



# Thinking Sex and American Religions

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## Abstract

Critical theories of sexuality provide key insights into American religious beliefs and practices. This article proposes six axioms by which scholars might approach thinking sex and American religions: that thinking sex is of broad academic significance; that critical sex theory differs in key ways from gender theory; that sexuality is historically constructed; that certain kinds of sex provide access to religious approbation and social privilege; that consideration of sex includes religious conservatives; and that American religious studies scholars must also confront the oversignification of sex. Each axiom is paired with examples of American religious scholarship that instantiate the proposed premise. Americans often assume that religion should dictate how to think (and do) sex – and that only certain kinds of sex are (or should be) permissible in “good old American” religions. Thus, scholars of American religions should be thinking sex.

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## Introduction

The time has come to think about sex – or so Gayle Rubin’s iconic 1984 essay, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” insists. In this essay, I suggest that “thinking sex” challenges scholars to reconceptualize the purview of American religious scholarship. I first provide historical context for critical theories of sexuality. Next, I build on the work of Gayle Rubin and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to propose an axiomatic for thinking sex in the study of American religions.<sup>1</sup> Finally, I insist that scholars of American religions should be thinking sex: because religious Americans take sex very seriously; and because religious Americans’ thinking about sex has significant material consequences.<sup>2</sup>

## What Thinking Sex Means

To begin thinking sex, we must first define it. On this point, I borrow from Eve Sedgwick: for the purposes of this essay, sex refers to “the array of acts, expectations, narratives, pleasures, identity-formations, and knowledges ... that tend to cluster most densely around certain genital sensations but is not adequately defined by them” (Sedgwick 1990, p. 29). That is: while sex has something to do with pleasures, identities, and genitals, we cannot reduce sex to any of these terms.

Critical sexual theory owes much to feminist theory and its predecessor, post-structural continental philosophy. These schools of thought encourage the confrontation and complication of hierarchical binary thought. Critical theories of sex, gender, and structure all demonstrate how western thought usually organizes itself into either/or terms (good/bad, male/female), and that one term is generally valued above the other (good is better than bad; male is better than female).

Theories of sexuality begin by confronting and complicating the normalization of a heterosexual/homosexual binary. Psychoanalysis helped create and enforce this binary by

insisting that sex is the truth of ourselves – that in order to know who I am, I must know what kind of sex I desire.<sup>3</sup> In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, analysts and sexologists began catalog and pathologize sexual differences as deviances. Consequentially, psychoanalysts also diagnosed as *deviants* those who engaged in “unusual” sexual behaviors (non-reproductive sex acts, including masturbation as well as same sex-sexual object choices). The semantic space between deviance and deviants is small but significant: while sexology and early psychoanalysis focused on a number of sexual “abnormalities,” their key epistemological innovation was the creation of sex-as-identity. The popular conviction that sex tells us who we *really* are owes much to psychoanalysis; the prevailing organizational structure that emerged from psychoanalysis has been a heterosexual/homosexual binary. Thus, until the late 19th century, many people might have engaged in sodomy, but homosexuality as an identity was literally unthinkable.<sup>4</sup> As historian David Halperin explains, we now find it hard to imagine a world *not* organized around sexual identity – but critical sex theory tries to do just that.

Thinking critically about sex means challenging cultural assumptions about what is “normal” to do with (to, on, in) one’s body, as well as thinking hard about where our ideas of normalcy came from. Critical theories of sex address and trouble the pathologization of difference. Such theories have traditionally focused on individual subjectivity, agency, and resistance.<sup>5</sup>

In short: critical sex theory addresses cultural assumptions about sexual bodies, including issues related but not limited to gender and sexual practices. While contemporary theorizations of sex began with challenging heteronormativity (the primacy and normalization of heterosexuality), this school of thought now addresses homosexuality as an identity, same-sex sexual object choice as a practice, non-traditional gender presentation (transsexuality, transgender, intersex), and transgressive sexual practices (e.g., celibacy, BDSM, non-monogamy, sex work). Critical theories of sexuality consider all those who are or feel marginalized based on their sexual practices and/or identities, as well as their bodily identities and/or presentations.<sup>6</sup>

Thinking sex is crucial to the study of American religions. Religious thought, belief, affect, and practices construct and constrain America beliefs about and practices of sexuality. Americans take religion(s) seriously, particularly when it comes to sexual matters; and we take sex seriously, particularly when it comes to religious matters. As scholars of American religions, then, we should be thinking sex.

### *Thinking Sex: Axiomatic for American Religions*

In her (dare we say?) seminal work on queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick built upon the axiomatic of cultural sexual assumptions Rubin proposed in “Thinking Sex.” Sedgwick’s introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet* serves an early schematic for critical theorizations of western sexualities. In the spirit of their urgency and irreverence, I have modified and expanded upon Rubin’s and Sedgwick’s axioms to construct a strategy for thinking sex in the study of American religions. I pair each axiom with examples of American religious scholarship that employ the proposed premise. Wherever possible, I have also provided case studies that instantiate these axioms.<sup>7</sup>

#### AXIOM I: THINKING SEX MATTERS

Taking sex seriously, in American religious studies or otherwise, starts with assuming that sex is important – and not only to those beyond the pale of Rubin’s “charmed circle” of

procreative binary marital heterosexuality (1984, p. 13). Many theorists and historians, arguably beginning with Foucault in the late 1970s, have demonstrated the urgency of sexual identity in studying western cultures. Academic consideration of sex nevertheless remained liminal to mainstream scholarship for nearly a decade beyond the publication of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. Sedgwick's *Epistemology* rejected this marginalization, asserting the universal importance of thinking sex. She stressed that sexuality – and for her purposes, specifically the homosexual/heterosexual binary – is “an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities” (Sedgwick 1990, p. 1). Indeed, she insisted that any understanding of contemporary Western culture is “not merely incomplete, but damaged” if that understanding fails to critically engage cultural assumptions about sex (Sedgwick 1990, p. 1).

