the word “containment” from foreign policy of the Cold War and repositioned it as a broader postwar cultural ethos that applied as well to gender and sexuality. In May’s influential rendition, middle-class Americans saw uncontrolled sexual behavior as a dangerous source of moral decline that would sap the nation’s strength. In postwar America, she wrote, “fears of sexual chaos” made “non-marital sexual behavior in all its forms . . . a national obsession.” Various officials, experts, and commentators “believed wholeheartedly,” she claimed, in “a direct connection between communism and sexual depravity.” Accordingly, they attempted to police sexual expression and “contain” it within marriage.¹ Over the past two decades, other historians have followed May’s lead, elaborating on the Cold War “containment” of sexuality and suggesting its impact on policy, politics, citizenship, masculinity, femininity, and sexual behavior. And yet they have simultaneously undermined the “containment” thesis. As they expanded their base of evidence, they stretched the dominant interpretation and poked a passel of holes—sometimes inadvertently—in the story it tells.

Mounting historical evidence now suggests that the postwar years were not as conservative as sometimes stated. In 1988, the same year that May published *Homeward Bound*, for example, John D’Emilio and Estelle

Freedman presented a somewhat different argument. In *Intimate Matters*, they accepted the sexual conservatism of postwar American culture but also posed the postwar years as a time of “sexual liberalism.” For D’Emilio and Freedman, sexual liberalism involved “contradictory patterns of expression and constraints.” It “celebrated the erotic, but tried to keep it within a heterosexual framework of long-term monogamous relationships.” With this formulation of moderate liberalism, they pointed to limited change during a conservative era. Since the publication of May’s and D’Emilio and Freedman’s books, other historians have made more direct assaults on the notion of postwar sexual “containment.” In her 1999 book, *Sex in the Heartland*, Beth Bailey wrote of an increasingly “sexualized national culture” in the postwar years, with a rumbling “dissonance” between “public norms and . . . private acts.” In colleges, she found, young adults engaged in “widespread covert violation” of conservative sexual norms, and college officials retreated from earlier policies that aimed to enforce sexual abstinence. More recently, in *The Permissive Society*, Alan Petigny pushed the argument even further. From the rising rates of nonmarital pregnancy, he detected an “appreciable upswing in premarital sexual behavior” in the postwar years. For Petigny, World War II “helped usher in an era of increased sexual liberalism.” In his view, the “permissive society” and the “sexual revolution” bubbled up conjointly in the 1940s, not the 1960s. Taken collectively, a number of recent works—on Germany, Britain, and other nations as well as the United States—suggest that, with regard to sexuality, the postwar era harbored surprisingly liberal leanings.²

What should we make of this? Were the postwar years an age of resurgent sexual conservatism, or were they forward strides in the long march of the sexual revolution? Although the debate is hardly over, the obvious answer, it seems, is “both.” This chapter draws on the recent literature on the postwar era to present the evidence for both sexual conservatism and sexual liberalism, and argues that the postwar years in the United States were in fact more liberal than often conceded, not only with regard to premarital heterosexual intercourse, but also in other areas, including published erotica and obscenity law, gay and lesbian life, and interracial sex and marriage. It was not just that pockets of liberalism flourished beneath a conservative surface or that erotic celebration worked to promote long-term monogamous heterosexuality. In the postwar era, I contend, sexual conservatives confronted powerful assertions and overt arguments in favor of various forms of nonnormative sexual expression. The ensuing debates sometimes erupted into open battles



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that took place mostly within the middle class. Conservatives did not always hold the upper hand in these battles, and their defensive maneuvers set the stage for the “culture wars” that still rage today.

Sexual Liberalism, Sexual Conservatism

“Sexual liberalism” and “sexual conservatism” have no inherent meaning, and so they require definition. In my usage, American postwar “sexual liberalism” endorsed sexual expression more than sexual restraint. It was not necessarily politically progressive or sexually liberating. It had many strands, ranging from the radically democratic, utopian, and ecstatic to the commercial, corporate, crass, elitist, misogynist, sexist, racist, orientalist, and exploitative. And, like sexual containment, it was also, at least in part, implicated in “biopolitics,” that is, multifaceted attempts to manage and administer the life and health of populations at the level of daily life and intimate interaction.³ Simply put, sexual liberalism involved various incitements to and endorsements of sexual expression and display, and these helped constitute a liberal reformist version of modern sexuality that aimed to create, channel, and sustain vital and healthy bodies and a vital and healthy nation.

In other words, it is not that “bad” conservatives tried to manage and suppress sexuality and “good” liberals tried to free it via frankness. Sexual liberals, too, engaged in the management of populations; they, too, had particular—if different—visions of how sexuality constituted healthy bodies and healthy nations. Rightly or wrongly, sexual liberals associated various forms of sexual expression and display with health, fun, nature, beauty, freedom, democracy, and individual rights, and conversely linked various forms of sexual “repression” to mental and physical illness, “prudish” moralism, and antidemocratic authoritarian politics. They endorsed greater sexual expression, especially for the educated middle class, and they generally supported reproductive restraint via birth control.

American postwar sexual conservatism also had multiple strands. Those who espoused it usually hoped to “contain” or eliminate what they saw as damaging forms of sexual behavior, but they did not necessarily agree on exactly what needed to be contained or why, nor did they share a common outlook on other political issues. Where they concurred was in their advocacy of sexual regulation and their distrust of modern sexual incitements. They worried that vernacular sexual cultures, mass-produced and commercialized



sexual products and services, nonnormative and nonmarital sexual expression, and sexually liberal ideals undermined the moral, social, and reproductive order. As one woman put it in 1956, “We can commercialize [sex] and degrade it to the extent that we destroy our own happiness, our marriages, our homes and even our nation.”⁴ When sexual conservatives attempted to control and manage sex, they had little choice but to talk about it, and their repeated warnings of sexual danger threatened to subvert the very goal of containment. Investigations, exposés, and morality tales could easily serve as unintended or unconscious sexual incitements, and direct arguments against sexual liberalism could advertise the views of one’s opponents. In any case, sexual conservatives often pushed for containment inconsistently. In theory and practice, a single person could be liberal on one sexual issue (say, legalizing erotica) and conservative, contradictory, ambivalent, or apathetic on another (say, interracial sex and marriage). But on a number of issues, various groups of sexual liberals and sexual conservatives lined up on opposing sides and made their competing cases for sexual expression and sexual restraint.⁵

