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## Constructing Sexuality and Fetishizing Women in American History: Debunking Myths in Popular Culture from Pocahontas to the Cold War

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# Constructing Sexuality and Fetishizing Women in American History: Debunking Myths in Popular Culture from Pocahontas to the Cold War

## Abstract

This paper features recent teaching and scholarship produced in U.S. Women's History and Women's History coursework at Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana. We discuss using visual culture analysis and intersectionality in the U.S. History and Women's History classroom to produce scholarship that interrogates the intersection of race, class, gender and sexuality at a particular historical moment and examines visual primary sources. We give examples of scholarship produced in coursework using these methods, from studying the Lavender Scare and popular culture's constructions of Democracy that equated communism with homosexuality to the ways in which middle class social reformers used their class status and white privilege to help prostitutes while also harming them in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. We also look at contemporary popular culture constructions of Pocahontas and the ways in which her depictions reinforce white supremacy and distort narratives of Native-America history. The paper engages readers with images and discussion questions about a visual construction of what is considered civilized womanhood. We also examine and question what it means to be American and American ideologies on the right way of being a sexual being.

## Keywords

visual culture, women's history

## Cover Page Footnote

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# CONSTRUCTING SEXUALITY AND FETISHIZING WOMEN IN AMERICAN HISTORY: DEBUNKING MYTHS IN POPULAR CULTURE FROM POCAHONTAS TO THE COLD WAR

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## INTRODUCING HISTORY MAJORS TO VISUAL CULTURE

In teaching U.S. history survey courses, as a gender historian with training in visual culture studies, I introduce Saint Mary's College students to historical narratives by consistently drawing on photographs, drawings, and paintings. We examine drawings of Malinche and paintings of Pocahontas, portraits of Harriet Tubman, and photographs of suffragists, reformers, and second wave activists. We consistently ask how constructions of gender shape national politics, society, and popular culture, along with narratives about labor and family. Turning an image over and over helps us discuss varied interpretations of womanhood and women's lived experiences. We also examine intersections of gender with citizenship, race, class, and sexuality. Through the use of the visual, my U.S. history courses aim to familiarize students with the process of historical interpretation and to help students gain a deeper understanding of the United States today. We review U.S. historians' work on visual culture, from Milton Sernett's study of the visual culture of Harriet Tubman to Linda Gordon and Gary Y. Okihiro's work analyzing Dorothea Lange's censored images of the internment of Japanese-Americans. The survey courses I teach help

students earn credit for American History in addition to a college-wide course outcome called “women’s voices” that asks that students understand women's contributions historically, and the ways in which the social construction of gender influenced our understanding of knowledge.

Several student-written research papers from U.S. history survey courses used visual culture analysis to come to similar conclusions about the stereotyping of women in history, as they examined various topic matters in gender history – from the visual culture of Pocahontas to the wartime public health posters warning U.S. soldiers about sexually transmitted diseases to the images and propaganda of the Lavender Scare. They selected their topic matter due to availability of online resources on their own research interests. Throughout the course, examining visual culture helped undergraduates gain an understanding of what it means to “do history,” to use primary sources to build historical narratives. Students used visual culture—from posters and book covers to paintings and Disney films—and found that visual culture has constructed damaging representations of women’s history: images that fetishize women’s bodies, uphold whiteness and exoticize women of color, and otherize and/or fetishize lesbian women. Women’s bodies have always been battlegrounds, and students’ exposure to visual representations of historical women and their bodies has helped them understand the social constructions of gender, race, and sexual orientation in historical narratives. They are able to discern the ways in which different interest groups have historically projected ideas on women’s bodies, claiming them as sexual or asexual, defining them. Analyzing visual matter—from photographs to crude drawings—has also helped them in their journey in challenging histories and identifying that every piece of historical evidence can lie, withhold, or misrepresent people, places, and events. These realizations have helped students embark on creative and original projects and learn to trust their own analysis more so in their research papers.

