

## Bad Girls and Masked Men: Recent Works on Sexuality in US History

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# Bad Girls and Masked Men: Recent Works on Sexuality in US History

Carolyn Strange

Ruth M. Alexander, *The Girl Problem: Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1995).

George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books 1994).

Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the U.S., 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press 1995).

WHAT ON EARTH WOULD ONE write about if one were to study the history of sexuality? This question used to be posed either perplexedly or cynically. The idea that sex could have a history mystified some historians while others dismissed it as a faddish fixation on the unmentionable. Even the appearance of landmark works, like Judith Walkowitz's *Prostitution and Victorian Society* or Linda Gordon's *Woman's Body, Woman's Right*, left many unconvinced of the subject's relevance to more than a small circle of feminists with axes to grind.<sup>1</sup> Now, less than twenty years later, the history of sexuality is a force to be reckoned with, not only in North American historiography, but in 'world' history (as a steady stream of articles in journals such as *Gender and History*, *Signs*, and the *Journal of the History of Sexuality* confirms). "Everybody's doin' it" could be applied not only to our historical subjects, but to historians who have suddenly come to write about physical and emotional intimacy in all its ambiguity.

Histories of sexuality can no longer afford to rely on raciness to draw readers' attention (or to raise reviewers' eyebrows). The minimum entry standard now goes

<sup>1</sup>Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (Cambridge 1980); Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New York 1976).

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something like this: mastery of theoretical constructs, particularly Foucault's opus; innovative selection and reading of official and unofficial sources; refusal to equate official pronouncements with 'actual' sexual practices; recognition of gender, race, and class as integral to analyses of sexuality; resistance to the temptation to universalize or essentialize sexual practices or identities. In a very short time, the expectations imposed on historians of sexuality (largely by fellow historians of sexuality) have inspired fine, challenging work, examples of which are represented in these three books.

The one which has received the most attention is George Chauncey's *Gay New York*. The publicity (and sales) it has garnered are unquestionably deserved. This is an extremely ambitious work, especially since it is a first book, written originally as a dissertation under the direction of Nancy Cott. If Chauncey's supervisor put "passionlessness" on the historical map, he has colourfully documented and celebrated the opposite — namely the sexual passions that drove men to create a "gay world" in late-19th to mid-20th-century New York. Although the stuffy parlour existence of Victorian ladies suffering from the vapours seems oceans away from the Bowery saloons where painted "fairies" and tattooed sailors consorted, Chauncey makes brilliant bridges between ground-breaking feminist historiography and *au courant* queer theory. For instance, he draws directly on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* while rejecting her central metaphor: pre-Stonewall gay men were not closeted, he contests, but were more like "masked" men who lived "double-lives."<sup>2</sup> For Chauncey, the closet image misses the complex strategies that men devised to be both visible (to each other) and invisible (to hostile outsiders). Like "separate spheres," an outmoded term which inaccurately defined women as creatures cocooned from "the public," the closet is a metaphor which wrongly implies that gay men existed in a kind of cryogenic state prior to coming out en masse in the 1970s. Chauncey's project is to put that image to rest: not only were there sexually-active gay men prior to the modern gay liberation movement, but there were numerous sites in the early metropolis where like-inclined men concocted a vibrant subculture of sex and sociability.

Alexander's and Odem's books cover much of same terrain (literally, and figuratively) as *Gay New York*, but these authors do not focus on the world that bad girls made. In both cases, they are interested in how, why, and according to whom working-class girls came to be considered problems in turn-of-the-century US cities and towns. Alexander traces how teenaged women, institutionalized for various morals offenses, challenged conventions of female heterosexuality. Almost all

<sup>2</sup>Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley 1990). In an important footnote in which Chauncey elucidates his modified Sedgwickian analysis, he states: "While the double life is predicated on the need for secrecy, hiding, and double entendre, which she analyzes, it does not connote the utter invisibility and aloneness of the closet: it recognizes the visibility of the gay world to gay men as well as its invisibility to the dominant culture." Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 375.

products of poor, working-class families, these "wayward girls" were sent to reformatories for indulging in the sorts of pleasures that their middle-class sisters got away with — going on unsupervised dates and spending their money as they pleased. They may have been the first to crash through barriers on the road to the heterosexual revolution of the 1920s, but it seems that the only kind of subculture they created emerged behind reformatory walls where the more spirited railed against therapeutic and punitive schemes to refashion them into good girls.<sup>3</sup>