Containment

It is easy enough to supply ample evidence that the postwar years were sexually conservative. As May and others have related it, the postwar discourse was rife with commentary that pathologized various forms of nonmarital sexual expression. Psychologists and psychiatrists, who won impressive cultural clout during and after the war, played a central role in drawing the lines between “normal” and “abnormal” sexual behavior. American postwar psychoanalysts, in particular, defined nonnormative sexuality and portrayed it as psychotic, neurotic, arrested, and immature. Various experts and their popularizers cast gay men, lesbians, unwed mothers, and other women who had sex outside of marriage as psychically damaged individuals who could, in turn, harm others.⁶ Such formulations appeared not only in clinical case studies, but also in newspapers, magazines, fiction, and film. From the mass media crime reports to the novels of Mickey Spillane to the movies of Alfred Hitchcock, postwar popular culture served up a range of crude and subtle narratives that depicted a populace threatened and weakened by sexually dangerous women and men.⁷

At the same time, the top-down policing of sexualized behavior escalated. In the 1950s, the state especially clamped down on homosexuality. Throughout the postwar years, the federal government, recent histories attest,

fired thousands of gay men and lesbians from their jobs, expelled them from the military, and denied them veterans' benefits, and after 1952, denied queer immigrants entry and naturalization. A number of politicians, including the Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson and the Republican senator Joseph McCarthy, found themselves tainted by rumors of homosexuality that wended their way through the postwar media. The "lavender scare" on the federal level had its counterpart locally in cities across the nation. Employers dismissed workers suspected of homosexuality, and police surveillance teams investigated gay life, raided parks and bars, and arrested scores of men and women under the guise of laws against vagrancy, lewdness, disorderly conduct, and obscenity. The police actions and the subsequent press reports were the most public part of the postwar "flood of suspicion" that stigmatized gay men and lesbians and pushed them into the social margins.⁸

The regulation of what was called "vice" expanded in other areas as well. Before the 1940s, the police rarely enforced the statutes that made abortion illegal, it seems, except when a woman had died, but in the 1940s and 1950s, they undertook new campaigns to target, investigate, and arrest abortionists, some of whom had practiced freely for decades without attracting the arm of the law. Newspapers reported on raids on "abortion rings" in a wide array of cities. As one arrested abortionist described it, the politicians and police hoped to win positive publicity—"a harvest of headlines"—from their campaigns against "vice."⁹

Local authorities also took a renewed interest in obscenity laws. The Catholic Church, middle-class clubwomen, and other concerned citizens organized local campaigns and joined nationwide organizations, such as Citizens for Decent Literature, that protested the sale of erotic books and magazines in drugstores and on newsstands. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover endorsed the local campaigns, which spoke to a broader fear that a sexualized mass culture was corrupting the nation's youth. In response to the outcry, state and municipal officials tightened and enforced the laws that restricted the sale of erotic literature. Several cities—New York, Houston, Minneapolis, Cincinnati, and others—conducted raids, seized books and magazines, and arrested the retailers who sold them. At the federal level, the Senate and House of Representatives conducted their own investigations of obscenity and its distribution.¹⁰

The heightened concern with "vice" shaped racial politics, too. The sexual behavior of African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans was often depicted as viceridden—"wild, unstable,

and undomesticated”—and in need of constraint. While nonnormative sexual behavior could be cast as an individual psychological problem, it was simultaneously understood as group-wide cultural pathology. In the post-war era, as before, white segregationists, for example, routinely portrayed blacks as “immoral, criminal, and diseased,” and attempted to cordon off the perceived threat to “white civility.”¹¹ In the face of the rising civil rights movement, southern whites expressed horror at the prospect of interracial sexual relationships, and they policed them through law, religion, censorship, intimidation, and violence. In a number of western states as well, laws against interracial marriage remained on the books and frequently barred marriages between whites and Asians and whites and Native Americans as well as between whites and blacks.

In the northeastern and midwestern states, regulation was often more subtle but still severe. Universities, for example, forbade interracial dating, and family and friends punished it through shame, stigma, and ostracism. In 1952, to give just one minor example, Earlham, a racially integrated Quaker liberal arts college in Indiana, made the national news when its president and board of trustees publicly opposed the engagement of two of its students, a black woman and a white man. The college asked the man to leave campus and complete his courses by mail.¹²

Interestingly enough, historians have no single explanation for all the containing, constraining, denouncing, and policing. Twenty years ago, when women’s history stood on the cutting edge, historians focused on fears of changing gender roles for women as the critical source of sexual conservatism. More recent interpretations, in line with recent historiographic trends, point to the containment of men’s sexuality as often as women’s—to fears of sexualized men who seemed to threaten the nation, including overly masculine “sadists” and insufficiently masculine “sissies.” Historians now also address changing race relations to help explain the postwar obsession with sex. In a provocative recent interpretation, scholars argue that sexuality, not race, became the explicit legal marker of the worthy citizen. As racial definitions of citizenship, which legalized second-class status for people of color, began to break down, the government gradually redrew the lines of citizenship with heteronormative sexual behavior as a critical sign that separated respectable, healthy citizens from the undeserving.¹³ Despite the changes in emphasis, however, the new historical literature—with its current concern with masculinity, the state, race, and citizenship—bolsters the same overarching argument of conservative containment.



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Historians, then, have provided enough accounts of containment in multiple domains and enough interpretive frameworks to overdetermine the conservative outcome. The history of postwar sexuality could—and often does—end there. But we might borrow instead from Helen Horowitz’s book *Rereading Sex*, which reconstructs the American discourse on sexuality in the nineteenth century. Horowitz addresses sexual regulation, but she does not pose the evolving conservative position, seen especially in the Comstock Act of 1873, as monolithic or inevitably dominant. She sees it instead as part of a multivoiced conversation, in which sexual conservatives engaged in open debate and legal battles with sexual reformers and vernacular traditions.¹⁴ Let me suggest that we imagine the postwar era similarly, not only as constraint and crackdown, but as an era of competing ideals, multiple voices, and vocal debate. In this view, the postwar sexual conservatives responded to, argued with, and denounced competing visions of sexuality, which they saw as threatening. They did not just argue with the past or an imagined present or future; they actively resisted other members of the postwar middle class and a commercial economy that stood to profit from sexual liberalism. In short, we cannot understand the conservatives unless we look at what and whom they opposed.



