Heterosexuality is old as procreation, ancient as the lust of Eve and Adam. That first lady and gentleman, we assume, perceived themselves, behaved, and felt just like today’s heterosexuals. We suppose that heterosexuality is unchanging, universal, essential: ahistorical.

Contrary to that common sense conjecture, the concept of heterosexuality is only one particular historical way of perceiving, categorizing, and imagining the social relations of the sexes. Not ancient at all, the idea of heterosexuality is a modern invention, dating to the late nineteenth century. The heterosexual belief, with its metaphysical claim to eternity, has a particular, pivotal place in the social universe of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries that it did not inhabit earlier. This essay traces the historical process by which the heterosexual idea was created as ahistorical and taken-for-granted.

The first part of this essay focuses on the history of heterosexuality (and a complementary homosexuality) as words and ideas—as ideology recorded in a variety of sources, medical journals and books, works on sexual theory, sexual and gender advice literature, sexual surveys, dictionaries, a play, a movie, a Broadway show song, fiction, and *The New York Times.*

‡ Advancing beyond heterosexuality as idea, the last part of this essay argues that the rise of the hetero notion is associated with the development of a historically-specific heterosexual identity, role, psychology, behavior, and institution. Since heterosexuality didn’t exist, it had to be invented.

Considering the popularity of the heterosexual idea, one imagines that tracing the notion’s history would have tempted many eager scholar-beavers. The importance of analyzing the dominant term of the dominant sexual ideology seems obvious. But heterosexuality has been the

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† ©1990 by Jonathan Ned Katz. I’m grateful to Lisa Duggan, Judith Levine, Sharon Thompson, Carole S. Vance, and Jeffrey Weeks for comments on a recent version of this manuscript, and to Manfred Herzer and his editor, John DeCecico, for sharing, prepublication, Herzer’s most recent research on Kertbeny. I’m also indebted to John Gagnon, Philip Greven, and Catharine R. Stimpson for bravely supporting my (unsuccessful) attempts to fund research for a full-length study of heterosexual history.
‡ Research in *The Times*, though of course only one inconclusive record, does provide a single, continuous source on the changing historical definitions of heterosexuality for the diverse national and international culture of the middle class.
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idea whose time has not come. The role of the universal heterosexual hypothesis as prop to the dominant mode of sexual organization has determined its not-so-benign scholarly neglect.

By not studying the heterosexual idea in history, analysts of sex, gay and straight, have continued to privilege the “normal” and “natural” at the expense of the “abnormal” and “unnatural.” Such privileging of the norm accedes to its domination, protecting it from questions. By making the normal the object of a thoroughgoing historical study we simultaneously pursue a pure truth and a sex-radical and subversive goal: we upset basic preconceptions. We discover that the heterosexual, the normal, and the natural have a history of changing definitions. Studying the history of the term challenges its power.

Contrary to our usual assumption, past Americans and other peoples named, perceived, and socially organized the bodies, lusts, and intercourse of the sexes in ways radically different from the way we do. If we care to understand this vast past sexual diversity, we need to stop promiscuously projecting our own hetero and homo arrangement. Though lip-service is often paid to the distorting, ethnocentric effect of such conceptual imperialism, the category heterosexuality continues to be applied uncritically as a universal analytical tool. Recognizing the time-bound and culturally-specific character of the heterosexual category can help us begin to work toward a thoroughly historical view of sex.

This historical approach to the analysis of heterosexuality builds on and extends recent work by feminists on the making of womanhood and manhood, and recent work by gay and lesbian liberationists on the historical construction of homosexuality. Contrary to ivory tower supposition, work on the social construction of sex did not start with Michel Foucault. But writers on homosexual history have ironically perpetuated a traditional error of the anti–homosexualists: the exclusive focus on homosexuality. While that sex-love has been subjected to intense historical questioning, heterosexuality has been allowed to go its merry way untouched by basic doubt as to its own timelessness. Historical study of heterosexuality is needed to complete the historical study of its dialectical counterpart, homosexuality.

Though this article contests the universality of a heterosexual identity, experience, and behavior, the legitimacy of that identification, emotion, and activity are certainly not in question. The social construction of heterosexuality and homosexuality implies nothing at all about their reality, profundity, and importance. The value of any eros is independent of its origin.

This is an exploratory first pass at an historically-specific heterosexual history—a call for a complete rethinking and total historicization of heterosexuality, and for new research based on that radical reviewing. So, come with me on a journey into the sexual past to observe and ponder the invention of heterosexuality.

**Before heterosexuality: early Victorian True Love, 1820–1860**

In the early nineteenth century United States, from about 1820 to 1860, the heterosexual did not exist. Middle-class white Americans idealized a True Womanhood, True Manhood, and True Love, all characterized by “purity”—the freedom from sensuality. Presented mainly in literary and religious texts, this True Love was a fine romance with no lascivious kisses. This ideal contrasts strikingly with late-nineteenth and twentieth century American incitements to a hetero sex.*

* Some historians have recently told us to revise our idea of sexless Victorians: their experience and even their ideology, it is said, were more erotic than we previously thought. Despite the revisionists, I argue that “purity” was indeed the dominant early Victorian, white, middle-class standard. For the debate on Victorian sexuality see John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. xii.
Early Victorian True Love was only realized within the mode of proper procreation, marriage, the legal organization for producing a new set of correctly gendered women and men. Proper womanhood, manhood, and progeny—not a normal male-female eros—was the main product of this mode of engendering and of human reproduction.

The actors in this sexual economy were identified as manly men and womanly women and as procreators, not specifically as erotic beings or heterosexuals. Eros did not constitute the core of a heterosexual identity that inhered, democratically, in both men and women. True Women were defined by their distance from lust. True Men, though thought to live closer to carnality, and in less control of it, aspired to the same freedom from concupiscence.