Odem's *Delinquent Daughters* is also a sympathetic portrait of working-class girls and young women who "explored opportunities for social and sexual autonomy," (2) but who ended up in police holding cells, juvenile courts, and training schools for their trouble. Odem adds a refreshing west coast perspective on a subject which has heretofore attracted the attention of historians who have focused on eastern seaboard and midwest cities. At the same time, she sets the reform and policing activities imposed on young delinquents in the Oakland and Los Angeles areas on a national stage of late-Victorian and Progressive Era sexual anxieties and controls. Beginning with late-19th-century Womens' Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) campaigns to raise the age of consent for girls (from as low as seven years old in Delaware!), Odem establishes that efforts to protect girls from rapacious men backfired: not only did girls remain sexually vulnerable (especially to men they knew), but their status as victims was openly questioned by judges, defence lawyers, and boyfriends. Their wilful defiance of expectations that they be dutiful and sexually circumspect rendered them vulnerable to a growing array of state agents and institutions established in the early 1900s to police sexuality. Like Alexander's wayward girls, Odem's "delinquent daughters" played a high-risk, high-stakes game in which their only option was to break the rules, not make them.

Reading these books together gives the impression that girls and boys just wanted to have fun, but that boys managed to have it without risking as much. All three authors agree that the late-19th century explosion in urban entertainments multiplied the possibilities for pleasure, even for the poorest of city dwellers. As historians Kathy Peiss, Lewis Erenberg, and David Nasaw have established, the late-19th to the mid-20th century was the golden age of cheap public amusements strung not along suburban fringes (like theme parks and malls of our time), but applied like sequins onto the fabric of inner city life.<sup>4</sup> For the most part, their

<sup>3</sup>Alexander devotes considerable attention to inmate sub-cultures in her analysis of the 1920 Bedford Hills riot. "Good girls" learned to not rock the boat, but the "worst inmates," those most resistant to forced lessons in respectability, went on a "campaign of prolonged defiance and displays of utter disrespect" which ultimately forced the institution to revamp its rules and discipline policies, 92-101.

<sup>4</sup>Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-century New York* (Philadelphia 1986); Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Chicago 1981); David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusement* (New York 1993).

work documents the transition from a homosocial, rough culture of public leisure (conducted in masculine venues, such as saloons and pool halls), to a form of heterosociability which thrived in glitzy places like Coney Island. By the 1880s and 1890s cities like New York and L.A. made it easy for even the greenest greenhorn to buy or barter every kind of amusement imaginable. Even smaller mixed-industry cities like Buffalo or Oakland had their share of dance halls, movie houses, and nickelodeons where strangers could meet and strike up acquaintances. Crowds were so thick at fair midways that passersby scarcely noticed if couples rubbed more than shoulders. Beaches and parks were also popular resorts which advertised healthful pleasures but also provided convenient rendez-vous for men and women seeking refreshments other than fresh air.

For heterosexual men, cruising for dates in these open-air sex markets apparently entailed few risks. Evidence from each of these books confirms that heterosexual men of all classes staked the surest claims in urban territory. Simply hanging out on street corners, or outside pool halls and saloons, young toughs in New York advertised their masculinity by heckling women and beating up men whom they considered rivals or "fairies." While disorderliness or public drunkenness frequently landed working-class and immigrant men in paddy wagons, expressions of heterosexual desire (or defensiveness) rarely led to arrests. Chauncey recounts a story about two gay men who were chased by a group of pugnacious sailors, only to be "rescued" by a policeman who arrested the pair for degeneracy. Odem and Alexander provide numerous examples of men and boys whose heterosexual exploits went unpunished. For instance, truancy, running away from home, stealing, or destroying property often led young men to L.A. juvenile courts, but sexual activity with girls seldomly did. Compared to their surveillance and control of their daughters, as Odem notes, "working-class parents clearly granted older adolescent sons more autonomy over their labor, social activities, and romantic relations than daughters received." (176) If sons lived up to parental expectations that they contribute their wages to the family economy, working-class families across a wide range of ethnic groups were little troubled if sons spent their evenings in dance halls or their weekends at amusement parks. When parents did report their sons for promiscuity (only 8 per cent of Odem's male youth went to court for sexual misconduct, compared to 60 per cent of females), the charges typically stemmed from accusations of incest or homosexuality. (178)

The opposite was true of heterosexual girls and young women. Sex outside of marriage, even with only one steady boyfriend, was sexual misconduct.<sup>5</sup> More