This article features three undergraduate history majors’ approaches in U.S. History surveys to analyzing gender, race, and sexuality constructions in visual culture. In her paper, “Societies’

Constructions of Pocahontas: An Investigation into the Underlying Themes of Sexism, Racism, and Societies' Appropriations of Historical Memory," student Alison Tipton examines the cultural depictions and interpretations of Pocahontas, arguing that she became a symbol that reinforced white supremacy and colonialism. As she writes, "In order to become what the English considered civilized, Pocahontas had to convert to Christianity and adopt all English mannerisms." Jumping ahead several centuries, student Katlynn Dee examines Midwestern constructions of prostitution at the turn of the twentieth century in her paper, "Harmful Aid: Prostitution in Urban America during the Turn of the Century." Dee investigates public health posters from the University of Minnesota's Social Welfare History Association; the posters, which are accessible online, are also excellent teaching tools for the ways in which visual culture signals cues about gender, sexuality, race, and class, along with the social construction of sexually transmitted diseases. Dee argues that white middle class reformers used their privilege to aid women prostitutes while also harming them, and her inquiry of visual culture supports this claim. Finally, in Adrienne Whisman's paper, "The Lavender Scare: A Construction of Lesbian Identity as 'Other,'" she examines visual popular culture representations of women during the Lavender Scare, arguing that popular culture portrayed lesbians as unfeminine and against domesticity to strengthen the traditional role of the family as the center of freedom and national identity.

### **POCAHONTAS AS A VISUAL SYMBOL OF WHITE SUPREMACY**

Exploration into the events of the 1907 Tercentennial Jamestown Exposition in Virginia unearths underlying assumptions and stereotypes in societies' representations of Pocahontas and Native Americans as a collective group. Anthropologist Frederic W. Gleach offers an in-depth discussion of the representations of Pocahontas along with the Powhatan tribe. He writes, "Pocahontas appears in images from the Jamestown Exposition generally in one of two ways: either an artist's conception of the rescue incident, with Pocahontas throwing herself over Captain John Smith's body... or in portrait view in English clothes" (428). Gleach

observes that “while Pocahontas gets credit for saving Captain John Smith, the Powhatans were otherwise poorly represented in images from the exposition” (429). Furthermore, Gleach asserts that “with the partial exception of Pocahontas (who is an individual, at least), the Powhatans are largely reduced to historical stereotypes of generic Indians, nearly mythical characters from the past” (429) and that Powhatans “were allowed only to be entertaining icons from the past” (440). Gleach also observes that “these depictions of Pocahontas, and those of other Natives, were all created by and for non-Native people” (428), and the orchestrators of the exposition intended it to be a celebratory event in honor of the Jamestown colony and not of the Native American people (427). This misrepresentation distorts the image of the Powhatans by diminishing their identity and their unique role in history. The orchestrators of the Tercentennial Jamestown exposition did not portray the Powhatan culture as an integral component of the Jamestown narrative but rather as an afterthought. By choosing to uphold the narrative of Jamestown and the white colonists, the orchestrators of the event ensured that the only story that mattered was one of whiteness and oppression; they ignored Native Americans’ roles in the success of Jamestown as a colony, and they further relegated Native Americans to the back pages of history textbooks.

An example of the latter portrayal of Pocahontas that Gleach describes can be seen on a brass medal from the exposition in which a rendition of Simon van de Passe’s engraving of Pocahontas is on the front of the medal (see fig.1); Pocahontas is in distinctly English dress. This would have been a common image circulating among attendees at the Tercentennial Jamestown Exposition. The two ways in which the orchestrators of the exposition represented Pocahontas as a historical figure only portrayed her in a way linked to white Europeans and their perceptions of her. The story of Pocahontas and her assimilation into English culture takes precedence over her identity as a Native American. Gleach writes, “Clearly the key aspect of her story is her transformation from savage (but good) girl to civilized and Christian lady—from Indian to white” (428). Her dress in this engraving signifies this transformation and cements her perceived role as a mediator. She was heralded as the

link between the two strikingly different cultures, the symbol of peaceful relations; however, there is a concealed yet distinct message within this context. By featuring this particular image to be the face of the medal, the exposition portrayed Pocahontas as a Native American woman who somehow transcended her upbringing and was accepted into white



Fig.1. Jamestown Tercentennial Exposition Brass Medal, from Alison Tipton's personal collection, 2016.

culture; this indicates the supposed inferiority of the Native American culture in which Pocahontas was raised and the superiority of white European culture.