Legitimate natural desire was for procreation and a proper manhood or womanhood; no heteroerotic desire was thought to be directed exclusively and naturally toward the other sex; lust in men was roving. The human body was thought of as a means towards procreation and production; penis and vagina were instruments of reproduction, not of pleasure. Human energy, thought of as a closed and severely limited system, was to be used in producing children and in work, not wasted in libidinous pleasures.

The location of all this engendering and procreative labor was the sacred sanctum of early Victorian True Love, the home of the True Woman and True Man—a temple of purity threatened from within by the monster masturbator, an archetypal early Victorian cult figure of illicit lust. The home of True Love was a castle far removed from the erotic exotic ghetto inhabited most notoriously then by the prostitute, another archetypal Victorian erotic monster. Between 1820 and 1860, only rarely was reference made to those other illicit erotic figures, the “sodomite” and “sapphist”—terms with no antonyms. State sodomy laws defined a particular, obscure act, referred to in a limited legalese, not a criminal, medical, or psychological type of person. Because the social organization of gender was dominant, not the mode of pleasure, the term “invert” was one of the early medical names for deviants from True Womanhood and True Manhood.

Because early Victorian True Love was not lust-linked, sex-reformers of the late Victorian era and early twentieth century began to refer to a new, hyphenated “sex-love.” Their coinage was designed specifically to distinguish the new heteroerotic amour from the old lust-free True Love.

Late Victorian sex-love: 1860–1892

Heterosexuality and “homosexuality” did not appear out of the blue in the 1890s. These two eroticisms were in the making from the 1860s on. In late Victorian America and in Germany, from about 1860 to 1892, our modern idea of an eroticized universe began to develop, and the experience of a heterolust began to be widely documented and named. Playing a pioneering role in the titling and theorizing of sexual normalcy we may be surprised to find the early theorists and defenders of man-man love.

At the start of this era, one eloquent, embattled exponent of the new male-female lustiness was Walt Whitman, whose third edition of *Leaves of Grass*, published in 1860, first included a section, “Children of Adam,” frankly evoking the sexual-procreational intercourse of men and women. As a pioneering heterosex radical, Whitman broke with the Victorian idea that women’s passion for motherhood included no eros. Whitman’s women participated lustily and equally with men in the act of conceiving robust babies. Another of Whitman’s new sections, “Calamus,” vividly detailed acts of erotic communion between men. Whitman named and evoked hot “amative” relations between men and women, and sizzling “adhesive” intimacies between men.
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as an attempt to position male-female and male-male eroticisms together as a natural, “healthy” division of human erotic responses. Though now perhaps better known as man-lover, Whitman was also the trailblazer of a previously silent and vilified male-female lust.6

At about the same time, in 1863, in Germany, another pioneer defender of man–man love, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, was also producing new sexual names to defend the love of the man who loved men, the “Uarning,” for the True Man. (His theory later included “women with a masculine love-drive”: women who loved women.) The Uarning’s sex-love for a True Man, Ulrichs argued, was as natural as the “Dioning-love” of True Man and True Woman. In Ulrichs’ eroticized update of the early Victorian True Man prototype, the real man possessed a male body and the male’s sex-love for women. The Uarning, as a Non–True Man (the True Man’s opposite, but not a pervert), possessed a male body and the female’s sex-love for a male. The Victorian concept of the “true,” applied to women, men, and love, linked sex–biology with sex–psychology, so that feelings were thought of as female or male in exactly the same sense as penis or clitoris: anatomy equalled psychology. The True Love of True Man and Woman was a physical appurtenance like the other private parts.7

A few years later in Germany, in a letter of May 6, 1868 to Ulrichs, another early sodomy-law reformer, Karl Maria Kertbeny, is first known to have privately used two new terms coined by him: “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality”—the debut of the modern lingo! Kertbeny’s “Heterosexualität” referred to a strong lust drive toward “opposite sex” intercourse (associated with numbers of morally reprehensible acts). It had the same sense as another of his new terms, “Normalsexualität.” Kertbeny’s term homosexual was first used publicly in an 1869 appeal for sodomy-law reform. His term heterosexual was first used publicly in Germany, in 1880, in a defense of homosexuality published as the work of “Dr. M”.8 Kertbeny’s coinage of the term heterosexual in the service of homosexual emancipation is considering the term’s later use—one of sex history’s grand ironies.

Heterosexual next made its public appearance in 1889, in the fourth German edition of Dr. Richard Krafft–Ebing’s Psychopathia Sexualis, where it was distinguished from homosexual.9 The homosexual emancipationist’s word homosexual was appropriated by Krafft–Ebing and other late Victorian German medical men (and later, by American doctors) as these Dr. Frankensteins’ way of naming, condemning, and asserting their own right to regulate a group of homoerotic creatures just then emerging into sight in the bars, dance halls, and streets of their countries’ larger cities.

But naming and specifying the sex deviant simultaneously delimited a sex norm—the new heterosexuality. The medical moralists’ interest in a few powerless perverts would help to ensure the conformity of the majority to a new sex ethic, one that was congruent with the pursuit of consumer happiness and capitalist profit.

In the late nineteenth-century United States, several social factors converged to cause the eroticizing of consciousness, behavior, emotion, and identity that became typical of the twentieth-century Western middle class. The transformation of the family from producer to consumer unit resulted in a change in family members’ relation to their own bodies; from being an instrument primarily of work, the human body was integrated into a new economy, and began more commonly to be perceived as a means of consumption and pleasure. Historical work has recently begun on how the biological human body is differently integrated into changing modes of production, procreation, engendering, and pleasure so as to alter radically the identity, activity, and experience of that body.10

The growth of a consumer economy also fostered a new pleasure ethic. This imperative challenged the early Victorian work ethic, finally helping to usher in a major transformation of values. While the early Victorian work ethic had touted the value of economic production, that
era’s procreation ethic had extolled the virtues of human reproduction. In contrast, the late Victorian economic ethic hawked the pleasures of consuming, while its sex ethic praised an erotic pleasure principle for men and even for women.