The Sexually Liberal Postwar Era

If we listen for “multiple voices,” who else spoke in the postwar era? Whom did the conservatives oppose? What bothered them and provoked their outrage? Historians who write of sexual liberalism give pride of place to the Kinsey reports, the two massive volumes compiled by Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, published in 1948, and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, published in 1953. These best-selling collections of statistics made it abundantly clear that Americans engaged in all sorts of nonmarital sexual behavior. Kinsey and his colleagues conducted thousands of interviews and reported that both men and women defied the normative expectations with striking regularity. The Kinsey reports brought startling publicity to everyday sexual practice. They attracted national (and international) attention and inspired vocal arguments among experts. As his critics knew and his biographers have shown, Kinsey and his colleagues were not dispassionate or impartial investigators; they actively advocated sex without guilt as a sign and source of freedom and health. As ardent sexual liberals, they



attacked the moralism of sexual conservatives and the legal constraints on the sexual behavior of consenting adults. Not surprisingly, sexual conservatives found the reports appalling. One biographer writes, “Kinsey’s most vociferous critics were deeply religious people who feared that this work would undermine traditional morality.”¹⁵

The Kinsey reports have come to symbolize the sexualization of American culture, but they represent only one tiny piece of the postwar explosion of sexual literature. A vernacular sexual culture was also making its way into the mainstream publishing industry, as publishers discovered, once again, that sex sold. Sensational tabloid newspapers and trashy magazines showcased sexual scandal and exposé, and new pulp paperbacks narrated risqué stories of sex outside of marriage. As queer studies scholar Michael Bronski notes, postwar publishers produced “huge numbers of original novels focusing on illegal or taboo sex.” In addition, “girlie” magazines, with photographs of nude women, built on the tradition of pin-ups popularized during World War II. Most famously, *Playboy* magazine directly attacked the sexual containment of middle-class white men as the prudish repression of male health, freedom, and vitality. The success of *Playboy*, which first appeared in 1953, spawned dozens of imitators, most of them short-lived, including *Cabaret*, *Jaguar*, *Jem*, and *U.S. Male*. The publishing industry also moved into other niche markets in the postwar years. *Duke* magazine, inspired by *Playboy*, attempted to court African-American heterosexual male readers with photos of nude African-American women, and body-building magazines, such as *Physique Pictorial* and *Vim*, featured beefcake photos of nearly nude men for a gay male readership. Sexual conservatives complained about the proliferation of sexual imagery, especially the “severely distorted sexuality . . . reflected in the cult of the female nude.” But they had little success in containing it.¹⁶

At the highbrow end of the market, the writings of Norman Mailer, Vladimir Nabokov, Allen Ginsberg, and others also pushed the boundaries of erotic literature. Most of the sexualized literature was by men and for men. The sexual liberalism of the postwar years harbored an aggressive masculinism, seen among soldiers during World War II and in veterans afterwards; it often construed nonmarital sexual expression as an assertion of male autonomy, which could include hostility to or subordination of women. But women were represented as readers and authors as well. Two especially sexual women’s novels—Kathleen Winsor’s *Forever Amber* and Grace Metalious’s *Peyton Place*—sold millions of copies with tales of nonmarital sex, and both reappeared in new form as popular Hollywood films. These works, too, provoked the ire of

sexual conservatives, who continued to protest the growing market in erotica, but millions of other Americans read the books and watched the movies that the conservatives decried.¹⁷

The explosion of erotic publications included a brisk mass market in lesbian and gay pulp novels, which attracted queer readers as well as straight ones. Pulp fiction was one sign, among many, of the growing visibility of gay and lesbian subcultures in the postwar years. Through the 1950s, gay and lesbian bars and queer drag shows attracted customers in every major city. In New York City, gay bars and gay street culture flourished in multiple neighborhoods: African Americans in Harlem, Puerto Ricans on the Upper West Side, and upper-class whites on the Upper East Side created their own gay circles, while hustlers in Times Square and street queens in Greenwich Village sustained a vibrant commercial culture of male prostitution. Philadelphia, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and other major cities had parallel urban geographies, in which certain neighborhoods and outposts were centers of lesbian and gay life. The visibility of gay locales attracted the attention of municipal politicians who promised to clean up “vice,” but despite the periodic sweeps, raids, and arrests, they could not eliminate the not-so-hidden sites of urban queer life.¹⁸

New York was also the center (but not the only locale) of a thriving gay arts scene. James Baldwin, Truman Capote, Carson McCullers, Gore Vidal, and Tennessee Williams, among others, brought gay sensibilities to American literature. Elsewhere in the arts, Leonard Bernstein, John Cage, Stephen Sondheim, Alvin Ailey, Merce Cunningham, Lincoln Kirstein, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg—all gay—stood at the center of modern music, dance, and painting. Various commentators noticed the gay arts scene and found it disturbing. Postwar critics complained of the gay influence on trends and tastes in arts and letters--what one called “a gradual corruption of all aspects of American culture.” But here, too, the protests scarcely made a dent. As Michael Sherry writes, “the success of gay figures was stunning. . . . [G]ay artists helped create the sights, sounds, and words of modern American culture.”¹⁹ Queers remained undeniably central to the postwar urban American modernist and avant-garde movements.

But neither queer life nor sexual liberalism was ever exclusively urban. Even in the most remote rural regions, flourishing mail-order markets brought liberal sexual science, gay literature, pulp novels, physique magazines, and pornography to isolated readers. *Sexology*, a magazine that popularized liberal sexual science, published letters to the editor (on every imaginable sexual topic) from all over

the United States. And the Haldeman-Julius booklets, published not in New York but in Girard, Kansas, were well known in the mail-order market. Founded by “freethinking” socialists in the 1910s, the Haldeman-Julius firm had shifted the center of its operations from politics to sex education and popular sexology by the 1930s. In the postwar era, it produced hundreds of sexual pamphlets that sold by mail for 35 cents a copy. Typical titles included *Voyeurism: A Form of Sexual Behavior*, *Male Homosexuals Tell Their Stories*, *Questions and Answers on the Sex Life and Problems of Trans-Sexuals*, *Questions and Answers about Cunnilingus*, and *Unconventional Modes of Sexual Expression*.²⁰

Mail-order materials traversed the nation, usually without legal threat when protected by the cover of science. And people, too, traveled in search of what was billed as sexual adventure. By the 1950s certain vacation destinations had established themselves as sites of sexual tourism. Within the United States, Las Vegas had a risqué allure, while outside the borders, Tijuana and Havana capitalized on a prevalent racialized sexual stereotype of hot-blooded Latins. For the gay niche market, there were other well-known vacation spots: outside New York and Boston, middle- and upper-class gays expanded their space for summer escapades to Fire Island and Provincetown, which became known as gay vacation enclaves.²¹