<sup>5</sup>Female homosexual desire in its working-class guises was comparatively invisible to authorities who were much more concerned at the turn of the century with prostitution, venereal disease and feeble-mindedness. For an analysis of the rise of the deviant lesbian in US criminological discourse, see Estelle B. Freedman, "The Prison Lesbian: Race, Class, and the Construction of the Aggressive Female Homosexual, 1915-1965," *Feminist Studies*, 22 (Summer 1996), 397-423.

importantly, it signified delinquency in the broadest terms. Alexander launches her first chapter (subtitled, "Young Women and the Lure of City Streets") with the story of Nellie Roberts, a "menace to the community" in the eyes of the magistrate who committed her to a three-year sentence at Bedford Hills Reformatory for Women. Her offence? "'travelling about the city [of Port Jervis] entering saloons and committing acts of prostitution.'" Trouble began when she and her sister took to waving at automobile drivers from roadsides. The daring duo hitchhiked, loitered on the streets, and "'[hung] around'" with soldiers. The servicemen were not handed prison sentences; nor were the men who picked them up in their cars, or who took them to their rooms in hotels. In Alexander's opinion, Nellie's is a classic tale of "moral conflict, social inequality, and state-imposed strategies of behavioral control." (11) Like other teenaged girls from working-class families, Nellie suffered disproportionately as a result of the "double standard of morality that punished young women more often and more severely than men for similar sexual offenses ...." (189)

Chauncey agrees. Until the 1930s and 1940s, when state liquor licensing laws and civic morality campaigns forced gay culture further underground in New York City, the spotlight of morals policing focused most intently on heterosexual prostitution and promiscuity. New York's famous Committee of Fourteen, formed in 1900 to investigate urban vice, was far more interested in heterosexual prostitution than in homosexuality, although investigators sometimes made incidental discoveries of "fairies" in their rounds of bars, nightclubs, and dancehalls. But agents usually busied themselves by posing as customers for prostitutes, hoping to flush out evidence of illicit sex rings in the backrooms of saloons. The Committee of Fourteen, appalled at the number of drinking establishments where men and women could rent rooms by the half-hour, managed to close hundreds of these makeshift hotels, and to force over five hundred remaining hotels to admit men only. At the same time, charitable organizations and churches sponsored inexpensive sexually segregated housing schemes for men and women. So great were concerns about opportunities for male and female strangers to mingle in working-class districts (especially in rooming houses and transient hotels) that the YMCA built seven residential hotels in New York by 1920.

Ironically, the policing of heterosexual morals could produce opportunities for gay men to find partners and customers. In one instance, the Committee closed a saloon near the Brooklyn navy yard after producing evidence that it was used as a house of heterosexual assignation; a year later, when it re-opened to men only, it began to serve an alternative market. In 1917, the police raided the bar after receiving reports that "'male perverts'" entertained sailors in the saloon's back rooms. As Chauncey shows, YMCA hotels were colonized by significant numbers of gay men. One man revealed to a sexologist in the 1940s that the West Side Y was an "'elegant brothel for those who like to live in their ivory towers with Greek

gods. If you go to a shower there is always someone waiting to have an affair. It doesn't take long'.<sup>6</sup>

It was not only the white slavery panic and the ensuing campaign against brothels and houses of assignation that provided a cover for men to pursue men. One of Chauncey's arguments, derived from Durkheimian deviance theory, is that the visibility and flamboyance of "fairies" and "pansies" allowed wide latitude for "normal" men to pursue both male and female sexual partners in early 20th century New York. As he notes, "the centrality of the fairy to the popular representation of sexual abnormality allowed other men to engage in casual sexual relations with other men, with boys, and, above all, with the fairies themselves without imagining that they themselves were abnormal." Chauncey is careful to locate this sexual ideology within the specific context of its cultural milieu — "the highly aggressive and quintessentially 'masculine' subculture of young and usually unmarried sailors, common labourers, hoboes, and other transient workers, who were a ubiquitous presence in early-20th-century American cities." Otherwise heterosexual men who responded to "fairies" and paid for sex could maintain their sense of "normal" manhood because they acted out the widely recognized "male quest for pleasure and power." When men (particularly working-class and immigrant men) strolled the streets in search of transitory sexual pleasures, Chauncey argues that they responded as readily to the lures of male fairies as to female prostitutes if the latter were unavailable. (65-7)