In the late nineteenth century, the erotic became the raw material for a new consumer culture. Newspapers, books, plays, and films touching on sex, “normal” and “abnormal,” became available for a price. Restaurants, bars, and baths opened, catering to sexual consumers with cash. Late Victorian entrepreneurs of desire incited the proliferation of a new eroticism, a commoditized culture of pleasure.

In these same years, the rise in power and prestige of medical doctors allowed these upwardly mobile professionals to prescribe a healthy new sexuality. Medical men, in the name of science, defined a new ideal of male–female relationships that included, in women as well as men, an essential, necessary, normal eroticism. Doctors, who had earlier named and judged the sex-enjoying woman a “nymphomaniac,” now began to label women’s lack of sexual pleasure a mental disturbance, speaking critically, for example, of female “frigidity” and “anesthesia.”*

By the 1880s, the rise of doctors as a professional group fostered the rise of a new medical model of Normal Love, replete with sexuality. The new Normal Woman and Man were endowed with a healthy libido. The new theory of Normal Love was the modern medical alternative to the old Cult of True Love. The doctors prescribed a new sexual ethic as if it were a morally neutral, medical description of health. The creation of the new Normal Sexual had its counterpart in the invention of the late Victorian Sexual Pervert. The attention paid the sexual abnormal created a need to name the sexual normal, the better to distinguish the average him and her from the deviant it.

Heterosexuality: the first years, 1892–1900

In the periodization of heterosexuality American history suggested here, the years 1892 to 1900 represent “The First Years” of the heterosexual epoch, eight key years in which the idea of the heterosexual and homosexual were initially and tentatively formulated by US doctors. The earliest-known American use of the word “heterosexual” occurs in a medical journal article by Dr. James G. Kiernan of Chicago, read before the city’s medical society on March 7, 1892 and published that May—portentous dates in sexual history.11 But Dr. Kiernan’s heterosexuals were definitely not exemplars of normality. Heterosexuals, said Kiernan, were defined by a mental condition, “psychical hermaphroditism.” Its symptoms were “inclinations to both sexes.” These heterodox sexuals also betrayed inclinations “to abnormal methods of gratification,” that is, techniques to insure pleasure without procreation. Dr. Kiernan’s heterogeneous sexuals did demonstrate “traces of the normal sexual appetite” (a touch of procreative desire). Kiernan’s normal sexuals were implicitly defined by a monolithic other-sex inclination and procreative aim. Significantly, they still lacked a name.

Dr. Kiernan’s article of 1892 also included one of the earliest known uses of the word homosexual in American English. Kiernan defined “Pure homosexuals” as persons whose “general mental state is that of the opposite sex.” Kiernan thus defined homosexuals by their deviance from a gender norm. His heterosexuals displayed a double deviance from both gender and procreative norms.

* This reference to females reminds us that the invention of heterosexuality had vastly different impacts on the histories of women and men. It also differed in its impact on lesbians and heterosexual women, homosexual and heterosexual men, the middle class and working class, and on different religious, racial, national, and geographic groups.
Though Kiernan used the new words heterosexual and homosexual, an old procreative standard and a new gender norm coexisted uneasily in his thought. His word heterosexual defined a mixed person and compound urge, abnormal because they wantonly included procreative and non-procreative objectives, as well as same-sex and different-sex attractions.

That same year, 1892, Dr. Krafft-Ebing’s influential *Psychopathia Sexualis* was first translated and published in the United States. But Kiernan and Krafft-Ebing by no means agreed on the definition of the heterosexual. In Krafft-Ebing’s book, “hetero-sexual” was used unambiguously in the modern sense to refer to an erotic feeling for a different sex. “Homo-sexual” referred unambiguously to an erotic feeling for a “same sex.” In Krafft-Ebing’s volume, unlike Kiernan’s article, heterosexual and homosexual were clearly distinguished from a third category, a “psychosexual hermaphroditism,” defined by impulses toward both sexes.

Krafft-Ebing hypothesized an inborn “sexual instinct” for relations with the “opposite sex,” the inherent “purpose” of which was to foster procreation. Krafft-Ebing’s erotic drive was still a reproductive instinct. But the doctor’s clear focus on a different-sex versus same-sex sexuality constituted a historic, epochal move from an absolute procreative standard of normality toward a new norm. His definition of heterosexuality as other-sex attraction provided the basis for a revolutionary, modern break with a centuries-old procreative standard.

It is difficult to overstress the importance of that new way of categorizing. The German’s mode of labeling was radical in referring to the biological sex, masculinity or femininity, and the pleasure of actors (along with the procreative purpose of acts). Krafft-Ebing’s heterosexual offered the modern world a new norm that came to dominate our idea of the sexual universe, helping to change it from a mode of human reproduction and engendering to a mode of pleasure. The heterosexual category provided the basis for a move from a production-oriented, procreative imperative to a consumerist pleasure principle—an institutionalized pursuit of happiness.

Despite the clarity of Krafft-Ebing’s heterosexual/homosexual distinction, Dr. Kiernan was not the only American medical writer to have difficulty understanding the hetero/homo pair as a normal/pervert duo. Perceived as ambivalent procreator, the heterosexual did not at first exemplify the quintessence of the normal. In 1893, for example, Dr. Charles Hughes assured his fellow medical men that, by medical treatment (hypnosis and sometimes surgery!), the mind and feelings could be “turned back into normal channels, the homo and hetero sexual changed into beings of natural erotic inclination, with normal impulsions.” The hetero, as person of mixed, procreative and nonprocreative, disposition, still stood with the nonprocreative homo as abnormal characters in the late nineteenth-century pantheon of sexual perverts.

