

# **AMERICAN SEXUAL POLITICS**

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**Sex, Gender, and Race  
since the Civil War**

**EDITED BY**

**JOHN C. FOUT AND MAURA SHAW TANTILLO**

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# **AMERICAN SEXUAL POLITICS**

## Acknowledgments

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John C. Fout  
Maura Shaw Tantillo  
Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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# Introduction

AMERICAN HISTORY SINCE the Civil War has been a period of ongoing political, economic, and social transformation almost unparalleled in modern Western culture. Central to that evolution, of course, was the establishment of an urban, industrial society in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the emergence of a technological society in the latter decades of this century, a process still underway in our time—scholars increasingly have referred to these two epochs as the modern and postmodern eras. The expanding political, economic, cultural, and even military roles for the United States in world affairs—the ascent of the United States as a world superpower—have contributed much to shaping the course of twentieth-century American history. Nonetheless, although these developments have had a substantial impact on the lives of all Americans, it is the more direct impact of social and economic change on the everyday lives of individuals that provides the context for the essays presented here. The central issue addressed in this anthology—modifications in sexual behavior and the growing significance of sexual politics—must therefore be understood as a response to the reorganization of society in the many generations since the Civil War. Controversies about sexuality surely have evolved from the alterations in patterns of work, family organization, and gender relations that have been the driving force behind the continuing struggles over “appropriate” sexual behavior for women and men.

For too long historians have underestimated the importance of sexual politics; this anthology is a contribution to what is yet a rather small but rapidly expanding body of literature that will surely assist scholars in reevaluating the formative role that sexual politics has played in the larger scheme of American political life. The essays in this anthology were originally published in the first three volumes of the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*; topically they encompass a broad range of issues in



the history of sexual behavior in America since the Civil War. Some of the essays are also comparative and are concerned with sexuality and sexual politics in both Canada and the United States. In putting this collection together, one of the central goals was to provide readers interested in the history of sexuality with a truly "integrated" view, in the sense that the essays examine the experiences of men and women, blacks and whites, straights and gays, and so on. As a result, the authors provide a far more comprehensive picture of the period under study than has been the case in any recent study. The essays in their entirety probe the fascinating intersections between and controversies around gender, sexuality, race, and class. They delineate the myriad complex factors that have shaped American sexual politics in very specific ways in the past hundred and twenty-five years.

Thus readers interested in American social and political history, gender studies, lesbian and gay history, African American history, and multicultural studies will find this collection of considerable interest. These essays also reflect the ever-expanding boundaries of gender studies. While many of the essays are specifically focused on women, a number of others offer new insights on men's issues—strife over sexual behavior, of course, is often a reflection of actual alterations in women's and men's gender roles and the anxiety that results when people have difficulty understanding or adjusting to such changes. Taken in their entirety, the essays in this volume also provide another kind of perspective on American sexual politics because they approach this enigma from a host of disciplinary perspectives. Scholars from the social sciences and literature are represented in the volume, and the essays illustrate the diverse methodologies used in various disciplines by scholars examining sexuality across time. Similarly, this multidisciplinary approach means that the authors have drawn on an enormous variety of primary sources, published and unpublished, which has led to new findings. Important new archival documents have been used and, in other instances, scholars have based their research on personal interviews.

The anthology is organized into two sections, which reflect two distinct periods in the history of sexuality in America: the first eight essays in Part 1 focus on the period from "the Victorians to the Flappers"; and the eight essays in Part 2 are concerned with "Sexual Politics and Sexual Radicals since the 1940s." If the first period under study began somewhere around the 1880s, it was surely preceded by the changes occurring from mid-century onward and speeded up by the impact of the Civil War, emerging industrialization, and the appearance of an organized women's movement. That latter movement naturally grew out of expanding employment and educational opportunities for women, which in turn accelerated women's demands for greater political and

economic equality. Moreover, the developments in the latter half of the nineteenth century epitomize the transition away from Victorian values regarding gender roles and appropriate sexual behavior to the new and often contentious lifestyles of the “modern” era. Those changes, to emphasize an earlier point, also coincide with the shift to an urban industrial democracy in the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century. With the political, economic, and social restructuring of American society, alterations in the dominant sex and gender system gradually evolved as well.