The relative absence of anything like a spinster subculture in working-class milieux helps to explain the contrast between the liveliness of gay New York, and the risk-ridden world of working girls' city pleasures. There were real differences between the material and cultural resources at gay men's, versus working-class girls', disposal. Because huge numbers of young males were unmarried in this period of rapid, disproportionately male immigration (approximately 40 per cent of males over the age of 15 in New York), bachelor societies thrived in immigrant and working-class neighbourhoods, creating possibilities for homosexual contact. Italians in particular, and African Americans and Irish, to a lesser extent, did virtually all of their working and socializing with other men, whether or not they were single. Those without English language skills, excluded from lucrative salaried jobs, often found casual work along the docks, or on construction sites. After-work drinking and after-drinking sleeping usually kept men within a tight circle of all-male associates — a social world in which gay male desire could and did surface. Hostile to the restraints and responsibilities of marriage and domestic-

<sup>6</sup>Chauncey also provides a richly detailed portrait of how many of the city's bath houses, originally constructed as hygienic facilities, were infiltrated by men who turned these spaces into resorts for homosexual contact and voyeurism. See chapter 8, "The Social World of the Baths," 161, 156, 207-26.

ity, working-class men “performed gender” (in Judith Butler’s sense of the term)<sup>7</sup> by dominating and subordinating effeminate men, especially if women were not available as sexual partners (a common scenario in immigrant enclaves). As the World War I venereal disease panic inflamed traditional fears of disease-ridden female prostitutes, fairies persuaded bachelors that homosexual encounters were safer than contact with “loose” women. The variety of sexual activities and the multiplicity of identities which emerged in bachelor subcultures of early-20th New York do not fit neatly along the “simple polarities of ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual,’” Chauncey argues. Rather he shows that phallogentric street-corner culture made more meaningful distinctions between active seekers of sexual release, and those willing to be acted upon. (76, 80, 96)

This is where I began to question Chauncey’s otherwise persuasive argument. At numerous points in the book he states that prior to the 1930s and 1940s crackdown on gay sociability, unofficial forms of restraint, including family and neighbourhood pressures, were more effective than formal policing initiatives in forcing gay men to remain masked. But aside from the sailor incident cited above, he offers little evidence that gay bashing or more formal means of disapproval, such as excommunication, repressed homosexual lives. Bachelor culture appears in Chauncey’s rendition to have created more possibilities than perils for homosexuals. But surely the rouged fairy who purred, “Hey, sailor!” from an alleyway was as prone to male violence or abuse as were saucy girls like Nellie. He might also have been even less likely than a female prostitute to bother pressing charges. New York’s bachelor culture unquestionably incubated homosexuality, but more might have been made of its simultaneous power to suppress its outward expression.

Spinster subcultures did emerge in the same period, but they flourished in settlement houses and women’s colleges, not in jam factories or behind sales counters.<sup>8</sup> Cultural and material factors restricted the resources working-class single women could draw upon in their search for autonomy and pleasure in the city, even though rates of singlehood were high for girls and young women. For instance, eighty per cent of New York’s wage-earning women in 1900 were single; in Toronto, the number of single women was actually much larger than that of single men — as great a ratio as 121:100 in 1901.<sup>9</sup> So the numbers were there but

<sup>7</sup>Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York 1990), esp. 25. Butler applies Nietzsche’s argument (in *On the Genealogy of Morals*) that “‘there is no “being” behind doing, effecting, becoming ...”’ to her post-structuralist feminist analysis of gender: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender ... identity is performatively constituted by the ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”

<sup>8</sup>Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920* (Chicago 1985); Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality* (Boston 1985).

<sup>9</sup>Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 34; Carolyn Strange, *Toronto’s Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880-1930* (Toronto 1995), 217.



single women's subculture was not. Although neither Odem nor Alexander directly asks why this was the case (given that young men managed to create urban bachelor subcultures) they both provide evidence to explain why this was so.

Young women from working-class families congregated in cities because masters, manufacturers, and retailers valued them as workers who could do the work of men for the wages of children. While some young women, like Alexander's Nellie, drifted to cities without any plans for work or lodgings, the vast majority of single women were not "adrift" but living in some sort of family arrangement and contributing to the family wage.<sup>10</sup> As Lesley Woodcock Tentler and Elizabeth Ewen established in their earlier work, working-class parents (particularly in immigrant families which were often one pay packet shy of destitution) expected their daughters to hand over their weekly wages out of a sense of filial duty.<sup>11</sup> In one 1910 census survey of New York department store employees, 84 per cent of female employees reported that they exchanged their entire earnings for a few trolley tickets.<sup>12</sup> Parents also expected daughters who worked in service to contribute to the family wage. Aside from parental expectations, domestics (usually recent immigrants) also fell under the intrusive gaze of mistresses and masters. Live-in domestic work, unlike men's day labour on the docks, spelled tight supervision and expectations of respectability both on and off the job.