Historians give Pocahontas agency and value her as a historical figure in both art and literature mainly for her work as a mediator between Native Americans and Europeans. As representations of her suggest, people value her in relation to the work she did to help Europeans. Artists demonstrate this in most visual representations of Pocahontas, which often depict the moment she supposedly saved John Smith from death (see fig. 2). In this particular image, Pocahontas lays her torso over the head of John Smith, protecting his body with her own.

By representing Pocahontas in this way, the artist portrays Pocahontas as a mediator between her own Native American culture and white European culture; essentially, this is her key role in history. It is in this way that people construct Pocahontas's image so that it is colored by European perceptions of her as a historical person. Artists allow this particular moment in history to define Pocahontas's life and her worth.



Fig.2. Christian Inger, *Smith Rescued by Pocahontas*,  
[www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/pocahontas/lege-nf.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/pocahontas/lege-nf.html).

In addition, the 1995 Disney film, *Pocahontas* represents Pocahontas inaccurately. One major issue that critics point out about the film is that while John Smith identifies the historical figure Pocahontas as “a childe of tenne yeares old” (38), the Disney film portrays her as a fully grown woman capable of having a relationship with the adult John Smith. The aging of Pocahontas in the film along with her dramatized womanly form directly contradicts the historical John Smith's description of his encounter with her (38).

A theory on this retelling of Pocahontas's story can be found within Michael Harris's book entitled *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*. Harris describes the racist and stereotypical portrayals of African Americans in art. While Harris applies his arguments specifically to African American women in this section, his arguments



are relevant to other women of color. Harris writes about “the essentialist stereotyping of non-white women” (126) and white perceptions of their sexuality. He observes that “women of color were associated with nature, uncontrolled passion, and promiscuity” (126). This practice can explain the overly sexualized nature of Pocahontas in the Disney film. Additionally, Harris argues that “using the nonwhite female body as a spectacle...offers a stage to play out white moral superiority because the exotic woman is a sign of the wanton sexual danger that white society has mastered” (134). The filmmakers uphold stereotypes about Native American women and their association with heightened sexuality, perpetuating notions of male dominance as well as white supremacy. Gleach also argues that “Native American Indian women began to be viewed in a dual-faceted manner: either as a strong, powerful, dangerous woman or as a beautiful, exotic, lustful woman. Both facets were merged together into one representation of Native American Indian women through the stereotype of Pocahontas” (190). Within the Disney film, the filmmakers afford Pocahontas agency by portraying her as a strong woman who defied her father and stood her ground for the things she felt strongly about. However, like in the aforementioned painting, this agency comes in the form of Pocahontas’s rescue of John Smith. The filmmakers create this portrayal of Pocahontas in a way that would benefit the story they were trying to tell, but this culminated in a biased representation of her as a historical figure. Rather than creating a movie that celebrated Pocahontas’s identity as a young Native American girl, the filmmakers succumbed to stereotypes about Pocahontas and her culture, a choice that remains harmful to the perceptions of Native American communities.

These points contribute to Harris’s assertion that “the discursive formation about race in American society constructed definitions of race, valuations of the groups involved, and devised a series of verbal and visual representations to reinforce the ‘truth’ of the constructs” (5). The filmmakers’ representation of Pocahontas through this specific lens contributes to a race and gender bias; these images and representations showcase the ideas of sexism and racism within society while maintaining them. Popular visual representations of Pocahontas such as

those discussed perpetuate notions of white supremacy and the hypersexuality of women of color.

By reinforcing stereotypes about Pocahontas and the Powhatan tribe in these images, the producers of them devalue Pocahontas and her culture while re-affirming the morality of white European culture. The biased perceptions of people from societies other than within Native American cultures flourishes, which is a discrepancy in the depiction of a historical figure's life. As literary scholar Karen Robertson writes, "She is available to us through a grid of texts and representations by European men" (554). Societies' depictions of Pocahontas taint the perceptions of her and other Native Americans as well; however, as Robertson states, "It would be a mistake to see her as only a trophy of colonization or tragic victim" (580). Authors, artists, and filmmakers should have portrayed Pocahontas in a way that celebrated her gender, her culture, and her legacy without succumbing to the bias of white supremacy and stereotypes about Native Americans, especially Native American women. Further Native American dialogue about Pocahontas as a historical figure would greatly benefit the discussion of her life and her role in the seventeenth century.

