

The Gershwins' Bathhouse: Pleasure, Perversion & the Technologies of Sexual Life During the 1893-1929 Era

by David Rosen

Too much of a good thing can be wonderful.
Mae West¹

Gershwins' bathhouse

One of the most notorious venues for homosexual assignations during the WW-I era was the Lafayette Baths, located at 403-405 Lafayette Street just south of Cooper Square in what is today's New York's East Village. The Lafayette was one of a handful of bathhouses that catered to an exclusively gay -- and mostly white -- clientele, providing a safe environment for sexual encounters as well as other forms of socializing. In addition, there were still other baths that catered to a mixed male heterosexual-homosexual clientele and tolerated discreet sexual encounters. However, what distinguishes the Lafayette from the other popular bathhouses is that on December 29, 1916, the Gershwin family took over its ownership and Ira and George Gershwin, whose father was in the bathhouse business, became its managers; at the time, Ira was age 20 and George was 18.^{*2}



In New York and other cities during this period, men and, more infrequently, women appropriated a wide variety of social venues to facilitate homoerotic liaisons. Such encounters took place in the privacy of a bathhouse; in an apartment or rented hotel room; in a tenement basement, stairwell and rooftop; in the civil space of public park, deserted street, dock or beach; in the quasi-public venue of a saloon's

backroom, movie theatre, washroom or comfort station (i.e., "tearoom"); and at a social gathering and an invitation-only party. One could say that illicit -- if not illegal -- sex was taking place nearly anywhere people could discreetly meet.³

Bathhouses like the Lafayette were a unique sexual venue. The historian George Chauncey notes, bathhouses "constituted a singular gay environment."⁴ First and foremost, men came to meet other men for explicitly physical, if not overtly sexual, purposes. In New York, there were only a handful of such establishments and they tended to serve an affluent, white clientele. And when they met, the men were either naked or modestly clothed, making explicit what under most public conditions would have remained concealed. Equally critical for this clientele, these discreet settings allowed them to feel relatively safe from public harassment or police arrest.

In addition to the Lafayette, other gay baths of the era included the Ariston Baths (on West 55th Street), the Everard (on West 28th Street), the Mount Morris Baths (at Madison Avenue at 125th Street), the Penn Post Baths (on West 31st Street), the Produce Exchange Baths (at 6 Broadway) and the St. Mark's Bath (on St. Mark's Place near Third Avenue). Among the gay-tolerant baths were the YMCA, the Claridge and Stauch's (on Stillwell Avenue near Coney Island, Brooklyn).⁵

* George and Ira Gershwin, 1928; Brooklyn College, CUNY.

As one might expect, the men who visited bathhouses engaged in a range of sexual acts, including fellatio and sodomy. Some seemed to have participated in more radical forms of engagement – group and “public” sex. Chauncey describes an encounter that took place during the early-20th century in the dormitory and cooling rooms of the Ariston Bathhouse:

Men crowded into the room looking for partners, and one investigator testified that he saw almost two dozen sexual encounters in the room over the course of two hours, with at least one involving more than two men. Although there were no lights in the room, it was partially illuminated by the light of the gaslights in the next-door parlor, which streamed in through the open door. Voyeurism and exhibitionism were an important part of the sexual excitement in the resulting light and shadow: one officer testified that two men had sex while he stood less than a foot away from them, and that another eight or so men observed the pair while standing against the walls or lying on cots.⁶

A decade later Thomas Painter, a future associate to the Kinsey study of male sexuality, described a visit to Stauch's, a mixed male bathhouse in Coney Island: “The more direct homosexual expression is reserved for the steam rooms. There, in an atmosphere murky with steam – so murky, indeed, that one cannot see more than a few feet ahead – with benches around the walls, fellation and pedication are not at all uncommon. ...” Innocently, he adds: “If one stumbles over a pair in the act, one mutters a hasty apology and goes on quickly in another direction.”⁷ Bathhouses constituted a unique sexual culture.

As the irony of history would have it, these bathhouses grew out a half-century-long movement of socially minded, progressive reformers seeking to better the life of immigrants and the poor. Given the poor quality of sanitary conditions and limited in-apartment toilets and baths, many municipalities during the late-19th and early-20th centuries built sex-segregated public baths to meet people's

needs. Contemporaneous to this effort, local ethnic, fraternal and religious organizations as well as commercial entities set up similar bathing facilities. In time, some of these operations catered to a decidedly gay constituency.⁸

“The baths were also important social centers, where gay men could meet openly, discuss their lives, and build a circle of friends,” Chauncey astutely recognizes. What makes this venue so important is that it was – and still is -- an explicitly sexual terrain of social engagement. Not unlike traditional -- and now nearly extinct -- heterosexual brothels and contemporary sex clubs, bathhouses remain a unique cultural venue of self-expression, for the experience of pleasure and the forging of community. There, as Chauncey notes, men “created a social world on the basis of a shared and marginalized sexuality.”⁹

Fin-de-siècle America

The thirty-five year period that spans the period from the 1893 Chicago World's Colombian Exposition to the 1929 Great Depression represents one of the most socially disruptive – and sexually traumatic -- eras in American history. During this period, the U.S. made its first-blush steps to become not merely a modern nation, but an international power as well. It was a period in which the country underwent a final, continent-wide transformation from a rural agricultural country to an urban industrial nation. The U.S. population not only more than doubled, but was simultaneously *recast* and *restructured*. It was recast from a relatively homogenous white Anglo-American people -- with the enforced concentration of the descendants of former African slaves in the South and Native people in the West -- into a heterogeneous multiethnic citizenry. And it was restructured from a rural and small-town country to a class-structured, industrial urban nation. These changes forced the nation to face it's fiercest and most sustained battle over moral order –

a battle in which those advocating more tolerance and greater freedom for sexual difference and expression were repeatedly thwarted if not momentarily contained.

This period can be distinguished by three phases, each defined by a number of struggles over sexual practice and expression, and each marked by a definitive social or political outcome that imposed tougher restrictions on the efforts to practice and/or express greater sexual freedom. The first phase is often referred to as the Progressive Era and took place between 1893 and 1910. The period witnessed the nation besieged by reports of widespread "white slavery," the interstate transportation of girls and women for the purpose of commercial sex. The outcome of this effort led to the passage of the 1910 Mann Act. The second period lasted from 1910 and 1919, and witnessed an enormous change in the make up of America's cities due to the combined forces of domestic migration and foreign immigration, especially involving the mixing of different races. The outcome of this phase led to the passage of the Volstead Act (1919) imposing abstinence. The third phase, between 1920 and 1929, witnessed Prohibition -- the "Roaring '20s" -- and the playing out of the failures of a peculiar socio-economic experiment. This phase culminated in the unraveling of world capitalism and, in particular the U.S. economy, due to the Great Depression.

During the period from 1929 to 1945, from the Depression through WW-II, sexuality was significantly contained, if not suppressed, due to the combined forces of widespread poverty and war discipline. Practitioners of more radical forms of sexual expression, like the devotees of the underground comics popularly know as Tijuana bibles, were judged as "perverts" and forced to lead a more subterranean existence. Nevertheless, the underlying tensions that had traumatized the nation during the first decades of the new century resurfaced in all their fury during the decade-and-a-half

following the WW II -- and from which there would be no going back.

The U.S. was remade between 1893 and 1929. Looking simply at population, in the forty years between 1890 and 1930, the U.S. population nearly doubled to over 123 million from 63 million. As the nation's population grew, its composition changed and increasingly concentrated in cities. For example, in 1890, 65 percent of the population lived in rural areas and 35 percent were urban dwellers; by 1930, this balance had been fully recast, with 56 percent now urban and 44 percent rural inhabitants.¹⁰ As the nation's population grew and its composition changed, an ever-increasing proportion concentrated in cities. This transformation was most vividly reflected in the major cities. By 1920, for example, the foreign born population of New York, Chicago and Detroit constituted, respectively, 36.1, 29.9 and 29.3 percent of the total population.¹¹ These changes radically transformed the nation's character.

This profound transformation of the nation's population and urban concentration was driven by the fundamental realignment of the nation's economic order. From a rural, agrarian country, the U.S. became one of the world's mightiest industrial nations. From a country of yeoman farmers to a nation of industrial workers, America became a truly modern society. It was a modernity embodied in the increasing widespread adoption of technological innovations. This modernization was all-inclusive, from the farm, to the factory, to the city street and to an increasing array of functions within the office and home. Siegfried Giedion dubbed this process, "mechanization takes command." It was characterized by the adoption of new forms of power, be it electricity or petrochemicals, and the application of the industrial manufacturing process to all forms of the economy, including agriculture, mining and the manufacturing, distribution and consumption of consumer goods like the

phonograph, radio, telephone, movies and automobile.¹²

Equally critical, the U.S. moved to center stage of the international struggle over global economic, political and military power through a series of imperialist efforts. They included, but were not limited to, the annexation of Hawaii; the waging of the Spanish-American War, with the resulting control of Philippines, Puerto Rico and Cuba; and the mediation of the Russo-Japanese conflict. These efforts culminate in its participation in WW-I and Pres. Woodrow Wilson's failed efforts to create a workable League of Nations.¹³

As the U.S. underwent these fundamental changes in demographics, industrial makeup and international status, so to was it witnessed a profound transformation of intellectual, cultural and social life. Whether expressed in terms of changes in literature, music, theatre, film or other popular arts or the more personal forms of expression like fashion and make-up, Americans were becoming decidedly "modern." This overall development was no better represented than in what came to be known as the "Harlem Renaissance." A new America was coming into being.¹⁴

Nothing better illustrates the impact of technological innovation on American life during this era than the adoption of electricity. Modern life – and thus a modern nation -- would not be possible without electricity. While the term "electricity" was first used in 1650, its principals were not formally, scientifically discovered until 1832 by Michael Faraday.¹⁵ And it would take another half-century before electricity began to be successfully commercialized.¹⁶ David Nye argues in his definitive history of the adoption of electricity in the U.S., *Electrifying America*, "Electricity appeared in public places and in a handful of the well-to-do mansions in the 1880s, but most houses were not wired until after 1915. ... The impact of electricity on

industry did not come until after 1905" By 1930, 70 percent of all U.S. homes were electrified; rural America lagged behind until Roosevelt's New Deal initiative.¹⁷

The shift from a steam-centered to an electricity-centered culture is best illustrated by the changes that took place over the two decades that separated the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876 and the Chicago World's Colombian Exposition of 1893. According to Nye, the 1876 fair was "the last great exposition based upon steam power, and its central symbol was the huge Corliss steam engine." During the intervening decades, arc lights, incandescent lighting, alternating-current transformers and practical batteries were introduced. The 1893 exposition was the first fair powered by electricity and its central symbol was the light bulb. "Some visitors saw more artificial light at the [Chicago] fair than they had previously seen in their entire lives. Its more than eleven million candle power overwhelmed them ... ," he adds.¹⁸

An estimated at 25 million fair visitors -- or one-third of the nation's total population -- were engulfed in electricity. The exposition's central facility, the Electrical Building, was two football-fields long and one field wide; it displayed 1.8 million candle power. Visitors were exposed to an electrified moving sidewalk, an electrical railway, battery-powered boats, electrified fountains equipped with 250,000-candle powered lights, powerful searchlights and -- perhaps the most favorite site -- an immense, electric Ferris wheel that was particularly popular at night.¹⁹

Visitors were also treated to still other innovative experiences, including the first public display of the earliest motion picture. Eadweard Muybridge's zoopraxiscope, a device that combined a Zoetrope's rotating disc with a Magic Lantern, was displayed. Also shown was the "electro-Photographic Tachyscope" that "reproduced ... the natural motion of

objects and animals ... with a degree of truth that is absolutely bewildering" A new world of representation was emerging to meet the realities of a new and very different century.²⁰

Visitors were also witness to a still more radical form of human "electricity" -- sexual excitation, the subject of innovative display. The Columbia Exposition was the first World's Fair at which a female artist was displayed in sexualized public performance; this innovation became a staple of many subsequent fairs and the popular media. At the 1893 fair, the voyeurism of prurient interest was camouflaged under the banner of science, with female sexual presentation displayed as part of anthropological exhibitions.* As A. W. Stencell observes, "The fairs' half-naked 'savages' from strange distant lands (many of them local black people) and the hoochie-coochie dancers of the Far East (some as far as New York City) provided white America with a grand opportunity for subliminal into the recesses of its own repressed desires and fantasies."²¹

The Exposition's first female sex star is said to be Fatima (aka Fahreda Mahzar) whose belly dancer performance -- given 1890's standards -- was considered notorious. She performed with a troupe of women as part of exotic midway side-shows called the "Streets of Cairo," "Turkish Village" and "Persian Palace." The women worked under such stage names as Hourii, Husaria, Farida and Maryeta; many of them were Ghawazi, or -- who Stencell describes -- "the celebrated voluptuous dancers -- the Gypsy prostitutes -- from Egypt." He observes, "Their typical costume was small vests fastened low on the bosoms, bare midriff, and short skirts, with their bodies heavily ornamented by jewelry, beads, and finger symbols. Their dances

* Semi-nude Samoan women were on display at the San Francisco Midwinter Exposition of 1894. [see photo in Rydell/23]

featured very little traveling across the stage, but lots of spasmodic movements of the abdominal area and rapid shaking of the shoulders."²² The '93 Exposition also introduced the "cooch" dance, the forerunner of the shimmy and the striptease.²³

Fatima's appeal was based on her very foreignness that concealed two secrets. First, as a "primitive," she allegedly had no shame and, thus, no respectable American white woman could be so lascivious. Second and equally intriguing, she went on to become one of the first female "sex" stars. Her allure was so powerful that she became a national celebrity as burlesque performers across the country quickly adopted her name to suggest a new sexuality. She was immortalized in the soon-to-emerge moving pictures industry in the earliest peep-shows by Thomas Edison and W.K.L. Dickson.**²⁴

Invisible to most visitors, the Exposition was the final battleground at which the decade-long war between the two contending standards of electric current was played out. On the side of direct current (DC) were aligned the forces of Edison and Andrew Carnegie; on the other side were those supporting alternative current (AC), led by the technology genius Nikola Tesla and his partners led by George Westinghouse. The victory of AC determined the electronic infrastructure

** Edison attempted to censor the display of Fatima with the use of series of black bars across the image. However, as one historian has noted, "in this early case the censorship was more symbolic than efficient, since the bars obscure almost everything except Fatima's unclothed belly." [Christie/73] Equally fascinating, Fatima's reputation as a sex symbol became so renown following the Fair that a women bearing her name is reported to have given a performance in San Francisco: "The small group of gentlemen who watched her dance naked on a table in the Poodle Dog one night -- the incident precipitated one divorce -- were probably more than amply satisfied with her credentials." [Gentry/205]

upon which 20th century life was to be lived.²⁵

The triumph and rapid adoption of AC electricity fueled the modernization of American – especially urban -- life. Little of urban American social experience was to remain free from electrification, be it in-door or out-door lighting, an ever-widening assortment of domestic appliances and forms of popular recreation as well as trolleys and subways, sweatshops, offices and other workplaces, to name just a few areas.²⁶ While elements of the older, steam-powered world lingered on, there was no going back. Truly, the full scope and significance of electrification is not unlike the digital transformation now taking place – and, which itself, is powered by electricity.

The reconstitution of the U.S. through the combined forces of population growth and diversification, on the one hand, and of technology-driven industrialization and urbanization, on the other, contributed to a fundamental realignment of social relations, especially those between men and women. Over the preceding two centuries, there had been a gradual evolution in the structure of civil association, in the way adults related to one another. For millennia, social relations had been predominantly *homo-social* – i.e., associations between men and women were segregated, men with men, women with women. However, during the 17th and 18th centuries, major social and economic changes began to refashion courtship, marriage and the family – especially for the middle- and upper-class.²⁷ With the birth of the 20th century, adult association was becoming predominately *hetero-social*.

During the period between 1893 and 1929, the sphere of male/female social exchange expanded to a historically new – and qualitatively different -- level. Women and men found themselves increasingly drawn together, in both the number of ways they interacted and in the

more intimate forms of exchange they engaged in. A new, more intimate form of marriage, known as “companionate marriages,” was promoted. For the growing number of working young (and especially unmarried) men and women who called the city home and had some disposable income, the seductions of the equally-rapidly expanding market economy promised both freedom and pleasure. As the historians John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman note in their invaluable history of American sexuality, *Intimate Matters*: “Despite the evidence of change in sexual mores in the years before World War I, the 1920s do stand out as a time when something in the sexual landscape decisively altered and new patterns emerged. The decade was recognizably modern in a way that previous ones were not.” They add, “The values, attitudes, and activities of the pre-Depression years unmistakably point to the future rather than the past.”²⁸

The social world was opening up especially for leisure activities. New experiences, even pleasures, could be found at an amusement park or baseball game, a movie theatre or burlesque parlor, a dance hall or music club or simply walking down a congested street window-shopping. The most intimate aspects of this new existence could be experienced in the cloths one wore, the music one listened and danced to, the books and magazines one read, and the cigarettes and alcohol one consumed. A new, “freer” and more sexualized American was being fashioned.