As scholars of American religions, we must think sex because American religions take sex very seriously. Many Americans assume that religion should tell us how to think (and do) sex. There are material, sometimes dire, consequences to the perceived connection between sex and religion.

Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini's, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (2004) illustrates this assertion. Jakobsen and Pellegrini address the naturalization of Protestant sexual morality as “good old American values” (2004, p. 3). Using Supreme Court decisions as evidence, Pellegrini and Jakobsen argue that American assumptions about religion, values, and public interest are “crucially connected” to sexuality and the regulation thereof (2004, p. 4). Indeed, they suggest that “the secular state's regulation of the sexual life of its citizens is actually religion by other means” (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2004, p. 19). The authors problematize the rhetoric of both religious and sexual tolerance, suggesting that tolerance is an inherently hierarchical model (“we” in power tolerate “them,” those who do religion and/or sex differently).

Mary Jo Neitz's 2000 “Queering the Dragonfest: Changing Sexualities in a Post-Patriarchal Religion,” and Jakobsen and Pellegrini's 2008 “Marriage Plots” address the importance of thinking sex to the study of American religions. Neitz's profile of a 1996 Neopagan festival describes how the Front Range Pagans came to identify as queer: considering themselves religious outsiders, they chose to align themselves with sexual outsiders. As Neitz explains it, the Front Range Pagans “saw themselves as marginalized, and at risk, because of their transgression of dominant cultural norms. They saw themselves—witches and non-heterosexuals—on the shifting margins of the dominant culture” (2000, p. 389). While her analysis reifies a homo/heterosexual binary, Neitz's point is well-made: she uses the “queering” of Dragonfest as evidence of an urgent need for sociologists of religion to acknowledge and question cultural constructions of sexuality.

In their 2007 post to *The Immanent Frame*, Jakobsen and Pellegrini apply *Love the Sin's* thesis to American marriage laws. If marriage is so sacred, the authors inquire, why is the state involved in the marriage business at all? “Marriage Plots” suggests that governmental regulation of marriage at once violates the first amendment's disestablishment clause (because legal arguments for the importance of marriage are often religious) and the free exercise clause (because federal marriage law forbids same-sex marriages, despite many religious traditions allowing such unions).<sup>8</sup> Like *Love the Sin*, “Marriage Plots” argues for religious and sexual freedom – and compelling evidence of the legislation of Protestant sexual morality.

Mary E. Hunt's “Queering Old Time Religion” provides an excellent case study upon which to test this first axiom. Hunt's 2001 article provides a “white, lesbian feminist perspective” on the contributions and contradictions of LGBT activists within American Christianities (p. 210). She highlights sexism within movements for LGBT inclusion in

Christian congregations. Hunt further demonstrates how bisexual identities reinforce the sexual binary, while transgender identities challenge that same binary. She argues for inter-faith work, for closer scrutiny of gender specificity (particularly with regard to women's flourishing), and for an increased emphasis on children's religious education as ways to effect change within traditional churches (Hunt 2001, p. 210). Perhaps most importantly, Hunt issues a challenge: "queering old time religion in the U.S. is not as easy as it looks;" but it is, she insists, vital to American Christianity's survival (2001, p. 222).

#### AXIOM 2: SEX IS NOT GENDER

Nor is the study of sexuality interchangeable with the study of gender – though they are, of course, related.<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler suggests that heteronormativity *creates* gender by requiring binary roles. Butler calls this the "heterosexual matrix," which

assumes that for bodies to make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality. (1990, p. 151, n. 6)

That is, heteronormativity makes sense of bodies in hierarchical, binary, reproductive terms.

Mary McClintock Fulkerson's, "Gender—Being It or Doing It? The Church, Homosexuality, and the Politics of Identity" (1997) explores the contingent relationship of heteronormativity to gender performance. Fulkerson suggests that in the debate on full ecclesiastical inclusion for queer people of faith, opposing arguments rely on similar assumptions about sex and gender (1997, p. 189). Both groups assume that persons are necessarily "sexed objects" (that is, male or female) and that two kinds of sexual persons exist (heterosexual and homosexual) (1997, p. 196). Fulkerson attempts to disrupt the concept of sex-as-identity both theoretically (using Weeks and Foucault) and theologically (via Galatians 3:28) (1997, pp. 192, 199). She insists that emphasizing sexual difference occludes the fundamental personhood of the individuals prohibited from full church membership – that inclusion requires, not recognition, but denial of difference (Fulkerson 1997, p. 200).

Negotiating the space between sex/uality and gender is also key in conversations about transgender and intersex identities.<sup>10</sup> While critical theories of sexuality comprise nearly all the academic treatments of these identities, transgender and intersex identities are gender- rather than sexuality-based. Jay Prosser articulates crucial distinctions between sexuality and (trans)gender in "Transgender" (1997) and *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998). Prosser disputes the "queering" of transgender and transsexual identities:

transgender specifies a methodology, subjectivity, and a community which, while it might overlap, is distinguishable from queer. The relation of transgender to queer is then both a dependent and independent one—derivative and novel—analogous to queer's relation to feminism. (Prosser 1997, p. 313)

Available sources on American religion and transgender or intersex identities are primarily anecdotal or pastoral.<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the collection *Transgendering Faith: Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* (2004) and Mollencott's, *Omnigender: A Trans-Religious Approach* (2007), as well as Raven Kaldera's, *Hermaphroditics: The Transgender Spirituality Workbook* (2002) and the Hillel LGBTQ Resource Guide, which includes a section on "Putting the T in LGBTQ" (2007, pp. 55–65).