One work that could offer a substantial starting point for researchers is Linwood "Little Bear" Custalow and Angela L. Daniel "Silver Star's" *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History*. Custalow and Daniel give evidence that Pocahontas was already married before she was kidnapped by the English and that she had given birth to a son before the English abducted her as a hostage (47). Even today, many do not know about this part of Pocahontas's story. Virtually no one acknowledges her other descendants because "the Powhatans were left presumably destroyed, a memory of the past" (Gleach 433). This is precisely the reason one point of view in history should not prevail; it takes a variety of interpretations and analyses to get the full picture. This expansion of knowledge on the part of the individual will help bring to light the hidden biases that are upheld, the work that is ignored, and the voices that are silenced through popular visual constructions of history.

## PROSTITUTION IN URBAN AMERICA

The depictions of Pocahontas present one of several instances of people choosing to use a historical narrative for their own purposes. The narrative of prostitution during World War II included similar biases regarding the visual constructions of women. Public health poster campaigns created a stigmatized misrepresentation and oversexualization of prostitutes during WWII. More specifically, the visual culture presented in health campaign posters depicted prostitutes as the sole carriers of venereal disease and, consequently, the main target of the health reform. I argue that the posters featured prostitutes in this manner to divert attention away from the male soldiers and to calm the minds of the American people during the venereal disease outbreak. In addition, the women vice reformers targeted prostitutes as a subject of moral concern to reinforce the societal norms that protected middle class white wives from the dangers of contracting venereal disease from their military husbands. The reformers and the government, therefore, contributed to the social construction of prostitutes as dangerously seductive, morally deviant, and disease-ridden threats to society. The following section will use historical scholarship to analyze primary sources regarding the visual construction of prostitution, while also taking into account the contributing racial, social and economic factors.

During WWII, the production of health campaign posters influenced vice reformers who also targeted prostitution. The oversexualized visual representation of prostitutes' interactions with military men contributed to the vice reformers' concern with prostitution as a way to alleviate the threat of venereal disease—a threat that affected them personally. In an attempt to understand the rise of the sex industry and the increased visibility of prostitutes throughout the city, middle class reformers categorized prostitution as a moral issue. Historian Lauren Rabinovitz' research on prostitution in Chicago during the turn of the century claims that some middle-class reformers characterized prostituted as “women adrift” in need of moral saving (6). Rather than focusing on the monetary needs associated with prostitution

and using reform to target economic issues, the middle class reformers focused on trying to save “pure and passive orphans threatened with sexual danger” (Rabinovitz 6). The reformers’ inability to associate economic, and even familial factors, as underlying motivations for prostitution ultimately reinforced the visual culture’s sexualized depiction of prostitutes.

Although vice reformers understood prostitution as an immoral choice and although the visual culture often presented prostitutes as women freely displaying their bodies for sexual pleasure, historian Sharon E. Wood describes a woman’s choice to enter prostitution as “no choice at all,” because poverty often led women into prostitution, not their lack of moral character (101). Prostitution provided poverty stricken women with the opportunity to provide for their families (Wood 44). Despite prostitutes’ attempt to achieve a type of independence by providing a form of income for their families, the posters still scrutinized and objectified the women as dangerous to the men in uniform. In this instance, the danger lay in the fear of venereal disease; however, this stigma extended beyond prostitution and leaned on the societal need to protect the power and control of men at the expense of a woman’s independence. For this reason, the poster campaigns depicted soldiers as approached or sought after by prostitutes. The poster campaigns suggested that women need to present themselves in a sexual way to attain such attention from the male soldiers.