By the turn-of-the-century, these combined forces had created a new social and personal condition, one that can only be called *rawness*. This experience is characterized by the intensifying immediacy of experience. It found expression in the most ordinary activities of everyday life like the intensity of work or street congestion. And it found expression in the more provocative sexual activities taking place in bathhouses, buffet parties, burlesque shows and

brothels throughout the country. Modern urban life was raw. It was a period in which "[m]ore and more of life, it seemed, was intent on keeping Americans in a state of constant sexual excitement."²⁹

This rawness was fueled by the rapid immigration of very different peoples into over-crowded urban neighborhoods. It was the demanding rawness of increasingly mechanized forms of labor, be it in manufacturing or the service sectors, the leading domains of, respectively, "male" and "female" wage labor. It was a rawness of ever-intensifying sights and sounds, smells and touches. A century later, it seems almost impossible to imagine just how raucous, over-powering this must have been. With smells, for example, streets must have been alive with the aromas – if not stench – from bakeries, produce shops, meat and fish stands, of restaurants and open kitchen windows; the wastes from horse-draw liveries, manufacturing exhausts and the notoriously ineffective sewer system; and the strong scents of personal body odors. The modern America metropolis was, first and foremost, an unprecedented sensuous experience.

The new urban condition was an ever-intensifying experience of personal and social existence. It was first and foremost an experience of difference, from a small-town world where everything was similar to a new world in which nearly everything was different. This experience was at once threatening and inviting, and was ever-present at the workplace, in commercial leisure activities and in the most intimate of human encounters, especially sexual ones. Modern existence was further exaggerated by the mixing – the literal rubbing against one another -- of a rapidly diversifying population. Even clustered in ghettos, city dwellers experienced one another on congested streets, in tenement buildings, at workplaces, hectic department stores, amusement parks and throbbing dance halls, dark movie theatres and over-crowded subway cars

and buses, among many, many other social venues.

Among the new urban multitude, two distinct groups seemed to most offend, if not threaten, traditional notions of moral order. The first was the significant number of unattached young men and women, in the fullness of their sexual maturity, who roamed the city. The second was the historically unprecedented diversity of races and ethnic groups, be they Eastern European or African-American, who called the city home. Together, they not only added to the lived, sensuous experience of urban life, but added a sense of tension unexpectedness to experience.

Adding further vitality to this experience was the new, more sensual practices and representation of the body that were appearing, especially those that demonstrated the erotic physicality of the female body. The presentation of the female body was most graphically enhanced through the increasing use of makeup, perfume and fashion. This was especially evident in, first, what was dubbed the "flapper" attire and the "bob" hair cut, and, second, in advertising and other forms of imagery that helped popularize, legitimize, the new look. This intensity was a defining feature of the new forms of popular entertainment that so significantly helped redefine personal and social concepts of pleasure. It reverberated in live, theatrical performance (most notably vaudeville and, especially, burlesque), in live music (particularly jazz) and in the increasingly popular forms of dance (especially the jitter-bug). It also found expression in the newer electronic media of the phonograph, radio and, most especially, the movies; movies were the medium in which the growing complexity, immediacy and rawness of the new urban experience of modern life was best realized.

The new conditions of modern life -- particularly the rawness of urban existence -- perplexed both conservative

traditionalists and progressive reformers. Repeated battles were fought during the 1893 to 1929 period over both the causes and consequences of these new conditions. Some of these battles were more economic or political, as with the organizing efforts of the Wobblies, the battle for women's suffrage, efforts to fight the Klan and the treachery of the Palmer raids and subsequent deportations. Other battles, however, had more to do with social values and personal choices, including the publishing of obscene materials, the availability of birth control and contraceptive techniques, the regulation of prostitution and the suppression of gambling, smoking and alcohol consumption. These battles, however, would ultimately prove ineffective in halting the reconstitution of social and sexual life.

Female pleasures

The period between 1893 and 1929 witnessed the birth of the "new woman." As the modern woman resettled into growing cities and entered the wage-labor market and secured the vote, she confronted perhaps the deepest challenge, sexuality. For millennia, a Western woman's pursuit of pleasure had been a distinguishing privilege of the private, the powerful and the possessed. Personal sexual pleasure was restricted to the most intimate personal settings; it was the pursuit of countesses and a handful of other well-to-do or socially powerful women as well as some courtesans, prostitutes and women thought to be possessed by demons. With the growth of the mass-manufacturing marketplace, especially the industrialization of appearance, entertainment and other aspects of daily life, the fantasy – and sometimes reality – of pleasure extended to the lives of an ever-increasing proportion of women.

To offer women new opportunities for pleasure, a historically new concept of female identity was constituted. Traditionally, female identity was defined

by the dictates of patriarchy that insisted that women be both passive and accommodating. Women were seen as socialized nature, something forceful yet weak, needing male stewardship; women were something to be colonized and husbanded. Within terms of this identity, sexuality was either assumed to be non-existent or subordinated to the demands of procreation – the fulfilled woman was the mother.

During the *fin-de-siècle* period, traditional female identity was reconstituted, with the essentially passive female giving way to the new, modern woman – one who was essentially active in an increasing number of aspects of personal and public life, including her pursuit of pleasure. Capitalism, spearheaded by the "appearance industry," directly challenged the more traditional, agricultural and patriarchal social model of female identity – replacing it with a new, and perhaps more empowering, form of existence. Henceforth, the marketplace would become the principle mediating institution by which a person's most personal, intimate pleasures could be fulfilled.

The appearance industry consisted – and still consists -- of the combined power of cosmetic and perfume firms, beauty parlors, garment and shoe manufactures, department stores, retailers and mail-order houses, advertising agencies and the popular media (especially women's magazines, the movies and radio), among others. [Peiss/Jar-61-62, 119] During the early part of the 20th century, the appearance industry fought a ferocious, two-pronged battle to redefine the American woman. On one side, it confronted the then-dominant social order made up of the traditional Victorian-era upper- and rising middle-class moralist who maintained ideological hegemony through the Protestant churches, temperance groups, moral reformers and censors over the meaning of womanhood. Anthony Comstock and his protégé, John Saxton Sumner, led the anti-vice crusade in New York City. On the other side, it

sought to contain the inherently more radical dimensions opening up to women, especially those articulated by suffragettes, birth control advocates, trade unionists and popular entertainers, among others. Margaret Sanger and Mae West epitomized the movement for sexual freedom.

The reconfiguration of female sexuality took place within two complementary dimensions – one involved a woman's representation of self, while the other consisted of her performance in the world. The first dimension involved turning one's self, especially one's face and body, into an object of display. This remaking of self-display was driven by the appearance industry, particularly with the new uses and significance of make-up, fashion and hair care. The second dimension involved presenting this new self in the world as an active performer, whether as a citizen, worker or consumer, let alone wife and mother. A woman's self-presentation was embodied in a recognizable -- if severely contested -- identity of the flapper that, in turn, enabled one to effectively negotiate social space. Of particular importance, the new social spaces opening up to women through the workplace and commercial amusement and entertainment provided unique opportunities to pursue and experience pleasure, especially sexual enticements. Together, both dimensions – performance and representation -- defined the female body that, in Angela Latham words, "... *inevitably* functions as a site where cultural values are displayed, contested, negotiated, and ultimately transformed."³⁰

For millennia women (as well as men) have used a host of "artificial" -- be they natural, hand-made or manufactured -- means to enhance their appearance. The 20th century witnessed the emergence of a new era of commercialized beauty. In her definitive study, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture*, Kathy Peiss summarizes this transformation: "In the nineteenth century, beauty culture had touted timeless principles of

enhancing appearance, and makeup was fashion mainly to the fast elite and daring working class women. In the 1920s and 1930s, manufacturers and consumers increasingly perceived the face as a style, subject to fashion trends and fads."³¹ Its only gotten more intensified during the last century.

The transformation of beauty was profound, but gathered force slowly. For much of the late-19th and early-20th centuries, the dominant social assumption was that "women's virtue and beauty were intertwined."³² The unstated objective of the new appearance industry involved separating virtue from beauty, thus fully reversing the historic model that saw appearance as the outward manifestation of inner qualities. Under the new marketplace conditions, appearance -- self-display -- bestowed value on one's external attributes, moral or otherwise, and having little or no reference to one's "inner" character.*

Traditionally, a woman's strong display of facial cosmetics signified a lady of ill repute; such females were long known as a "painted lady," a "fast woman," a prostitute. By the 1880s, as Peiss observes, "Makeup slowly began to cross from the stage into everyday life." And by turn-of-the-20th-century, cosmetics – and especially lipstick – became symbolic of women's new freedom in an age that Peiss identifies as one "in which appearances were fluid and social rank unstable." For a growing number of women, and especially younger women, makeup was used to mark their place in an unstable world. As Peiss points out, makeup "assert[ed] worldliness against insularity and sexual desire against chastity." So powerful was its appeal that between 1909 and 1929, cosmetics sales skyrocketed tenfold, from \$14 to \$141

* This analysis is principally for the dominant white population; a separate but no less powerful beauty culture existed for African-American women, see Peiss, 41-42, 71-77, 89-95, 108-14 and 203-37.

million. The traditionalist's battle against the "false face" was roundly defeated as makeup served as a means for women to "transform the spectacle of themselves into self-conscious performances." Based on social presentation, the apparent line between a painted lady and a respectable working girl was, like makeup, smudging.³³

Women's clothing further intensified self-representation, fueling the power of the body as a vehicle of performance. "Dress," notes Peiss in her groundbreaking study, *Cheep Amusements*, "was a particularly potent way to display and play with notions of respectability, allure, independence, and status and to assert a distinctive identity and presence." During the 19th century, the American women – or at least middle- and upper-class women – were physically restrained by acceptable clothing, particularly by corsets and trailing skirts. The new fashions, including swimwear, that would become popular during the first few decades of the century -- especially worn by the flapper -- symbolized and facilitated the creation of a more active woman.³⁴

The flapper posed a major threat of traditional moral order. As Latham notes, "the fashionable flapper was correctly perceived to present a serious challenge to the tenacious influence of American Victorian traditions of feminine behavior and display." Nothing better exemplified this than the freeing of the woman's physical movement, her step, made possible by the removal of the corset (and its replacement with more flexible if not more erotic undergarments, particularly the brassier) and the shortening of the hemline. As the hemline moved up the leg, more female flesh – be it the ankle or calf – was exposed, thus setting the stage for new fashion statements offered by shoes and stockings.³⁵

The most threatening fashion statement was reserved for the beach. As Latham notes, "no particular fashion aroused more

anxiety and strife than swimwear." For at beaches and nearby amusement parks like Brooklyn's famed Coney Island, personal public performance was active and explicit – one was looked at and one looked at equally under-dressed men and women alike. Swimwear exposed what had long been a most precious secret, the body as a terrain of sexual engagement. Yet, as she adds, "in the 1920s, for a woman to swim in an abbreviated bathing costume was less acceptable than for her to parade in more."³⁶

Beaches and amusement parks were but two of a growing network of public venues that people – and especially younger women – went to in pursuit of personal pleasure. Movie theatres and dance halls proved particularly appealing settings, for each served as a unique space for the relatively unsupervised interchange between women and men. The movie theatres constituted a new type of social space, one in which darkness, silence, close physical proximity and larger-than-life – and often suggestive -- imagery stimulated fantasy. The dance halls facilitated the intermingling of suggestive music, provocative dancing, smoking and physical contact that stimulate the imagination if not the flesh; during Prohibition, illegal alcohol only added to the overall available stimulation.* These venues encouraged flirtation and sexual encounters, particularly touching and kissing.³⁷

No two women of the WW-I era had more of an impact on the sexual life of the nation and yet appear to be totally foreign

* It must be noted that for many younger working-women attended dances with an expensive proposition. To accommodate the income differences between men and women, dance halls charged a significantly lower entrance price. In addition, a social ritual of men "treating" women emerged. The consequences of this economic unequal relation was clearly seen by Peiss who points out: "Women ... were financially unable to reciprocate in kind and instead offered sexual favors of varying degrees." [Peiss-109]

to one another as Margaret Sanger and Mae West. One was a champion of women's rights and birth control, the other a provocative vaudeville performer and movie star. Not surprising, while both women lived long lives that roughly overlapped chronologically, they never met. While both were first-generation "new women" and born of white, artisan-class parentage, they probably had their greatest impact on the lives of the poorer classes and immigrants. While both were arrested and served jail sentences for committing what was labeled "obscene" activities, neither really knew the work – and thus the inherent radicality -- of the other. Truly, they inhabited vastly different social worlds – and this difference frames the scope of change in the sexual landscape that took place during their lives.

Nonetheless, Sanger and West shared much in common. Both were married at relatively early ages and had unfulfilled relations with their respective first husbands. Both were notorious divorcees in an era that frowned on single women of passion and accomplishment. Both were driven and achieved personal success and fame through their intellectual and/or artistic talents. Both faced significant challenges from contemporaries and, through personal tenacity and force of will, fulfilled much of their promise. While both were essentially atheists in practice, they dabbled with mysticism. Finally, both lived out unabashedly powerful sexual passions and were attracted to and had affairs with some of the most interesting men of their era.

Sanger and West were radical women in, respectively, politics and entertainment. Their respective radicality pushed the limits of accepted sexual practice – Sanger in the domain of sexual performance, West in that of sexual presentation. Sanger's tireless efforts in favor of a woman's right to birth control enabled a woman to not only better control her body, her pregnancy, but helped her better separate pleasure from

procreation – and thus enjoy the full pleasure of her sexuality. Thus women – and, in turn, men – could partake in the performance of sexual relations with greater freedom and, potentially, greater pleasure. West's role as a stage/screen personae embodied the most radical version of female sexuality, one that integrated sexual allure with inversive insubordination – and thus present female sexuality in not only its most active but exotic sense.³⁸ Her attempt to reconcile the apparent differences between passion and power offered an image to women – and, in turn, men – of an alternative model of female sexuality that the appearance and culture industries have sought to deny.

Sanger was born Margaret Louisa Higgins on September 14, 1879, to Irish-immigrant parents in Corning, NY; she died almost eighty-eight years later on September 6, 1966. Her life mirrors the trajectory of what has been identified as the "2nd-generation women's movement." The efforts of this generation culminated in a number of fundamental shifts in social values that provided greater freedom for women. These shifts included: securing women's formal citizenship through the right to vote (a defining goal of the 1st generation women's movement led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton); accepting birth control as a woman's – or family's – basic right (abortion rights have yet to be so accepted and therefore remain lightning-rod issues for the 3rd generation movement); and winning some of the important basic labor rights, among them the 8-hr day, minimum wage (yet to have full equality at the workplace) and child-labor protection. The course of how these issues moved from the radical margin of society, advocated by feminists, bohemian and progressive intellectuals, labor organizers and socialists, into the mainstream of academic, medical, business and social life is the story of Sanger's life. In her youth, she was one in struggle with Emma Goldman, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Havlock Ellis; in her maturity, she was on a first-name basis

with Eleanor Roosevelt, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and Gandhi.

Sanger came of age during the 1910s, a period in many ways similar to the social, intellectual and political upheavals that marked the 1960s. She moved with her husband, William Sanger, an architect and painter, and children from the placid suburbs of Westchester, NY, to New York City in 1910. She plunged fully into the rich intellectual, cultural and political life taking place in what Ann Douglas has called "mongrel Manhattan." [Douglas/5] She joined the Socialist party; wrote columns for *The Call*, *The Village Voice* of its day; and was a regular at the legendary salon's hosted by Mabel Dodge -- where those in attendance included political figures like John Reed and Bill Haywood, the artists Arthur Davis, Charles Demuth and Max Weber, and renown intellectuals like Will Durant and A. A. Brill, among many, many others. Within such a stimulating environment -- and stimulating not only in the intellectual sense -- the obligations of marriage and family became greater and greater restraints on her fulfillment of a passionate life.

Sanger challenged the powerful traditionalist convention that held that a married mother without means (i.e., a rich husband or inherited wealth) should not lead an autonomous life, a life separate and distinct from her husband's. Fully exploiting the knowledge and experience she had gained as a nurse in upstate New York, she became an articulate spokesperson for what was then called "women's issues," particularly conception and birth control. Ellen Chesler, Sanger's principal biographer, evaluates the significance of her writing during this period:

For a woman to write about sex was especially provocative. To tackle such subjects as pregnancy and abortion, masturbation, menstruation, and defloration, the materials of Margaret's first forays as a columnist, demanded considerable courage, even though she took a traditional Victorian and

conservative view of sexual excess, especially with respect to masturbation, which she condemned as harmful on the grounds that it made the experience of sexual gratification in conventional intercourse more difficult.³⁹

She founded and edited *The Women Rebel* and published two critical pamphlets, "What Every Girl Should Know" and "Family Limitation," that directly challenged U.S. obscenity laws. She was arrested and, fearing a trial and possible imprisonment for up to forty-five years, she fled to Europe in 1914 using a false passport.

Upon her return to the U.S., the original charges were dropped and she plunged back into her tireless campaign for women's sexual and contraceptive rights. Emboldened by the strong support she received from not only the New York progressive community, but women of all classes from across the country, she opened the nation's first birth control clinic on October 16, 1917, in a small tenement storefront in Brownsville, Brooklyn. The clinic dispensed birth control literature, provided helpful information and supplied contraceptive devices (e.g., pessaires, condoms and douching solutions) to the predominately immigrant and working-class women of the neighborhood. The police raided the clinic, arrested Sanger and closed it down -- for violating obscenity laws!