But Krafft-Ebing’s clear hetero/homo opposition began to catch on—although at first only in medical journals. By 1895, for example, one of these late Victorian purveyors of explicit sex published a translation from the French of an article by Marc-André Raffalovich. Here, as in Krafft-Ebing’s work, the terms heterosexual and homosexual referred consistently to different-sex/same-sex eroticisms—two, symmetrical, polarized erotic desires, mental states, and persons—the present dominant usage. As late as 1901, however, *Dorland’s Medical Dictionary*, published in Philadelphia, still defined “Heterosexuality” as “Abnormal or perverted appetite toward the opposite sex.”

Only gradually did doctors agree that heterosexual referred to a normal, “other-sex” eros. This new standard-model heterosex provided the pivotal term for the modern regularization of eros that paralleled similar attempts to standardize masculinity and femininity, intelligence, and manufacturing. The idea of heterosexuality as the master sex from which all others deviated was (like the idea of the master race) deeply authoritarian. The doctors’ normalization of a sex that was hetero proclaimed a new heterosexual separatism—an erotic apartheid that forcefully segregated the sex normals from the sex perverts. The new, strict boundaries made the emerging
erotic world less polymorphous—safer for sex normals. However, the idea of such creatures as heterosexuals and homosexuals emerged from the narrow world of medicine to become a commonly accepted notion only in the early twentieth century. In 1901, in the comprehensive Oxford English Dictionary, "heterosexual" and "homosexual" had not yet made it.

The distribution of the heterosexual mystique: 1900–1930

In the early years of this heterosexual century the tentative hetero hypothesis was stabilized, fixed, and widely distributed as the ruling sexual orthodoxy: The Heterosexual Mystique. Starting among pleasure-affirming urban working-class youths, southern blacks, and Greenwich-Village bohemians as defensive subculture, heterosex soon triumphed as dominant culture. In its earliest version, the twentieth-century heterosexual imperative usually continued to associate heterosexuality with a supposed human "need," "drive," or "instinct" for propagation, a procreant urge linked inexorably with carnal lust as it had not been earlier. In the early twentieth century, the falling birth rate, rising divorce rate, and "war of the sexes" of the middle class were matters of increasing public concern. Giving vent to heteroerotic emotions was thus praised as enhancing baby-making capacity, marital intimacy, and family stability. (Only many years later, in the mid–1960s, would heteroeroticism be distinguished completely, in practice and theory, from procreativity and male-female pleasure sex justified in its own name.)

The first part of the new sex norm—hetero—referred to a basic gender divergence. The "oppositeness" of the sexes was alleged to be the basis for a universal, normal, erotic attraction between males and females. The stress on the sexes' "oppositeness," which harked back to the early nineteenth century, by no means simply registered biological differences of females and males. The early twentieth-century focus on physiological and gender dimorphism reflected the deep anxieties of men about the shifting work, social roles, and power of men over women, and about the ideals of womanhood and manhood. That gender anxiety is documented, for example, in 1897, in The New York Times’ publication of the Reverend Charles Parkhurst's diatribe against female "andromaniacs," the preacher's derogatory, scientific-sounding name for women who tried to "minimize distinctions by which manhood and womanhood are differentiated." The stress on gender difference was a conservative response to the changing social-sexual division of activity and feeling which gave rise to the independent "New Woman" of the 1880s and eroti-cized “Flapper” of the 1920s.

The second part of the new hetero norm referred positively to sexuality. That novel upbeat focus on the hedonistic possibilities of male-female conjunctions also reflected a social transformation—a revaluing of pleasure and procreation, consumption and work in commercial, capitalist society. The democratic attribution of a normal lust to human females (as well as males) served to authorize women's enjoyment of their own bodies and began to undermine the early Victorian idea of the pure True Woman—a sex-affirmative action still part of women's struggle. The twentieth-century Erotic Woman also undercut nineteenth-century feminist assertion of women's moral superiority, cast suspicions of lust on women's passionate romantic friendships with women, and asserted the presence of a menacing female monster, "the lesbian." A major medical manufacturer of the heterosexual mystique was Dr. Havelock Ellis, whose multi-volume Studies in the Psychology of Sex began to be published in Philadelphia in 1901. The other early, major hetero-mystique maker was Dr. Sigmund Freud, whose Three Contributions to the Sexual Theory was first published in New York in 1910. In this work, Freud presented heterosex as a familial imposition upon an originally roving eros. Freud's 1910 version of the normal developmental process involved fantasies of incest and parent and sibling murder—high melodrama, to say the least. Despite its deeply troubled origins,
heterosexuality was finally defined by Freud’s arbitrary, authoritarian assertion as “maturity.” Homosex was similarly defined as the “fixated,” “immature” resolution of the same family sex play. In the name of Freud and popular psychology, heterosexuality would be proclaimed throughout the land as, simply, perfection.

In conscious opposition to Freud, Ellis claimed that heterosexuality and homosexuality were inborn; he nervously rejected the idea that the species might depend for its continued reproduction on such an open-ended intrafamily war and fallible developmental process as that proposed by Freud. Despite their argument over the physiological versus family origins of heterosex, both doctors were major publicists of the different-sex erotic among a “progressive” public.

From about 1900 on through the 1920s, a mixed bag of novelists, playwrights, sex educators, and profit-seeking publishers and play producers struggled to establish the legal right to discuss and distribute a new commodity, the explicit (for its time) heterosexual drama, novel, and advice book. The writers included James Branch Cabell, Theodore Dreiser, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Elinor Glyn, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, and sex educators like Mary Ware Dennett.

In the perspective of heterosexual history, this early twentieth century struggle for the more explicit depiction of an “opposite-sex” eros appears in a curious new light. Ironically, we find sex-conservatives, the social-purity advocates of censorship and repression, fighting against the depiction not just of sexual perversity but also of the new normal heterosexuality. That a more open depiction of normal sex had to be defended against forces of propriety confirms the claim that heterosexuality’s predecessor, Victorian True Love, had included no legitimate eros.