The posters emphasized and exaggerated the sexuality of women, specifically prostitutes, as a way to draw attention away from the sexuality of men. In this way, the posters also glorified the soldiers as men who could do no wrong. For example, Figure 4 sets the scene of two men in uniform at the bar relaxing and drinking a beer. A young woman in a plunging dress hovers over the soldiers. The soldier on the left looks up toward the woman’s chest with a grin. Notice how the prostitute’s curved feature and extensive makeup characterize her as a grown woman, whereas the soldiers’ seated position and facial expressions depict them as young boys naively intrigued by the sexual prowess of the prostitute. To further illustrate the prostitute as a huntress and the soldiers as the prey, the author of the poster plastered the phrase “booby

trap . . . syphilis and gonorrhoea” over the image to suggest the sexual and physical entrapment of the soldiers. The provocative image of the woman in this poster presented prostitutes as powerful, yet docile. The bold make-up paired with her emphasized chest, wide hips and small waist sexualized the woman as an object of male affection. This portrayal, coupled with the idea of the prostitute as a seductress with the power to sexually persuade innocent soldiers, leaned on contradictory expectations. Just as the prostitute appeared to embody power and dependence simultaneously, society expected women to be self-sufficient while also relying on the affection and muscles of men.

In addition to the oversexualization and the enforcement of society’s moral standards, prostitutes faced scrutiny through criminalization. The phrases associated with the poster campaigns attacked prostitutes as threats to the moral and physical health of society. For example, a public health poster from 1940 shows three men in uniform behind the phrase “men who know, say no to prostitutes: spreaders of syphilis and gonorrhoea” (see fig. 5). Although this poster portrays soldiers, not prostitutes, the bold and bright phrasing targets prostitutes as the center of the venereal disease epidemic. In contrast to the phrasing, the shaded and blurred soldiers portrays the men as innocent bystanders. Historians Anne E. Bowler, Leon S. Chrysanthi and Lilly G. Terry’s collaborative article on Bedford penitentiary from 1902 to 1913 analyzes the domesticated criminalization of prostitutes that continued during WWII. The female inmates at Bedford were convicted of various offenses including prostitution and chastity violations. The reformers and social workers associated with Bedford defined prostitution as all sexual acts including “flirtatiousness, premarital sex, and other forms of behavior that deviated from the Victorian codes of moral sexual propriety” (Bowler 462). The domestication program at Bedford, therefore, sought to adhere to social norms and kept women within the confined spaces that society deemed acceptable for women. The isolation of domestic work after parole condemned women to a life of servitude and privation. The reform movement represented at Bedford returned young women to the very occupation that essentially condemned them to a life of poverty: poverty that led them into

prostitution in the first place (Bowler 476). The reform program's desire to rescue women by influencing them with the Victorian ideals of female purity failed to consider the economic factors of prostitution (Bowler 474).



Fig.4. Booby trap/Syphillis and Gonorrhoea, from the American Social Health Association, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, 1940.

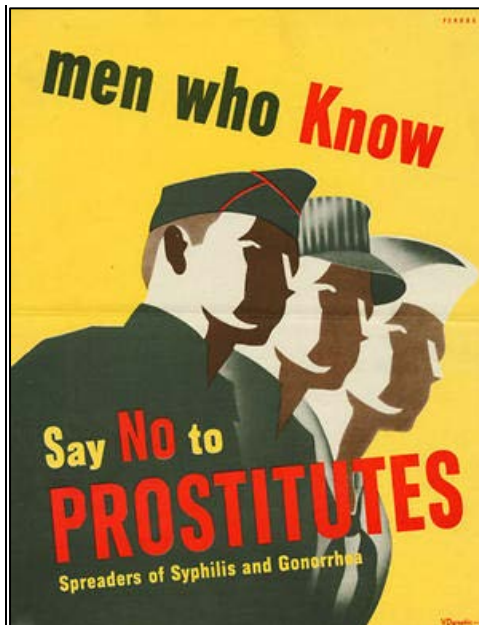


Fig.5. Men Who Say No, from the American Social Health Association, University of Minnesota-Minneapolis, 1940.

In combination with the confinement and forced domestication at Bedford, prostitutes faced extreme measures of incarceration, forced medical examinations, and government imposed familial separations. The wartime regulation and repression of prostitution granted the government the power to interfere in the lives of the working class people in an unprecedented way. Historian Elizabeth Alice Clement's book on prostitution from 1900 to 1945 explains that the government incarcerated 30,000 women for prostitution related offenses during WWII (114). Furthermore, a prostitute's involvement with a soldier often resulted in the removal of her children from her custody, and women

infected with venereal disease served longer sentences than prostitutes arrested for similar offenses (Clement 142).