Within this context a few gay men and lesbians created the first American gay rights movement. Donald Webster Cory set the stage for the movement with his 1951 book, *The Homosexual in America*, in which he argued that homosexuals were an oppressed minority. He associated gay life with democracy, freedom, and healthy expression, and opposed it to totalitarianism. Homosexuals, he claimed, “are seeking to extend freedom of the individual, of speech, press, and thought to an entirely new realm.” In California, activists created new gay rights organizations in direct response to the “lavender scare” and police harassment. The Mattachine Society, a gay male group founded in 1951, and the Daughters of Bilitis, founded in 1955 to advocate for lesbians, eventually had local chapters across the nation. Along with One, Inc., a splinter group established in 1952, these small organizations were known collectively in their day as the “homophile movement.” They published magazines, called for civil rights, and attempted to educate the public.²² The movement adopted the language of sexual liberalism, which presented sexual expression as an individual right and a sign of freedom. As one author stated directly in 1955, “We might consider ourselves as part of a liberal, modern movement towards greater personal freedom.”²³

At the same time, as Renee Romano and others have shown, the mass media was increasing its focus on—and its pronouncements defending—

heterosexual interracial romance, love, sex, and marriage. After World War II, racial liberalism won greater national attention, inspired in part by revulsion against the racist policies of the Nazis and even more by the civil rights movement within the United States. While many racial liberals consciously avoided the delicate topic of interracial sex, others used its illicit, and therefore titillating, status to attract attention to the evils of racial segregation. The 1944 best-selling novel *Strange Fruit*, the 1949 box-office hit movie *Pinky*, and the sensational 1949 Broadway musical *South Pacific* all protested racism with moving stories of thwarted interracial love. In *Strange Fruit*, a young southern white man rejects his pregnant black girlfriend, and the tragic affair ends in murder and lynching; in *Pinky*, an African-American nurse who had passed as white refrains from marrying her white fiancé; and in *South Pacific*, a white Navy officer spurns his Polynesian lover but then regrets his racism before he dies in battle. Despite the ill-fated couplings, all three stories tugged on the heartstrings and invited readers and viewers to root for interracial love.

In 1956, Hollywood revised its production code to permit films that depicted abortion, prostitution, and interracial relationships, another sign of sexual liberalization. The following year, *Island in the Sun*, a film that featured an interracial couple whose love was not thwarted, was a major money-making success. Set on a Caribbean island, the film depicts two interracial romances, one of which ends happily as the couple leaves to marry in England. (Like *South Pacific*, *Island in the Sun* drew on the racialized association between tropical locales and freer sexual expression.)

As with other forms of tabooed love, the risqué topic of interracial romance came under attack. *Strange Fruit*, for example, was banned in Boston for its obscene language, and the board of censors in a town in Texas prohibited theater owners from showing the film *Pinky*. Despite the attacks (or maybe, in part, because of them) the book and film attracted readers and viewers. *Strange Fruit* sold three million copies in the 20 years after its publication, and *Pinky* brought in more than \$4 million the year it debuted.²⁴

Meanwhile, the new African-American mass-circulation magazines *Ebony* and *Jet* repeatedly publicized and defended interracial relationships and attempted to bring black-white heterosexual love within the scope of the heteronormative, healthy, and acceptable. Like the homophile publications, these magazines promoted a version of sexual liberalism that cast love as a “private affair” or a “personal matter.” Interracial love was “normal and natural,” and racial difference was an artificial barrier or a superficial factor that should not abridge the “right of individuals.” Marriage, one author

wrote, was “an individual choice . . . in a nation that was founded on the principles of human dignity and freedom.” The northern white press also paid some attention. In 1951, for example, both *Life* and *Harper’s Magazine* carried sympathetic articles on interracial heterosexual couples. And in the Earlham College episode in which officials publicly opposed the engagement of two of its students, the mostly white student body protested and both black and white newspapers covered the story. With the headline “Love in a Democracy,” the *Chicago Defender*, an African-American newspaper, responded with the credo of sexual liberalism: “Love and marriage should be an individual matter in a democracy. . . . [I]ndividual liberty is the cornerstone of our democracy.”²⁵

The sexual liberals who defended various forms of sexual expression—from erotica to gay and lesbian rights to interracial heterosexual relationships—often adopted or fashioned an urbane outlook in which sexual expression and sexual variation were understood as the modern “spice of life” or the sophisticated rejection of bland conformity. Like Kinsey and his colleagues, they sometimes presented a pluralist view that expanded the boundaries of the acceptable and the normative. In 1954, the celebrity transsexual performer Christine Jorgensen took this stance publicly when she told an interviewer, “I think that much that has been classified as abnormal for many years is becoming accepted as normal.” At least as often, sexual liberals also used the political language of democracy in defense of sexual “freedom” and “individual rights.” As Hugh Hefner said in a 1955 interview, his magazine, *Playboy*, was “a kind of argument for a liberal democratic society with emphasis on the freedom of the individual.” Increasingly, scholars, artists, lawyers, and others defended the right to erotic expression as a hallmark of a vital democracy and denounced sexual restriction as a sign of totalitarianism. In their 1959 book, *Pornography and the Law*, for example, the anticensorship advocates Eberhard and Phyllis Kronhausen used the language of the Cold War not to contain sexual expression but to defend it. “The more actual democracy a society allows,” they wrote, “the more sexual freedom is granted to its members. The more authoritarian the political organization of a society. . . the less sexual freedom.”²⁶

But explicit demands for freedom and rights were only the tip of the iceberg. The outspoken advocates of sexual liberalism were bolstered all along by a burgeoning marketplace that profited from sexually liberal ideals. And here less politicized incitements to sexual expression were just about everywhere. They appeared widely in the growing youth subcultures of the postwar era, not just in the well-publicized unconventional circles of the Beat poets and authors in New York and San Francisco, but also more generally in the jazz, rhythm and

blues, and rock 'n' roll that attracted youth throughout the United States (and elsewhere) with sexualized music, lyrics, and dancing. In the 1950s, the "racy" language of black working-class vernacular culture moved into mainstream white middle-class rock 'n' roll and, via the radio, into middle-class homes. To its opponents, the music symbolized vice, excess, and rebellion, but to its advocates, it signified freedom and fun. In the late 1950s, to give just one among many examples, the rock 'n' roll pioneer Little Richard sang top-ten hits with openly heterosexual lyrics, such as the infamous (and still well-known) hit, "Good Golly, Miss Molly," which used the vulgar slang verb "ball" to celebrate sexual intercourse. Although Little Richard hid (and still hides) his homosexuality, he used and even flaunted sexual innuendo to enhance his popular appeal. Postwar critics decried the sexualization of middle-class youth culture, from the lyrics in songs to the pictures in comic books to the pelvic grinds of Elvis Presley, and expressed dismay at the all-too-eager responses of young women and men. Their pressure tactics led to self-regulation in radio broadcasts, comic books, and television, but they could not stop the heavy investment in sex in the growing youth consumer culture.²⁷