## AXIOM 3: SOME SEX IS BETTER THAN OTHERS

More accurately, some sex gets treated better (as more moral, or normal, or healthy) than other kinds. Previously, I addressed heteronormativity: the assumption that heterosexuality is universal and innate. But the cultural validation of certain kinds of sex over other kinds extends well beyond either heteronormativity or a hierarchical homo/hetero binary.

In “Thinking Sex,” Rubin maps this cultural divide as a caste system or “charmed circle” of “Good, Normal, Natural, Blessed Sexualit[ies]” and “Bad, Abnormal, Unnatural, Damned Sexualit[ies]” (1984, p. 13). “Sexuality that is ‘good’, ‘normal’, and ‘natural’”, she suggests,

should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. It should be coupled, relational, within the same generation, and occur at home. It should not involve pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female. (Rubin 1984, pp. 13–4)

## Bad sex

may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial. It may be masturbatory or take place at orgies, may be casual, may cross generational lines, and may take place in ‘public,’ or at least in the bushes or in the baths. It may involve the use of pornography, fetish objects, sex toys, or unusual roles. (Rubin 1984, pp. 13–4)

This sexual dichotomy is demonstrably hierarchical. Those who engage in good/blessed sex receive “certified mental health, respectability, legality, social and physical mobility, institutional support, and marital benefits” (Rubin 1984, p. 12). Unrepentant sexual transgressors may be accused of mental illness, disrespectability, and criminality, as well as restricted social and physical mobility, loss of institutional support, and economic sanctions (Rubin 1984, p. 12). In short: some kinds of sex are (or at least get treated) better than others.

Nancy Cott and Tracy Fessenden adopt historical approaches to exploring methods by which religious people use sex to construct morality and access privilege.<sup>12</sup> In her 1978 “Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790–1850,” Cott argues that evangelical discourse on the inherent morality of women popularized an idealization of women as passionless: that is, unaffected by or absent of sexual desire (p. 221). “Passionlessness” supposedly evidenced spiritual superiority over men; Cott suggests that literate Protestant New England women leveraged “passionlessness” into domestic and political influence while necessarily limiting their sexual agency (p. 228). Tracy Fessenden responds to Cott in her 2000 “The Convent, the Brothel, and the Protestant Woman’s Sphere.” Fessenden agrees that evangelical discourse extolled the inherent morality of white, middle-class Protestant women; however, she suggests that lurid tales of escaped nuns and prostitutes reposition and retrieve counter-narratives of female sexual excess (p. 453). Protestant male writers deployed these tales of fallen women’s depravity against any who rejected the proprieties of “legitimate femininity” or challenged the “hegemony of the white Protestant middle class” (2000, pp. 453, 471). Fessenden’s, “Sex and the Subject of Religion” (2008) further delineates the mobilization of sexuality-as-morality. Fessenden proposes that following Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church has attempted to universalize its authority by emphasizing the foundation of morality in natural law. While Catholic doctrine necessarily applies to Catholics alone, the Church’s teachings on morals – usually presented as correct gender or sexual behaviors – should be “understood to be universal and absolute.”

Scholars of American religions might also consider how sex is used to deny individuals and groups access to privilege. In his excellent *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (1997), Terryl Givens convincingly demonstrates the articulation of an American religious orthodoxy through demonization of LDS plural marriage. In “Queering Fundamentalism: John Balcolm Shaw and the Sexuality of a Protestant Orthodoxy,” Kathryn Lofton recovers the voice of a *Fundamentals* author previously silenced after allegations of sexual improprieties emerged. Marie Anne Pagliarini’s 1999 “The Pure American Woman and the Wicked Catholic Priest: An Analysis of Anti-Catholic Literature in Antebellum America” suggests that such texts portrayed Catholicism as a threat to sexual norms, gender definitions, and family values; Pagliarini suggests anti-Catholic literature promoted normative sexuality by emphasizing the perversity of the religious other, instantiated by the “wicked Catholic priest” (p. 98, 118). Finally, Lynn Neal’s “They’re Freaks! The Cult Stereotype in Fictional Television Shows, 1958–2008” illustrates popular culture depictions of new religious movements as sexually deprived, exploitative, or predatory (2011, p. 101). Neal argues that the American “cult stereotype” contributes to the “marginalization and oppression of new religious movements” (2011, p. 101).

Scholars might further consider the ways in which some individuals and groups – including new religious movements and evangelicals – have deliberately used sex to distance themselves from mainstream religions. New religious movements provide a wealth of primary source material on this subject: see, for example, the Children of God, the Shakers, and the Oneida community. Molly McGarry explores the “queerness” of Spiritualism in the final chapter of her 2008 *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America*. McGarry argues for possibility of a religious sexual subject while proposing that Spiritualism allowed women spiritual authority, sanctioned free love, and facilitated same-sex connections through channeling.<sup>13</sup> Sarah M. Pike’s “‘All Acts of Love and Pleasure Are My Rituals’: Sex, Gender, and the Sacred” in *New Age and Neopagan Religions* might also be of interest (2006, pp. 115–44).

Michael Warner testifies to both evangelical and secularist sexual strategies in his 2008 “The Ruse of ‘Secular Humanism.’” Warner notes that the regulation of sex – in the form of abortion, contraception, and other transgressions – rallied an evangelical confederation of disparate Protestantisms in the late 1970s. He further notes that secularism can provide a “framework of corporeal experience and struggle.” Amy DeRogatis also explores recent shifts in evangelical discourses on marital sex in her fascinating “What Would Jesus Do? Sexuality and Salvation in Protestant Evangelical Sex Manuals, 1950s to the Present” and “Born Again is a Sexual Term: Demons, STDs, and God’s Healing Sperm.”