The poster campaigns placed prostitutes at the forefront of the venereal disease outbreak during WWII to protect the patriotic support of the men in uniform. A 1940 advertisement displays the assumed moral deviancy and the imposed criminalization of prostitutes by depicting two women lurking outside an army/navy base with the statement: “Warning: these enemies are still lurking” (see fig. 6). This poster suggests that women hunted for men and presented men as the victims of venereal disease infested prostitutes. The representation of the prostitutes targets seductive women as the focal point of the health reform. The visual culture of the prostitutes throughout the poster campaigns presented women as wanted enemies of the state and shunned creators of an epidemic.



Fig.6. American Social Health Association, 1940.

The underlying contributions of racial divides present in the criminalization of prostitutes demonstrates a middle-class denial of

racial and economic factors in an attempt to emphasize the immorality of prostitution. The racial divides within the criminalization of prostitution stemmed from an attempt to give a face to prostitution based on arrest records (Clement 78). The majority of prostitution arrests pertained to streetwalkers as opposed to strippers, taxi dancers, or erotic dancers. Due to the racial bias of brothel and club owners who refused to hire black women, black and Latino women made up the majority of streetwalkers and white and Asian women made up the majority of better paid and legal strippers, taxi dancers, and erotic dancers (Clement 85). As a result, most white middle class reformers viewed black women as “inherently less moral” because black and Latino women “were overrepresented in streetwalking, the lowest paid and most dangerous form of sex work” (Clement 6). This situation contributed to the continuation of racialization in the sex industry, and the visual culture contributed to the racialization of the sex industry by solely displaying white women and white soldiers.

The public health campaign posters criminalized prostitution as a “white woman’s issue.” The overrepresentation of white prostitutes rather than minority prostitutes suggested concern with aiding the white upper- and middle-class communities rather than the minority and working class communities. According to the visual culture, prostitution was a white issue, a health danger for the soldiers, a moral problem for the women, and a social problem for the reformers. Although prostitution and venereal disease affected men and women of all races and socioeconomic classes, the government failed to adequately and equally regulate the minority brothels and, therefore, failed to protect minority prostitutes from other dangerous forms of prostitution on the streets. In this way, the government drew a color line in prostitution by dividing the safe and governmentally regulated forms of prostitution that white women relied on from the dangerous streetwalker forms of prostitution left to minority women. The kinds of posters seen here produced images of womanhood that created social, racial, and sexual hierarchies. The visual culture also upheld the binary of the prostitute and the virgin by oversexualizing and criminalizing the prostitutes. Although prostitution faced stigma, it must be viewed beyond the binary of the prostitute and



the virgin, beyond the oversimplifications of the surrounding visual culture and beyond the moral judgments of the vice reformers. Prostitution during WWII presented women with the opportunity to enter the public sphere and, more importantly, to enter the workforce. The posters' criminalization of prostitution ignored the fact that prostitution provided some women with a sense of independence and freedom and can be understood as part of the process of dismantling patriarchy. The posters' depiction of the visibility of women in the workforce as detrimental to society exemplified fears of the destruction of the patriarchy and the power of man

### **BUILDING A BINARY IN LESBIAN VISUAL CULTURE**

The fight against gender binaries emphasized in visual culture and the dismantlement of the patriarchy continued during the Cold War as the United States targeted lesbian visual culture as another scapegoat. Post-World War II was a time of uncertainty for the world. The atomic bomb had been dropped, a Cold War between the USSR and the United States started, and social turmoil about gender and sexuality invaded American society. The '50s featured a time of insecurity for America, and behaviors beyond the norm or not readily understood were considered a threat to America's ability to lead the world as a pinnacle of democracy. The beginning of the Cold War saw the Red Scare against communist sympathizers and the Lavender Scare, where gay men and women were targeted as otherized "homosexuals." This phenomenon has been referred to as the Lavender Scare due to the comment made by Senator Everett Dirksen when he promised to remove the so called "lavender lads" from government (Smith 319). The reason given for targeting communists and "homosexuals" was to stabilize American society and democracy in the face of a war against communism. Popular portrayed lesbians as unfeminine and against domesticity and gay men as anti-masculine and morally weak. It was meant to strengthen the traditional role of the family as the center of freedom and national identity.