Sanger drew inspiration for her birth-control clinic from the efforts underway in Europe to establish socialized public health clinics that she had learned of during her trip there and the network of some five hundred tuberculosis clinics then operating in the U.S. However, while her effort drew support from neighborhood women and progressives, the traditionalists, police and medical community were marshaled against her. Convicted for violating the New York Comstock laws, she went to jail for thirty days; while imprisoned with prostitutes and drug addicts, she educated these

women on birth control and other "women's issues."⁴⁰

Sanger's arrest and trial took place amidst the mounting hysteria that accompanied the U.S. entry into World War One. The war caused a fundamental schism within the progressive community. While many of her more radical comrades, most notably Goldman, stood in pacifist opposition to U.S. involvement in the war and others supported the effort, Sanger took a third course. She claimed a neutral zone, one that placed women's right to birth control above the war and its polarizing stands. Sanger's decision would guide her efforts during the subsequent decades of her long and distinguished career. She would escape the traditionalist's revenge against the most radical of progressives that came in the immediate post-war Red Scare. While the Palmer Raids and subsequent deportations of radicals (including her oldest comrade-in-arms and rival for influence, Goldman) were underway, she was organizing the nation's first birth control conference. Held in 1921, the conference was distinguished with the presence of Winston Churchill, Theodore Dreiser and other medical and academic dignitaries. As Chesler notes, "The conference reestablished Margaret as the country's preeminent spokeswoman for birth control."⁴⁰

Sanger is remarkable for, among many other factors, the fact that she really did – especially in her early life -- attempt to reconcile political ideology and practice with her personal life. Birth control not only provides a woman with greater power over her life – her body and her pregnancy – but also provides a means by which she can experience greater physical and sexual pleasure. Sanger's political

* Ironically, the New York State court turned down Sanger's appeal on the grounds that ordinary women should not give out medical information – this should be left to trained doctors. This ruling set the stage for the subsequent opening of legal birth control clinics with medical supervision. [Chesler/160]

activism and intellectual forcefulness were matched by a strong sexual passion. She not only advocated for sexual freedom, but practiced it – she appears to have really enjoyed sexual relations! And, in particular, she found sexual passion in the intellectual drives of men like Havlock Ellis, H. G. Wells and Lorenzo Portet,^{*} among many others.^{**} Her relationship with (and subsequent marriage to) Noah Slee, a millionaire manufacturer, started in 1921 as she was planning for her first U.S. birth control conference. With its success and her marriage to Slee, she abandoned not only her radical socialist roots, but sexual liaisons outside of marriage as well.

Mary Jane ("Mae") West was born on August 17, 1893, to Irish-English-German immigrant parents in Brooklyn, NY; she died eight-five years later on November 22, 1978. The trajectory of her life mirrors the transformation of the forms of representation of female sexuality that occurred during the first half of the 20th century. Her life bears witness to how sexuality has been integrated into the commercial marketplace -- and the ongoing resistance to this development. West understood the full consequences of this development perhaps better than any public figure of the period – for she lived her life at the very eye of the storm and, through her very success, became a casualty of it.

"... West's personae played on the margins of bourgeois tolerance and tested its limits," acknowledges the theatre historian Robert Allen, placing her in a unique position among modern female performance artists. He adds, "She created a personae of the glamorous, tough, aggressive, sensual women."⁴¹

* Portet was a disciple of Francisco Ferrer, Spain's leading reformer and educator who had been assassinated by Spanish monarchists in 1909.

** She may well have had a homo-erotic encounter with Janet de Selincourt, the wife of one of her lovers, Hugh de Selincourt. [Chesler/186]

She seems, especially in her youth, to have clearly recognized the difficulty of her position. Her critique of the culture industry, expressed as a monologue in her 1927 play, *The Wicked Age*, is spoken in the self-conscious voice of one who has learned deeply from painful experience:

The basis of any industry that needs immediate attention of the public for success today is based on the exploitation of the female form -- ... Take the theatre, ... plays go over that exhibit the woman's body in some way or another [L]ook at musical comedies – with their beautiful curtains of living beauties – their tableaux, their beautiful scenes – everything is an excuse for a horde of almost naked women to parade up and down the stage, to give the out of town buyers a kick.⁴²

The contradiction that West attempted to reconcile – being simultaneously the *almost naked* woman at center stage of the culture industry and a fierce critique of it – represents not only the dilemma faced by other female performers of the 20th century, but women in general in an increasingly commercialized sexual culture.

Her rise to prominence took place at an historically critical moment – the life and social image of women was undergoing profound change and so too where it's principal forms of presentation. The intensifying sexualization of women was implemented on both the level of self- or personal-expression (through fashion and makeup) and publicly- or socially-shared imagery (through literature, theatre and movies). Nevertheless, there were also enormously powerful social, religious and political forces that attempted to contain this sexual expression or, if containment couldn't work, at least channel it into more manageable activities. West's provocative, explicit sexuality deeply antagonized these traditionalists.

West's sexuality artful incorporated two forces – exposure and insubordination, or as she put it, "It isn't what you do; it's how you do it!"⁴³ It seems that her exposure never involved total nudity.

While other cabaret, burlesque and carnival girl-show performers exploited the provocativeness of nudity through the striptease, West resisted. Rather, her exposure radiated a certain lewdness of expression. This lewdness was articulated – in an increasingly exaggerated form -- in the suggestive clothing, the verbal inflections, the knowing, provocative double entendres, the playful gaze and pose, and the dances she incorporated into her live performances, especially the cooch and the shimmy. As she so salaciously said to one of her male fans, "Is that a pistol in your pocket or are you just glad to see me?"⁴⁴

West challenged convention through her representation of a radical sexuality, one that, in its self-conscious lewdness, embodied female insubordination – it was a sexuality that refused to lose its critical edge, to give up its demand for fulfillment, to passively accommodate to male desire. It was through this forceful and subversive quality that she posed her greatest challenge to traditionalist's sensibilities, particularly in the years she was part of the New York theatre scene and before she went to Hollywood, during the Depression, and became a movie star. Her performances were considered among the most provocative, lascivious, of the period and were repeatedly being closed down by the police as obscene, resulting in her arrest and imprisonment.

Not unlike today's inner-city youth drawn to the Hip-Hop scene, West grew up at a time and in a place in which the theatre was a viable option for the more adventurous. Her turn-of-the-century Brooklyn neighborhood was birthplace to such stars as Clara Bow and Marion Davis.⁴⁵ West first performed on-stage at six years of age;* for a young woman with

*West's last film was *Sextette*, featuring Timothy Dalton, Tony Curtis, George Hamilton, Walter Pigeon and George Raft as well as such rock stars as Ringo Starr, Alice Cooper and Keith Moon; it was finished in 1977, when she was well into her eighties. [Leonard/386]

passion, everything seemed possible. As a performer, she came of age during the 1910s and 1920s – the era right before the triumph of movies, when popular entertainment was live, whether presented in the more legitimate theatre setting or at more informal cabarets and speakeasies.

The New York theatre was divided between the upscale dramatic performance, the popular vaudeville, the more risqué burlesque and the still more provocative revues. Each reflected -- in its own way and to its own constituency -- the fundamental changes taking place throughout American society, especially involving female sexuality. Most critically, the New York legitimate theatre was rocked in the mid-'20s when Eugene O'Neill's play, *All God's Chillun' Got Wings*, opened on Broadway. For its time, it presented an uncompromising critique of the miscegenation taboo.

In O'Neill's drama, a white woman not only loves and marries a black man, but has sex with him to their mutual happiness and pleasure. The play forced more informed Americans to deal with not only the consequences of slavery, but the reconfiguration of urban life that was accompanying the vast black migration to the North.⁴⁶ For the intelligentsia of the day, drama played a vital role in American society and, with a few notable exceptions, was far more influential at the time than movies.

Vaudeville and more upscale revues, especially the Florenz Ziegfeld productions, were in crisis. They were being challenged for popularity, on the one side, by the new medium of motion pictures and, on another, by the more sexually explicit world of burlesque and cabaret revues. West positioned herself, during the 1910's, at the cusp between vaudeville and burlesque, in what was known as the "small-time" vaudeville circuit and Broadway houses. While she performed with some leading entertainers like Al Jolson, she failed to achieve the

stardom she desired. This was due, in part, to her repeated efforts to push the limits of acceptable presentation as with her 1915 production of "The Gladiator" that drew complaints of being indecent.⁴⁷ *Variety* caught her dilemma most pointedly: "May West in big-time vaudeville may only be admired for her persistency in believing she is a big-time act and trying to make vaudeville accept her as such. ... Unless Miss West can tone down her stage presence in every way, she just as well hop right out of vaudeville into burlesque."⁴⁸

It was within the contradictory impulses of Prohibition that West achieved her legendary status – pushing the limits of acceptable behavior and being repeatedly arrested and imprisoned for doing so. She did this, not as *Variety* had urged, by toning down her presentation, but by having popular culture catch up with her. With the dedication and resolve that is recognized only after fame is achieved, West put in more than a decade of ceaseless effort to not simply perfect her talent but to force America to accept a radically different notion of female sexuality. Her work became more salacious and provocative than mainstream vaudeville, but less explicit than burlesque and the explicit sex that took place in private parties and buffet flats. Probably the most famous star of the revue circuit was Sophie Tucker, one of West's leading competitors.

Never losing her critical edge, West's work during the decade is marked by defiance. A brief review of but five of her efforts during the mid-'20s is illustrative. *SEX* opened in 1926 and was, as one of West's biographer's declares, "the play that put Mae on the map."⁴⁹ Set in a Montreal brothel and featuring "gaudily dressed prostitutes," it was closed down by the police and ruled by the court as "obscene, immoral, and indecent." West was arrested and, along with her producers, received a fine and a ten-day prison sentence.⁵⁰

The 1927 play, *The Drag*, is about how an apparently "normal" man deals with his homosexual desires. Allen notes, "The characters who suffer in the play are those who deny their true nature or attempt to conceal it." The high-point of the show is the third-act during which a party is staged with forty gay men in drag. While the play ran for two-week rehearsals in Paterson, NJ, West did not open it in New York after the police notified her that they would close it.⁵¹ *The Wicked Age*, which ran in 1927, is a critique of beauty pageants, especially the "Miss. America" pageant then gaining popularity. West attacked pageants as pernicious vehicles that exploited female sexuality for commercial purposes. While beauty pageants date from 1854, when P.T. Barnum first introduced them to attract male customers, they took on a new social role in the '20s as a legitimizing institution that set the parameters of acceptable female physical display.⁵²

The Pleasure Man ran in 1928. It depicts a brother's rage at a man who acts in what one critic called "barbaric masculinity" against his sister; it ends with him castrating the sexual villain off-stage. The play achieved such notoriety during rehearsals that the police closed it on opening night. Finally, *Diamond Lil*, which also ran in 1928, was West's most successful Broadway effort. Rich with the imagery of the turn-of-the-century urban underworld or tenderloin, it un-self-consciously presents an appealing portrait of the demi-monde of prostitutes, "white-slave" traders, shoplifters and cocaine addicts.⁵³

With her new acclaim on Broadway, West was enticed to Hollywood as the Depression was settling in and studio executives looked to provocative female sexuality to sell tickets. Female sexuality had been a staple feature since the medium's earliest inception and stars like Theda Bara and Alla Nazimova had perfected the on-screen form of female

glamour.⁵⁴ West films during the '30s, like *She Done Him Wrong* (1933) and *I'm No Angel* (1933), were essentially extensions of her theatre personae and paired her with such male stars as, W. C. Fields, Cary Grant, George Raft and Randolph Scott, among others. Yet, as she achieved greater popularity through movies, her image of sexuality became frozen and she a virtual caricature to her own once-radical presentation. Nevertheless, as a movie star, her reputation and uncompromising explicitness antagonized traditionalist forces of moral order, particularly the Catholic Legion of Decency. Unfortunately, as Allen and others have pointed out, "West's personae became less and less threatening as it became more and more difficult to take her expressive sexuality seriously."⁵⁵

West's once-radical sexuality was fueled by a self-conscious attempt to reconcile her performance arts (both her performances and the plays she wrote) with her personal life. In the formative years of her life on the New York stage, she not only advocated for sexual freedom, but practiced it – she appears to have really enjoyed sexual relations! And, in particular, she found sexual passion in the appeal of powerfully physical men. As Leonard notes, "Throughout her life she loved to have sex with boxers on the night they had fought, and frequently did so." Among her apparent conquests were heavyweight champions James J. Corbett and Jack Dempsey.⁵⁶ As she became a frozen, sexual persona, her sexual liaisons – especially as she got on in years -- became increasingly more pathetic caricatures of all that had been. Sadly, the more she held to her original sexuality, the more she seemed a prisoner of it and, thus, with time, to lose her very radicality.

Sexual healing

At the turn-of-the century, electricity was widely viewed as a magical technology. It was being invisible, enormously forceful and had the power to remake nearly every

aspect of personal and social life. In a way very similar to how "digital" technologies are promoted today, electricity was championed as the unprecedented promise of the new century, a new era of human accomplishment that was at hand. And where else was the mysterious powers of electricity demonstrated more convincingly than in health care and sexual performance.

The fledgling branch of electro-medicine was garnering enthusiastic support among the middle- and upper-classes. A wide assortment of products was being introduced for the treatment of nearly every ailment and condition people faced. For example, the "Medico Electric Jar" was introduced to cure neuralgia and asthma and "Ohio Electric Insoles," which claimed to revitalize the blood, was reported to have sold more than 3,750,000 pairs.^{57*}

This was a period in which new technologies were actively recruited to solve a host of sexual maladies. For example, Christian America's war against masturbation -- or the sin of onanism, as it was long called -- took a major step forward in the 1750s when leaders of the then-fledgling medical community, most notably by Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signator to the Constitution, diagnosed it as harmful to the nervous system and brain. By the 19th century, a host of medical practices were being used in the battle against what Vern Bullough calls "the dangers of sexual abuse." For men, these included perforating the foreskin of the penis and inserting a ring, cutting the foreskin with a jagged scissors, applying special ointments and, in extreme cases, castration.⁵⁸ The conventional treatment of female masturbation is best revealed by no less an authority as John Harvey Kellogg, of cornflakes fame, in his *Ladies Guide*: "Treatment: Cool sitz baths; the

cool enema; a spare diet; the appellation of blisters and other irritants to the sensitive parts of the sexual organs, the removal of the clitoris and nymphae, constitute the most proper treatment."⁵⁹

Bullough reports, "there was even a device to prevent bedcovers from coming into contact with sensitive areas." Masturbation restraint devices came in many different forms and at different price points. For males, one of the most expensive was "an electrical alarm to warn of nocturnal emissions"; a cheaper device consisted of "a spiked ring, to warn the sleeper of imminent erection"; and a still cheaper variant was a tinier ring.⁶⁰ Other patented anti-onanistic devices were patented by such "inventors" as Daniel Cook (the "Self Protector," 1870), Michael McCormick (an anti-erection device, 1896), Raphael Sonin (a "mechanical penis sheath" with key lock, 1906) and Albert Todd (an "electrified anti-masturbation harness [that] included a bell that sounded in the event of an erection. ... It delivered electric shocks sufficient for 'burning the flesh of determined masturbators," 1903).⁶¹ For females, electric corsets promoted by a "Dr. Scott" and others were available. Unfortunately, as Carolyn Marvin notes, these devices were designed to control female sexuality: "If one of these articles is pressed by a lover's arm it at once admits a shriek like the whistle of a railway engine."⁶²

The era achieved its most peculiar realization in the technologies developed to treat a wide variety of sexual dysfunctions. For males, an assortment of competing electrical belts was available to restore men's potency. In fact, the venerable Sears, Roebuck catalog offered one; others products included the "Ohio Electric Belt," the "Heiderlberg Electric Belt" and "Harness Electric Belt and Suspenders" manufactured by the Medical Battery Company of England (its ads promised "to restore impaired vigor"). In addition, a host of inventions were developed to treat male impotence, including "erection rings," penal splints

* T.C. Boyle savagely mocks the appeal of this high-tech "medical" culture among the upper classes in his hilarious parody of the Kellogg sanitarium, *The Road to Wellville*.

and implants. These were complemented by a wide assortment of vacuum pumps to enlarge the penis. (Such devices are still commercially available in the 1990 innovative marital aids for both gay and heterosexual men; see Mr. S catalog.) Jean Webb, Sr., patented the "Vacuo Thermic Body Treatment Appliance," a penile erector, in 1921.⁶³

Women were not excluded from the wonders of the new technologies. A host of sexual-enhancement implements were developed exclusively for women, including clitoral stimulants, eroticized bras, artificial breasts and breast implants.⁶⁴ These devices appear to be as much projections of male fantasy (i.e., in terms of how men wanted woman to be represented) as sincere prosthetic innovations intended to help women address genuine physiological and psychological needs.

Technology was also applied to helping free human pleasure from the restraints of biological determinism. Most importantly, rubber technology played an essential role in the development of a wide assortment of birth control technologies over the last century, especially condoms and vaginal barriers. The use of condoms -- or, as they have also been called, penis sheaths, rubbers, prophylactics, safes, French safes, French letters, etc. -- can be traced back to 1350 BC when, according to James S. Murphy, "Egyptian men wore devices made of papyrus as phallic decorations and colored and undyed membranes in their more active sexual pursuits."⁶⁵ By the 16th century, animal intestines and fish membranes were being used for contraceptive purposes and to prevent the spread of disease.