Working girls' economic disabilities, combined with greater family expectations of filial duty, made the establishment of a working-class spinster subculture virtually impossible in this period. If male day labourers' pay was dismal, single women workers' was wretched. Treating her garment factory mates to drinks would have cleaned out a seamstress's daily pay in a single round. The meagre wage-earning possibilities for most women, other than the elite handful of doctors, lawyers, journalists, and business executives, have been well-documented over the past two decades in histories of the working class and the labour movement. But that work is also relevant to the history of sexuality since the underpayment of female wage-earners reinforced the heterosexual imperative for women. It also explains why working-class lesbianism typically manifested itself in the form of cross-dressing, in which women, either as individuals or as partners of outwardly feminine women, dressed and acted as men in order to traverse the gender divisions in the labour and sex markets. Cora Anderson, a Native-American woman charged with "disorderly conduct" in 1914 for passing as a man, hit the nail on the head when

<sup>10</sup>In New York, close to 90 per cent of girls and young women who earned wages lived at home or with relatives. Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 52. Across the US, the average was approximately 80 per cent in 1900. Joanne Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago 1988), 4.

<sup>11</sup>Lesley Woodcock Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women: Industrial Work and Family Life in the United States, 1900-1930* (Oxford 1979); Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York 1985).

<sup>12</sup>Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women*, 92.

she dryly observed: "The world is made for man — for man alone ... is it any wonder that I determined to become a member of this privileged sex?"<sup>13</sup>

Where patches of working girls' culture did exist (typically in larger factories or department stores) it manifested itself not in female solidarity or single-sex socializing but in the torrid pursuit of male attention. According to scandalized religious authorities, as well as to sympathetic progressive settlement house workers, urban working girls were alarmingly boy crazy. Their inordinate devotion to cultivating heterosexual interest came to be labelled as 'the girl problem.' No such problem was identified among men of any class or sexual persuasion in the early twentieth century.

Working-class young women's economic dependency provided the material impetus for a culture of heterosexual expressiveness to emerge in big cities. Alexander and Odem write about girls (presumably those among the 20 per cent who refused to hand over their pay packets) who preferred to spend their money on finery designed to turn men's heads and to empty their pockets. Indulgent middle-class parents could afford to get by without their daughters' earnings, but working-class families, especially those headed by single mothers, depended on daughters, not only as financial contributors but as unpaid baby sitters, cooks, nursemaids, and seamstresses. Fed up with such demands, young women who spent their pay on frilly blouses could understandably drive working-class parents to distraction.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike sons who could also disappoint parents by failing to contribute their full wages, daughters upped the ante by jeopardizing their own, as well as their family's, reputation if they were merely suspected of heterosexual activity. Odem's chapter on "Generational Conflict in Working-class Families" illustrates this point nicely. Among immigrant groups with customs of arranged marriages, young women, like dance hall habitu  Patricia Alberti (who attended disreputable dance halls against her parents' wishes), sounded alarm bells. Many Jewish, Mexican, Italian, and Irish parents blamed their daughters' immorality on corrupt American culture, thereby reversing social welfare agents' characterization of immigrant family culture as the source of female sexual delinquency. Odem avoids the temptation to caricature immigrants as inordinately controlling. Native-born parents, both black and white, also "expected their daughters to behave in a modest,

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift*, 96. As Meyerowitz argues, women with inherited wealth and property had the material resources to establish "Boston marriages." A working-class woman, even an older one, was highly unlikely to earn enough to support another.

<sup>14</sup>On the importance of children's earnings in working-class households, and on the different expectations imposed on daughters, versus sons, see Bettina Bradbury, *Working Families: Age, Gender, and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* (Toronto 1993), esp. 147. The freedom to live away from home, Bradbury shows, "was less easily achieved by girls unless they found an unusually well-paying job, could board with relatives, or turned to prostitution."

respectable manner and to remain sexually chaste before marriage." Indeed, this is why so many (about half of Odem's sample, and slightly more than a fifth of Alexander's) of the young women ended up in juvenile courts and training schools: Odem notes that parents "linked the moral respectability of their daughters to the family's reputation and status ...." (165)

So how and why did young women, whose parents did not turn them in, end up in the grasp of the criminal justice system? For the period Alexander and Odem study the answer to the "why" question is straightforward: because they were heterosexually active outside of marriage, or because authorities suspected they were likely to engage in heterosexual acts. The "how" question requires closer analysis. Working-class women's sexual adventuresomeness inspired a sense of social disorder so profound that their bids for independence triggered a staggering array of punitive responses. Compared to the legal statutes which stigmatized gay male sexual activities (the felony offence of sodomy and the misdemeanour of disorderly conduct), legal responses to female heterosexual delinquency were both more extensive and more punitive in practice (although this would change by the mid-1920s and 1930s).