The Cold War fight against communism propelled conservatives and leaders in America into seeking a united identity through

propaganda and huge government inquiries to root out communists and outsiders. The upset of gender roles during World War II, combined with zoologist Alfred Kinsey's "infamous" mid-century reports on male and, later, female sexuality, led to an uncertainty within the American consciousness. His reports shook the idea that homosexuality was the result of learned behavior or mental illness by depicting it as an intrinsic identity. He also pointed out that one in three men were likely to have had a same sex relationship and 1 out of 4 women (Walker 2). American society, through popular culture and government reports, looked back to traditional gender roles and the nuclear family as a stabilizing component in an uncertain world. More and more, "patriotism and masculinity were synonymous" (Smith 316). A fractured society would undermine the principles the U.S. was attempting to uphold during the Cold War. "Homosexuals" and nontraditional gender roles undermined the traditional masculine and feminine identities, therefore undermining American patriotism. Cultural Historian Geoffrey Smith states that a "fear of those who did not subscribe to prevailing sexual and gender norms" pervaded America (318). The winning of the Cold War relied upon one united American identity. The government connected homosexuality to communism, arguing that both posed a threat to democracy. The idea that some members of America did not follow traditional ethical codes created a national identity crisis (Bodnar 21). An America divided on moral grounds would only weaken the country in the fight against communism. Anyone who went against the accepted social traditions was a threat to the social stability and the success of America against the USSR. The fear of anything not democratic, traditional, or American caused many to associate gay individuals with communism. Their differences were considered dangerous to the American way of life. A *New York Times* article from 1960 showed the belief that homosexuality and communist leanings were connected. Two government employees defected to the Soviet Union. The article linked the defection with low moral fiber and homosexuality, writing that "the defectors were known to their acquaintances as 'sex deviates' (Raymond 9). The fact that the article discussed the defectors' sexuality at all showed the relationship within the public between sexuality and

trustworthiness. The widespread worry that someone's sexuality could determine their ability to stay loyal caused paranoia and a crackdown on nontraditional expressions of identity.

In much the same way, lesbians were scrutinized and stereotyped through popular depictions during this time. To be a lesbian, one seemed unfeminine and against American values. A 1959 *Pageant Magazine* cover featured the article, "How to Understand the 'Queer' People," invoking a sense of otherness and oddity directed by popular media toward gays and lesbians (see fig.7). The focus on traditional gender roles led to the reification of ideas about what exactly made a woman. She was supposed to be feminine, domestic, and submissive to her husband, something that was "crucial to the survival of American democracy" (Corber 6).



Fig.7. Pageant Magazine. July 1959, [www.oldmagazinearticles.com/1950s-GAYS#.V94d0vmANHw](http://www.oldmagazinearticles.com/1950s-GAYS#.V94d0vmANHw).

The belief in the threat of lesbianism to American society extended from Butch Femme culture. Although imitative of heteronormative gender roles, Butch-Femme culture removed men from

the equation, giving women more power within the relationship. “Butch” identity was the obvious stereotype of a lesbian. Mainstream, heterosexual society saw this identity as a “harshly hostile figure” who had a “masculine haircut, coarse skin, nasty vocabulary” and wore male clothing (Corber 2). This stereotype isolated the more overtly “traditional” lesbians from American society (4). The greater threat of lesbians came from the “femme” aspect, the women who looked feminine and acted it but were secretly gay (3). They validated the stereotype that lesbians could be anywhere, hiding. Even a hint of a woman’s sexuality as not heterosexual could result in her losing her job (Toops 96). As cultural historian David Johnson points out, the federal government was almost the only place a woman could gain a high-level job; her “ambition to rise to positions of responsibility in male-dominated environments” led to doubt about her femininity and sexuality (155). Because of this, lesbians policed their own behavior and persona, especially within public spheres of dating and work. Lesbians would “project a feminine persona” to “avoid suspicion” especially since men could easily trigger an investigation into a woman’s sexuality if they “resented reporting to a female boss” (Corber 18). The interrogation that ensued was considered by many as “the most demeaning experience” of their lives (Johnson 148). Washington D.C. and many other workplaces were filled with fear since “it happen[ed] to others, it could happen to them” (149). Mere socialization with “known homosexuals” was “sufficient cause for dismissal” (150). Social and political degradation of lesbians led to much harassment and isolation of lesbians from the mainstream (Toops 95). The result was a feeling and reality of Otherness within society.