The invention of vulcanized rubber in 1843-1844 led to "[t]he widespread use of condoms accelerated." These condoms were manufactured by hand dipping from rubber cement. These early rubber condoms were considered inferior to those made of animal membranes until the 1920s. The Civil War further accelerated

condom use in part due to the reported increase in prostitution that accompanied troop movements.⁶⁶

A variety of contraceptive devices were developed for women during the second-half of the 19th century. A number of pessaries were patented, the most notable among them was the hard rubber ring diaphragm developed by W.P.J. Mensinga (C. Haase) in the early 1870s; it incorporated a flat watch spring. In the 1860s, Edward Bliss Foote introduced "The Womb Veil" -- unfortunately, the pamphlets used to promote the product were seized and destroyed under the Comstock law.⁶⁷

It appears that during the Civil War neither the Union nor Confederacy military took an official position mandating condom use among its respective troops. But things changed considerably during the First World War. While the U.S. War Department adopted an official policy in line with the dominant, Comstockian orthodoxy that emphasized abstinence, many individual officers (especially among those stationed in France) ignored it by promoting condom use among soldiers in an effort to prevent the spread of venereal diseases. In 1918, General George Pershing finally ordered a change in military policy, thus effectively undermining popular adherence to then-dominant legal and moral authorities banning use of contraceptives and birth control.⁶⁸

During the intervening years, a more "professionalized" condom industry developed led, in part, by Julius Schmidt who "pioneered the production of a standardized, safe, reliable condom of the highest quality." By the mid-1930s, Schmidt Laboratories (manufacturer of Sheik, Ramses and others) and Young Rubber Company (manufacturer of Trojan and other brands, and later acquired by Carter-Wallace) controlled 84 percent of the retail condom market.⁶⁹

Medical research into female contraception lagged significantly behind that for men during this period. For example, the intrauterine device (IUD) was first introduced in Germany in the late 1920s. Originally developed by Ernst Grafenberg, a well known gynecologist and sex researcher, it consisted of "a ring of gut and silver wire." One reason for this delay had to do with the lack of precise information on how it worked. Bullough notes, "For much of their history, the precise mechanisms by which IUDs prevented pregnancy remained unknown." It was not until the late-1950s that significant progress in development took place. One outcome was the introduction of IUDs that took advantage of new materials, including polyethylene, stainless steel, nylon, silkworm gut and other materials. The leading devices at the time were the Lippes Loop, the Margulies Spiral, Binberg Bow and the Dalkon Shield -- the Shield was linked to seventeen deaths and pulled from the market, but not until it nearly destroyed the IUD market. The introduction of the contraceptive pill in 1961 would fundamentally transform contraception and sexuality.⁷⁰

During the early decades of the century, the medical profession took advantage of technological innovations to further perfect its research efforts into the body, its processes and vulnerabilities. Robert Latou Dickinson, who has been called "an innovative specialist in obstetrics and gynecology," undertook some of the pioneering studies into female sexuality during the 1890-1920 period. Among his major accomplishments was to be the first to use "a glass tube resembling an erect penis in size and shape while women masturbated an orgasm ...". In addition, Dickinson -- along with W.F. Robie and LeMon Clark -- was responsible for the introduction of the electrical vibrator, or massager, into U.S. gynecological practice.⁷¹

There appears to be no surviving record to determine whether the AC or DC current

was used to power the world's first known electric flagellation machine. According to Ivan Bloch, "Chicago papers reported that an industrial school in Denver had introduced an electrically driven whipping contrivance." He goes on to quote extensively from De Villiot's 1899 publication, *Etudes sur la Flagellation*:

The contrivance in question has the form of a chair which lacks the seat or cane bottom. The patient seats himself on this after having uncovered what is disrespectfully termed his posterior. This up-to-date chair is sufficiently raised to allow four beaters fixed beneath it to operate freely in a rotatory movement more or less rapid according to the wish of the operator, who has only to switch on an electric battery fixed to the chair with metal wires. The beaters, set in motion, do their job most consciously, and possess the advantage of working in a regulated, orderly manner and without the least fatigue to the operator. As to the feelings of the principal party -- that is to say, the pupil -- who is held in the chair by a vice gripping ankles and wrists, American papers say nothing. The operator has only to press a button and the whipping chair does the rest.⁷²

Thus completes the efforts of one Chace Price to develop a mechanical flagellation machine.

Sexual underground

It was a clear, cool night in 1904 and New York is bustling, especially at night when the sex scene came alive. Having merged with Brooklyn in 1898, Gotham claimed nearly 3.5 million inhabitants, becoming America's first metropolis. Tonight, 300 men, many well dressed and sporting the latest fashions, crowd into the dimly-lit backroom of the Tecumseh Hall & Hotel, a shabby, second-rate establishment.

The men's collective gaze was focused on a tiny, darkened stage where live sex shows take place. Tonight, the show is "between a black man and a white woman, between two women, and between a woman and a man in women's clothes." Salacious catcalls likely rang out; the hushed, heavy breathing of

fantasy underscores the room's mounting tension. A few male spectators were probably discreetly holding their hardened penises; others likely exposed themselves to public view and aggressively bringing themselves to orgasmic relief. However overcrowded and overheated, drink abounded as did the mixed scents of tobacco smoke and the unmistakable excitement of men engaged in what was considered then – as it is by many today – an illicit sexual experience.

Located on 33rd Street between 1st and 2nd Avenue, and bounded by small warehouses and row houses, the Tecumseh traditionally catered to union meetings and similar social events. But this night it hosted a rather more entertaining performance. The men in attendance were lured, most likely, to the Tecumseh through discreetly whispered word-of-mouth enticements and calling cards placed at select saloons, dance halls and hotels catering to prostitutes, especially those in the "Tenderloin" of the West 20s and 30s, what was popularly known as "Satan's Circus." Each man in the audience paid \$2.50 to get in – a not insignificant sum for the day, about \$60 in 2015 dollars.⁷³ Looking back, one can only wonder if they got their money's worth?

The men who gathered at the Tecumseh Hall a century ago were the first of a new generation of modern, 20th century men. Much of the uninhibited, assertive sexuality that marked the lustful masculinity of the first-half of the 19th century was restrained during and following the Civil War. However, in the intervening decades sexuality had recovered so that by the late-19th century a new masculinity had taken shape, one that indulged in the most illicit, prurient fantasies and practices. Engaging in such sex, men were learning how to effectively discipline their wilder impulses. Part of this disciplining of male desire was due to the emergence of a new, more assertive female New Yorker, one forging a stronger sense of self-identity and sexuality. Other

sex shows of the era featured a woman identified as a "sodomite for pay" who apparently engaged with two men as part of a floor show and a hermaphrodite who, according to Chauncey, "displayed her/his genitals as part of the show."⁷⁴

Illicit sexual pleasures can be achieved in two principle ways – as an experience of performance and/or as one of participation. Each offers a distinct experience of pleasure. Together, they constitute the parameters of the lived erotic experience as well and the fantasy imagining of erotic life. Sexual engagements of participation can be distinguished between those offered without an economic incentive, i.e., freely, and those that are commercial exchanges.* The most common example of the former is prostitution, in all manner and form; the latter are exemplified by an adulterous liaison or a furtive encounter in a male tearoom. In either case, what makes such acts of performance illicit is that they involve a pleasurable sexual engagement achieved outside the boundaries of a conventional, and often martial, relationship.

Sexual engagement with a prostitute underwent a fundamental transformation during the 1893-1929 period. As Ruth Rosen convincingly argues in her definitive study of prostitution, *The Lost Sisterhood*: "Although prostitution has always been a commercial transaction, the striking change in the *scale* of its commercialization just before the turn of the century made it seem especially dehumanizing and most flagrantly immoral. It had evolved from a small-scale, informal operation into a highly organized business that reaped vast profits and maintained connections with numerous third-party agents, including liquor interests, landlords, police, and politicians."⁷⁵

* Sexual engagement under duress or manipulation, like rape and pedophilia, are yet other categories of non-consensual performance.

In effect, prostitution was transformed from a business into an industry. It became both a more visible feature of city life and flourished in many (if not nearly all) cities throughout the nation. The full scope of its commercialization is evident in the types of places in which it was solicited and occurred. They included cafes, restaurants, movie theatres, private clubs, saloons, dance halls, brothels, hotels, rooming and lodging houses, and public alleyways, streets and parks. Thus, prostitution was found throughout the country – investigators found 1,800 “vice resorts” in New York, 372 in Philadelphia, 300 in Baltimore and even a handful in such small Wisconsin villages as Watertown and Janesville.⁷⁶

Prostitution was identified as both a symptom and a cause of the moral decay that was allegedly corrupting the nation. As such, it brought together traditionalists and progressives in common cause to fight for its suppression. The success of their campaigns is evident in such civic actions as the restriction of prostitution to “red-light” districts, the passage of the Mann Act in 1910 and the closing of many of the most notorious districts under the requirements of “war discipline” brought on by the U.S. entry into WW-I.

As with any business of the day, there was a formal structure to prostitution – one that mirrored American society’s evolving class and race structure. Kevin Mumford points out, “the type of sexual institution determines to a great extent the amount of financial remuneration a given prostitute could expect.”⁷⁷ These venues can be divided into two types – public and private settings. The former ranged from the streets plied by a legion of “painted women” as well as nearly all public spaces that men and women might congregate, including dance halls and speakeasies. The latter included those operating in tenements, hotels and brothels as well as what Timothy Gilfoyle calls “camouflaged houses” like massage parlors and manicurist shops.⁷⁸

The bustling city was a receptive home for public encounters, particularly with a streetwalker. Prostitutes solicited business not only on street corners and building doorways and stoops, but in a variety of local or neighborhood stores, like bakers, cafes, cigar shops, delicatessens, lunchrooms and other shops. Ironically, as Gilfoyle recognizes, “For many local merchants and businessmen, prostitution was a way to attract customers.”⁷⁹

Prostitution, along with gambling, alcohol consumption and other social evils, proliferated in “red-light” districts* that sprang up in cities throughout the country. As Rosen notes,

Some of the more infamous districts in the country, though hardly typical in the smaller cities and towns, [that] had already achieved national reputations as dens of legalized vice: New Orleans’s Storyville, San Francisco’s Barbary Coast, Denver’s Market Street, Baltimore’s Block, Chicago’s Levee, and New York’s Bowery, Five Points, and Tenderloin. These sporting resorts with their streets lined with brothels, saloons, and hotels, the air filled with the odor of tobacco and the sounds of blaring music, [and had] windows framed by images of women making obscene gestures ...

She adds, noting the significance of this modern urban environment on popular sensibilities, they “gave Americans their most distasteful and frightening picture of the segregated vice district.”⁸⁰

The most celebrated regulated “red light” district was New Orleans’s Storyville, which operated as a legal vice district from January 1, 1898, through November 12, 1919. It was “an area, carefully defined by law, *outside* of which prostitutes and other lewd and abandoned women were not permitted to live or

* The notion of “red-light” is derived from the early days of prostitution in Kansas City when a railroad brakeman posted a red light outside a whorehouse while he was engaged inside. [Rosen/105]

work." [Rose/1; emphasis in original] One of the early and most celebrated characters of the district was Joe the Whipper, the paramour of Red-Light Liz, a one-eyed prostitute, "who made a good living administering beatings to masochist harlots, using whips, switches, steel rods, razors straps, or canes, according to the lady's preference [Rose/9]

By the turn-of-the-century, Storyville had become a massive commercial sex enterprise: "Approximately two thousand prostitutes were working regularly, averaging seventy dollars a week for tricks alone, totaling somewhere in the neighborhood of one hundred forty thousand dollars a week." If one adds the take from the sale of alcohol, from gambling and from the tips to piano players and other musicians, Rose estimates that "over a quarter of a million dollars a week, well over ten million dollars a year, probably close to fifteen million, found its way into the stockings of prostitutes, the cassocks of the clergymen who owned the whorehouses property, the pockets of politicians and policemen, and the swelling bank accounts of the landlords." [Rose/31]

In reverse proportion to the money it generated, Storyville appears to have been a horrendous place to live and engage in this most intimate human exchange:

The gutters were open sewers, filed with the contents of chamberpots and garbage cans, dead domestic animals, all the debris of a crowded and careless community in a day when inside plumbing was rare and knowledge of the relationship between dirt and disease was not yet widespread. ... Only the strongest-stomached and most lustful of males could have found its products attractive. [Rose/31-32]

Other cities attempted to regulate the sex industry through the enforcement of medical certification. In St. Louis between 1870 and 1874, one doctor operated in each of the city's six districts and visited both the brothels and apartments where

prostitutes worked and provided medical examinations on an as-needed basis. However, "clergy and women succeeded in overturning the St. Louis experiment... ." [Seligman/109; q/D'L/E - 149] in Minneapolis, two physicians gave "weekly checkups to all prostitutes for five months during 1902. In exchange for a dollar, each woman was issued a 'certificate of freedom from communicable diseases.' Any infected woman received orders to cease her practice until cured." [q/Rosen/16] Similarly, in San Francisco between March 1913 to May 1915, the city attempted to regulate prostitution through the establishment of the Municipal Clinic for the Prevention of Venereal Disease. The clinic was established in the Barbary Coast area, the city's principal "red-light district," to examine prostitutes every four days; infected women were ordered to cease their practice and given free medical treatment. [Rosen/16-17; Gentry/236-43] Such a practice appears to have been employed in Philadelphia as well as Atlantic City and Cheyenne. [Seligman/241]

In distinction to the formal, legal attempts at regulation of prostitution, many cities employed informal methods to contain or segregate prostitution and other social vices to designated red-light districts. For example, in Kansas City, it was reported that "[v]ice flourished in all parts of the city; wine rooms were wide open to anyone having the price of a drink; private houses and assignation houses abounded --and the roadhouses ran full blast for twenty-fours a day." [q/Rosen/78] However, in some smaller cities like Sacramento, CA, the police used vagrancy and pandering laws in an attempt to restrict what appeared to be female prostitution. [Ullman/116-35]

In New York in 1876 a local grand jury recommended legislation to "segregate houses of ill-fame, and to subject them at all times to the careful and vigilant supervision of the boards of health and police." The legislation was defeated by

the forces of moral order. But in 1910 the Page law was passed; it gave the police and courts the power to conduct medical examination on females arrested as "vagrants." [Seligman/232 and 233/n-34/n] However, the anti-vice Committee of Fifteen found: "... the social evil in New York City is an elaborate system of systematically fostered by business interests rather than a consequence of emotional demand. What reformers have to deal with ... [is] vice as a business conducted for profit, with various beneficiaries in all walks of life. [Seligman/218] A similar commission in Chicago found that "prostitution ... has become a vast commercial business" [Seligman/235]

In summary, a 1911 survey by the National Vigilance Committee of seventy-two cities found the following:

The conditions of police control of the social evil vary widely, and in but few of them has the modern or constructive point of view been adopted. ... [The] legal licensing of prostitution ... exists, in fact, in two [cities], namely Atlantic City and Cheyenne. In those two cities there is segregation of prostitution, medical examination, and a system of fines for houses of ill fame and their inmates. In thirty-two of the cities, the police declare there is a system of regulation, by which fact, however, is simply meant that the police take an active part in dealing with the problem. In thirty-two of the cities the policy of segregation is followed, while in most of the others that policy has abandoned as unsuccessful. [Seligman/240-41]

"Working the streets was considered by many prostitutes to be the most dangerous and brutal form of prostitution," Rosen observes.⁸¹ Many of the women who took-up streetwalking were what can only be called occasional or situational prostitutes, women who were momentarily short of money or facing other hardships and exploited an opportunity that promised relatively easy remuneration. Some prostitutes of the period preferred streetwalking because it freed them from the grip – both physically and economically – of the middleman, be

it a pimp or madam, and thus provided an opportunity to earn more money. In addition, because she had to negotiate each transaction, a streetwalker was able to evaluate – and sometimes reject – a prospective customer. This was especially true for African-American streetwalkers in the 1910s and '20s for they, as Mumford makes clear, had become "exceedingly public, flagrant, flashy [and were] ... not presumed to be, or presented as, quasi-respectable but rather as just the opposite: a whore, a fallen woman."⁸²

Many prostitutes worked out of speakeasies. With the possible exception of today's failed U.S. government policy toward illegal drugs (i.e., "Just Say No"), Prohibition represents the greatest failure of social policy in 20th century America. As Chauncey astutely observes: "The criminalization of liquor not only drove many respectable middle-class establishments out of the restaurant business, but resulted in the virtual criminalization of nightlife. ... The proliferation of illegal speakeasies and nightclubs after Prohibition led to the wholesale corruption of policing agencies, the systematic user of payoffs, and the development of crime syndicates that offered protection from the police." Reinforcing this observation, he adds: "The speakeasies eroded the boundaries between respectability and criminality, public and private, and between commercial space and home life" At the speakeasy, a virtual "criminalized demimonde," patrons "entered an intimate theater in which they were expected to play a role. ..."⁸³

No wonder that under these conditions speakeasies -- and the colorful women (sometimes madams) and men (sometimes gangsters) who ran them -- garnered legendary status. They ranged from the fly-by-night "big pigs" or "blind pigs" that dispensed diluted alcohol, to drinking clubs like the "Pen and Pencil" and "Artists and Writers," to fancy night clubs like Belle Livingstone's "Country Club" and Gilda Gray's "Piccadilly

Rendezvous." Perhaps the most famous "speak" of Prohibition was the "El Fay Club" run by Texas Guinan (and bankrolled by the gangster Larry Fay). According to Leonard, Texas "was blonde and blowsy and could match any man in a fist fight." She was considered May West's inspiration and, among her more famous catchphrases was, "Hello suckers." Her toughness is evident in the telling comment reported to have been intoned by one her regulars: "Reach down in your heart, Texas, and get me a piece of cracked ice."⁸⁴

One of the unintentional consequences of the Prohibition concerns the role of speakeasies in the "democratization" of perversion. While slumming has long been an indulgence, if not a privilege, of many well-to-do men (and some women), the "intimate theaters" created by Prohibition brought together elements of normally disparate social groups through the bonding of breaking the law. Men and women, gay and straight, black and white as well as elements from the upper-, middle- and working classes mixed together in a commonly shared conspiracy. May West caught the spirit of this sexuality in a visit to Chicago's "Elite No. 1 Café" where black couples were dancing the shimmy: [They] stood in one spot, with hardly any movement of the feet, and just shook their shoulders, torsos, breasts and pelvises. We thought it was funny and were terribly amused by it. But there was a naked, aching sensual agony about it too. Chauncey provides a valuable insight into the complex experience found in these illicit venues of social engagement: "If whites were intrigued by the 'primitivism' of black culture, heterosexuals were equally intrigued by the 'perversity' of gay culture."⁸⁵

There were essentially three types of speakeasies during Prohibition, each offering – in addition to illegal alcohol – an opportunity to meet a prostitute. The first consisted of the more common watering hole where prostitutes congregated like

other customers and also solicited business. The second was more like the traditional saloon of the late-19th century where prostitutes worked as hostesses and either provided a hurried service in a private booth, an upstairs or backroom or left the venue to conduct the sexual encounter; the prostitute gave a kick-back to the management. Finally, the most notorious speakeasy were more like brothels where the prostitute was considered a "resident" or "sitter."