Chauncey's description of a raid on the Hotel Koenig illustrates the differences between the policing of gay men and heterosexually active women prior to the 1920s. A gathering place for prostitutes, pannies, coarse burlesque performers, gay men, and trade, the joint was raided in 1920, and 30 male customers were arrested for "degenerate disorderly conduct." Chauncey notes that their sentences (23 spent 10 days in jail, and 7 paid \$50 fines) were unusually severe for this sort of bust: most gay men arrested for "degeneracy" around the turn of the century were given only \$1 or \$2 fines. (171) Young working-class girls risked much more for doing much less. Alexander points out that a 1915 New York State vagrancy law, designed to combat street prostitution, facilitated arrests of young women who did little more than flirt: "The new law substituted the idea that women willing to engage in non-marital sex were a threat wherever they went and to whomever they came in contact. Moreover, it expanded the definition of prostitution to include sexual favours that were not rewarded with monetary payment."<sup>15</sup> Juvenile females arrested under these and similar statutes elsewhere usually suffered much longer than 10 days behind bars. Over half of the women sent to Bedford Hills and Albion between 1900 and 1930 served sentences of one to five years for various forms of solicitation and prostitution. Statistics are similar for Odem's sample: young teenaged girls remanded by the L.A. Juvenile Court spent an average of 3.7 years in the state reformatory.

<sup>15</sup> At the behest of the Committee of Fourteen the vagrancy law was amended to include: any person "who offers to commit prostitution, ... who loiters in or near any thoroughfare or public or private place for the purpose of enticing ... another to commit lewdness [or] unlawful sexual intercourse ... [or] who in any manner induces [another] to commit any such acts'," 55-56.

Age and race varied the risk factors for working-class women who fell under official scrutiny, whether or not they were actually "guilty" of heterosexual activity. Some women complained, (and several vice squad critics confirmed) that they were victims of police frame-ups and rackets. Black women had little chance of acquittal if white officers arrested them for soliciting or loitering when they had merely hailed cabs or talked to acquaintances on the street. Police also considered young working-class women who shared accommodations with other women to be suspicious, particularly if they were unemployed. And in 1923, state support increased for parents who were unable to control their sexually assertive or merely wilfully independent daughters. New York's "Wayward Minor Act" (which applied to young women aged 16 to 21) allowed alleged female delinquents to be incarcerated or placed on probation simply on their parents' word. The early-20th-century anti-prostitution campaign's punitive impact on young working-class women was considerable, Alexander concludes: "Not trusting sexually adventurous working girls' ability to steer clear of prostitution, indeed, unable to distinguish between casual consensual sex and prostitution, New York's legal system worked to uncover and punish sexual desire." (57, 52-3, 65)

In Odem's estimation it was not that the "legal system" could not distinguish between non-commercial and commercial heterosexual activities; rather, legal actors did not consider the distinction to be relevant. She sets up her book by reviewing the campaign to raise the age of consent for females, and by showing how easily the desire to protect young women metastasized into imperatives of control. Inmates certainly believed that incarceration was punishment. As one El Retiro School for Girls inmate proclaimed: "I think the cause of unhappiness today and a lot of the girls today is the Juvenile Court. In a lot of cases it isn't justice." By seeking and gaining considerable state support for their reform activities, white feminists and clubwomen sponsored juvenile courts, women's reformatories and training schools, female probation officers, and women police officers. Their success in carving out professional and political niches for themselves left them "implicated in repressive and discriminatory policies directed against female offenders." Ironically, racist barriers to African American women's participation in state institutions, combined with black women's deep suspicion of a criminal justice system which utterly failed to protect black victims (both male and female), meant that black families were more likely to turn to charitable community resources, such as homes for wayward girls, before they sought out the courts and the police.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup>African American clubwomen expanded the resources available to help maintain and restore young women's sexual respectability. They established networks of residences, vocational registers, cafeterias, social clubs, travellers' aid societies, private reformatories and maternity homes. Odem notes that only seven reformatories for black female youths were established by the mid-1920s; in comparison, 23 state-funded institutions for white women were established between 1910 and 1920, when the girl problem seemed most critical. (149, 120-1, 116)