Lesbians and gay men were subjected to voyeuristic articles like one in *Pageant* from 1959, with the cover stating “How to Understand the ‘Queer’ People” (Walker 2-8). This article has an eye-catching opening page with “Plain talk about HOMO - SEXUALS” emblazoned on the page and “sexuals” printed in red to draw the eye and create a connection between sex and gay men and women. The article attempts to explain how to interact with gays as well as explain why they are the way they are. Published relatively late in the 1950s, it exemplifies prejudice with phrases such as “those who are maladjusted sexually” and

“deviants” to describe gay men and women. The article attempts to foster understanding but presents gays and lesbians as people who are different and should be pitied and analyzed. The overall tone of the article shows the Lavender Scare’s legacy of othering and critiquing gays and lesbians as un-American and inhuman and therefore not privy to the same rights and privileges as other citizens of the United States.

The isolation caused by being labeled in such a way caused many gays and lesbians to turn to each other and form community. Losing economic security and social standing through job loss, and feeling isolated from society also led to many negative impacts on lesbians. Stress played a detrimental role in the lesbian identity – leading to mental health issues like anxiety and depression (Toops 103). One must recognize the great internalized homophobia and fear that many lesbians struggled with while simultaneously attempting to validate their own existence by forming various communities like the Daughters of Bilitis. Social hatred of lesbians was another barrier to overcome in order to form communities. Communities formed in order to band together against social prejudice but also to prove to the individual that their identity was valid, as many women and lesbians took “drastic measures” in order to hide their identities or rid themselves of the label of “lesbian” (99). In this way, the formation of the early gay rights movement can be understood as a result of both a need to band together and a validation of identity as well as a way to overcome internal and external prejudices and hatred of gays and lesbians. The social climate of the 1950s was not open to acceptance of different identities. Instead, stereotypes and dehumanizing propaganda about gays and lesbians formed America’s perception of these individuals. Popular culture and the rhetoric that stemmed from the Lavender Scare made American gays and lesbians into the dehumanized trope that threatened Cold War America. Because of this and despite this, gays and lesbians were able to overcome their own internalized fears and self-hatreds to form communities that would grow into Gay Lib and start the campaign for LGBTQ rights.

The censor of the U.S. government and harassment of “homosexuals” and “non-conformers” as a result of both Cold War paranoia and prejudice, led to attempts at dismantling America’s

traditional social values. Popular images and ideas found within articles, from news to sensationalized gossip, of both gay men and lesbians helped foster the idea of “homosexuals” as Other and apart from mainstream American society. The fear and paranoia sparked by the Red Scare and the Lavender Scare gave way to factions of society who rebelled against the status quo. The popular ideas of lesbians and gays found within magazines and government rhetoric not only created stereotypes but it also helped spread awareness of the existence of gays and lesbians. The idea of safety through persecution of “security threats” actually undid much of the social values of the day and led to the liberation movements of the 60s. The fear of differences that drove many of the early Cold War decisions led to the upheaval of American society and values. American minorities felt constrained by the scrutinizing effect put upon them by the government and “normal” portion of the United States. By constricting the ability to express individuality, Cold War culture created a build-up of resentment and fostered a desire for something different and freer. Instead of stabilizing and securing the nation, Cold War paranoia destroyed tradition and rebuilt America with rebellion and liberation movements.

## CONCLUSION

All of the images deconstructed in these U.S. history survey papers come to similar conclusions: that popular visual culture images construct dangerous and false images of women century upon century. These images begin to seep into the national collective memory, confirming societal impressions of women as upholding whiteness and colonialism and always and forever walking the impossible line between upright moral purity or hypersexualization. These conclusions have helped history majors at our women’s college make sense of visual culture propaganda and imagery. One of the questions we address in class is why false narratives about women get passed down century upon century, and why women’s bodies and stories are remembered in such damaging ways. This often leads to lively discussions about media, education, and legal history, and ultimately the analysis of visual culture helps students

continue to scrutinize, question and critique narratives and images, mythos and ideas.

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