Prostitutes operating out of a speakeasy or taxi-dance hall tended to engage in a limited range of sexual practices. However, at the better, more exclusive venues, sex approximated more respectable heterosexual relations. "Elite white dance hostesses and black women within the upper tier of nightclubs often spent the night with the clients and engaged in traditional intercourse, performing their sexual exchanges in ways that mimicked or emulated noncommercial sexual relations," Mumford reports. "These elite hostesses were something like a middle-class man's mistress; they concealed or denied that commercial aspects and dramatized the affective or romantic dimensions of the exchange."⁸⁶

Unfortunately, most often speakeasy prostitutes fellatiated their male customers, with only a small fraction willing to engage in coitus. As Mumford observes: "Speakeasy sex was performed in corners of dark hallways, beneath a staircase, behind a trash bin in an alley. It was aggressive, quick, groping, highly impersonal, stripped of any pretense of Victorian romance." And he adds: "African-American female prostitutes performed the kind of sexual services that were deemed most degenerate, most immoral, the least 'domestic,' and, for some, the most desirable." Looking specifically at the nature of the emotional costs of the sex conducted by black prostitutes in a Harlem or Chicago tenement speakeasy, Mumford warns that it "represented the ultimate example of

modern anomie, of bodily interpenetration and complete emotional estrangement."⁸⁷

The principal venues for private assignations with a prostitute included brothels, hotels, tenements or apartments and "cribs." Attempting to mirror their legendary status in Europe, U.S. brothels – or what were often called "parlor houses" -- were the most celebrated venues for sexual assignation during the mid- to late-19th century. Many of the most celebrated upper-crust brothels were richly decorated, often housed in well-appointed mansions and furnished with imported French decor. No wonder why they were favored by a range of gentlemen, including notorious gangsters, famous entertainers, politicians, business tycoons and other "sporting" men.⁸⁸

Perhaps more important, many brothels were home to some of the most renown and successful madams of their day. Among the famous madams of the late-19th and early-20th centuries were Rosie Hertz, Matilda Hermann and Polly Adler in New York; the Everleigh Sisters, Ada and Minna, of Chicago; Jessie Hayman, Tessie Wall, Maude Spenser and Reggie Gamble in San Francisco; Lulu White, Josie Arlington, Emma Johnson, "Voodoo Woman" Julia Jackson and Norma Wallace of New Orleans's Storyville; Mae Field, Corrine B. Gary, Kate Rockwell and Josephine Earp of Alaska and the Klondike; as well as Josie Washburn of Lincoln, NB, and Pauline Tabor of Bowling Green, KY, among many, many other women. These were career women who had few if any other fields available for entrepreneurial accomplishment. As Rosen reminds us, "The madam and the extravagant surroundings were suppose to create the feeling of entering a specially sexual world in which customers became part of an erotic and sensual atmosphere."⁸⁹ And they did!

Behind the legendary façade, brothels could be extremely oppressive sexual venues. Clearly, there were quite a number of more exclusive brothels, what

were often called "\$5.00 houses," as well as those that catered to a specialized clientele like elderly men who sought to "deflower" young girls, those seeking flogging or interracial encounters.⁹⁰ However, at those brothels targeted to middle- and working-class men, especially for immigrants and people-of-color (e.g., African-Americans, Chinese, Filipinos the conditions of work could verge on sexual slavery. For example, three woman who worked in a New York 50-¢ brothel at the turn-of-the-century are reported to have had intercourse over a two-week period with 273, 185 and 120 men, respectively; one is reported to have copulated with 49 men in a single day! At still another brothel on Delancey Street, a "brothel inmate" is reported to have had sexual encounters with 58 different men in one day. These examples do not seem either isolated or exaggerated.⁹¹

During the late-19th and early-20th centuries period, brothels began to be eclipsed by hotel, tenement and crib prostitution. Although never disappearing, brothels declined because of population changes, shifts in housing construction patterns and anti-vice reform efforts. While hotels have long been venues for sexual engagement, their role was fundamentally recast in New York with the establishment of what were called "Raines Law hotels" in 1896.

Originally introduced to prohibit working-class male drinking in saloons on Sunday, hotels with ten or more beds were permitted to sell alcohol. Ever resourceful, saloon keepers – often working with large brewery owners – quickly transformed their facilities's backrooms, walk-ups, cellars and other spaces to provide for ten beds, thus effectively side-stepping the intent of the law and opening up a new revenue source, commercial sex. As Edwin Seligman notes in his appendix to the original Committee of Fifteen's 1902 report on New York vice, *The Social Evil*, "the effect of the Raines Law has been to provide unexampled accommodations for

prostitution." By the early-20th century, Raines Laws hotels became, according to Gilfoyle, "the leading institution of prostitution in Gotham."⁹²

These hotels were widespread throughout the city. In Manhattan and the Bronx alone, a 1904 study found that 1,205 of the 1,405 registered hotels permitted prostitution. Many of the hotels did considerable business. For example, the National Hotel, on Irving Place, had sixteen rooms and reported to have accommodated 240 couples a day – an average of ten per hour! And the sexual services that the in-house prostitutes provided were truly industrial in character. A contemporary investigator reported that teenage girls working at "Flagelle's" on Mott Street: "Very few of these girls were spoken to, you simply nod your head or beckon." The girls provided services to their customers for less than 10 to 15 minutes and, as one said, complained: "Hurry up, ... there is others that want to be fucked as well as you."⁹³

Around the turn-of-the-century, tenement and apartment prostitution flourished in New York and other cities. Reflecting the eclipse of brothels and the increase in multi-family dwellings, prostitution at these venues "was the least organized and most casual variety of commercial sex." By the 1910s, it was estimated that in New York 30 percent of all prostitution was done out of these venues. Nevertheless, as Gilfoyle notes, such prostitution adopted many of the features of brothels: "Prices were similar, medical examination were required by proprietors, advertising was common, and liquor was sold."⁹⁴

If this period was witness to the industrialization of prostitution, then the "crib" and, ultimately, the "cowyard" represented the manufacturing process being imposed on this, the oldest profession. While cribs operated in New York, New Orleans and other cities, they seem to have achieved their fullest articulation in San Francisco. Cribs were

tiny spaces or sub-divided cubicles designed to accommodate the rapid sexual encounters; they specialized in low-cost, high turnover sexual exchange. On average, as Curt Gentry notes in his richly anecdotal tale, *The Madams of San Francisco*, they measured as follows: "H: 6-1/2', L: 6-3/4', and W: 4-1/2'." Stripping the urban sexual exchange to its essence, they contained only a bed, a chair and a washbasin.⁹⁵

Cribs were industrialized with the establishment of "cowyards" or, as Gentry explains, "many cribs assembled under one roof and management." Among the many cowyards that apparently flourished in San Francisco, two are representative, the "Nymphia" and the "Municipal Crib." The "Nymphia," which originally been called the "Hotel Nymphomania" but the police would not allow it, was a three-story U-shaped building that housed 450 cribs. The original "Municipal Crib," a three-story building located at 620 Jackson Street in Chinatown, housed 90 rooms and was destroyed by the 1906 earthquake; it was rebuilt (and, because of its shape, nick-named the Big Ship) and accommodated 130 cribs.⁹⁶

The crib's female inmates -- often Chinese, black or from other immigrant backgrounds -- worked under intense pressure to perform. For example, in New Orleans's Storyville red-light district, Al Rose describes their allure as follows: "The inhabitants would stand in the doorway in what she considered her most fetching attitude and hope to entice customers by word, deed, gesture, attire (or lack of it), or any combination of these. [In the heart of Storyville] ... at Basin and Iberville streets, crib girls could earn a dollar a "trick." In less desirable locations, further down Iberville, for example, the prices could drop to a dime.⁹⁷ In San Francisco, crib women were expected to be naked while on duty. At the Nymphia and Municipal Crib, the prostitutes worked in two shifts. They were expected to pay the proprietor between \$2.00 to \$5.00 for a half-day's

rental of the crib. As Gentry notes, "anything over that was profit."⁹⁸

During the 1893-1929 period, prostitution in the U.S. grew to an historically-unprecedented scale. As Rosen points out, "Commercialized vice had become the underworld analogue of the faceless trust and monopolies of the legitimate business world; both robber barons and profiteers of prostitution had successfully consolidated, rationalized, and formalized their businesses. Furthermore, both were associated with crime, exploitation, and corruption; and both were politically protected and economically invisible."⁹⁹

Not unlike the appearance industry that emerged at the same time, what can be called the "commercial sex industry" drew together a formal and informal network of intertwined interests that had a stake in its successful perpetuation. These interests included saloon keepers, brewery owners and liquor distributors; landlords, local merchants and questionable medical service providers; police, judges and politicians; pimps and madams; underworld gangsters and their respectable front-men; the innumerable number of "johns" who paid for the sexual services; and, finally, the female inmates who tried to make a living from this profession.

It was the poor and working-class women – and especially immigrant and women-of-color -- who carried the entire enterprise, literally and figuratively, on their backs. They were women who had few if any social options and who bore the brunt of social scorn and arrest, physical illness and drug addiction, and sometimes even beatings and death to keep the industry functioning. As Rosen points out:

Denied access to social and economic power because of their gender and class status, poor women made their choices from a position of socially structured powerlessness. All too often, a woman had to choose from an array of dehumanizing alternatives: to sell her body in a loveless marriage contracted solely for economic protection; to sell her body for

starvation wages as an unskilled worker; or to sell her body as a "sporting women." Whatever the choice, some form of prostitution was to be involved.¹⁰⁰

Respectable society was not kind to these women – and still isn't.

Illicit pleasures

Men who engaged in relations with men were different than those who did so exclusively with women. While sexual encounters with male prostitutes took place with some frequency, [Chauncey/66-76; Mumford/86-91] many more occurred outside the nexus of commercial exchange. In addition, during this period, a man's choice of a male or female sexual partner was much less restrictive than it is today, as the historian Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and other scholars have observed, "... in the 1920s and 1930s the social dichotomies of heterosexuality and homosexuality were not yet hegemonic."¹⁰¹

Chauncey defines this situation clearly: "Many men alternated between male and female sexual partners without believing that interest in one precluded interest in the other, or that their occasional recourse to male sexual partners, in particular, indicated an abnormal, 'homosexual,' or even 'bisexual' disposition, for they neither understood nor organized their sexual practices along hetero-homosexual axis." The relative fluidity of this situation took on particular significance for those who engaged in occasional, if not furtive, homoerotic encounters: "Anonymous encounters with strangers were the only way some men conscious of distinctively homosexual desires felt safe satisfying them. The existence of places like the tearooms made it easier for men to move in and out of the gay world, and men who had sexual encounters there participated no further in the world."¹⁰²

While there was more fluidity within male sexual identity during the late-19th and

early-20th centuries, there was still a highly formal structure to sexual performance. In particular, the dominant social convention defined masculinity in terms of how one engaged in specific sexual acts. For example, a man's "heterosexuality" – as both a personal belief and a public role -- was not questioned by engaging in occasional fellatio and sodomy. Rather, as long as the man assumed the role or position of the "top" -- the fellated or the sodomizer – he never surrendered his masculinity, his power to be a man. However, if he surrendered that power, if he became the "bottom," the one fellating or sodomized, he would assume the role of the "woman" and, thus, be homosexual.¹⁰³

Amidst the wide spectrum of those men engaged in male sexual performance, one can distinguish between the "trade" and the "fairy". In the face of the intensifying class hierarchy that characterized the early-20th century urban life and the rise of a solid, respectable middle-class, many well-to-do men often engaged in "slumming" in the poorer and working-class neighborhoods. For these men, poorer neighborhoods provided a place for them to seek out prostitutes as well as be openly "gay," i.e., act-out as a "fairy" or engage sexually with fairies. These men were known as the "trade," men who sought out occasional and anonymous homoerotic encounters.

At the other extreme, and perhaps the most explicit part of the gay community, were the fairies, the most flamboyant, effeminate "male degenerates." Since the early 20th century, fairies had been a small yet distinct presence within working-class neighborhoods. They were a common feature of New York Bowery's red-light district and relocated uptown as the working-class and general gay community migrated west and north, to Greenwich Village, Times Square and Harlem.

Fairies, and later "pansies," made – and still make -- a distinct life for themselves

within the gay community. They tended to gather in "resorts" -- during the early part of the century, saloons or dance halls; by the 1920s, in cabarets and speakeasies. They also found different ways to make a living. Some plied their trade as prostitutes along with female prostitutes on many of city's major thoroughfares. Others worked for enterprising businessmen, for whom their exaggeration of male (or female) identity could be an exotic, commercial attraction. During the early part of the century, Billy McGlory -- who operated the infamous Armory Hall on Hester Street -- featured fairies as performers and waiters. By the '20s, they had become the centerpiece of Prohibition night-life. "The pansy craze," as Chauncey points out, "highlights the cultural upheaval wrought by Prohibition..."¹⁰⁴ So popular, if not notorious, were fairies that they were featured in Mae West's play – *The Drag*; so threatening was their explicit subversion of the dominant masculine heterosexual value system, the play was officially censored and banned.

Surely, the highpoint of the social life of fairies must have been the celebrated drag balls that were a regular feature of the social scene of New York, Chicago, Baltimore, New Orleans and other cities during the first-third of the century. Dating from the mid-19th century, gay balls had their origin in the masquerade balls that were very popular among heterosexuals. These galas were notorious for the "promiscuous intermingling" they encouraged, creating what Chauncey calls "liminal cultural spaces in which people could transgress."¹⁰⁵ A reporter for the *New York Herald Tribune* provides an invaluable glimpse into the social engagement that took place at a masquerade ball held in the early 1930s:

Blonds equipped themselves with dark hair. Caucasians came distinguished as Orientals. Mongoloid individuals blackened their faces and appeared as Ethiopians. Negroes powdered their skins and dressed as Scandinavian villagers. College boys masqueraded as hoboes. Waitresses and soda clerks wore full

evening dresses. Men danced with women in men's clothes. Women danced with men in women's clothes. And strange androgynous couples careened about the floor oblivious to the workings of society and nature.¹⁰⁶

By the 1920s, drag balls had become "the largest and most significant collective events in gay society." In the mid-20s, a half-dozen enormous balls were being staged annually in some of the most prestigious civic venues in the New York, including Madison Square Garden, the Astor Hotel and the Manhattan Casino in mid-town and the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem. "The Vanderbilts, the Astors, and other pillars of respectability were often there, along with Broadway celebrities popular in the gay world, such as Beatrice Lillie, Clifton Webb, Jay Brennan, and Tallulah Bankhead," Chauncey observes.¹⁰⁷

Explicitly Afro-American gay balls originated with the Hamilton Lodge No. 710 of the Grand United Order of the Odd Fellows, with their annual balls that started in 1869. So popular were these extravaganzas that by the '20s, at the Hamilton Lodge alone, attendance skyrocketed from a "mere" eight hundred in 1925, to fifteen hundred in 1926 and to an estimated eight thousand in 1932; by 1937 attendance had dropped to only four thousand.¹⁰⁸ Men and women attended these legendary galas to have a good time. "Great fun was to be had, after all," notes Loughery. He adds, "Solidarity of a kind was possible, and strength in numbers did mean something at least for the night. Even class barriers were momentarily lifted." Drag balls drew a very mixed universe or, as a singer of the day commented, the one he attended was "packed with people from bootblacks to New York's rarest bluebloods."¹⁰⁹ However, as Chauncey notes, "although whites attended the [Hamilton] ball as both dancers and spectators, most of the guests were black." Attendees took many sexual forms: "Lesbian 'male impersonators' and straight masquerades attended as well as gay men, but the latter constituted the vast majority of

dancers and the focal point of attention."¹¹⁰

Illicit sexual pleasure can be experienced through both performance and representation, and sometimes both together. Sexual representation is available either as a live or a prerecorded experience. Among live experiences are sex "circuses" and burlesque shows; among prerecorded ones are books and movies. One of the unintentional goals of technology innovation, particularly that associated with the communications, media and entertainment industries, has been to overcome the difference between live and prerecorded representation of sexual pleasure. Each new media adds greater texture, sensuous reality, to the image, helping representation become a more tangible and, thus, more erotic medium. The goal of the maturation of media technology over the last two centuries has been to overcome the separation between performance and presentation.

Masquerade and drag balls were but two venues in which live experiences of sexual presentation and performance intermingled. While the principle purpose of these gatherings was the presentation of self in a compelling -- if not extravagant -- form, they were also social contexts in which occasional sexual liaisons could take place. In fact, one of the most powerful attractions of these venues, their very allure, was their promise of the possibility of engaging in a discrete, anonymous sexual encounter or leaving with someone for such a coupling. Among venues that served men who were predominately heterosexual in their sexual preference were burlesque shows, carnival "girl shows" and explicit sex shows. They were considered by more respectable elements of society as "places of disrepute," because they offered -- in the words of historian David Nasaw -- "... the presence and availability of prostitutes."¹¹¹

Burlesque was the form of live performance art that most represents the

trajectory of turn-of-the-century American sexuality. It made its U.S. debut on September 28, 1868, when the British star Lydia Thompson took to the stage of George Wood's Broadway theatre to perform in *Ixion*. The sold-out, 800-seat hall witnessed, as the *New York Times* reported, a star "of the purest type, saucy, blue-eyed, golden-haired and of elegant figure." She, along with her female co-stars, acted out the play based on a Greek myth and performed the cancan (which had recently been introduced in Paris) as well as "jigs, hornpipes, and parodies of minstrel show numbers."¹¹² Thompson became a national sensation, touring the country to sold-out performances and establishing a new, popular art form that competed with the traditional legitimate theatre.