The postwar sexual display and the postwar arguments in favor of it began to have impact in the legal profession and on the law. In 1948, the California Supreme Court overturned the state law forbidding interracial marriage and, as Peggy Pascoe writes, "jump-started the post-World War II campaign to eliminate the [miscegenation] laws once and for all." This landmark decision argued that the state law violated the rights of individuals and "arbitrarily and unreasonably" discriminated. In the wake of the California decision, seven other western states repealed their miscegenation laws in the 1950s. The liberal approach, which upheld sexual expression as an individual right, showed up elsewhere in the legal arena. In 1955, the American Law Institute published sections of its Model Penal Code that called for the decriminalization of sodomy between consenting adults, and two years later a municipal court in San Francisco won national publicity when it declared that Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl*, which had graphic homosexual references, was not legally obscene. More important, the federal courts steadily chipped away at obscenity laws. The long list of notable cases involved, among others, the men's magazine *Esquire* (1946), the Hollywood film *Pinky* (1952), the Kinsey Institute's collection of erotica (1957), and the homophile publication *ONE* (1958). In those and other cases, federal courts, despite vocal conservative opposition, gradually defended and expanded the right to publish, exhibit, import, and mail various kinds of erotica.²⁸

The Long Sexual Revolution

Historians' emphasis on the postwar "containment" of sexuality has underplayed the concomitant liberalization of sexual mores, and their accounts of "sexual liberalism" have only begun to touch on the extent of the postwar endorsement and incitement of various forms of sexual expression. Historians of the African-American civil rights movement have extended the timeline of that movement and now write of a "long civil rights movement" that began earlier than we used to think. Perhaps, as some historians have suggested, we should talk about a "long sexual revolution" as well. It might begin in World War II, the 1920s, or even after the Civil War, and though it was by no means a linear progression (and the 1950s moment, of course, differed substantially from the 1960s one), historians could trace genealogies, with their multiple branches, over the course of decades and also track the opposition all along the way. In this view, postwar attempts to "contain" sexuality might appear less as signs of muscle-flexing by triumphant conservatives and more as an episodic panic—a desperate rally to the defense—by the losers in a long war over the meanings of modern sex and healthy populations. In the postwar era, various sexual conservatives tried to apply the brakes to the widely publicized sexual expression and display that had marked the war years; they may have slowed the momentum of sexual liberalism, but they could neither stop nor derail the train.²⁹

However we define or date the sexual revolution, a genealogical view of postwar sexuality invites us to turn our attention to the long-term trends that linked the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. A number of critical trends encouraged sexual expression and display, and not sexual containment. First, by 1950, in the capitalist American economy, sex-for-sale had undergone its own industrialization. If we borrow a labor history model, we might say that the center of sex-for-sale had changed over the course of a century from the customized craftwork of prostitution to the commercial production of leg shows, burlesque shows, and strip tease to the industrialized mass production of pornography, seen in postcards, books, magazines, and films. The shift seems to have entailed more impersonal relations of production and consumption, or to put it another way, an aggregate generational shift in sex-for-sale, in which men moved, partially and gradually, from sex with prostitutes to masturbation with pictures, that is, from touching others to touching themselves. And it evoked protests from those who feared that the free market and its masturbatory mass culture were infiltrating the nation's homes and corrupting the nation's youth. But like other forms of industrialization, it was not easy to reverse, curtail, or

contain. From the early twentieth century on, then, the industrialization of sex-for-sale, especially the proliferation of mass-produced erotica, encouraged the display and celebration of nonmarital sexual expression. In this area as in others, the trajectory of modern capitalism encouraged desire and longing, created and expanded markets, and mass-produced standardized goods and services that were once handcrafted and custom made.³⁰

Second, by the 1950s, various scholars had been protesting for decades against the harmful effects of “repression,” and their arguments had made their way into the popular culture. By mid-century, “repression” was understood as psychologically damaging. To various authors, simply put, repression caused frustration, which in turn caused neurosis and aggression. Social scientists and their popularizers explained militarism, fascism, criminality, racism, mental illness, and a host of other social ills by pointing in part to repression, including sexual repression and its attendant frustrations. Freud had introduced the language of repression to American intellectuals decades before, but for Freud, sexual repression created not only neuroses but also civilization. Some of his followers were less optimistic. Austrian and German radical émigrés such as Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse were among the key thinkers who espoused the antirepression thesis in the United States. Reared in heavily patriarchal cultures and watching (with horror) the rise of fascist dictatorships, these and other European leftists tended to blame early childhood sexual repression on authoritarian fathers. From the 1920s on, American-born sexually liberal authors, including Margaret Mead and Alfred Kinsey, produced their own condemnations of a sexually repressive culture that damaged its own youth. Writing from a different social context, the Americans tended to blame repression on domineering or prudish mothers. In the pop psychology that followed, the antidotes to repression included more permissive childrearing, liberal sex education, and a rejection of the alleged constraints of the “Puritan” and “Victorian” past. By the 1950s, it was routinely assumed that self-expression and “self-actualization” were good and healthy, and repression was bad and damaging. In 1954, one critic of this trend wrote: “Repression came to have a bad name, and everyone so disposed went in for nonrepression. It was good for the health . . . [and] it was in line with the general quest for self-expression and self-enhancement.” In sum, a popularized version of Freud posited sexual repression as unhealthy and associated it with individual ill health, social malaise, and dangerous politics. It posed the “containment” of sex as bad and damaging to the individual and the nation.³¹

Third, in politics and the law, sex had become a critical test case for free speech in a democracy. From at least the 1920s on, a tiny transnational

European and American movement had called for “sexual freedom.” This international network of sex advocates differed from the older “free love” movement of the nineteenth century. They did not call for freeing love from economics and marriage but insisted instead on freedom of sexual expression, with or without love. From the 1920s on, the American Civil Liberties Union began to back this position, recognizing sexual speech (though not yet sexual behavior) as part of its civil liberties domain.³² Various commentators began to associate freedom itself with the lifting of conventional sexual restrictions. That is, by the postwar era, sexual speech and the individual rights of consenting adults had already become part of the political discourse. In the 1950s, the Cold War language of containment had its counterpart in a Cold War language of individual freedom in a “free society,” and the advocates of sexual expression also borrowed successfully from racial liberalism and its language of individual rights. From the 1930s on, then, sexual expression and the right to engage in some nonmarital forms of it became a critical part of the liberal political discourse on freedom and rights in a democracy.