#### AXIOM 4: SEX CHANGES OVER TIME<sup>14</sup>

Which is to say that sexuality is a modern construct. Because we now understand sexual identity as the core truth of our beings, the idea of a culture or time period that did not think of sex as identity can be hard for students to grasp. As historian David Halperin explains in *How to Do the History of Sexuality*:

The rise to dominance of those categories [*i.e.* heterosexuality and homosexuality] represents a relatively recent and culturally specific development, yet it has left little trace in our consciousness of its novelty. As a result, not only do we have a hard time understanding the logic at work in other historical cultures’ organizations of sex and gender, but we have an even harder time understanding our own inability to understand them. We can’t figure out what it is about our own experiences of sexuality that are not universal, what it is about sexuality that could be cultural instead of natural, historical instead of biological. (2004, p. 3)



Halperin is responding to Michel Foucault's *The Will to Knowledge*, the first volume in the exhaustive *History of Sexuality* (1978).<sup>15</sup> *The Will to Knowledge* is canonical for scholars of critical sex theory; however, Foucault outlines key concepts in the introduction ("We 'Other Victorians'") and final chapter ("Right of Death and Power over Life").<sup>16</sup> These two sections might guide nascent sexuality scholars in defining the repressive hypothesis, tracing the historical construction of sexuality, and considering the relationship between power, knowledge, and sexuality.

"We 'Other Victorians'" defines the repressive hypothesis and establishes the narrative Foucault disrupted. Once upon a time (the story goes), sex was public and unabashed; then Victorian prudery made sex silent and secret: repressed (1978, p. 3). Late 20th-century sexual liberation challenged that repression by speaking about sex (1978, p. 6). Foucault problematized this narrative: "what led us to show, ostentatiously," he asked, "that sex is something we hide, to say it is something we silence?" (1978, p. 9). This is the repressive hypothesis: Foucault's assertion that while we like to think we've been sexually repressed until recently – that sex was simply not talked about until the late 20th century – in fact, we've never stopped talking about how much we don't talk about sex (1978, p. 8). Understanding sex in repressive terms suggests that merely *speaking* sex created resistance, a space outside power (1978, p. 8). Alas, Foucault told us, talking about sex was not enough. We had to think about what this talk – this discourse – of sex *did*, of what power and knowledges it created (1978, p. 11).

"Right of Death and Power over Life" proposed that "sexuality" connected discourse, power, knowledge, and sex (1978, pp. 152–3). In the late 19th century, Foucault argued, psychoanalysis *created* sexuality as an identity – a collection of acts, drives, desires, products, and significances (1978, p. 153). This is key: sexuality, sex-as-identity, did not exist before the late 19th century. Sexuality became a way of knowing ourselves; we have judged and regulated ourselves according norms historically established by medicine and psychoanalysis (1978, pp. 155–6). In short: Foucault is crucial to thinking sex because he insisted we (re)think sex in historical terms (1978, p. 157).<sup>17</sup>

The work of Laura Vance and Ann Taves demonstrates Foucault's historicization of sex.<sup>18</sup> Laura Vance's (2008) "Converging on the Heterosexual Dyad: Changing Mormon and Adventist Sexual Norms and Implications for Gay and Lesbian Adherents" illustrates pertinent discursive shifts. Vance notes that late 19th century Mormonism and Adventism had widely disparate views on sex: Adventists discouraged even marital sexual behaviors; while Latter-Day Saints encouraged marital sex beyond the boundaries of American norms and were largely ambivalent about same-sex sexual object choice. By the mid-20th century, Adventists and Mormons increasingly championed "dyadic gender roles" and condemned homosexuality (Vance 2008, p. 60). Ann Taves', "Sexuality in American Religious History" (1997) investigates the ways in which "Euro-American Protestantism" attempted to "maintain its purity and power" in response to increasing religious diversity (p. 56). Taves deftly illustrates changes in American religio-sexual discourse; however, non-historians might find her meticulous evidence somewhat daunting.<sup>19</sup>

#### AXIOM 5: SEX IS NOT JUST FOR RADICALS

Much critical work on sexuality focuses on transgression of and resistance to norms. As Ann Taves notes, "recent textbooks of American religions ... discuss sexuality explicitly only when it 'deviates' from the norm" (1997, p. 28). But thinking sex does not only mean thinking about sexual (or religious) outsiders. Disrupting the presumed naturalness

of heterosexuality also allows us to consider “negative” agency (cf. Mahmood’s “negative freedom”), cases in which religious people address issues of conservative sexualities.<sup>20</sup>

Richard Dyer’s article on “Heterosexuality” theorizes normative sex (1997, pp. 261–73). Responding to Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, Dyer notes the extent to which heterosexuality constructs gender norms (1997, p. 270). Dyer insists *all* sexuality is “fluid and unstable,” thus the analytical significance of isolating heterosexuality’s “peculiarities” (1997, pp. 263–4). While Dyer’s conclusion regarding the racialized consequences of “denaturalizing heterosexuality” felt hasty, the piece works well to frame conversations on conservative religious agency (Dyer 1997, p. 272).<sup>21</sup>

A number of authors explore conservative sexuality in North American Islam. In her editorial for *The Globe and Mail* (1993), “My Body is My Own Business,” Naheed Mustafa reflects on her decision to cover while in Canada as a graduate student; she embraces covering as a rejection of the eroticization of Muslim women’s bodies. Homa Hoodfar’s, “The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: Veiling Practices and Muslim Women” (2001, pp. 420–46) offers a nuanced historical analysis of covering practices in Iran, Canada, and the United Kingdom.<sup>22</sup>