What distinguished burlesque from the other popular forms of male entertainment during the last quarter-century of the 19th century (as well as today) was the appeal of the female performers, stars following in the mode established by Thompson. Their appeal was derived from a very compelling presentation of female identity, one that uniquely combined what Robert Allen has called "sexual allure and inversive feminine insubordination." The full power of these two characteristics is clearly appreciated by Allen: "Either half alone could be controlled and made to please without seriously undermining the position of the male spectator. Fused together in a single performer, however, this combination was much more threatening."¹¹³

This helped differentiate burlesque from the more legitimate vaudeville and revue theatre of the day. These latter forms of live performance were best represented by the Ziegfeld Follies of the 1910s and, most especially, by the "Ziegfeld girl," a de-erotized femininity that did not challenge the male viewer. The burlesque star, however, engaged the male audience directly and actively, through the

combination of her sexual display and her provocative stage presence.

The burlesque star's sexuality incorporated far more suggestive, provocative expressions than other forms of entertainment of the period. However, by the time of the 1893 Chicago exposition, burlesque was increasingly becoming one dimensional, moving more and more toward sexual explicitness with the incorporation of the belly dance and its more extreme expression, the "cooch" or "hootchy-kootchy" dance; with the popularization of jazz during the '20s, the cooch dance became the "shimmy." With these more exaggerated forms, as Allen notes, "all pretense that the performance was about anything other than sexual pleasure was dispensed with."¹¹⁴

During the first decades of the 20th century, burlesque faced intensifying competition from other forms of popular male entertainment, particularly movies for prerecorded and cabarets and revues for live sex shows. In response, and apparently as the result of a very intentional "accident," the striptease emerged during the late-'10s and, by the '20s, to become the principal form of presentation.* As legend would have it, the first "strip" took place at the Minsky brother's New York theatre. As Allen recounts the birth of the striptease:

In 1917 they constructed a runway into the auditorium so that patrons could examine cooch dancers more closely. ... May Dix did her dance act in a short black dress with detachable white collar and cuffs. At the end of her song one hot summer night, she removed her collar as she walked offstage, trying to forestall the next laundry bill. Someone in the audience demanded an encore, at the end of which she removed her cuffs as well. "Between the heat and the applause [reports Morton Minsky], May lost her head, went back for a short chorus, and

* The striptease appears to have made its first display at the St. Louis exposition of 1896 when Omeena performed what was called the "take off." [Allen/230]

unbuttoned her bodice as she left the stage again.

It was, as Allen concludes, "burlesque's last-ditch and ultimately unsuccessful strategy to stay alive."¹¹⁵

With the adoption of the striptease, the female star was transformed. Her sexual allure became the predominant, if not sole, source of her appeal. As the male audience's attention became more and more fixed on her ever-more nude body, the female performer lost her equally-compelling attraction, her spirit of insubordination – the female object of desire was silenced, her transgressive, lewd appeal reduced to an image parading before the paying male customer. Nevertheless, this more complex, more compelling form of female theatrical appeal would stay alive in renewed, modified forms with such cabaret stars as Sophie Tucker and Bette Midler as well as singular legends like May West and Madonna.

Another social venue in which live experiences of sexual representation and performance intermingled was the "girl show" that was part of the touring carnival's sideshow. This new form of popular entertainment emerged out of the Chicago Exposition of 1893 and was targeted to smaller town and more rural America. Smaller, less formal than traveling circuses, carnivals quickly grew in popularity; in 1902 seventeen operated nationally, by 1920 there were an estimated two hundred!¹¹⁶ The predominant male audience was often drawn to the carnivals by the accompanying sideshow performances and, in particular, the girl shows that were a staple feature.

The "girls" who worked in these shows performed a variety of provocative sexual acts. As Allen observes:

Girl shows are distinguished by how "strong" the dancers are allowed to perform – in other words, by the extent of sexual abandon of the dancing routines and the degree of genital

display. In the large and more sedate carnivals (those that play state fair dates, for example), the performance might end with a strip down to the G-string or its removal for a moment just before the dancer leaves the stage. In the smaller shows, however, where "stronger" acts are the norm, the performance might end with a gynecological anatomy lesson ...¹¹⁷

The female posture artist acted out a "Living Picture" in which she held a revealing pose (often with minimal clothing) for audience inspection as well as performed some suggestive dances, including the "Butterfly" and the "Serpentine." In addition, and utilizing the artful technique that Stencell calls the "girls and grift" con, the "carney" operator further tapped male desire with the suggestive fantasy of the "cooch" dance. After seeing the more public show, and for an additional fee, "marks" would be invited into back rooms where the "girls" put on a special show. During the early part of the century it appears that very few such shows involved totally nude exhibitions or more explicit sex acts (e.g., fellatio, intercourse) – they would come later during the post-WW-II period.

A final social venue in which live experiences of sexual presentation and performance intermingled were sex shows, like the circuses that took place in African-American buffet flats during Prohibition. Most of these gatherings appear to have taken place informally and anonymously, and throughout the country. Such shows were based on the display of explicit sexual performance by one or more performance artist before a predominantly male audience.

Sex shows displayed a variety of sexual performers: a single female performer, two or more women engaged in homoerotic performance, a man and a woman together, inter-racial combinations as well as disabled or disfigured women (what were known as "freaks" during this period). The audience could be numbered in the handful, as with the sex circuses that took place at buffet parties, or

involved hundreds of men as those who attended the show that took place at the Tecumseh Hall in New York City in 1904. Sex shows, like the contemporary peep shows, were designed to stimulate sexual fantasy, not fulfill it – therefore, there appears to have been no crossing the line between the performer and a man from the audience, no on- or off-stage sex between female actor and male viewer.

Various anecdotal reports describe sex shows occurring across the country. They could often be found, among other places, in saloons, as Ruth Rosen notes: "... saloons frequently provided "vaudeville" shows in rear rooms. Such shows regularly included sexual acts designed to create more interest in immediate sexual gratification. Half-naked, stripping girls encouraged male customers, already plied with drink from waitresses, to accept prostitutes' offers."¹¹⁸

Such shows took place in Chicago in the 1920s and offered interracial acts. Mumford found, "Some of the early black/white dives included small-scale, often quite lurid erotic shows. In Chicago an establishment on Halstead provided black/white sensual entertainment for white patrons, including a performance in which the most popular guide was a midget named Julie Johnson. She gave erotic exhibitions with a Negro nearly three times her height and more than twice her weight."¹¹⁹ In New Orleans's French Quarter in 1910s sex shows were not uncommon: "Little cabarets sprang up in storefronts or in the front rooms of buildings; the lewder programs, like the 'freak shows,' kinky displays of eroticism, were relegated to the back rooms."¹²⁰

Biographical portraits, let alone memoirs, of female sexual performance artists are very rare. For the ones that are available, one needs to take all information with a good deal of caution, as any number of personal or social agendas might inform what is presented. Given this proviso, Rose's portrait of Emma Johnson, a New Orleans prostitute, madam and sexual

performance artists of the 1880s through 1910s is suggestive of what it took for a woman to provide such an extreme form of illicit sexual pleasure:

Long and rangy, Johnson was probably the most wanton of Storyville's sinners. Caring nothing for life or human emotions, a hard, masculine type who was possibly the closest approach to pure evil the crescent City ever harbored, sadistic and unprincipled, this virago was selling children of both sexes into slavery years before Storyville came into being." She then became its most sensational and unprincipled impresario, offering unbelievably lewd "shows" every night in her notorious studio on Basin Street.

... Early drawn to lesbianism, Emma exercised a strange power over many of her sex and took pride in the fact.

Savage and full of hate, ... making up for her lack of beauty with fierce energy and a daredevil willingness to engage in any form of erotic misconduct the mind of man or woman could dream up. Combined with psychotic tendency for exhibitionism, these characteristics were so overwhelming that Emma became notorious even among the lowest classes of strumpets. She soon that it was more profitable to perform her misdeeds in full view of an audience than merely for the fees available from individual clients. In 1880, in her house in Gasquet Street (now Cleveland Street), she frequently put on these productions, with herself as the central character. Wealthy men of the town, not in the least inclined to partake of her favors, proved aeager to spend their money with her for laughs, paying her more and more just to find out how depraved she could be.

...

As Rose notes, "Emma was still operating at full speed when the District closed down in 1917."¹²¹

Erotic spectacle

"The 1920s and 1930s," reports Jay A. Gertzman in his definitive study of print pornography, *Bookleggers & Smuthounds: The Trade in Erotica, 1920-1940*,

"produced an unprecedented amount of erotica in America." Illicit printed sexual materials fell broadly into two categories, art vs. obscenity or erotica vs. pornography, and the difference between them, according to Gertzman, "was mostly a matter of marketing convenience."¹²² People who were interested in such material had a wide variety to choose from.

High-quality literary or classical erotica targeted to the "carriage trade" was probably the cream of the crop, and included privately produced or secretly imported copies of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or Frank Harris's *My Life and Loves* as well as works by Aretino, Casanova and Defoe, among many others. Also suspect were works that the sexologist Gershon Legman named "gallantiana," or "those marginal elements of unexpurgated literature such as jest-books and balladry, works on (or against) women and love, facetious treatises in prose and in verse, and the hinterland of scatologica."¹²³

The "sex pulps" were the literary equivalent of the "pulp magazines" that included gossip, pinup, art and nudist publications like *Broadway Brevities*, *Police Gazette*, *Artists and Models* and *Paris Nights*. As Gertzman defines them, sex pulps "featured brightly colored jackets, plain cloth bindings, inexpensive paper, and were small enough to be held in one hand as part of a cigar or drugstore shopper's purchase." More to the point, he adds: "[They were] aggressive rather than discreetly titillating, parvenu rather than genteel in sensibility, garish rather than sophisticated in their packaging, and issued in large print runs rather than limited editions."¹²⁴

No wonder they were popular among both men and women. Sexology or "erotology" represented the more academic or scholarly segment of erotica and focused on the techniques of sexual stimulation. They included sex encyclopedias, medical treatises on the benefits of flagellation

and other sexual practices, "scientific" studies of sexual variations both legendary and anthropological, and similar topics. Finally, "bibles" and "readers" were cheaply produced, often side-stapled, works. Titles like *Venus in Love*, *The Cracked Virgin* and *Delightful Pastime* were "[g]enerally ... thirty-two or sixty-four pages long, featured between two and seven grainy photos or line drawings of uncommon copulation positions, naked grinning women, or naked men and women fondling each other," reports Gertzman. "The text was composed of scatological stories of approximately ten thousand to twelve thousand words, centering exclusively on sexual conquest and gymnastics, often of a prodigious nature."¹²⁵ Finally, cheaply produced, eight-page comic books, often called "Tijuana bibles," were sexual parodies of popular newspaper comic strip characters or famous theatre- and movie-stars, including Orphan Annie, "Mae Breast" and "Douglas Farybanks." They expressed, as Gertzman points out, "adolescent masturbatory fantasies, full of sexual and racial stereotypes, and wildly contemptuous of authority."¹²⁶

Customers interested in these works could discretely acquire them in a wide variety of retail outlets in most major cities. They included bookstores (especially second-hand shops), backdated magazines shops, lending libraries as well as cigar stores and other retailers who catered to a male constituency. In addition, pushcarts peddlers often carried a sampling of sex-pulp and other more affordable products. During Prohibition, speakeasies often sold Tijuana bibles along with alcoholic beverages.¹²⁷

Among the leading "pornographers" of this era were Samuel Roth, John Lewis and Eser Levine and Benjamin Rebhuhn. However, among this group, Roth stands out and, with time, would become the foremost American pornographer of the 20th century. Between the '20s and '60s, Roth pushed the limits of First Amendment freedom further than any

publisher. As Gertzman notes, "Roth was the most often incarcerated, the most feckless, and quite likely the most resourceful booklegger of his time, challenging moral and legal authorities with quixotic bravado."¹²⁸

Roth was the first to release pirated editions (expurgated and without permission) of such literary classics like Joyce's *Ulysses* and Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*; he financially supported and published *avant-garde* writers and critics of the '20s like George Sylvester Viereck, Clement Wood, Milton Hindus and Legman; and he published exposes like *The Strange Death of President Harding* and *The Strange Career of Mr. Hoover Under Two Flags*. He wrote for *The Nation*, *Harper's Weekly*, *Poetry* and the *Menorah Journal*, among other outlets. He ran a variety of bookstores, including one catering to poetry and another for erotica. And he operated under an innumerable set of pseudonyms, including Francis Page and David Zorn.¹²⁹

For his efforts, Roth was arrested innumerable times and served two terms in the Lewisburg federal prison, between 1936-39 and 1957-61. However, it was with Roth's 1956 federal indictment for sending allegedly obscene materials through the postal system that finally brought him immortality. His case, combined with that of David Alberts, went before the Supreme Court in 1957 and became the basis for the benchmark "the average person, applying contemporary community standards" ruling.

Prior to the wide-scale adoption of wire-distributed electricity for manufacturing, street lighting, in-home appliances and other purposes, the first use of electrical devices was as conspicuous items of personal apparel. The historian Carolyn Marvin identified battery-powered "flash" jewelry from Paris as all the rage when exhibited in New York in 1884. They "included hatpins and brooches studded with tiny, glittering electric lights mounted like jewelry." Also available were

electrical neckties, walking canes, watch chains and scarf pins. Curiously, the sexologist Krafft-Ebing reports that one of his patients took advantage of the new power source to achieve a particularly pleasure: "B., age twenty-nine, merchant, married, heavily tainted, since his sixteenth year masturbation by means of a pocket electric battery, neuasthenia [i.e., a deficiency of nerves], impotent at the age of eighteen, for a while absinthe drinker on account of unrequited love." These devices served both to popularize electricity as a "tame," user-friendly technology and to set the precedent for its integration into personal display and sexual performance.¹³⁰

The difference in experience between a live and a prerecorded sexual presentation is profound. As Allen astutely observes: "In the [live] theater, the body and gaze of [female] dancer and [male] spectator – although they were separated by the floodlights and by their respective roles – occupied the same space, the same time, the same materiality. As a photographic or cinematographic image, however, her returning gaze had less power to unsettle since the gulf that separated the displayed woman from the man who looked at her was an unbridged, material gulf."¹³¹

The early 20th century dance halls were inviting, magical social spaces and were the other venue of sexual presentation. As Peiss points out, "The gaily decorated hall, riveting beat of the orchestra, and dance partners created a magical world of pleasure and romance." She adds, "Women enjoyed dancing for the physical pleasure of movement, its romantic and sensual connotations, and the freedom it allowed them. The commercial dance halls were public spaces they could attend without escorts, choose companions for the evening, and express a range of personal desires."¹³²

During this period, dances and balls were unbelievably popular, taking place on a nightly basis in a wide variety of spaces and catering to all social classes, races

and ethnic groups. Dancing occurred in dingy saloon backrooms and walkups; religious, fraternal, trade union and neighborhood halls; and well-lit commercial halls, pavilions and ballrooms. According to Peiss, the number of public halls in Manhattan, NY, during the period of 1895 to 1910 increased from 130 to 195.¹³³ Many of these halls, like the New Irving, Progress Assembly Room and Liberty Hall, could accommodate between 500 and 1,200 people at a time – and were often sold-out.

While people came to these halls to be seen and see others of the opposite – and sometimes same -- sex, to flirt and (in Peiss's words) "experiment with unconventional sexual and social roles," they also came to dance. As Havlock Ellis wrote in 1894, "One reason why women love dancing is because it enables them to give harmonious and legitimate emotional expression to their neuromuscular irritability and legitimate emotional expression in more explosive form." Peiss notes, dancing is "a form of structured, expressive movement that articulates and conveys cultural information to its participants, helping them to make sense of their world."¹³⁴

And dance they did, exploiting a whole range of innovative -- and often race- and class-based -- expressions of style, technique and sexual expression. In particular, people danced the "slow rag" and the "tango argentino." They also embraced what were known as "tough" dances like the "turkey trot," the "grissley bear" and the "bunny hop," which -- and not unlike today's hip-hop and rap cultures of poetry, dance, dress and pose -- emerged out of urban working class and poor communities. So threatening were these provocative forms of popular expression that the forces of moral order attempted to appropriate dance by making it safer for more middle-class adults and, especially, young people. They established the more respectable styles like the "one step," the "long Boston" and the "fox trot."¹³⁵

No wonder. Tough dancing was threatening for it was, as Peiss notes, "an overt symbol of sexual activity." It emerged out of the brothels of San Francisco's notorious Barbary Coast and became famous nationally around 1905. It caught on under a variety of names, including the "lovers' two step" and, by 1910's, the "one-step." And it caught on, initially, in the poorer neighborhoods, especially in what were known as "low resorts." As Peiss points out: "More than any other dances, the tough dance allowed young women to use their bodies to express sexual desire and individual pleasure in movement that would have been unacceptable in any other public arena." She reminds readers, most informatively, "the essence of the tough dance was its suggestion of sexual intercourse."¹³⁶

The goal of high-tech innovation, especially evident in the transition from analog to digital media, has built a bridge between the object of display and the desiring subject, the female and the male. Specific examples of the growing assortment of "pre-recorded" media of sexual representation – bridges – are books, magazines and comics, records, photographs, peep-show reels and movies, among others. They have proved invaluable in enhancing sexual anticipation as well as providing their own experiences of pleasure.