When vice squad officers raided gay cabarets, they did not haul in "pansies" to protect their morals, but this is precisely what happened when women police officers came across young women spooning with men on park benches, or dancing a little too closely. Promoted as "protective-preventive" police work, this form of morals policing often set into motion a variety of coercive mechanisms, from probation to incarceration.<sup>17</sup> The transformation of protection into punishment accelerated in World War I, when the Commission on Training Camp Activities enlisted women police and probation officers to round up suspected female v.d. carriers. Massive federal resources were thrown behind the effort between 1918 and 1920, when an estimated 30,000 women and girls "suspected of illicit activity, prostitution, or venereal disease" were arrested, and over half were institutionalized. As was the case with the male spooners and dance partners, soldiers and male v.d. carriers were not incarcerated as a matter of policy (most received medical treatment as outpatients). As Odem shows, the few heterosexual males who faced potentially serious charges were those accused by parents of having sex with underage daughters. Still, older men were the only ones likely to end up serving prison sentences: young men were usually given a lecture and placed on probation, while girls were frequently detained for months "for their own good."<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the girl problem and the gay world emerged simultaneously, often in the same urban zones. Yet they do not share the same history. Considered together, these three books confirm that "the history of sexuality" is crude short form for the interpretation of the sexual past. The ways in which sexuality is expressed (indeed, what is recognized as sex), as well as the means by which it is policed vary not only over time but within historical periods. Race, ethnicity, class, and gender are only the most obvious markers which historians have examined to identify sexual subgroups with distinct histories. Historians of sexuality have also established that generalizing about queer history is problematic, not only because of the differences between lesbians' and gay men's pasts, but because of the contentiousness of terminology devised to describe both practice and identity.<sup>19</sup> If historians apply labels of homosexuality, bisexuality, or heterosexuality casually, they cannot be

<sup>17</sup>For a recent exploration of similar patterns of protection and policing, see Tamara Meyers, "Criminal Women and Bad Girls: Regulation and Punishment in Montreal, 1890-1930," PhD dissertation, McGill University, 1996.

<sup>18</sup>In Odem's 1920 sample, only 9 per cent of juvenile boys charged with statutory rape ended up being incarcerated or sent to foster homes. As one court official commented in 1914: "With a youth up to the early twenties a slip of this kind can be condoned." The maximum penalty for statutory rape in California was 50 years. (75, 78)

<sup>19</sup>This challenge is addressed in several essays which appear in Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin, eds., *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York 1993). The absence of the terms "bi-sexual" and "trans-gendered" in the title suggest that the collection is already dated.

sure that they will stick: historical actors' sexual sensibilities are far too complex for clumsy taxonomical exercises.<sup>20</sup>

Which brings me to the question of methodology. If one intends to write about subjectivity — in this case, the sexual identities of past persons — which sources and interpretive tactics are most appropriate? The earliest historians of sexuality relied on pronouncements from clerical, legal, and religious authorities to reconstruct the history of sexuality. Predictably, disparaging or hostile comments were interpreted as mirrors for dismal lives of secrecy, denial, and self-hatred. But movements in social history forced a re-examination of this story. By the mid-1980s, historians of the so-called oppressed were dissatisfied with picturing women, the working class, Aboriginal peoples, slaves, and so forth, as helpless victims of the powerful. The problem which historians of all stripes now face, and which each of these authors tackles, is this: how to remain cognizant of oppression while recognizing agency and the possibility of oppositional or affirmative identities? Working one's way out of this quandary requires more than the kind of fancy jargon typical of post-colonial studies. Empirically grounded work must excavate evidence and present it compellingly to substantiate arguments about people's self-perceptions. This banal point is worth making because historians of sexuality face bigger problems than most. As Judith Allen argues, "the modern notion of sexual intimacy is predicated upon secrecy — others do not see and know. The acts and relations are hidden."<sup>21</sup>

In my estimation, it is best to err on the side of caution when examining the inner lives of historical subjects, especially those whom we discover through records created against their wishes.<sup>22</sup> For this reason, Alexander's and Odem's portraits of bad girls' motivations are not always convincing, although they frequently offer appealing alternatives to the depressing pictures of misfortune and foolhardiness which could otherwise be drawn from prison, police, and court records. Odem's argument is that "the image of female entrapment [in statutory rape laws] ... served mainly to obscure the actual lived experiences of young working-class women and girls." (68) Certainly this is true, but does she have evidence, in the form of freely-offered accounts of their lives, to support this claim? On the contrary, she relies on court transcripts to argue that heterosexual activity was, for most young women, "an assertion of social autonomy in the face of

<sup>20</sup> A small army of Canadian graduate students is leading the movement to make the writing of sex history more sophisticated. The recent establishment of the Canadian Committee on the History of Sexuality, spearheaded by Elise Chenier, Karen Duder, and Steven Maynard, attests to their profound contribution to what has heretofore been an arid zone in Canadian historiography.