Before 1930 in the United States, heterosexuality was still fighting an uphill battle. As late as 1929, a federal court in Brooklyn found Mary Ware Dennett, author of a 21-page sex education pamphlet for young people, guilty of mailing this obscene essay. Dennett’s pamphlet criticized other sex-education materials for not including a “frank, unashamed declaration that the climax of sex emotion is an unsurpassed joy, something which rightly belongs to every normal human being” after they fell in love and married. If it seemed “distasteful” that the sex organs were “so near . . . our ‘sewerage system,’” Dennett assured America’s youth that this offensive positioning of parts was probably protective (“At any rate, there they are, and our duty is . . . to take mighty good care of them.”). The word heterosexual did not appear.

**The heterosexual steps out: 1930–1945**

In 1930, in *The New York Times*, heterosexuality first became a love that dared to speak its name. On April 30th of that year, the word “heterosexual” is first known to have appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*. There, a critic described the subject of André Gide’s *The Immoralist* proceeding “from a heterosexual liaison to a homosexual one.” The ability to slip between sexual categories was referred to casually as a rather unremarkable aspect of human possibility. This is also the first known reference by *The Times* to the new hetero/homo dyad.

The following month the second reference to the hetero/homo dyad appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, in a comment on Floyd Dell’s *Love in the Machine Age*. This work revealed a prominent antipuritan of the 1930s using the dire threat of homosexuality as his rationale for greater heterosexual freedom. *The Times* quoted Dell’s warning that current abnormal social conditions kept the young dependent on their parents, causing “infantilism, prostitution and homosexuality.” Also quoted was Dell’s attack on the “inculcation of purity” that “breeds distrust of the opposite sex.” Young people, Dell said, should be “permitted to develop normally to heterosexual adulthood.” “But,” *The Times* reviewer emphasized, “such a state already exists, here and now.” And so it did. Heterosexuality, a new gender-sex category, had been distributed
from the narrow, rarified realm of a few doctors to become a nationally, even internationally cited aspect of middle-class life. In 1933, in an English novel published in the United States, the colloquial abbreviation “hetero” is first known to have made its published appearance. In Eileen A. Robertson’s Ordinary Families a character declared: “The odd thing about me is that . . . I should be so purely ‘hetero’ in spite of lack of opportunity.” Quote marks around that ‘hetero’ suggest the newness of the colloquialism. But the slang usage suggests that people were now on quite familiar terms with the hetero on both sides of the Atlantic.

By December 1940, when the risque musical Pal Joey opened on Broadway, a song titled “Zip” satirized the striptease artist Gypsy Rose Lee, who was quoted: “I don’t like a deep contralto, Or a man whose voice is alto, Zip, I’m a heterosexual.” That lyric registered the historically new, self-conscious, public proclamation of a heterosexual identity.

Heterosexual hegemony: 1945–1965

The “cult of domesticity” following World War II—the reassociation of women with the home, motherhood, and child-care; men with fatherhood and wage work outside the home—was a period in which the predominance of the hetero norm went almost unchallenged, an era of heterosexual hegemony. This was an age in which conservative mental-health professionals reasserted the old link between heterosexuality and procreation. In contrast, sex-liberals of the day strove, ultimately with success, to expand the heterosexual ideal to include within the boundaries of normality a wider-than-ever range of nonprocreative, premarital, and extra-marital behaviors. But sex-liberal reform actually helped to extend and secure the dominance of the heterosexual idea, as we shall see when we get to Kinsey.

The post-war sex-conservative tendency was illustrated in 1947, in Ferdinand Lundberg and Dr. Marnia Farnham’s book, Modern Woman: The Lost Sex. Improper masculinity and femininity was exemplified, the authors decreed, by “engagement in heterosexual relations . . . with the complete intent to see to it that they do not eventuate in reproduction.” Their procreatively defined heterosex was one expression of a post-war ideology of fecundity that, internalized and enacted dutifully by a large part of the population, gave rise to the postwar baby boom.

The idea of the feminine female and masculine male as prolific breeders was also reflected in the stress, specific to the late 1940s, on the homosexual as sad symbol of “sterility”—that particular loaded term appears incessantly in comments on homosex dating to the fecund forties.

In 1948, in The New York Times Book Review, sex liberalism was in ascendance. Dr. Howard A. Rusk declared that Alfred Kinsey’s just published report on Sexual Behavior in the Human Male had found “wide variations in sex concepts and behavior.” This raised the question: “What is ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’?” In particular, the report had found that “homosexual experience is much more common than previously thought,” and “there is often a mixture of both homo and hetero experience.”

Kinsey’s counting of orgasms indeed stressed the wide range of behaviors and feelings that fell within the boundaries of a quantitative, statistically accounted heterosexuality. Kinsey’s liberal reform of the hetero/homo dualism widened the narrow, old hetero category to accord better with the varieties of social experience. He thereby contradicted the older idea of a monolithic, qualitatively defined, natural procreative act, experience, and person.

Though Kinsey explicitly questioned “whether the terms ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ belong in a scientific vocabulary,” his counting of climaxes was generally understood to define normal sex as majority sex. This quantified norm constituted a final, society-wide break with the old qualitatively-defined reproductive standard. Though conceived of as purely scientific, the statistical
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definition of the normal as the-sex-most-people-are-having substituted a new, quantitative moral standard for the old, qualitative sex ethic—another triumph for the spirit of capitalism.

Kinsey also explicitly contested the idea of an absolute, either/or antithesis between hetero and homo persons. He denied that human beings “represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual.” The world, he ordered, “is not to be divided into sheep and goats.” The hetero/homo division was not nature’s doing: “Only the human mind invents categories and tries to force facts into separated pigeonholes. The living world is a continuum.”