The essays in Part I also illuminate why the older Victorian value system was under siege, and how reformers and reactionaries alike fought a bitter struggle to reform or retain the existing system—which, it was widely agreed by all, was in flux. Indeed, by the years immediately preceding the outbreak of World War I, Victorian assumptions about sexuality were largely a thing of the past. In turn, the war itself hastened the adoption of the new ideas about sex, a phenomenon patently obvious in the Roaring Twenties. Although it generally has been assumed that the 1920s was another watershed period in the history of sexuality, the essays presented here question whether sexual behavior and gender roles in that decade were modified all that dramatically. The Depression era may have undercut a process that had been accelerated by World War I, and therefore the ultimate impact may be less than was earlier believed. Rather, the period from the 1880s through the 1930s may well define the chronological limits of a distinct period in the history of sexuality in America.

Many historians, when writing about sexual politics in the decades after World War II, initially tended to emphasize the changes in attitudes toward sexuality reflected in the emergence of the “second women’s movement” and the gay rights movement of the late 1960s. However, as new research has shown, the 1960s reform movements did not develop out of a vacuum. Much like the earlier period when the Civil War helped to shape the developments leading to the 1880s, the transformations in American life brought on by World War II had a decided impact on the next generation; rapidly changing patterns of women’s work and the transformation of the American family impacted on American society in substantive ways both during the war and in the immediate decades thereafter. Thus, as a number of the essays in Part 2 demonstrate, the explosion of new ideas in the 1960s was preceded by the transformation begun in the 1940s. It is also important to note that, just as the growing concern and the resulting discussion in the late nineteenth century about sexually transmitted diseases played a role in the breakdown of Victorian values, so its contemporary counterpart, AIDS, has been a central issue in contemporary sexual politics since the early

1980s. The AIDS crisis and even the growing abortion debate have forced society to confront a range of issues around sexual politics anew, resulting once again in public discussion of explicit sexual behavior and sexual lifestyles. The two debates over AIDS and abortion have also spawned new activist movements that few would have expected in the 1960s and 1970s.

#### PART 1: FROM THE VICTORIANS TO THE FLAPPERS

Scholars generally agree that important developments around issues of sexuality and gender began to surface about the middle of the nineteenth century, but most existing studies have focused on the period from the 1880s onward, often seen as a turning point in the history of sexuality. Although the essays in Part 1 emphasize the importance of the developments beginning in the 1880s, this collection recognizes as well that the Civil War was a pivotal time for American society; with the emancipation of millions of slaves, for example, a troubled new era in race relations was inaugurated. It should not be surprising that these changes had decisive impact on gender relations, sexuality, and sexual politics during the turbulent years that followed. Anthony S. Parent, Jr., and Susan Brown Wallace's essay on "Childhood and Sexual Identity under Slavery" and Martha Hodes's piece on "The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics: White Women and Black Men in the South after the Civil War," the first two essays in this anthology, introduce this complex problem. They illustrate how racial problems intersected with issues of gender and class, and, as other essays clearly demonstrate as well, those factors have been an ongoing feature of American race relations right up to the present day. Clearly the sexual politics of race were shaped by the legacy of that "peculiar American institution"—slavery—and the burden of that unfortunate history has been an ongoing source of crisis and confrontation between whites and blacks.

Parent and Wallace based their study of "Childhood and Sexual Identity under Slavery" on a remarkable compilation of slave narratives taken down in 1929 and 1930 by Ophelia Settle Egypt and others at the Social Science Institute at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee; all the interviewers were also African Americans. This underutilized source was first published in 1941 and has been reexamined by Parent and Wallace to study the impact of slavery on children, but with the specific purpose of scrutinizing how the treatment—all too often, the abuse—by their white masters shaped these individuals' understanding of their sexuality, sexual identity, and even attitudes toward their own bodies long after slavery was ended. These men and women who recalled their brutal childhoods for the Fisk interviewers vividly remem-

bered the day-to-day impact of slavery on their families. The former slaves graphically described how violence, sexual abuse, forced marriages, and the buying and selling of slaves irrespective of family units had a devastating impact on their own sense of self-worth; slaves were forced to accommodate their own personal, sexual, and family needs to this vicious social system. Parent and Wallace's study, therefore, offers significant new insights on the slavery experience from the perspective of sexuality and gender identity. The authors discuss how those degrading experiences were carried with these former slaves into their adulthood as free individuals. Clearly, the memory of slavery for most former slaves continued to affect their attitudes toward their own bodies and their sexual behavior long after Emancipation. Their responses to white culture were similarly influenced.