American evangelicalism also provides rich fodder for considerations of conservative sexualities. Amy DeRogatis’ “What Would Jesus Do? Sexuality and Salvation in Protestant Evangelical Sex Manuals, 1950s to the Present” demonstrates conservative evangelicals’ engagement in definitional debates about sex. The introduction to Tanya Erzen’s, *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement* (2006) establishes a relationship between sexual and religious surrender. Erzen underscores the extent to which “ex-gay” requires religious *and* sexual conversion. “Heterosexuality isn’t the goal,” Erzen insists; rather, “ex-gays” seek to reconcile their religious and sexual identities (2006, p. 5).<sup>23</sup> While Erzen’s account of ex-gay ministries is widely popular among American religions scholars, Lynne Gerber offers a more nuanced and critically adept account in her “The Opposite of Gay: Nature, Creation, and Queerish Ex-Gay Experiments” (2008). Using Butlerian theories of gender performance, Gerber interrogates the contradiction between ex-gay ministries’ reliance on heteronormativity and their encouragement for candid disclosures of same-sex desire. Finally, Michael Warner’s, “Tongues Untied: Memoirs of a Pentecostal Boyhood” (1997) and “The Ruse of ‘Secular Humanism’” (2008) present the poignant tension between religious piety and transgressive sexual expression. “Secular Humanism” in particular insists that the mobilization of a “pan-Christian alliance” during the 1970s required a conservative sexual consensus: “these Christians needed sex to exist as a movement.”<sup>24</sup>

#### AXIOM 6: IT’S NEVER JUST SEX

As important as thinking sex is to the study of American religions, it’s possible to overthink (and over-do) sex. Jakobsen and Pellegrini call this oversignification; the authors suggest “we have bundled a number of social relations into sex” (2004, p. 144). That is, finances, hospital access, and kinship rights have all been (arbitrarily, if we believe Foucault) linked to sexual relationships (2004, p. 140). Thus, Pellegrini and Jakobsen recommend we treat sex as religiously and politically significant, but also recognize that sex is one among many concerns for scholars of embodied religions (2004, p. 139). Thinking sex does not exempt us from considering other cultural factors – race, education, geographic location, economic status – that construct and constrain religious belief and practice.

Elizabeth Povinelli and Katherine Ewing both address oversignification in their contributions to *The Immanent Frame*. In her 2007 “Can Sex Be a Minor Form of Spitting?”



Povinelli critiques Charles Taylor's "rather tame, dare one say, liberal" solution to the problem of sexual oversignification (cf. Taylor 2007). While Taylor argues for a celebration of sexual multiplicity, Povinelli insists that we must deprioritize sex as a bodily activity. She suggests we rather think of sex as "a minor form of spitting," a reconceptualization Povinelli hopes might foster "the conditions in which multiple forms of the body and communities thrive, not merely multiple forms of sexuality" (2007). Ewing's, "Religion, Spirituality, and the Sexual Scandal" (2010) focuses on the deployment of sexual oversignification, specifically by "that media darling, the religious sex scandal." Ewing suggests that such scandals are "public act[s] of abjection," attempts to expel religious conservatives from the body politic while establishing a tacit secular/spiritual, liberal (dare one say liberated?) orthodoxy.

The U.S. government has not only used religion to regulate sex, but has also used sex to regulate religion.<sup>25</sup> The paradigmatic example of religious regulation on sexual grounds is the 1890 decision on *Davis v. Beason*, in which the Supreme Court ruled that free exercise does not protect religious practice – specifically the LDS practice of plural marriage. Terryl Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (1997) and Sarah Barringer Gordon's, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (2002) both provide insightful analysis of Mormon disenfranchisement on the grounds of "sexual decency."<sup>26</sup>

Oversignification also presents an opportunity to consider intersectionality,<sup>27</sup> particularly the intersection of race, sexuality, and religion.<sup>28</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas', "Black Body/White Soul: The Unsettling Intersection of Race, Sexuality, and Christianity" (2003) highlights the complicity of white Christianity in hypersexualizing black bodies, which places a "double burden of sin" on black people of faith (pp. 105–6). The consequences of this double burden, Brown Douglas suggests, have been "sexual silence and sexual discrimination," particularly against community members who engage in "abnormal" sexual behaviors (2003, p. 106).<sup>29</sup> Brown Douglas proposes a new sexual ethic, based on Foucauldean understandings of power and liberation theological "preferential options" for the oppressed (2003, pp. 109–10). Keith Boykin's, "Bearing Witness: Faith in the Lives of Black Lesbians and Gays" (1996) provides ethnographic evidence for Brown Douglas' argument. Boykin emphasizes the importance of the black church to understanding black queer American's experiences (p. 126).

### Conclusion

Critical theories of sexuality encourage us to think differently – deeper, broader, more carefully – about what sex is, what it can mean and what it can do. Scholars of American religions must think sex because religious Americans take sex very seriously, and American religious thought has material consequences. Americans' religious ideas about sex affect military service, access to marital privilege, even international government policies. Americans often assume that religion should tell us how to think (and do) sex – and that only certain kinds of sex are (or should be) permissible in "good old American" religions. As scholars of American religions, then, we should – we *must* – be thinking sex.

### Short Biography

Megan Goodwin is a doctoral candidate in the Religion and Culture concentration of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Religious Studies department. Her dissertation focuses on religious intolerance and masculinity in contemporary American

culture. She has published articles on the occlusion of queer discourse in the study of new religious movements scholarship and on the role of religious language in graphic novels. She has taught classes on critical theories of sex/gender and sexuality in contemporary religions, the role of religion in American history, philosophical approaches to the study of religion, and histories of global Christianities. Goodwin holds a BS in print journalism from Boston University and master's degrees in Women's Studies and Religious Studies from Drew University and UNC Chapel Hill respectively.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Sedgwick, with Judith Butler, is widely recognized as the mother of queer theory. See her *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), as well as Butler's, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993).