With a wave of the taxonomist’s hand, Kinsey dismissed the social and historical division of people into heteros and homos. His denial of heterosexual and homosexual personhood rejected the social reality and profound subjective force of a historically constructed tradition which, since 1892 in the United States, had cut the sexual population in two and helped to establish the social reality of a heterosexual and homosexual identity.

On the one hand, the social construction of homosexual persons has led to the development of a powerful gay liberation identity politics based on an ethnic group model. This has freed generations of women and men from a deep, painful, socially induced sense of shame, and helped to bring about a society-wide liberalization of attitudes and responses to homosexuals.

On the other hand, contesting the notion of homosexual and heterosexual persons was one early, partial resistance to the limits of the hetero/homo construction. Gore Vidal, rebel son of Kinsey, has for years been joyfully proclaiming:

> there is no such thing as a homosexual or a heterosexual person. There are only homo- or heterosexual Acts. Most people are a mixture of impulses if not practices, and what anyone does with a willing partner is of no social or cosmic significance.

> So why all the fuss? In order for a ruling class to rule, there must be arbitrary prohibitions. Of all prohibitions, sexual taboo is the most useful because sex involves everyone. . . . we have allowed our governors to divide the population into two teams. One team is good, godly, straight; the other is evil, sick, vicious.

Though Vidal’s analysis of our “wacky division” is persuasive, we may now go one step further and question not only the division into hetero and homo persons but the hetero/homo division itself.

Kinsey popularized the idea of a “continuum” of activity and feeling between hetero and homo poles. His liberal reform of the hetero/homo dualism did widen the narrow, old hetero category to accord with social experience, suggesting there were degrees of heterosexual and homosexual behavior and experience. But that famous continuum of erotic acts and feelings reaffirmed the idea of a sexuality divided between the hetero and homo. Kinsey’s hetero/homo rating scale, from zero to six, sounded neat, quantitative, and ever-so scientific; his influential sex-liberalism thus upheld and consolidated the hetero/homo polarity, giving it new life and legitimacy.

In 1953, in *The New York Times*, anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn reviewed the new Kinsey report on women. The word heterosexual appeared once. Kluckhohn complained that the report did not treat the “frequency of rectal heterosexual coitus”—no doubt the first overt mention of hetero sodomy in the decorous *Times*. This historic sodomitical occasion illustrates how the Kinsey reports and responses to them expanded the discussion of heterosex to include a wider range of variations than the “respectable” media had previously admitted.

That era’s liberalization of the heterosexual ideal is also illustrated by the play *Tea and Sympathy*, reviewed in *The Times* in 1953; the “story of a schoolboy falsely suspected of homosexuality.” But the false homo was a true hetero. Though our hero was gentle, quiet, shy, intellectual, and
nonconforming, the playwright finally certified him as straight. (As usual, it turned out the villain had homo tendencies.) More about heterosexuality than homosexuality, the play decried the era’s narrow, loutish genderism, advocating the expansion of heterosex to include young men lacking in the brutish manly virtues. The progressive expansion of heterosexuality to include a wider range of gender-appropriate behaviors and feelings served to strengthen the dominance of the hetero ideal, the rule of the hetero/homo dualism.

Heterosexuality questioned: 1965–1982

By the late 1960s, anti-establishment counterculturalists, fledgling feminists, and homosexual-rights activists had begun to produce an unprecedented critique of sexual repression in general, of women’s sexual repression in particular, of marriage and the family—and of some forms of heterosexuality. This critique even found its way into The New York Times.

In March 1968, in the theater section of that paper, freelancer Rosalyn Regelson cited a scene from a satirical review brought to New York by a San Francisco troup:

a heterosexual man wanders inadvertently into a homosexual bar. Before he realizes his mistake, he becomes involved with an aggressive queen who orders a drink for him. Being a broadminded liberal and trying to play it cool until he can back out of the situation gracefully, he asks, “How do you like being a homosexual?” To which the queen drawls drily, “How do you like being whatever it is you are?”

Regelson continued:

The Two Cultures in confrontation. The middle-class liberal, challenged today on many fronts, finds his last remaining fixed value, his heterosexuality, called into question. The theater . . . recalls the strategies he uses in dealing with this ultimate threat to his world view.35

Just a few weeks later in March 1968, Times critic Clive Barnes reviewed Paddy Chayefsky’s new play, The Latent Heterosexual. In this play, a middle-aged and extremely effeminate writer discovered that “his homosexuality was . . . merely a cover-up for his fears of impotence.” The play, said the ever-earnest Barnes, “makes a serious point.”36 In the perspective of heterosexual history, Chayefsky’s holding out hope of hetero happiness for even the most unlikely homosexual queen is a document of heterosexuality on the defensive. Chayefsky’s portrayal of latent heterosexuality triumphing against all odds was nervous propaganda for a norm increasingly challenged by feminists, counterculturalists, homosexuals, and those advanced other-sex lovers aware of something radically wrong in the house of heterosex.

The new hetero defensiveness was illustrated again six months later in The New York Times, in a classic document of heterosexual history. In September 1968, Judy Klemesrud’s interview with Cliff Gorman, who played “The Definitive Screaming Queen” in The Boys in the Band, was headlined “You Don’t Have To Be One To Play One.” Klemesrud satirically skewered the macho excess of Gorman’s nervous assertion of heterosexuality.37

The nasty subtext of Klemesrud’s humor suggested that the actor did protest too much; his uneasy heterosex, she implied, revealed a hint of the homo. But whatever private psychodramas were performed on the stage of this particular male’s mind, the exquisite anguish of the actor, desperate to dissociate himself from a homosexual role, was just an extreme example of many men’s new need to publicly proclaim their heterosexuality to define themselves to the world as
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not one of those perverts now more openly portrayed in the media. The coming out of the homo provoked the coming out of the het.*

Klemesrud began: Gorman’s “Flitting and floating and fluttering” as Emory, “the pansy interior decorator,” was “not exactly the kind of part you’d imagine for a nice Jewish boy from Jamaica, Queens.” But Gorman had taken the part, and Boys in the Band had become a “smash hit.” Gorman had recently signed for television to play a rapist. Gorman was quoted: “What can be more heterosexual than that?”