Martha Hodes traces what she calls the "sexualization of Reconstruction politics" by examining what impact the emancipation of the slaves had on race relations and sexuality. She argues that there was an important shift away from the manner in which society in the antebellum South had regarded sexual relations, primarily between white women and black men. This same issue would be regarded with great anxiety by white Southerners during the period of Reconstruction and long after. The new intolerance after the Civil War, she believes, was played out through the violent actions of the Ku Klux Klan, whose activities enunciated a manifesto of white concerns about the maintenance of a rigid racial hierarchy. Her essay is based on the testimony before an 1871 congressional committee investigating Klan violence in the South and a host of contemporary sources. The major thrust of Klan violence was directed at black men, and it took place in those areas of the South where there was less social and economic inequality between whites and blacks. Black manhood became intertwined with the freeman's newly acquired economic and political power and his goal of equal citizenship. Accusing a black man of the rape of a white woman was a common rationale for Klan attacks. Black men were beaten, maimed, castrated, and even killed. White women who had relationships with black men were also terrorized, because anyone who broke sexual taboos could be a target for Klan attacks. But why were black men often castrated? Obviously, taking away their manhood would serve to subvert political equality between blacks and whites. This brand of sexual violence against black men, as shown in a later essay by Robyn Wiegman, continued well into the twentieth century. Issues of citizenship and masculinity have molded the sexual politics of race for over a hundred years, and this pattern betrays a long history of violence against black men down to the present day.

The next three essays in Part 1, by Kevin J. Mumford, Jesse F. Battan,

and Joan Smyth Iversen, examine still other issues in sexual politics in the latter half of the nineteenth century, but from the perspective of the dominant white middle-class cultural perspective. If there had been a prevailing sex and gender paradigm in Victorian America, it was shaped largely by white, middle-class Americans and by the 1880s was under siege. A range of new issues around sexuality had emerged, which were challenging the older value system. These issues reflect the symbiotic relationship between assumptions about appropriate gender behavior and appropriate sexual behavior. It was widely assumed that a biological imperative shaped gender roles, which dictated how men and women were supposed to behave sexually. However, with the roles that women played in society undergoing a transformation—especially the changes in the patterns of women's employment and the emerging women's movement—and with men's roles being reexamined as a result, the debate over sexual behavior reached a new level of intensity by the turn of the century. Although the existing literature on the progressive era has tended to emphasize the role of the state in regulating sexuality (for instance, attempts at control of prostitution and venereal diseases) and the emergence of a moral purity movement, the essays that follow offer new insights by focusing especially on the sexual radicals and sexual reform ideas.

In his essay on "‘Lost Manhood’ Found: Male Sexual Impotence and Victorian Culture in the United States," Kevin J. Mumford examines a problem underlying an ongoing crisis in male sexuality, namely, the challenge of impotence. The concern about that predicament, he demonstrates, was actually interconnected with a number of other issues affecting masculinity—factors, his essay suggests, that were also indicative of the shift away from Victorian sexual values in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Mumford sees his research as a corrective of sorts, because recent scholarship has focused largely on women's sexuality or gay male experiences; he aims the spotlight on the male heterosexual. In the early Victorian period, when America was essentially an agricultural and preindustrial society, impotence was perceived as intertwined with reproductive concerns and fear of bodily depletion. Male impotence, however, came to be seen as quite a different problem by the early twentieth century. Mumford explores the complex factors involved in that transformation. In an urban industrial society, impotence was regarded as a problem of repressed desire as well as a sign of the damage done by modern civilization; these factors combined to deplete the sexual energy of the middle-class male, it was believed. Conversely, the white male of the artisan class represented a muscular masculinity unaffected by civilization, while black male sexuality was depicted as hypersexual, similar to that of barbaric, primitive tribal people. The de-

bate over impotence now increasingly mirrored concerns about male sexuality from a racial and class perspective in a threatening big-city environment.

