

WGS.110J/21H.108J
Week 4 Reading Guide

Sex and the City: Working Class Sexuality and the Crusade Against Vice

This week we launch into Unit 2 of the course, “The Tempest: Contesting Sexual Order, c. 1900-1920.” For the next two class sessions we will examine the ways in which commercialization, industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and other historical processes at the turn of the twentieth century led to massive changes in the sexual lives and gender identities of Americans. This period of rapid change is sometimes referred to as the “progressive era,” because it witnessed a sharp rise in activism geared toward what was called at the time “progressive social change.” Much of this activism addressed sexuality and gender directly (the moral reformers that show up throughout this week’s reading are participants in this movement). Progressive politics in the twenty-first century differ in important ways from the politics of reformers at the start of the twentieth, but as you read this week you might consider some continuities that unite “progressives,” then and now.

In class we will focus on the lives and choices of urban, working people, as well as the reformers who sought to contain and contest the tempest unleashed by modernization and urbanization in its many forms. As you read, think about how changing urban landscapes in the United States lead to changes in American thinking about publicity/privacy, gender identity, and sexuality (including its commercialization).

Required Texts

- Sarah Deutsch, “The Moral Geography of the Working Girl (And New Woman)” from *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston* (2000) 78-114.
- Kathy Peiss, “Charity Girls and City Pleasures,” Vol. 18, No. 4 (July 2004) 14-16.
- Jeffrey Escoffier, Whitney Strub, and Jeffrey Patrick Colgan, “The Comstock Apparatus,” in *Intimate States: Gender, Sexuality, and Governance in Modern US History*, eds. Cannaday, Cott, and Self (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021) 41-59.
- George Kneeland, “Commercialized Prostitution in New York City” [1913], in *Documenting Intimate Matters: Primary Sources for a History of Sexuality in America*, Foster ed. (2012) 104-107.
- Emily Skidmore, “[Life as a Trans Man in Turn-of-the-Century America](#),” *Literary Hub*, September 22, 2017.
- Alva French and Channing Joseph, “[How a Former Slave Became the World’s First Drag Queen](#),” BBC, February 1, 2023.
- OPTIONAL (for more info on Swann): Cari Shane, “[The First Self-Proclaimed Drag Queen Was a Formerly Enslaved Man](#),” *Smithsonian*, June 9, 2023.

Questions to Consider:

Sarah Deutsch is a professor of history at Duke University. The selection you read by her this week offers a close examination of the lives of working women in the Boston area around the turn of the twentieth century. Pay attention to her treatment of race, ethnicity, and the “moral implications” of public and private space.

Kathy Peiss is a cultural historian whose research on turn-of-the-century working-class sexuality emphasizes key differences in the experiences of women from differing class backgrounds. The short article you read by her this week examines the role of leisure in the lives of young working women and the emerging culture of “treating” in urban America. What choices were available for young, urban, working women around the turn of the twentieth century? What strategies did they use to navigate the chaotic, public world of the city, removed from the restraints and protection of home and family? Read the Kneeland primary source alongside Deutsch and Peiss.

The co-authored article on the “Comstock Apparatus” examines the history of moral reform and “vice suppression” during this era within a legal and political framework. As you read, think back to our conversation from last week about the regulation of sexuality and gender from earlier periods in American history. What changes and continuities do you notice between “Comstockery” around the turn of the twentieth century and efforts to police/regulate/contain sexuality and gender during the colonial era and the early-mid nineteenth century?

Emily Skidmore is Assistant Professor of History at Texas Tech University. Compare her short article on the lives of transmen around the turn of the twentieth century with the video (and optional article) about William Dorsey Swann. How do early queer communities and the lives of Harry Gorman and others like him, “fit” into what you’ve learned this week about the shifting landscape of gender and sexuality in the US?

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