“With a can of Schlitz in his hand,” said Klemesrud, Gorman “rapped” with the reporter about what everyone’s asking him these days: “How can a straight guy like you play a fag in a gay play?”

“It’s simple—I needed the money,” he says in his very butch real-life voice. “I really don’t give a damn what people think. . . . There’s no question in my mind of my gender. And there’s no question in my wife’s mind. . . . I’m buying my own beer now. . . . If I was playing a psychopath that doesn’t mean I’m psychopathic.”

His incredibly beautiful wife, Gayle, tiptoes across the room and pours Cliff’s beer into a glass. . . .

Cliff is still seething. “People think it’s so amazing that a guy can play a homosexual in such a flamboyant way and still be straight. I guess we publicize the point because it’s a selling point and makes everybody want to come and see the show. . . .”

Cliff unties his bandanna, flings it onto the coffee table and strolls across the room to flip on a recording of the only kind of music that really moves him—country and western. Then he pops open his second Schlitz. “They told me they called a lot of gay actors, but nobody wanted to do Emory. I guess a real homosexual might be too inhibited. . . . I didn’t do anything special to prepare for [the part], although the walk took a lot of practice. . . . But I already knew how to lisp because I’d been telling gay jokes since I was a kid.”

After making it as an actor, said Gorman, “I want to have four kids and a stereo and a boat and move to Baja California, and fish and skin dive and all that wholesome stuff.” Printed with this Times interview was a large photograph of Gorman, his arms clasped tightly around his wife, both sad-eyed and clinging—a classic image in the historical iconography of heterosexuality, a documentation of heterosex haunted by the specter of homosexual.

The haunting of heterosex continued. By the early 1970s, militant homosexuals and feminists were explicitly criticizing some institutional forms of heterosexuality. A “heterosexual dictatorship,” enforcing that single erotic standard, had been named by Christopher Isherwood.38 “Compulsory heterosexuality” was named in 1976 as one of the crimes against women by the Brussels Tribunal on Crimes Against Women.39 In the winter of 1977–1978, in a gay movement periodical, I reviewed Mary P. Ryan’s Womanhood in America, and said:

Throughout her book Ryan applies a simple conceptual innovation. This is to casually refer to “heterosexual relations” and “heterosexual women,” rather than the usual “sexual

* Examples are legion of men’s need to defensively assert their heterosexuality. For example, on April 16, 1989, Bruce Weber, an editor of The New York Times Magazine, writes an “About Men” column on “My Best Friend’s Girlfriend.” He begins by confessing his fear that the new live-in female lover of his male friend will disrupt the men’s long-standing intimacy—then immediately identifies his sexual orientation: “We are the oldest two heterosexual men I know who have never lived with a woman.” On March 16, 1989, the single front-page headline of New York Newsday proclaimed: “Koch: I’m Heterosexual”.

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relations” and “women.” Ryan thus refuses to take for granted as natural and universal the specifically heterosexual character of the history being studied. The existence of such a particular thing as heterosexual history, along with homosexual history, has not yet been generally recognized, its implications analyzed. Ryan furthers such analysis.

The naming of “heterosexual history” was a step toward theorizing it. In 1979, Lillian Faderman coined the term “heterocentric” to condemn a world-view that made homosexuals (especially lesbians) invisible. And in the summer of 1980, Signs, the feminist scholarly journal, published Adrienne Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” Taking off from earlier discussions among feminists in the movement press, Rich’s was the first “respectable” work to so explicitly question the implicit assumption of heterosexuality. Rich’s essay was important in beginning to legitimize the serious study of heterosexuality as social and political institution.

In 1982, ninety years after the US invention of heterosexuality, The New York Times was regularly sending out distress signals about a heterosexuality in crisis criticized from within and without its own ranks.

In August 1982, novelist Margaret Atwood reviewed Marge Piercy’s poems, calling them the product of a mind rooted firmly in time and place and engaging itself with the central dilemmas of its situation. How, for instance, is a heterosexual feminist to respond to (a) men as they are and (b) more extreme feminists who want her to divest herself of them?

Lesbian feminists’ questioning of heterosexuality had received serious recognition in The Times.

In October 1982, in John Osborne’s review of Noel Coward’s Diaries, we learned that Coward “challenged heterosexuality as a failure of style.” Coward’s aesthetic critique (the resistance tactic of the old-time cultured queen) has roots reaching back to Oscar Wilde. And in the last month of 1982, The Times described Tootsie as a film about “the crucial importance of friendship as a prerequisite to love between a man and a woman.” Tootsie’s writer-producer was quoted: “Isn’t it a sad comment on heterosexual relationships that it’s so rare to see a man and a woman who are best friends?” Ninety years after heterosexuality’s American debut, its crisis had become a cliche. That year, its crisis was so acute an embattled California psychologist felt compelled to publish the world’s first book In Defense of Heterosexuality.

Several years before herpes and AIDS became focal points for the anxiety of heterosexuals, their sex-love had begun to lose its old certainty, its unquestioned status. Masters and Johnson’s Crisis: Heterosexual Behavior in the Age of AIDS in fact named an emergency predating AIDS. Yet the media response to AIDS has created a major, unremarked, quantitative increase in references to heterosexuality and a historic, qualitative change in the public perception of heterosexuals as one of the endangered erotic species.