The long-term trends help explain the sexual liberalism of the postwar years. But the war, too, had its impact. As many historians have noted, World War II—with its disruptive mass migration, “live-for-the-moment” ethos, assertion of the virility of soldiers, escalation of prostitution, proliferation of sexual imagery, interracial sex in war zones, and same-sex intimacy in the sex-segregated military—challenged traditional sexual standards.³³ In the postwar years, the memories of wartime sexual expression did not inspire a cultural consensus; instead, they informed competing visions of sexual order. Some Americans attempted to “contain” the wartime challenge, but others expanded, celebrated, and defended it. In niche and mainstream markets, entrepreneurs continued to lure consumers with sexual services, products, and fantasies, and the sexual marketplace supported (and was supported by) evolving liberal conceptions of health, freedom, and individual rights.

Conclusion

Why do we need a new overarching interpretation of postwar U.S. sexuality? What do we gain if we move away from the insistence on “containment” and look instead for the debates that pitted sexual liberals against sexual conservatives? We are reminded, first, that the sexualization of wartime culture provided openings for change that were not closed off in the postwar era.

Wartime changes did not simply lead to a backlash that insisted on reasserting an imagined traditional order. Rather, the wartime challenge amplified a multifarious conversation about what constituted a healthy sexual regime for a modern nation. The debates show, second, that the stereotype of the conservative postwar era is a one-sided account that erases historical complexity. The story of the “bad old days” of the 1950s fits too neatly with an overly simple progressive generational model in which the young rebels of the 1960s allegedly liberated themselves from repression, conformity, and conservatism. Just as the bohemians of the 1920s conjured a myth of Victorian sexual repression, so the activists of the 1960s constructed their own myth of postwar sexual containment. The emphasis on postwar conservatism also works to support another simplistic model, one in which the nation swings between seemingly liberal eras, like the 1960s and 1970s, and seemingly conservative ones, like the 1950s and 1980s. This model, too, erases the buzz of political conflict that animated the sexual discourse of past decades—and continues to animate it today.

In recent years, the “sex wars” have reappeared in new form in the conflicts between the Christian right and its opponents over pornography, abortion, feminism, gay rights, and same-sex marriage. In the 1950s, these battles did not align with a right-left split. Both sexual conservatives and sexual liberals used the language of the Cold War, arguing on one side about the sexual threat that weakened home and nation and on the other about individual rights in a free world. Those who advocated sexual “containment” were not necessarily Republicans, and those who advocated “sexual liberalism” were not necessarily left-of-center. Since the 1970s, the political valence of the sexual arguments seems to have shifted, but the battles continue, and so do the long-term economic, intellectual, and political trends toward public sexual expression and calls for sexual “freedom.” As recent events have shown, the peculiar sexual liberalism that blossomed in the second half of the twentieth century is still a source of divisive debate—and not just in the United States. In various parts of the world today, the liberal sexualized society, found in various incarnations in the United States and Europe, has become a symbol of cultural imperialism, capitalist corruption, decadence, decline, secularism, and amorality. And in other parts of the world, it has come to stand for modernity, health, democracy, self-expression, freedom, and individual rights. Sex in the abstract has been detached from its mundane performance and elevated to bear heavy symbolic weight in defining the characters of peoples and nations and in constructing competing fantasies of good and bad societies.³⁴

We need to attend to the debates of the 1940s and 1950s, then, because they capture the complexity of the long postwar era and reveal crucial historical roots and context for current rifts and conflicts within the United States and on the international stage. The postwar debates (and the current ones as well) tell us as much about the world we live in and our varied attempts to manage it as they tell us about our sexual practices and sexual ideals.

Notes

1. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic, 1988), 93–4.
2. John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 276, 300; Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 40, 44, 49; Alan Petigny, *The Permissive Society: America, 1941–1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 103, 132. See also Susan K. Freeman, *Sex Goes to School: Girls and Sex Education before the 1960s* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008); and R. Marie Griffith, “The Religious Encounters of Alfred C. Kinsey,” *Journal of American History* 95 (2008): 349–377. On other nations, see, for example, Elizabeth Heineman, *Before Porn Was Legal: The Erotica Empire of Beate Uhse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Frank Mort, *Capital Affairs: London and the Making of the Permissive Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); and Heike Bauer and Matt Cook, eds., *Queer 1950s: Rethinking Sexuality in the Postwar Years* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
3. On biopolitics, see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1978), part 5. The term “liberal” here is not anachronistic: postwar “sexual liberals” often used the word “liberal,” as later quotations in this essay attest, to describe their views on sexuality.
4. Quoted (from *Ladies’ Home Journal*) in Joanne Meyerowitz, “Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material: Responses to Girlie Pictures in the Mid-Twentieth-Century U.S.,” *Journal of Women’s History* 8, no. 3 (1996): 9–35, 25.
5. For an overlapping definition of current “sexual liberals” and “sexual conservatives,” see Kristin Luker, *When Sex Goes to School: Warring Views on Sex—and Sex Education—since the Sixties* (New York: Norton, 2006), chap. 4. For Luker, the dividing line between “sexual liberals” and “sexual conservatives” is “whether any kind of sex besides heterosexual married sex should be morally and socially acceptable . . . [F]or conservatives, sex is *sacred*, while for liberals, it’s *natural*”; Luker, *When Sex Goes to School*, 98–99. For the postwar era, Miriam Reumann draws a distinction between “sexual pessimists, who foresaw the decline and collapse of the nation in changes in the sexual status quo, and idealists, who envisioned a new sexual order as liberating and empowering”; Reumann, *American Sexual Character: Sex, Gender, and National Identity in the Kinsey Reports* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 9.