One often overlooked link between a new medium and sexual representation is found in the early phonograph, the device considered by some scholars as "the first automatic amusement machine." During the early- to mid-1890s, Edison and his associates in the fledgling recorded-audio industry attempted to control the content on recording cylinders. However, as Nasaw notes, "To the dismay of phonographic company executives, 'unscrupulous' exhibitors had begun to record, collect, and exchange recordings of 'jim-jam' songs, profanities, vulgar conversations, and simulated sexual

encounters." As one executive of the time observed: "A lively trade developed ... in pornographic and obscene material, as for example the purportedly secret recordings of a husband's dalliances with the maid." Other provocative materials were drawn from jazz lyrics and the still older African-American musical genre dubbed "coon" songs. Gramophone or phonographic recordings were available in for individual consumption at nickel-a-listen slot machines in retail arcades.¹³⁷

The greatest innovation within the area of prerecorded forms of sexual presentation took place with image-based media, especially in the progress from still to moving pictures. The four principal still image formats of the turn-of-the-century period were the printed card, photography, carte-de-viste and stereograph. These formats were extensively exploited for the display of female sexual imagery and were often referred to collectively as "French cards." Their availability and popularity is suggested by historian Elizabeth Hovey description of their circulation in New York at the turn-of-the-century:

... between 1900 and 1920 brazen individuals hawked sexually explicit cards openly on market streets, usually attracting crowds of young men and risking arrest. In some neighborhoods saloon owners and shopkeepers used pornographic paintings, photographs and figurines to attract customers. Several bars in lower Manhattan and Brooklyn offered slot machines that showed twelve to fifteen provocative pictures for a nickel or a dime.

She also notes, "Pornographic items were sold by some pushcart vendors and stationery stores, and ... even reputable vendors sold postcards with graphic images, drawings with suggestive captions, and photographs of scantily clad women."¹³⁸

While each of the four media formats displayed a relatively tiny static representation, was to be viewed by a private individual or small group and required the viewer to handhold the

image, only the stereograph attempted to break the barrier of two-dimension representation. Stereography was the principal alternative form to photography for still-image representation during much of the 19th century. Having almost disappeared today, it was, as Allen found, "One of the most popular forms of visual entertainment in the home in the late 19th century" ¹³⁹

Utilizing a display technique that placed two images side-by-side on a viewing device, stereographs simulated a three-dimensional representation. During the second half the 19th century some five million stereographs were in circulation and, at the turn-of-the-century, more than fifty companies were producing images for the medium – as Allen states, "ten thousand subjects each."¹⁴⁰

In an attempt to compete with the moving-picture format that emerged in the 1890s, stereograph image producers introduced what were called "picture stories" that included several to several dozen images in narrative sequences to tell a story so as to further capture the viewer's attention. Many of these stories were of a sexually suggestive nature, often exploiting established burlesque themes. Among them were "The Maid and the Furnace Man" (a bourgeois woman asks her maid to have the furnace man repair the boiler and when he leaves, the maid has black handprints on the back of her blouse), "The Living Picture Model" (1904) (a reclining nude draped with a loosely fitting sheet), "Jolly Mr. Jack" (1904) (in which several burlesque performers undress behind a screen), and "The French Corset" (1906) (in which a woman models her new corset).¹⁴¹

The most significant innovation of the period between 1893 and 1927 was moving pictures. According to the film historian Charles Musser, "Motion pictures had their first premiere ... on 9 May 1893, when George M. Hopkins gave a lecture on Thomas A. Edison's new motion picture system, the kinetoscope and kinetograph

camera at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Science. At its conclusion, four hundred people lined up in front of Edison's peep-hole kinetoscope, and one by one looking at the twenty second film *Blacksmithing Scene*.¹⁴²

The early moving pictures were shown in two types of venues, initially in "peep shows" arcades or parlors and then screen-projected theatres. Edison's* kinetoscope peep-show was the first mechanical means by which people came to see moving images. It was commercially introduced as part of the Holland Brothers amusement arcade on 27th Street and Broadway in New York City in April 1894. It was shortly followed by Dickson's mutoscope, which was based on flip-card peep-show model. The kinetoscope was electrically powered; the mutoscope used a hand-crank.¹⁴³ However, by 1895-96, peep-show display was being eclipsed by projection systems. Edison's first "kinetoscope" system consisted of a 50-ft spool of 35mm still images placed within a lightproof cabinet and seen through a peephole. These first moving pictures lasted approximately 20 to 40 seconds.¹⁴⁴

During the first few months of public display of moving imagery in the U.S., a New Jersey Senator, James Bradley, was shocked by the display of lewd behavior. The Senator, the founder of Asbury Park, was offended by a suggestive display on one of Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope. As reported in the July 17, 1894, *Newark Evening News*:

* It should not be forgotten that Edison is often praised for innovations that he, in fact, did not create, but often championed an alternative implementation that was a failure. For example, he is popularly credited with the invention of the phonograph and motion pictures, but actually – due to his stubbornness – was committed to the recording cylinder and the peep-show/kinetoscope. Most critically, he was the principal proponent of direct current (CD) that lost out to Tesla's alternating current (AC).

... The view was that of Carmencita in her famous butterfly dance, and the Senator watched the graceful gyrations of the lovely Spanish dancer with interest that was ill-concealed. But near the end of the series of pictures the Spanish beauty gives the least little bit of kick, which raises her silken draperies so that her well-turned ankles peep out and there is a background of white lace.

The kick settled it. The Senator left the peep-hole with a stern look on his face. ... While he was trying to collect his scattered thoughts sufficiently to give full swing to his wrath Mayor Ten Broeck applied his eye to the peep-hole. The Mayor was greatly shocked and agreed with the Founder that the picture was not fitted for the entertainment of the average summer boarder, and the exhibitor was told he would have to send for some new views or shut up shop.¹⁴⁵

Ongoing skirmishes over the acceptability of the content of this new medium culminated in the founding of the National Board of Censorship in 1909.

One of the earliest picture shows at a Chicago penny arcade was *How Girls Undress*; it was displayed on a "mutascope" system and attracted many young boys.¹⁴⁶ Movie theatres at that time were one of the few acceptable social spaces in which white men and women, often unchaperoned strangers, could share an intimate proximity and an exciting visual experience; African-Americans were barred from early New York movie houses. Other than the saloon, the dance hall or church-sanctioned gathering, young men and women (excluding prostitutes) had few public venues in which to socialize let alone flirt, touch or kiss. "The very darkness of the room," warned the social reformer Jane Addams in 1909, "is an added attraction to many young people, for whom the space is filled with the glamour of love making."¹⁴⁷

The early kinetoscopes were often paired with similarly constructed phonograph machines – kinetophones -- in what one film historian has called "show shops" offered as part of penny arcades.

Benjamin Hampton points out, "[they were] store-rooms from which windows and doors had been removed, or set back, the wide entrance hospitably inviting passers-by to enter and enjoy the marvels of talking machines and animated pictures." He adds, "Usually the entrance was decorated with garish, circus-like posters, and a mechanical piano or a giant music-box assisted in a leather-lunged barker in advertising the entertainment."¹⁴⁸ Peiss notes, "The early [arcades] seemed extensions of street life, their megaphones and garish placards competing with the other sights and sounds of urban streets."¹⁴⁹

Motion picture display underwent rapid change during this period. While Edison initially resisted the move to project film images, he faced significant competition not only from his former associate, W.K.L. Dickson (who had developed the 35mm perforated filmstrip and the peep-show mutascope), but from European innovators as well, most notably the Lumiere brothers. In 1895, Dickson demonstrated his Biograph projection system that used 68mm film for improved picture quality. This led Edison and his collaborators to introduce the vitascope at Koster & Bial's music hall on April 23, 1896.¹⁵⁰ Over the next two decades, movies would migrate from the small, provocative backrooms to larger vaudeville theatres. These efforts would culminate with the introduction of sound movies in 1927.

However, the early movie-projection theatres were a far cry from the "palaces" they would become in the 1920s. As Peiss observes, "Inside the movie theaters, the atmosphere seemed a heightened version of life in the tenement district."¹⁵¹ Nasaw adds additional detail to this portrait in his description of one such theatre: "...darkened, airless storefronts [for patrons] to see a fifteen-minute picture show. The smell inside the nickel shows that were housed in storefronts must have been overpowering. The ceilings were low, and any opening that might have let in air or

light was sealed off or papered over."¹⁵² This assessment was confirmed by no less an authority on moral virtue than the great social reformer Jane Addams. "The very darkness of the room," she warned, "... is an added attraction to many young people, for whom the space is filled with the glamour of love making."¹⁵³

Resembling today's few remaining "porn" houses, these stuffy retail storefronts or arcade backrooms created a uniquely new venue for public association. These settings enabled anonymous strangers, white men and women (African-Americans were prohibited from the early motion-picture theatres) to sit next to each other. Here, in the hushed atmosphere of public privacy, they could socialize – unchaperoned! -- in a darkened space and view a larger-than-life display, often with a sexually-suggestive subject matter. While other "darkened spaces" like vaudeville theatres and opera houses existed for adults to mingle (and prostitutes to solicit customers), they do not seem to have had the intimacy for the illicit as did the early movie theatre. As Nasaw warns, "the nickel shows presented an unparalleled danger to civic morality."¹⁵⁴

While the still-image peep-show format was short-lived, much of the programming content was, according to one historian, "heavy on exotic dancers."¹⁵⁵ The "Nixon" Commission on Obscenity confirmed this, noting "Shortly after Edison developed his motion picture camera the process was put to erotic use."¹⁵⁶ Edison's kinetoscope parlors also represented a new business model, one that would transform the structure of entertainment in the US during the 20th century. As Nasaw points out: "In the phonograph parlors, admission has been free and the minimum price of entertainment had been five cents for two minutes of song. In the kinetoscope parlors, customers were required to buy twenty-five-cent tickets at the door, which entitled them to peer into the peepholes of five different machines."¹⁵⁷

Dickson's mutoscope differed from Edison's kinoscope in one very important area. While the kinoscope operated automatically when a coin was inserted in a slot, the mutoscope operated by a hand-crank. As a contemporary advertisement states, "In the operation of the Mutoscope, the spectator has the performance entirely under his own control by the turning of the crank."¹⁵⁸ This hand cranking was a powerful, tactile experience that, while fundamentally different than the handholding of a photograph, adds a unique physical dimension to the visual experience of viewing the tiny moving images displayed through the peephole.

However, when the moving image happened to be that of "Little Egypt" or the other women who posed by Edison's and Dickson's male filmmakers, a new era of erotic representation begins to emerge. As reported at the time, "Little Egypt ... the first Mutoscope success ... was followed by 'Serpentine Dancers,' 'How Girls Go to Bed,' 'How Girls Undress,' and similar tidbits." One of the format's most lasting contribution came with the release of "The Birth of the Pearl," the first commercial film to display partial nudity which shows "a girl in white tights and bare arms crouching in an oversized oyster shell."¹⁵⁹

Early projected film was profoundly different than what we see in theatres or at home today. First, they were of a very short duration. Initially, between 1896-1899, film stock ran only 50' to under-250'; during 1889-1901, it increased from 250' to 400'; from 1901-1903, it further increased from 300' to 600'; and, finally, between 1903-1910, a film stock "reel" reached 1,000' and became the standard.¹⁶⁰ These films ran from, initially, from 20-40 second to 3 to 14 minutes. Second, until around 1902, the theatrical exhibitor assembled a film showing – not, as is common today, by the "maker" (be it director or producer). Exhibitors often combined filmed

sequences in very peculiar ways – running and re-running the same sequence, playing it forward then backward, juxtaposing distinct film sequences with little regard to coherence or appropriateness. Finally, the formally structured narrative format that we accept as "natural" – i.e., a story with a beginning, middle and end -- needed nearly a decade of artistic development to gain acceptance. It took much effort, many fits and starts, innumerable dead-ended undertakings and some remarkable achievements to create the medium that has come to define the 20th century.¹⁶¹

While moving pictures were undergoing its technical and aesthetic evolution, it came to radically transform sexual presentation and performance in two important ways. First, movies helped create an historically new sexual experience, one which was both uniquely visual and as much private as public. Second, movies transformed the basic structure of sexual display. The relationship between the observing "subject" (i.e., the male audience) and the "object" of representation (especially female performers, particularly in provocative clothing and situations or simply nude) was transformed. In comparison to a photograph, film became more intimate (as you saw more of the object, the female actor) and became more distant (the woman's display made her less attainable, less accessible). A new sensibility was forged that we, today, accept as modern.¹⁶²

The earliest moving picture image-projection systems were the "pantopticon" and "vitascope". The vitascope, originally developed by Thomas Armat and Francis Jenkins but with Edison's association for necessary market legitimacy, quickly came to dominate the fledgling industry. One of the earliest vitascope films was "The Kiss," a 16-second close-up of two actors, John Rice and May Irwin, kissing. The film was later projected onto a large screen and, as the film historian Linda Williams notes, "caused great consternation." A newspaper critic of the

day is reported to have exclaimed: "Magnified to gargantuan proportions, it is absolutely disgusting. ... Such things call for police intervention."¹⁶³

Dickson's Biograph company produced its own series of provocative films including "Pajama Girl," "A Hustling Soubrette" and "Poor Girls: It Was a Hot Night and the Mosquitoes Were Think." Another provocative release was "The Gay Shoe Clerk," directed by Edwin Porter (the director of the legendary *The Great Train Robbery*), which Williams calls an "illicit shot of the female customer's foot and ankle."¹⁶⁴ Christie sheds additional light on a new, break-through filmmaking technique -- the inserted close-up -- introduced in this 1903 short:

... the younger of two women [customers] boldly encourages a salesman by raising her skirt while he attends to her shoes. The fact that we follow this mutual seduction in an inserted close-up has the effect of blanking out embarrassment, disbelief, disapproval and any other emotions this surpassingly direct little film may originally have aroused. As erotic tension rises with the girls skirt, our attention is held on the tantalizing calf -- until the clerk lunges forward to kiss her and, now back in wide shot, "reality" crashes in with the girl's chaperone indignantly attacking the clerk and bringing the film to an end.¹⁶⁵

No less of an early-movie pioneer as D.W. Griffin appears to have gotten his start at Dickson's company acting -- and most likely directing -- such works as "A Scene in a Dressing Room" and "The Merry Widow at a Supper Party."¹⁶⁶

Like today's "soft-core" porn, early moving pictures utilized numerous suggestive themes to present sexualized imagery and provocative settings of women. One such theme was physical fitness and examples of its use can be found in movies like "The Physical Culture Girl" (1903), "Athletic Girl and the Burgler" (1905) and "The Physical Culture Lesson" (1906). As Christie points out concerning the latter work, it "went so far as to show a man leading a woman through exercises before pulling her on to

his lap for a passionate embrace." Another theme that has made a lasting contribution to visual aesthetics was the "Peeping Tom" or "keyhole" shot, which permitted the viewer to "secretively" gain access to the on-screen action. According to Christie, the first use of the "proxy viewer" was in Billy Blitzer's "Peeping Tom in the Dressing Room" (1905) -- the modern media voyeur was born.¹⁶⁷

Revenge & repression

The period between the Chicago Exposition of 1893 and the 1929 stock market crash was one of the most tumultuous eras in American sexual history. Battles over the nature of acceptable forms of pleasure, especially experienced by women, took place in nearly all domains of public and private life, whether at dance halls or street, whether involving the cloths a woman wore, the books or movies she read or viewed, or her ability to control pregnancy. What makes this period even more remarkable was that these battles took place within a national climate that formally restricted the open discussion and display of explicit sexuality by legally prohibiting the interstate exchange of what in the broadest sense was labeled as "obscene."

The social and economic changes that followed the Civil War were equally traumatic era for a new nation unified with the end of slavery and, symbolically, by a transcontinental railroad and the rise of cities marked by an ethnically mixed population. In the face of these challenges, a powerful movement -- represented by Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and the Women's Christian Temperance Alliance (WCTA) -- emerged to attempt to contain those forces that were perceived as threatening moral order. The YMCA's ever-upstanding Anthony Comstock was the movement's leader. In 1868, it was powerful enough to have the New York State legislature pass an incredibly broad law to suppress what was described as obscene materials.

Five years later, the U.S. Congress adopted what became popularly known as the Comstock laws that outlawed interstate commerce of all materials and devices deemed obscene, whether they dealt with conception, birth control and other sexual matters, be they medical or erotic. It covered nearly every form of exchange then known or anticipated:

... no obscene, lewd, or lascivious book, pamphlet, picture, paper, print, or other publication of an indecent character, or any article or thing designed or intended for the prevention of conception or procuring of abortion, nor any article or thing intended or adapted for any indecent or immoral use or nature, nor any written or printed card, circular, book, pamphlet, advertisement or notice or any kind giving information, directly or indirectly, where, or how, or of whom, or by what means either of the thing before mentioned may be obtained or made, nor any letter upon the envelope of which, or post-card upon which indecent or scurrilous epithets may be written or printed, shall be carried in the mail ...¹⁶⁸

Adding insult to injury, Comstock was appointed a special officer of the U.S. postal system and given the power to seize what he labeled as obscene materials as well as arrest those he identified as pornographers.