**Heterosexual history: out of the shadows**

Our brief survey of the heterosexual idea suggests a new hypothesis. Rather than naming a conjunction old as Eve and Adam, heterosexual designates a word and concept, a norm and role,
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an individual and group identity, a behavior and feeling, and a peculiar sexual-political institution particular to the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Because much stress has been placed here on heterosexuality as word and concept, it seems important to affirm that heterosexuality (and homosexuality) came into existence before it was named and thought about. The formulation of the heterosexual idea did not create a heterosexual experience or behavior; to suggest otherwise would be to ascribe determining power to labels and concepts. But the titling and envisioning of heterosexuality did play an important role in consolidating the construction of the heterosexual’s social existence. Before the wide use of the word heterosexual, I suggest, women and men did not mutually lust with the same profound, sure sense of normalcy that followed the distribution of “heterosexual” as universal sanctifier.

According to this proposal, women and men make their own sexual histories. But they do not produce their sex lives just as they please. They make their sexualities within a particular mode of organization given by the past and altered by their changing desire, their present power and activity, and their vision of a better world. That hypothesis suggests a number of good reasons for the immediate inauguration of research on a historically specific heterosexuality. 47

The study of the history of the heterosexual experience will forward a great intellectual struggle still in its early stages. This is the fight to pull heterosexuality, homosexuality, and all the sexualities out of the realm of nature and biology into the realm of the social and historical. Feminists have explained to us that anatomy does not determine our gender destinies (our masculinities and femininities). But we’ve only recently begun to consider that biology does not settle our erotic fates. The common notion that biology determines the object of sexual desire, or that physiology and society together cause sexual orientation, are determinisms that deny the break existing between our bodies and situation and our desiring. Just as the biology of our hearing organs will never tell us why we take pleasure in Bach or delight in Dixieland, our female or male anatomies, hormones, and genes will never tell us why we yearn for women, men, both, other, or none. That is because desiring is a self-generated project of individuals within particular historical cultures. Heterosexual history can help us see the place of values and judgments in the construction of our own and others’ pleasures, and to see how our erotic tastes—our aesthetics of the flesh—are socially institutionalized through the struggle of individuals and classes.

The study of heterosexuality in time will also help us to recognize the vast historical diversity of sexual emotions and behaviors—a variety that challenges the monolithic heterosexual hypothesis. John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman’s Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America refers in passing to numerous substantial changes in sexual activity and feeling: for example, the widespread use of contraceptives in the nineteenth century, the twentieth-century incitement of the female orgasm, and the recent sexual conduct changes by gay men in response to the AIDS epidemic. It’s now a commonplace of family history that people in particular classes feel and behave in substantially different ways under different historical conditions. 48  Only when we stop assuming an invariable essence of heterosexuality will we begin the research to reveal the full variety of sexual emotions and behaviors.

The historical study of the heterosexual experience can help us understand the erotic relationships of women and men in terms of their changing modes of social organization. Such modal analysis actually characterizes a sex history well underway. 49 This suggests that the eros–gender–procreation system (the social ordering of lust, femininity and masculinity, and baby–making) has been linked closely to a society’s particular organization of power and production. To understand the subtle history of heterosexuality we need to look carefully at correlations between (1) society’s organization of eros and pleasure; (2) its mode of engendering persons as feminine or masculine (its making of women and men); (3) its ordering of human reproduction; and (4) its dominant political
economy. This General Theory of Sexual Relativity proposes that substantial historical changes in the social organization of eros, gender, and procreation have basically altered the activity and experience of human beings within those modes.\textsuperscript{50}

A historical view locates heterosexuality and homosexuality in time, helping us distance ourselves from them. This distancing can help us formulate new questions that clarify our long-range sexual-political goals: what has been and is the social function of sexual categorizing? Whose interests have been served by the division of the world into heterosexual and homosexual? Do we dare not draw a line between those two erotic species? Is some sexual naming socially necessary? Would human freedom be enhanced if the sex-biology of our partners in lust was of no particular concern, and had no name? In what kind of society could we all more freely explore our desire and our flesh?

As we move toward 1992 and the one-hundredth birthday of heterosexuality in the United States, a new sense of the historical making of the heterosexual and homosexual suggests that these are ways of feeling, acting, and being with each other that we can together unmake and radically remake according to our present desire, power, and our vision of a future political-economy of pleasure.

Notes


2 Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860,” American Quarterly, vol. 18 (Summer 1966); Welter’s analysis is extended here to include True Men and True Love.


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22 Mary Ware Dennett, The Sex Side of Life, An Explanation for Young People (Astoria, New York: Published by the Author, 1928).


26 Lorenz Hart and Richard Rogers, Pal Joey (Columbia Masterworks, ML4364), liner notes by Richard Rogers. I quote (by heart) from the record.


38 I have not traced when Isherwood first referred to the “heterosexual dictatorship.” Isherwood dates to 1929, at age twenty-four, his becoming “suddenly, blindly furious that ‘Girls are what the state and the church and the law and the press and the medical profession endorse, and command me to desire.’” *Christopher and His Kind* (New York: Avon Books, 1977), p. 12.


47 In addition to those already cited in these notes, a few writers have begun the historicizing of heterosexuality. In 1987, GMP in London published *Heterosexuality*, a collection of essays by gay men and lesbians edited by Gillian E. Hanscombe and Martin Humphries; the essay by Jon Ward on “The Nature of Heterosexuality,” is the most relevant to historical analysis. In April 1988, at a lesbian and gay studies conference at Brooklyn College, I spoke on that subject, and Henry Abelove and Randolph Trumbach spoke on a separate panel of the same title. In February 1989, Abelove, G.S. Rousseau, and Trumbach participated in a panel of the same title at the University of California, Berkeley. See Mary Shaw, “Inventing Straights: Homosexuality Was a 19th Century Invention; Now Historians Say, So Was Heterosexuality,” *Bay Area Reporter*, March 9, 1989. Also see Abelove’s “Some Speculations on the History of ‘Sexual Intercourse’ During the ‘Long Eighteenth Century’ in England,” *Genders*, vol. 6 (November 1989).