6. Estelle B. Freedman, "Uncontrolled Desires: The Response to the Sexual Psychopath, 1920–1960," *Journal of American History* 74 (1987): 83–106; Rickie Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race before Roe v. Wade* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Carolyn Herbst Lewis, "Waking Sleeping Beauty: The Premarital Pelvic Exam and Heterosexuality during the Cold War," *Journal of Women's History* 17, no. 4 (2005): 86–110; Kenneth Lewes, *Psychoanalysis and Male Homosexuality* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1988); Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Kevin Allen Leonard, "Containing 'Perversion': African Americans and Same-Sex Desire in Cold War Los Angeles," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 3 (2011): 545–567. For a well-known primary source, see Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia F. Farnham, *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (New York: Harper, 1947). For an intriguing account of psychoanalytic influence on postwar sexuality, see Rachel Devlin, *Relative Intimacy: Fathers, Adolescent Daughters, and Postwar American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
7. May, *Homeward Bound*, chap. 4; Robert J. Corber, *In the Name of National Security: Hitchcock, Homophobia, and the Political Construction of Gender in Postwar America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); Gabriele Dietze, "Gender Topography of the Fifties: Mickey Spillane and the Post-World-War-II Masculinity Crisis," *Amerikastudien* 43 (1998): 645–56; and Corber, *Cold War Femme: Lesbianism, National Identity, and the Hollywood Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
8. Michael S. Sherry, *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture: An Imagined Conspiracy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 52. On the postwar regulation of homosexuality, see John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: Free Press, 1990); Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001); David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); K. A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Andrea Friedman, "The Smearing of Joe McCarthy: The Lavender Scare, Gossip, and Cold War Politics," *American Quarterly* 57 (2005): 1105–29; Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Fred Fejes, "Murder, Perversion, and Moral Panic: The 1954 Media Campaign against Miami's Homosexuals and the Discourse of Civic Betterment," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9 (2000): 305–47; Stacy Braukman, "'Nothing Else Matters but Sex': Cold War Narratives of Deviance and the Search for Lesbian Teachers in Florida, 1959–1963," *Feminist Studies* 27 (2001): 553–75; and Whitney Strub, "The Clearly Obscene and the Queerly Obscene: Heteronormativity and Obscenity in Cold War Los Angeles," *American Quarterly* 60 (2008): 373–98.
9. Rickie Solinger, "Extreme Danger: Women Abortionists and Their Clients before *Roe v. Wade*," in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 352. See also

- Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and the Law in the United States, 1867–1973* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), chap. 6. On the postwar regulation of “vice,” see also Amanda H. Littauer, “The B-Girl Evil: Bureaucracy, Sexuality, and the Menace of Barroom Vice in Postwar California,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12, no. 2 (2003): 171–204; and Josh Sides, *Erotic City: Sexual Revolutions and the Making of Modern San Francisco* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), chap. 1.
10. D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 279–285; Meyerowitz, “Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material”; and Andrea Friedman, “Sadists and Sissies: Antipornography Campaigns in Cold War America,” *Gender & History* 15 (2003): 201–27.
 11. Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 87; and Susan K. Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 284–85.
 12. See also Jane Dailey, “Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after *Brown*,” *Journal of American History* 91 (2004): 119–44; Whitney Strub, “Black and White and Banned All Over: Race, Censorship and Obscenity in Postwar Memphis,” *Journal of Social History* 40 (2007): 685–715; Renee C. Romano, *Race Mixing: Black-White Marriage in Postwar America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); and Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
 13. See especially Siobhan Somerville, “Queer Loving,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 11 (2005): 335–70.
 14. Helen Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Vintage, 2002).
 15. James H. Jones, *Alfred C. Kinsey: A Public/Private Life* (New York: Norton, 1997), 576. On religious sexual liberals who supported Kinsey, see Griffith, “The Religious Encounters of Alfred C. Kinsey.” See also Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, *Sex the Measure of All Things: A Life of Alfred C. Kinsey* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Paul Robinson, *The Modernization of Sex: Havelock Ellis, Alfred Kinsey, William Masters and Virginia Johnson* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989, originally 1976); Reumann, *American Sexual Character*; and James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), chap. 5.
 16. Michael Bronski, *Pulp Friction* (New York: St. Martins, 2003), 2; Lundberg and Farnham, *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, 297. See also D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 279–85; Meyerowitz, “Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material”; and Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). On *Playboy*, see especially Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), chap. 4; and Elizabeth Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
 17. Lynette Carpenter, “The Censorship of a Wartime Heroine, or Taking the ‘Forever’ out of *Forever Amber*,” unpublished essay, c. 1988, in author’s possession; Ardis Cameron, “Open Secrets: Rereading Peyton Place,” introduction to Grace Metalious, *Peyton Place* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999). On postwar popular sexualized

- fiction and women readers, see also Regina Kunzel, "Pulp Fictions and Problem Girls: Reading and Rewriting Single Pregnancy in the Postwar United States," *American Historical Review* 100 (1995): 1465–87.
18. On gay and lesbian pulp fiction, see, for example, Bronski, *Pulp Friction*; Yvonne Keller, "'Was It Right to Love Her Brother's Wife So Passionately?': Lesbian Pulp Novels and U.S. Lesbian Identity, 1950–1965," *American Quarterly* 57 (2005): 385–410; Susan Stryker, *Queer Pulp: Perverted Passions from the Golden Age of the Paperback* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001); and Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), chap. 3. On postwar gay urban life, see George Chauncey, *The Strange Career of the Closet: Gay Culture, Consciousness, and Politics from the Second World War to the Gay Liberation Era* (book in progress); Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945–1972* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).
 19. Alfred Towne, "Homosexuality in American Culture: The New Taste in Literature," *American Mercury*, August 1951: 3–9, 9; Sherry, *Gay Artists*, 47. See also Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); and Martin Duberman, *The Worlds of Lincoln Kirstein* (New York: Knopf, 2007).
 20. On gay life outside of big cities, see especially John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). On Haldeman-Julius, see Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 42. On mail-order erotica in postwar West Germany, see Heineman, *Before Porn Was Legal*, chap. 3.
 21. Red Vaughan Tremmel, "Sin City on The Hill: Play, Urban Conflict, and the Rise of Commercial Liberality, 1900–1960" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2008); Louis A. Pérez Jr., *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon, 1993); and Karen Christel Krahulik, *Provincetown: From Pilgrim Landing to Gay Resort* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).
 22. Donald Webster Cory, *The Homosexual in America: A Subjective Approach* (New York: Greenberg, 1951), 229. See also John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*; Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s–1970s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Marcia M. Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007); Daniel Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles and the Making of Modern Politics* (Berkeley: University of California