<sup>21</sup> Judith Allen, *Sex and Secrets: Crimes Involving Australian Women Since 1880* (Melbourne 1990), 1.

<sup>22</sup> I explore this point in "Casting Light on Women in the Shadow of Law," in Elsbeth Cameron and Janice Dickin, eds., *Great Dames* (Toronto 1997), forthcoming.

parental restrictions and confining moral codes." (137) Alexander's bad girls were even more enterprising: they "rejected the behavioral conventions and moral values of the nineteenth century, substituting self assertion and conspicuous heterosexuality for deference and sexual purity." More than that, they "tried to reinvent female adolescence." (1) Self-consciously? I doubt it. The problem in both cases is not so much incredible readings of the records, or inattention to imagined stashes of working-class women's self-composed records; rather it is a question of interpreting at times over-burdening official records of "the girl problem."

Chauncey too wants to rescue his masked men from the obscurity of the historical closet. The difference is that his sources allow him to stack up a weightier analysis of subjectivity and identity, or more accurately, subjectivities and identities. Had he relied solely on police records of bath house raids or court records of sodomy trials, he would likely have come up with a much gloomier image of the gay world. His sources include unpublished memoirs, journals, and underground publications; unofficial city guides; contemporary studies of gay men; diaries and letters of the obscure and the famous (such as Tennessee Williams). Of course, the contrast between Chauncey's treasure trove and Odem and Alexander's institutional records springs from the wide class range of men who dipped in and out of the gay world: that Chauncey's acknowledgements include his thanks to several literary executors speaks volumes. But Chauncey's rich sources are not simply a windfall, since he generated his own in the form of over 75 interviews with gay men and lawyers who handled "gay-related cases." "Early in my research it became clear that oral histories would be the single most important source of evidence concerning the internal working of the gay world," he comments in his useful "Note on Sources." (370) Indeed, he would not have come up with his informal taxonomy of fairies, wolves, pansies, trade (rough and otherwise), normals, queers and perverts had he not heard gay men use such terms themselves. At several points in the book (particularly when he recounts the sexual culture of YMCA's, cafeterias, and bath houses) his interviewees may prompt him to drift into "a poetics of nostalgia."<sup>23</sup> Yet Chauncey is well aware that "no source is 'unfiltered'," including oral testimony. (370)

One of Chauncey's principal arguments is that it is wrong to track the history of sexuality, and sexual identity in particular, through the writings of sexologists, psychiatrists, doctors, and other 'experts.' Certainly women's historians have stopped relying exclusively on the words of misogynistic legislators and clerics to reconstruct women's lives. Historians proceed like rivers, however: we tend to surge along the easiest courses, propelled by the largest bodies of records we can

<sup>23</sup>For an excellent exposition of oral history's methodological challenges, see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York 1995), 309-11. For a path breaking study of lesbian history based on oral histories, see Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York 1993).

find. Glancing through New York historians' bibliographies is enough to make Canadian historians of sexuality drool with envy.<sup>24</sup> Yet we know that people have had sexual lives beyond the limits of the five boroughs. The challenge is to come up with questions which our evidence can bear, and methodologies which are appropriate for the sources we unearth, whether they be scandal sheets or family photos. Historians of sexuality, following in the footsteps of labour and feminist historians, are well aware that "the recording of history is both the outcome of struggle and the locus of struggle itself."<sup>25</sup> Thus it is fair to suggest that each of the authors under review will not regard his or her book as the last words on a subject about which we still know so little.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Consider, for instance, Timothy Gilfoyle's *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York 1992). The book is stuffed with pictures of brothels and saloons; investigative details from vice surveys and inquiries into police corruption abound; excerpts from diaries, letters, memoirs, novels, plays, and popular song appear throughout. So when New York historians like Chauncey predict that graduate students and local historians studying Midwestern cities, small towns and rural areas, and "communities of colour" will "ultimately revise and make more complicated the periodizations based so far on national studies of coastal cities," they will have much less to work with. (365)

<sup>25</sup>McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 310.

<sup>26</sup>Chauncey was already working on a companion volume (examining the gay world in post 1940 New York) before *Gay New York* was completed.



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