<sup>2</sup> To provide an introductory example of that materiality: Jakobsen and Pellegrini explore the extent to which American legal opinions often draw directly or indirectly upon interpretation of sacred texts. (For a non-sex-specific example of the American legal system's protestantism, see Winnifred Sullivan's, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* 2005.) The following do not address American religions *per se*, but might be of use in considering the relationship between sexuality and sacred texts: Peter Gomes', "Homophobia and the Bible" (1992), Randall C. Bailey's, "They're Nothing but Incestuous Bastards: The Polemical Use of Sex and Sexuality in Hebrew Canon Narratives" (1995), Walter Wink's, "Homosexuality and the Bible" (1999), Rebecca Alpert's, "In God's Image: Coming to Terms with Leviticus" (1989), the Hillel LGBT Resource Guide, and Scott Kugle's, "Sexuality, Diversity, and Ethics in the Agenda of Progressive Muslims" (2003).

<sup>3</sup> This necessarily oversimplifies Freud's theories of sexuality (though perhaps not many of those theories' practical applications). For more on Freud's understanding of sexuality, see his 1905 *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.

<sup>4</sup> This abbreviated (and contested, cf. Didier Eribon's *Michel Foucault*) timeline owes much to Foucault's *The Will to Knowledge (The History of Sexuality, Volume One, 1978)*, and does not intentionally convey a seamless shift in discourse, thought, or identity formation. Though American social historian George Chauncey does not dwell on the religious implications of sexual identity formation, his outstanding *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (1994) meticulously explores the multiple emergences of male sexual identities before World War II. Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* also challenges the absolutism of Foucault's proposed discursive shift from sexual acts toward sexual identities.

<sup>5</sup> Recently, however, theorists have begun to think about sex in the broader terms of social theories (cf. Warner's, *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (1993); Judith Halberstam's, *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005)). In conversation with queer theory matron Judith Butler, Saba Mahmood has challenged critical theory's bias toward conceptualizing agency as resistance – a point to which I return in Axiom 5.

<sup>6</sup> This understanding of critical sex theory reworks Halperin's definition of queerness, to wit: "queer' ... demarcates not a positivity but a positionality that is not restricted to lesbians and gay men but is in fact available to anyone who is or who feels marginalized because of her or his sexual practices" (1995, p. 62).

<sup>7</sup> Should one want to use a textbook in crafting a "Thinking Sex and American Religions" syllabus, *Que(e)rying Religion: A Critical Anthology* (1997), *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality: Documents and Essays* (2002), or *The Puritan Origins of American Sex: Religion, Sexuality, and National Identity in American Literature* (2001) might serve. More, the American Academy of Religion's syllabus project lists several syllabi on religion and sexuality. Kathryn Lofton and Susan Henking have also made their religion and sexuality syllabi available online.

Instructors might also consider directing students to the "Sexuality/Gender" section of Religion Dispatches as an introduction to pertinent conversations in the field.

<sup>8</sup> Disestablishment and free exercise are the two legal protections regarding religion explicitly stated in the first amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

<sup>9</sup> On this point, see Sedgwick's second axiom: "the study of sexuality is not coextensive with the study of gender; correspondingly, antihomophobic inquiry is not coextensive with feminist inquiry. But we can't know in advance how they will be different" (1990, p. 27).

The study of gender in American religions is far better established than the study of American religions and sexuality. An incomplete list of significant contributors to this conversation includes Ann Braude ("Women's History Is American Religious History American Religious History" (1997); *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (2nd edn. 2001), *Sisters and Saints: Women and American Religion* (2007)), Mary McClint-

tock Fulkerson (*Changing the Subject: Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology* (2001)), Rebecca Alpert (*Like Bread on a Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition* (1998); *Lesbian Rabbis: The First Generation* (ed. 2001)), R. Marie Griffith (*God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (2000); *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora: Knowledge, Power, and Performance* (ed. 2006)), Laurie Maffly-Kipp and Kathryn Lofton (*Women's Work: An Anthology of African-American Women's Historical Writings from Antebellum America to the Harlem Renaissance* (ed. 2010); see also Lofton's, "Queering Fundamentalism: John Balcom Shaw and the Sexuality of a Protestant Orthodoxy" (2008), which is in many ways a stronger piece on masculinity than it is on sexuality), Robert Orsi (*Thank You St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (1998)), Anthea Butler (*Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (2007)), Catherine Brekus (*Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (1998); *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past* (ed. 2007)), and Lynne Neal (*Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction* (2006)). Kelly Baker provides a three part series on "Gender and the American Religious Historian" on the Religion in American History blog, available here: part one; part two; part three.

It is worth noting that the study of gender in American religions remains strongly biased toward consideration of women (cf. Kelly Baker and Jon Butler on this point). Studies of Muscular Christianity and the Promise Keepers represent the lion's share of scholarship on masculinity and American religions. Beyond these two concentrations, see David Morgan's chapter on "The Masculinity of Christ" in his 1999 *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (pp. 97-123), forthcoming work from Baker (*The Gospel According to the Klan*) and Amy Koehlinger (*Rosaries and Ropeburns: Boxing and Manhood in American Catholicism*), as well as Bret Carroll's "The Religious Construction of Masculinity in Victorian America: The Male Mediumship of John Shoebridge Williams" (1997), Janet Moore Lindman's "Acting the Manly Christian: White Evangelical Masculinity in Revolutionary Virginia" (2000), and Molly McGarry's (2008, pp. 247-82). For instructors interested in assigning fiction for discussions of religion and masculinity, I cannot recommend Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* strongly enough. (Be sure to require the book rather than the movie – the film omits Palahniuk's messianic conclusion.)