Jesse F. Battan's essay, "The Word Made Flesh': Language, Authority, and Sexual Desire in Late Nineteenth-Century America," is an excellent companion piece to Mumford's study. Battan focuses on another interesting facet of the debate over sexuality, namely, the controversy over sexual language—particularly the anxiety over the use of explicit Anglo-Saxon words for sexual activities. He profiles those "reformers" who sought to expand the discourse on sexuality and those "reactionaries" who sought to constrict it. Battan, like Mumford, believes his findings also confirm the breakdown of Victorian values by late in the century. The conflict demonstrates the power of language and reveals why issues such as obscenity and censorship are often such a fundamental part of any dispute over sexuality. Battan is especially interested in the Free Love movement, and he examines how its leaders provoked controversy through their promotion of the use of the explicit sexual vernacular to discuss problems that individuals were experiencing in their own sexual lives. The Free Lovers posited that Victorian prudery had had a debilitating and unhealthy impact on people's sexual behavior and that through the liberation of the language, a healthy sexual life could result. Battan scrutinizes the writings of Moses Harman, the editor of *Lucifer, the Light-Bearer*, and Ezra Hervey Heywood, the editor of *The Word*, as well as Heywood's wife, Angela Tilton Heywood, who was an important voice in her own right in the Free Love movement. These activists sought to create a forum where people could discuss their sexual dilemmas without fear of censorship. The Free Love newspapers provoked fierce public controversy and therefore played an overt role in the "liberation" of sexually explicit language.

The focus in Joan Smyth Iversen's essay, "A Debate on the American Home: The Antipolygamy Controversy, 1880–1890," shifts to women and some of the complex misgivings about women's sexuality in the late nineteenth century reflected in the antipolygamy movement. Iversen maintains that the Mormon practice of polygamy, or patriarchal (plural) marriage, which was made public in 1852, developed into a controversial issue in American sexual politics because companionate marriage was in the process of becoming the dominant family ideal. After the Civil War, polygamy became an especially contentious issue because of the Mormons' drive for statehood for Utah. The Supreme Court ruled against polygamy in 1879, and in the same year women in Salt Lake City founded an organization that came to be known as the Woman's National Anti-Polygamy Society. These women had launched a women's crusade, but, as Iversen demonstrates, their movement came

into conflict with the movement for women's suffrage; Mormon women had had the right to vote in the Utah Territory since 1870, and they were suffragists. Of the two mainstream women's suffrage organizations, the National Woman Suffrage Association, under the leadership of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, supported the Mormon women, and the American Woman Suffrage Association took a stand against the polygamous women. The conflict was played out in the 1880s as Congress debated taking the vote away from Utah women, which it indeed did in 1887. In focusing on that suffrage dispute, Iversen shows how the controversy became an argument about the American home. Because of the belief, which flourished in some quarters, that virtuous women were protected by traditional marriage, Mormon women were seen as victims of licentious men who supported polygamy; suffrage and sexual politics became intertwined.

The last essay in Part 1 to focus mainly on the period before World War I is Angus McLaren's "Sex Radicalism in the Canadian Pacific Northwest, 1890–1920." McLaren's findings also establish the radicalization of the debate over sexuality by the late nineteenth century and show how ideas about social reform and sexual reform were played out in Canada. In fact, many of the same controversies over gender and sexuality in North America were being contested all across Western culture at the same time, through a network of sexual radicals. McLaren rightly points out that there have been numerous investigations of the opponents of sexual radicalism in Canada but few studies on the advocates of these ideas, which emanated primarily from the political Left. His essay concentrates on two relatively neglected radical thinkers, Robert Bird Kerr and Dora Forster, who were both born in England but left for Canada in the early 1890s, where they eventually married. They returned to Britain in 1922, and in the following year Kerr became the editor of the *New Generation*. On the surface Kerr, who practiced law in various western Canadian provinces, led a rather mundane bourgeois existence. Nonetheless, during these years in Canada Kerr and Forster were writing for a series of socialist, progressive, and radical sexual reform publications in Canada, the United States, and Great Britain, such as the *Champion*, a suffrage newspaper in British Columbia, *Lucifer, the Light-Bearer*, in Chicago, and the *Malthusian*, an English neo-Malthusian publication (later renamed the *New Generation*). McLaren provides a detailed analysis of Kerr and Forster's sexual radicalism and traces their contacts with other sexual radicals in many countries.