- Press, 2007); and Douglas M. Charles, "From Subversion to Obscenity: The FBI's Investigations of the Early Homophile Movement in the United States, 1953–1958," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19, 3 (2010): 262–87.
23. Carle, "The Fifth Freedom," *ONE*, October 1955, 25.
 24. See Romano, *Race Mixing*, 33–8, 165.
 25. Jack Johnson, "Does Interracial Marriage Succeed?" *Negro Digest*, June 1945, 3; "Do Negro Stars Prefer White Husbands?" *Ebony*, May 1954, 90; Thyra Edwards Gitlin and Murray Gitlin, "Does Interracial Marriage Succeed?" *Negro Digest*, March 1945, 63; Roi Ottley, "No Color Line for Frauleins," *Negro Digest*, February 1947, 11; Ilka Chase, "The Hazards of Interracial Marriage," *Negro Digest*, September 1948, 13; Dr. Nathaniel O. Calloway, "Mixed Marriage Can Succeed," *Negro Digest*, March 1949, 27; and "Love in a Democracy," *Chicago Defender*, May 17, 1952, 10. See also Richard L. Williams, "He Wouldn't Cross the Color Line," *Life*, September 3, 1951, 94; and "My Daughter Married a Negro," *Harper's Magazine*, July 1951: 36–40.
 26. Jorgensen quote (from *True Confessions* magazine) in Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 52; Hefner quote in Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 13; and Eberhard and Phyllis Kronhausen, *Pornography and the Law: The Psychology of Erotic Realism and Pornography* (New York: Ballantine, 1959), 283–84. See also Joanne Meyerowitz, "Sex, Gender, and the Cold War Language of Reform," in *Rethinking Cold War Culture*, ed. Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 106–23.
 27. See, for example, Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings*, chap. 9. On somewhat similar battles over youth culture, sexuality, and jazz and rock music in postwar Germany, see Uta G. Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
 28. Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 206; *Perez v. Sharp*, 32 Cal. 2d 732 (1948). On state miscegenation laws, see Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 243. On the American Law Institute, see Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves*, 131–32. On *Howl*, see D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 275–76. For federal court cases, see *Hannegan v. Esquire, Inc.*, 327 U.S. 146 (1946); *Gelling v. Texas*, 343 U.S. 960 (1952); *United States v. 31 Photographs*, 156 F. Supp. 350 (S. D. N. Y. 1957); and *One, Incorporated, v. Oleson*, 355 U.S. 371 (1958).
 29. On British history, see, for example, Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception, 1800–1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). See also Petigny, *The Permissive Society*, chap. 3. Some American postwar commentators themselves wrote, as did Wilhelm Reich, of a sexual revolution. See, for example, Pitirim F. Sorokin, *The American Sex Revolution* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1956).
 30. On this point, see also Joanne Meyerowitz, "Transnational Sex and U.S. History," *American Historical Review* 114 (2009): 1273–86, 1284.
 31. Abram Kardiner, *Sex and Morality* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1954), 51. On American mother-blaming, see Rebecca Jo Plant, *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); on the different emphases on maternal responsibility in Europe and the United States, see esp. 14–15. On the myth of Victorian "repression," see Foucault, *History of Sexuality*,

- vol. 1; Christina Simmons, "Modern Sexuality and the Myth of Victorian Repression" in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, ed. Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 157–77.
32. On the ACLU, see Leigh Ann Wheeler, *How Sex Became a Civil Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
33. See, for example, John Costello, *Virtue under Fire: How World War II Changed Our Social and Sexual Attitudes* (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1985); Bérubé, *Coming Out under Fire*; Beth Bailey and David Farber, *The First Strange Place: The Alchemy of Race and Sex in World War II Hawaii* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps during World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Marilyn E. Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality during World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); and Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
34. See, for example, Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), introduction.

We live in a time much like the postwar era. A time of arch political conservatism and vast social conformity. A time in which our nation's leaders question and challenge the patriotism of those who oppose their policies. But before there was Jon Stewart, Al Franken, or Bill Maher, there were Mort Sahl, Stan Freberg, and Lenny Bruce—liberal satirists who, through their wry and scabrous comedic routines, waged war against the political ironies, contradictions, and hypocrisies of their times. *Revel with a Cause* is their story. Stephen Kercher here provides the first comprehensive look at the sat 6 American Culture in the 1950s. for the next fteen years. Sometimes turning points do not focus on historic events but on personalities; the deaths of actor James Dean in September 1955 and painter Jackson Pollock in August 1956 — both through car crashes — are often cited as dramatic moments that altered the direction of lm and art culture in the second half of the decade. 8 American Culture in the 1950s. But how could a decade be at once —secure and hopeful—, as Hillary Clinton describes it, and also be plagued by such profound ideological and atomic fears? But postwar containment also had negative connotations, suggesting that classied information was being withheld or that citizens were being duped into believing the ofcial line from Washington. The Liberal 1950s? Reinterpreting Postwar. American Sexual Culture Joanne Meyerowitz. For more than twenty years now, historians have written about the sexual conservatism of the postwar United States. In her 1988 book *Homeward Bound*, Elaine Tyler May drafted the outline of this now-common interpretation. so they require definition. In my usage, American postwar sexual liberalism endorsed sexual expression more than sexual restraint. It was not necessarily politically progressive or sexually liberating. It had many strands, ranging from the radically democratic, utopian, and ecstatic to the commercial, corporate, crass, elitist, misogynist, sexist, racist, orientalist, and exploitative.

American authors effected, in Richard Poirier's seminal phrase, a stylistic escape to "a world elsewhere." The explicit ahistoricism and apoliticism of the New Critics was matched less obviously in the development of a new interdisciplinary study of Americanness. The anxiety fostered under fire continued into the postwar period as a more general uncertainty in the face of shifting moral values. Removed from his military battleground, the existential hero in the 1950s warred against society in general. Paul Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky* (1949) combined a Hemingwayesque narrative of expatriates in Africa with a New Critical awareness of the poetic qualities of prose to characterize crises of self-identity resulting from the confrontation with an alien culture. the postwar & 1950s period characterized by economic prosperity and an increased birthrate (when US population grew: 150 to 180 million). Dynamic conservatism. Eisenhower's philosophy of government: forward-looking rather than traditional or laissez-faire, bipartisan (he was willing to work with the Democratic Party), and willing to accept most of the New Deal reforms. liberal Chief Justice of the Supreme Court 1953 to 1969 who oversaw many important civil rights decisions, including *Brown v. Board of Ed.* GI Bill. During the 1950s, a sense of uniformity pervaded American society. Conformity was common, as young and old alike followed group norms rather than striking out on their own. Though men and women had been forced into new employment patterns during World War II, once the war was over, traditional roles were reaffirmed. He called this new society "other-directed," and maintained that such societies lead to stability as well as conformity. Television contributed to the homogenizing trend by providing young and old with a shared experience reflecting accepted social patterns. But not all Americans conformed to such cultural norms. A number of writers, members of the so-called "beat generation," rebelled against conventional values.