<sup>10</sup> Transgender here refers to persons whose gender identities are either mutable or ambiguous; intersex is a medical term referring persons whose bodies are sexually indeterminate. David Valentine's, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (2007) and Morgan Holmes', *Intersex: A Perilous Difference* (2008) provide detailed historical and analytical accounts of these identities. Judith Butler's work in *Undoing Gender* (2004), Judith Halberstam's, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), Jay Prosser's, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998), and Riki Wilchins', "A Certain Kind of Freedom: Power and the Truth of Bodies—Four Essays on Gender" (2002) might also be of interest.

<sup>11</sup> Discussion of transgender and intersex identities also requires historical specificity and geographic awareness. For example: while there gender-ambiguity occurs in many times and places, transgender emerged as an identity in the early 1980s. More, as Gayatri Reddy notes in her 2005 *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, western scholars often interpret non-western case studies as instantiations of cultural theories – particularly with regard to non-traditional gender performances. Thus, Reddy argues that we must be mindful "of the history and politics of particular discursive and theoretical lenses" (2005, p. 4). While gender and sexuality are obviously important in hijras' lives, understanding hijras solely as "the quintessential 'third sex' or 'neither men nor women' ultimately might be a disservice to the complexity of their lives" (Reddy 2005, p. 4). For Americanists, this is especially pertinent to considerations of Native American shamanic conventions such as berdache (see, e.g., Sabine Lang's, "There is More than Just Men and Women: Gender Variance in North American Indian Cultures" (1996)).

<sup>12</sup> See also Axiom 6 regarding the Nation of Islam's mobilization of "black uplift" strategies, including "sexual propriety" (cf. Curtis). I have already mentioned Jakobsen and Pellegrini's *Love the Sin* and "Marriage Plots," both of which explore this issue. Their 2008 "Practicing Sex, Practicing Democracy" further engages the American political "presumption that 'values' equals 'sexuality', and conservative sexuality at that." As with their previous work, Jakobsen and Pellegrini insist that religious and sexual freedom are mutually contingent. "Ironically," the authors insist, "there might be more religious freedom if there were more sexual freedom."

<sup>13</sup> McGarry's article, "'The Quick, the Dead, and the Yet Unborn: Untimely Sexualities and Secular Hauntings,'" and her final chapter in *Ghosts of Futures Past* cover very similar material; the argument and structure of the chapter is demonstrably clearer.

<sup>14</sup> Sex necessarily changes over distance as well. The extent to which queer theory has influenced critical sexual theories makes such theories particularly suited to the study of American religions – given its deep roots in Anglo-American identity politics, it's fair to say that queer theory speaks with an American accent (Warner 2002, p. xxv). I have previously referred to Gayatri Reddy's cautionary remarks on attempts to apply western cultural theory to non-western cultures (see Axiom 2). Povinelli and Chauncey address these challenges in their 1999 "Thinking Sex Trans-nationally: An Introduction;" Povinelli also argues for a trans-national approach to studying American sexualities in her 2007 "Disturbing Sexuality."

<sup>15</sup> While this article does not focus on Foucault's theorizations of religion, Jeremy Carrette's, *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* (2000) is a valuable resource on this topic.

<sup>16</sup> The introduction to the series' second volume, *The Use of Pleasure*, also contains a succinct and uncharacteristically clear statement of Foucault's original intentions for the project.

<sup>17</sup> “We must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power ... [I]t is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim ... to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance” (1978, p. 157).

<sup>18</sup> There are many noteworthy analyses of historical shifts in American religions and sexuality. Mark D. Jordan’s, *Recruiting Young Love: How Christians Talk about Homosexuality* (2011) surveys a half-century of Christian rhetoric – including interviews, memoirs, oral histories, and pulp novels – to demonstrate discursive shifts within the American church debates on adolescence and homosexuality. (Jordan discusses his work in an interview with Religion Dispatches here.) Vance further explores Adventist responses to homosexuality in her *Seventh Day Adventism in Crisis: Gender and Sectarian Change in an Emerging Religion* (1999, pp. 154–71). Heather White’s, “Proclaiming Liberation: The Historical Roots of LGBT Religious Organizing, 1946–1976” (2008) documents the emergence of many Christian LGBT religious communities. Theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid (2000) provided a Marxist theological response – what she called “doing theology without underwear” – to the complicated sexual and gendered elements of Latin and South American colonization in her *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics*. Ann Braude includes a chapter on sexuality and marriage among Spiritualists in her *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (2001, memorably titled “The Body and Soul Destroying Marriage Institution,” pp. 117–41). Charles Taylor’s genealogy of post-Enlightenment western religio-sexual morality in “Sex & Christianity: How Has the Moral Landscape Changed?” (2007) provoked a number of insightful responses on The Immanent Frame. As I mentioned above, McGarry argues convincingly that the sexual subject is not necessarily a secular one, both in her *Ghosts of Futures Past* (2008, “Secular Spirits,” pp. 154–76) and in “‘The Quick, the Dead, and the Yet Unborn: Untimely Sexualities and Secular Hauntings’” (2008). Hugh Urban’s, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism* (2006) focuses primarily on Europe; however, Urban’s chapters on “Paschal Beverly Randolph and the Birth of Sex Magic in Victorian America,” “The Goddess and the Great Rite,” and “The Age of Satan” might be of interest to Americanists. Finally, the introduction to Rebecca Alpert’s, *Like Bread on a Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition* (1997, pp. 1–16) provides a thought-provoking account of Jewish attempts to include sexual outsiders while preserving tradition.