The essay by Pamela S. Haag, "In Search of 'The Real Thing': Ideologies of Love, Modern Romance, and Women's Sexual Subjectivity in the United States," and Ann duCille's essay, "Blues Notes on Black Sexuality: Sex and the Texts of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen," are companion



pieces that address the question, How liberated was women's sexuality in the 1920s and 1930s? The essays offer contrasting images of black and white women and reflect the similarities and differences between a dominant cultural perspective and the perception of women's sexuality within and outside of African American culture. Both scholars rethink the supposed gains for women in the age of the flappers. Their findings challenge the view that the decade of the 1920s was a positive turning point in the history of sexuality, which supposedly altered gender roles in ways that led to new options for women.

Pamela Haag, for example, questions the widely held assumption that with the modernization or liberalization of sexual mores, especially in the period after World War I, came a transformation of sexuality that brought sexual freedom for women. Was it really a time when society acknowledged that women had sexual desires that could be expressed inside or outside of marriage? Can we assume that women were no longer judged by standards of chastity or virginity, as had been the case in the Victorian period? That age, by contrast, had sought to repress women's sexuality entirely, at least for middle-class women. Haag reinterprets the 1920s and 1930s and argues that many of the views from the nineteenth century were largely replicated in the twentieth; that is, women's sexuality was still seen as unruly and out of control, rather than rational and self-controlled—the attributes of male sexual behavior. She draws upon a broad miscellany of contemporary sources, from popular advice columns for the lovelorn to the social scientific literature, in order to highlight the variety of discourses on women's sexuality, and she stresses that class differences played an important role in differentiation of heterosexual behavior. The sexual mores of working-class women were still highly denigrated, because these women were seen as oversexed and out of control. At the same time, middle-class women found themselves in a position where their sexual behavior was rigidly shaped by standards of conduct that determined how a “nice girl” comported herself. Haag constructs a complex analysis of this phenomenon through her discussion of ideologies about love and romance, which, she maintains, actually inhibited women from exercising proprietary control over their own sexual lives.

Ann duCille also challenges prevailing suppositions about black women's sexuality, which, she argues, largely have been defined through the images of black women blues artists and epitomized by the songs of women such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, who sang of love and sex and longing and loss with the most direct and provocative language. They created a vernacular discourse on sexuality that supposedly was representative of the sexual attitudes and activities of all black women, and they articulated the material ills of a changing society when they



spoke for blacks both in the rural South and in northern urban ghettos. By contrast, it has been asserted that black women novelists, who wrote about the lives of middle-class northern black women, enunciated a view of sexuality that was far more conservative and considerably less representative of black women as a whole. DuCille's study of two novelists, Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen, who published in the 1920s and 1930s, contests these interpretations and argues that Fauset's and Larsen's prose represented in reality a black bourgeois blues. Their novels also focused on sexuality, especially black female desire, and, like the lyrics of the classic blues, addressed erotic and power relationships through their portrayal of male and female characters who experienced the lust and longing of middle-class women—and of their men. DuCille argues for a more comprehensive representation of the African American experience, which has too often been understood as singular and monolithic. Fauset's and Larsen's writings should not be seen as less authentically black because they are not raunchy or sensational. Moreover, they reflect how the lives of the black female bourgeoisie were qualitatively different from an uninhibited urban working class or a rural black peasantry. In fact, Fauset and Larsen confronted a far broader range of sexual problems for black women, duCille suggests, than the lyrics of Ma Rainey could begin to address.

## PART 2: SEXUAL POLITICS AND SEXUAL RADICALS SINCE THE 1940s

The period in American history since the 1940s has witnessed remarkable changes in sexual politics; many scholars in fact have asserted that after World War II a new period in the history of gender relations and sexuality began, an era of sexual reform movements focusing especially on women's reproductive rights and gay liberation. Certainly the second women's movement (or the second wave of feminism) in the 1960s, as well as the lesbian and gay rights movement—first launched, it has been suggested, by the Stonewall riots in New York City in 1969—actually had their origins in the dramatic social changes that came with World War II. That war, as well as the reactionary McCarthy era, had a decisive impact on gender relations and sexuality, and it signaled the emergence of new issues in sexual politics. The essays in Part 2 of this volume are concerned with developments since the 1940s that represent the second major shift in gender relations and sexual behavior in America, the first having occurred in the Victorian era. It is interesting that the sexual politics of the 1880s and 1960s were each an outgrowth of a major war and the development of a women's movement.

The first four essays in Part 2 are concerned, in the main, with sexual