So effective was the law that, within the first six months of passage, Comstock claimed that it led to the seizure of 194,000 pictures and photographs, 14,200 stereopticon plates and 134,000 pounds of books, among other things. In the 1910s and near the end of his life, Comstock boasted that he had destroyed 3,984,063 photography and 160 tons of "obscene" literature. [Corn-Revere/4] The laws would remain in force until the mid-1930s, when it was partially reversed by the Supreme Court with regard to medical and scientific materials; it would take another three decades until literature and art were given comparable freedom.*

*The U.S. government has not been above using the old Comstock law when it needed to; for example, as Attorney General, Robert

A quarter-century later, the Comstock law remained the law of the land. Faced with rising industrialization and urbanization, the traditional forces of moral order drew upon a new generation championing social conformity took up a new "culture war" targeting a wide assortment of social ills, including obscenity, vice, gambling, temperance, miscegenation and immigrants. Among some of the leading local groups fighting the rising social evils were the American Purity Alliance (formed in 1895) and American Vigilance Committee (the two later consolidated into the American Vigilance Association) as well as Chicago's Committee of Fourteen in Chicago, New York's Committee of Fifteen, the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice and the New England Watch and Ward Society in Boston. These groups drew upon many social notables, from Jane Addams and Grace Dodge to J. P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller, Jr., for both political influence and financial support.¹⁶⁹ They sought to preserve the older moral conventions that insisted that female sex for pleasure was evil; that chastity was the preferred state for unwed women; and that motherhood was the goal of a woman's life. Embracing an unspoken double standard, many traditionalists winked at male dalliances with prostitutes.

The Christian conservative movement sometimes made common cause with some "progressives" over such issues as temperance, prostitution (particularly "white slavery"), sexually transmitted diseases and temperance (specially its destructive power in working-class family life).¹⁷⁰ The old-time belief in moral suasion was replaced by an active reliance on the power of the state to enforce their beliefs and to establish, in effect, a national moral standard to which all Americans had to adhere.

Kennedy relied upon it in his victorious 1962 censorship battle against Ralph Ginsburg and *Eros* magazine. [Heidenry/60]

Countering these traditionalists, a diverse ensemble of progressives sought to redefine the sexual equation. Not unlike the traditionalists, progressives represented a wide variety of political and social agendas. Some of these progressives, like Emma Goldman and Margaret Sanger, were truly far more radical in the politics and feminism; they placed women's issues and birth control within a socialist and internationalist perspective. Others like Mary Ware Dennett and Carrie Chapman Catt were more accommodating, never questioning the inequities inherent to capitalism and sought social-welfare solutions through an assertive state bureaucracy. The different political and social agendas of the progressives often reflected the very real class (and sometimes race) differences among them.

Where the traditionalists and progressives differed was less to do with their reactions to the generalized lewdness that seemed to accompany modernization and the creation of the modern city. Rather, faced with intensifying explicitness or rawness of experience, they differed in terms of the social policy that resulted from their reactions. In simplest terms, traditionalists argued for the police suppression of all forms of illicit sexual performance and the confiscation (and, if possible, destruction) of the all manner of obscene sexual presentation. Progressives argued for the regulation of vice (accompanied by better paying jobs for women, proper sex education and easy availability of condoms for effective birth control) and a more liberal acceptance of medical information and erotic literature within the parameters of the First Amendment.

Both traditionalists and progressives were deeply disturbed over the rising social problems associated with prostitution, particularly the rise in venereal diseases, especially syphilis and gonorrhea. A 1909 U.S. Army study found that one out of five soldiers had a venereal disease. These findings were indirectly

corroborated by another pre-war study conducted by a group of New York physicians. They found that an estimated 80 percent of all adult males in the city had had gonorrhea at some time during their life.

The battle over social morality intensified in the 1910s with, first, the adoption of the Mann Act (1910) to stop "white slavery," or the interstate trafficking in women and children. The climate of repression intensified with the coming of WW-I. The first targets in the late-'10s were approximately 125 the "red light districts" (like New Orleans's Storyville) that operated across the country in an effort to regulate gambling, drinking and prostitution; they were forcefully shuttered under the requirements of "war discipline." A campaign was launched that involved the arrest, forceful medical testing and/or imprisonment of an estimated 30,000 women for allegedly being carriers of venereal disease and, thus, "domestic enemies" accused of undermining the war effort.

A further symptom of the shift moral and political climate came with the adoption of the Espionage Act (1917), the Sedition Act (1918) and the Alien Act (1918). In April 1919, dynamite-filled bombs were mailed to three-dozen prominent citizens, including Rockefeller. In June, Luigi Galleani, the nation's leading anarchist and proponent of "propaganda of the deed," was deported for subversion. In August, a bomb exploded at the Washington, D.C., home of U.S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. Federal efforts to suppress radicals peaked in 1919-1920 with the Palmer Raids, named after the Attorney General and led by his 24-year-old *protégé*, J. Edgar Hoover. The raids were designed to capture, arrest and deport subversives. More than 1,000 "aliens" were seized and 300 deported, including noted anarchist Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman; Berkman was a direct-action anarchist who had failed in an 1892 assassination attempt of the business tycoon, Henry Clay Frick.

According to a 1944 FBI report, anarchists in perpetrated the September bombing of the Morgan bank in reaction to Galleani's deportation.¹⁷¹

A final symptom of this campaign was the passage of the Volstead Act (i.e., the National Prohibition of 1919 Act named for Rep. Andrew Volstead (R-MN) and that passed over President Woodrow Wilson's veto) and the adoption of the Eighteenth Amendment that outlawed alcohol production, distribution, sales and consumption just after the war. Together, these initiatives restructured commercial sex, forcing it into more underground settings and more fully under the control of organized crime.*

America capitalism was transforming from a manufacturing nation to a consumer society, with all its citizens – but especially its female members – being required to be more sensual, if not sexual, people. (Some examples of this process included: people took baths on a more regular basis, people increasingly used soap, cosmetics & other grooming agents and clothing became both less confining and more revealing.) The ultimate winners in the battle of Prohibition were those who were outside the moral order, those who knowingly broke the law. They did so because the law was not only a failure in terms of addressing the underlying issues that lead to its adoption, but also unenforceable so that more and more people willfully broke it.

The most exaggerated representations of the Roaring '20s were those engaged in explicit sexual expression, be it the burlesque star, the buffet flat performance artist or the speakeasy prostitute. They expressed the extreme articulation of an experience that would, with time, become the raw material for popular taste and

* The period also witnessed the Supreme Court's 1915 decision, *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio* (236 U.S. 230), that granted movies First Amendment protection.

fashion in the post-WW II decades. And the sex that the traditionalists (and many progressives) so forcefully fought against would, a half-century later, become the standard fair of online chat rooms, public sex clubs, private commercial and free encounters and the intimate exchanges between married couples. But this was in the future.

Prohibition, which lasted from 1920-1933, not only undercut the traditionalist's efforts to police prostitution, but contributed to the most peculiar, if not contradictory, period of sexual experience in U.S. history. It was, in its essence, an attempt, as Chauncey has argued, "to control public sociability." As he notes, "in particular [it sought] to destroy the autonomous working-class male culture of the immigrant saloon which seemed so threatening to middle-class and rural Americans."

Equally important, it represented the final attempt by – and momentary triumph of – rural and small-town America to contain the inexorable march of urban, industrial capitalism to refashion social life. It has been celebrated by popular movies and television shows in the failed efforts of J. Edgar Hoover and Elliot Ness to suppress alcohol importation, distribution and consumption. Yet, as history would have it, illegal alcohol was the *juice* of the Roaring '20s, making it a period marked by "increasingly bold dressing, dancing, acting, writing, and the public discussion of [sexual] issues that challenged or ignored previous taboos." Ironically, as Chauncey observers, "Prohibition resulted instead in the expansion of the sexual underworld."¹⁷²

The failure of Prohibition represented not merely a failure to control alcohol consumption, but to meaningfully deal with prostitution as well as such other "moral" issues as gambling and smoking. The proponents of a more conservative moral order were led by prominent citizens, including businessmen, politicians and clergy as well as many leading

bourgeois women. They were particularly concerned with the apparent increase in prostitution that was leading what they perceived as the moral decline of America. To combat it, they pursued a variety of strategies, including the formation of special citizens committees to mobilize for legislative and other civil actions, the undertaking "blue-ribbon" investigations of the causes and conditions of prostitution and other social evils, and – through Comstock and other state agents – the arrest, trial and imprisonment of apparent prostitutes. Ironically, many social progressives supported the new and then-fashionable science of eugenics that was used to diagnose female prostitutes as "feeble-minded" and then send them to mental institutions.

While prostitution may have been the leading area of sexual performance that the forces of moral order attempted to repress or contain, it was not the only one. Police action was also targeted against homosexuals and at the birth control movement. In particular, at the local level, city police repeatedly harassed and arrested gay men, most often in municipal bathrooms, bathhouses, parks and other public venues. Even the legendary New York drag balls were subject to police raids.¹⁷³ However, no national legislation barring or prohibiting homosexuality – as, for example, could be found in Germany – was enacted in the U.S.

Equally important, the forces of moral order waged a ceaseless campaign to contain numerous forms of what they believed to be excessive, illicit or obscene sexual representation. These efforts took place throughout the country and were often directed at implementing the Federal Comstock laws to local conditions or supplementing them with local ordinances to address a specific activity that offended those in power. These efforts ranged from actions to ban women from wearing bathing suits, to efforts to close down burlesque and other risqué theatre productions and to restrict intellectual

materials, including scientific or medical information, erotic literature and images as well as marriage manuals.^{174*}

The moral fear of sexual presentation was probably most extreme with the new media of movies. Chicago enacted the first film censorship law in 1907. Faced with a rising wave of religious and civil approbation during the 1910s and '20s, Hollywood producers setup a watch-dog group, the Production Code Administration (popularly known as the Hayes Office), in 1927 to monitor the voluntary enforcement of safeguards against the depiction of "licentious or suggestive nudity, sex perversions, white slavery, and miscegenation."¹⁷⁵

Nevertheless, in the eyes of some concerned citizens (particularly the Catholic Church), these efforts were a failure and called for greater vigilance to keep "immoral" materials out of movies. Under pressure from a Church front-group, the Legion of Decency, Hollywood would adopted a tougher production code in 1934, the Code and Rating Office, that oversaw "banning among other things the portrayal of adultery, lustful embraces, undressing scenes, and dances suggestive of 'indecent passion'.¹⁷⁶ As Richard S. Randall has observed:

This triad of control -- industry self-regulation, organized religious pressure, and government censor boards -- effected a censorial stability that lasted nearly a generation. The industry discovered it could live quite easily with these burdens because of the extraordinary profits from the "family" film, the chief product of a censored medium addressing itself to an

* In 1928, an English-language edition of the very popular Dutch work, *Ideal Marriage*, by Dr. Theodoor H. Van de Velde, was published in the U.S. and, according to one authority, became the most popular manual in U.S. history up to that time. [Bullough/140] According to another account, it "was the first Western marriage manual to pay explicit attention to foreplay, oral sex, and different coital positions." [Heidenry/174] There were repeated efforts to block the distribution of this work.

almost undifferentiated mass audience in the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁷⁷

Hollywood, in particular smaller studios, would continue to push the limit of acceptable presentation with the release of provocative titles like *A Shocking Night*, *Luring Lips*, *Red Hot Romance* and *Her Purchase Price* were released. The overall climate of control would remain in place until the post-WW II decades when a new moral order would begin to emerge and change forever the sexual landscape of the nation.

Notes:

- ¹ *San Francisco Chronicle*, Datebook, Apr 15, 2001, p. 34.
- ² Geroge Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), pp. 221, 221n.
- ³ [Chauncey/39-42, 185, 190, 195, 202 and 205; Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in 21st Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1991), pp. 72-76; Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* 1993 (New York: Penguin, 1993), pp. 22-25.
- ⁴ Chauncey/223]
- ⁵ Chauncey/155, 210-11; see also John Donald Gustav-Wrathall, *Take the Young Stranger by the Hand* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 158-69.
- ⁶ [Chauncey/212-14]
- ⁷ Chauncey/q-210-11]
- ⁸ Chauncey/209]
- ⁹ Chauncey/224]
- ¹⁰ 1993 Statistic Abstract/14
- ¹¹ 1993 Statistic Abstract/8; also D. Rosen/42, 43]
- ¹² Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* (New York: Norton, 1969); Giedio Nathan Rosenberg, *Technology and American Economic Growth* (New York: Harper Touchbooks, 1972), pp. 87-130; Edward C. Kirkland, *A History of American Economic Life* (New York: Appleton-Century-Croft, 1969), pp. 293-346.
- ¹³ William A. Williams/ xx]
- ¹⁴ Nathan Irving Huggins, *Harlam Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920's* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995).
- ¹⁵ Alfred P. Morgan, *The Pageant of Electricity* (New York: Appleton-Century Corp., 1939), pp. 335.
- ¹⁶ Thomas P. Hughes, *Networks of Power: Electrification in Western Society, 1880-1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), pp. 102-24, 260-331.
- ¹⁷ David E. Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of Technology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 26, 304-38.
- ¹⁸ [Nye/35, 37-38]
- ¹⁹ Nye/24, 38-40]
- ²⁰ Benjamin B. Hampton, *History of the American Film Industry: From Its Beginnings to 1931* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), p. 5; Ian Christie, *The Last Machine: Early Cinema and the Birth of the Modern World* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), p. 70; David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), p. 68.
- ²¹ A. W. Stencell, *Girl Show: Into the Canvas World of Bump and Grind* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1999), p. 4.
- ²² Stencell/5-6]
- ²³ Robert M. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 135-36; Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 225; Nasaw/68.
- ²⁴ Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), p. 78.
- ²⁵ see David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime*. Cambridge, MA: The MI

- Press, 1996), pp. 143-72; Margaret Cheney, *Tesla: Man Out of Time* (New York: Laurel, 1981), pp. 70-75; Wyn Wachhorst, *Thomas Alva Edison: An American Myth* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), p. 132; Andre Millard, *Edison and the Business of Invention* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 147-48; Th. Metzger, *Blood and Volts: Edison, Tesla & the Electric Chair* (Brooklyn, NY: Antonomdia, 1996), pp. 49-115.
- ²⁶ [Nye-Sublime/173-98]
- ²⁷ Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New York: Harper Touchbooks, 1979), pp. 217-32.
- ²⁸ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 240-41.
- ²⁹ D'Emilio and Freedman, p. 279.
- ³⁰ Angela Latham, *Posing a Threat: Flappers, Chorus Girls, and Other Brazen Performers of the American 1920s* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), p. 11.
- ³¹ Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1998), p. 130.
- ³² Peiss/57]
- ³³ Peiss/48, 39, 154, 55, 97, 142, 57]
- ³⁴ Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), p. 3; Latham/7
- ³⁵ Latham/21, 48, 50, 54-59
- ³⁶ Latham/65; see also Peiss/Cheap-115-38; Nasaw/80-95
- ³⁷ Peiss-Cheap/108
- ³⁸ see Allen/281
- ³⁹ Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth of the Birth Control Movement in American* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), pp. 65-66.
- ⁴⁰ Chesler/201
- ⁴¹ Allen/280, 274
- ⁴² q/Latham-92
- ⁴³ q/Allen-274
- ⁴⁴ q/Douglas/47
- ⁴⁵ Leonard/5]
- ⁴⁶ Mumford/121-32]
- ⁴⁷ Leonard/45
- ⁴⁸ q/Allen-275
- ⁴⁹ Maurice Leonard, *Mae West: Empress of Sex* (New York: Birch Line Press, Carroll Communications, 1991), p. 61.
- ⁵⁰ Allen/267, 277; Leonard/61-85
- ⁵¹ Allen/277-29; Leonard/70-72
- ⁵² Leonard/77-79; Latham/91-93
- ⁵³ Allen/279-80; Leonard/80-84
- ⁵⁴ Leonard/56
- ⁵⁵ Allen/281
- ⁵⁶ Leonard/35, 48, 56
- ⁵⁷ Morgan/336-37; Nye/153
- ⁵⁸ Vern L. Bulloch, *Science in the Bedroom: A History of Sex Research* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), pp. 26-27.
- ⁵⁹ Richard Zack, *History Laid Bare: Love, Sex, and Preversity from the Ancient Etruscans to Warren G. Harding* (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 1994), p. 385/q.
- ⁶⁰ Drawings in Reay Tannahill, *Sex in History* (New York: Scarborough House, 1992), p. 343.
- ⁶¹ Hoag Levins, *Amerian Sex Machines: The Hidden History of Sex at the U.S. Patent Office* (Holbrook, MA: Adams Media Corp., 1996), pp. 13-16.

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- ⁶² Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Communications in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 131.
- ⁶³ Marvin/336, 131-32; Levins/141, 113.
- ⁶⁴ Levins/153-63
- ⁶⁵ James S. Murphy, *The Condom Industry in the United States* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1990), pp. 1, 6
- ⁶⁶ Murphy/7
- ⁶⁷ Bullough/105-06
- ⁶⁸ Bullough/107
- ⁶⁹ Murphy/10, 12, 54-56
- ⁷⁰ Bullough/186-89; Elizabeth Siege Watkins, *On the Pill: A Social History of Oral Contraceptives, 1950-1979* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 9-52.
- ⁷¹ Bullough/109
- ⁷² Iwan Bloch, *Sexual Life in England: Past and Present* (Herfordshire, England: Oracle Publishing, Ltd., 1996), p. 339]
- ⁷³ Chauncey/37
- ⁷⁴ Chauncey/37]
- ⁷⁵ Rosen-42]
- ⁷⁶ D'Emilio and Freedman, p. 210.
- ⁷⁷ Mumford/97
- ⁷⁸ Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: Norton, 1992), p. 241.
- ⁷⁹ Gilfoyle, pp. 241-42
- ⁸⁰ Rosen/79
- ⁸¹ Rosen/83
- ⁸² Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 101.
- ⁸³ Chauncey/307-308
- ⁸⁴ Leonard/53, q/53, 110, q/135
- ⁸⁵ q/Allen-275; Chauncey/310
- ⁸⁶ Mumford/103
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