With regard to primary sources, instructors might find the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Religious Archives Network of interest. The site includes a “profiles gallery” that identifies religious leaders involved in movements for queer justice, an oral history collection, early documents from LGBT communities of faith, and a “collections catalogue” that identifies primary source collections pertinent to research on LGBT religious organizations and activists.

<sup>19</sup> Taves discusses New England Puritans, 17th century Pueblo, Shakers, Oneidans, Mormons, 18th- and 19th-century black Protestants, 18th- and 19th-century Catholics, Jews, and Mormons, and mid-20th century debates about contraception in the course of 30 pages. She also includes some terminological anachronisms: see, for example, her reference to 16th century “heterosexual marriage.”

<sup>20</sup> My thinking on conservative or “negative” agency owes much to Saba Mahmood’s, “Agency, Performativity, and the Feminist Subject” (2006). The article provides a succinct summary of Mahmood’s project in her 2005 *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* while directly responding to Butlerian theories of gender performativity. Mahmood’s interlocutors are devout Muslim women of Cairo, who express their religious and gendered agency through pious submission. Though Mahmood’s work focuses primarily on concerns of gender rather than sexuality, this piece helped my students understand that thinking sex is not only about studying those who challenge regulations – and that sexual and gendered agency are not equivalent to resistance.

Mary McClintock Fulkerson makes a similar argument in her 2001 *Changing the Subject: Women’s Discourses and Feminist Theology*, in which she engages Foucauldian theories to consider religious women of Appalachia. R. Marie Griffith also addressed agency and submission in her *God’s Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*; however, Griffith’s genealogy posits subtle forms of gendered resistance within a conservative evangelical context (contra Mahmood).

<sup>21</sup> Jay Prosser, whose work I addressed in Axiom 2, also challenges the equivalence of sex with transgression or radicality. In both “Transgender” (1997) and *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998), Prosser disputes the “queering” of transgender and transsexual identities. The distinction is key, Prosser insists: not all transgender people consider themselves (or want to be thought of as) queer. Prosser explains that “queer theory’s deconstruction of sex ... clearly does not hold for those transsexuals who experience a traumatizing split between their sex and gender, whose goal in seeking [gender] reassignment is to align their sex to their gender identity. For these subjects, gender and sex may be all too different, sex all too real, that is material, embodied, fleshly” (1997, p. 319). For many transgender or transsexual people, then, the purpose of surgical or medical intervention is sexual conformity rather than transgression.

<sup>22</sup> Though beyond the scope of American religions, this video  
 embed code: [`<iframe src=“http://player.vimeo.com/video/15747849?title=0&byline=0&portrait=0” width=“400” height=“300” frameborder=“0”></iframe><p><a href=“http://vimeo.com/15747849” >NiqaBitch shakes Paris (Official video – english version)</a> from <a href=“http://vimeo.com/user4724649” >NiqaBitch </a> on <a href=“http://vimeo.com”>Vimeo</a>.</p></code>]`

made by two women who call themselves “Niqabitch,” beautifully illustrates the cognitive dissonance between western cultures’ approval of women in revealing clothing and discomfort with women choosing to cover their bodies. (n.b. The video is set to sixth track on the Beastie Boys’ “To the 5 Boroughs” album; instructors leery of profanity in the classroom might want to play this one on mute.) And while Scott Kugle’s, “Sexuality, Diversity, and Ethics in the Agenda of Progressive Muslims” does not directly address Islam in America, he provides compelling textual evidence of a Quranic imperative for sexual justice (2003, pp. 190–234).

<sup>23</sup> Erzen also addresses ex-gay ministries in her 2007 article, “Testimonial Politics: The Christian Right’s Faith-Based Approach to Marriage and Imprisonment” (an arguably unfortunate juxtaposition). As in *Straight to Jesus*, Erzen demonstrates the ways in which “Christian Right” organizations mobilize a “born again” narrative – here, to provide an origin for and solution to social ills such as homosexuality and criminality (2007, p. 1010).

Instructors interested in discussing ex-gay ministries at length might also consider using Sy Rogers’ work as primary source material. Rogers formerly identified as gay and transsexual; he now lectures internationally on healing “sexual brokenness” through a relationship with god. This video,

embed code: [`<iframe src=“http://player.vimeo.com/video/3273904?portrait=0” width=“400” height=“300” frameborder=“0”></iframe><p><a href=“http://vimeo.com/3273904” > Sy Rogers – Freedom from Homosexuality and Transsexualism</a> from <a href=“http://vimeo.com/purepassion” > Pure Passion</a> on <a href=“http://vimeo.com”>Vimeo</a>.</p>`]

in which Rogers details his own sexual genealogy, illustrates many elements discussed in Erzen and Gerber’s work.

<sup>24</sup> On this point, see also Bethany Moreton’s, “Why is There So Much Sex in Christian Conservatism and Why Do So Few Historians Care Anything about It?” (2009). [http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?&id=GALE%7CA206533088&v=2.1&u=unc\\_main&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?&id=GALE%7CA206533088&v=2.1&u=unc_main&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w).

<sup>25</sup> Jakobsen and Pellegrini also address the mutual imbrication of sexual and religious gain in their 2008 “Practicing Sex, Practicing Democracy.”

<sup>26</sup> Gordon also explores legal constructions of American religion in her 2000 “Blasphemy and the Law of Religious Liberty in Nineteenth-Century America.” Gordon suggests that legal restrictions on blasphemy (including pornography and obscenity) constituted attempts by judges, clerics, and other enforcers to shape the American religious landscape on the grounds of “religious liberty.”

<sup>27</sup> Intersectionality is a methodology that considers the ways in which culturally constructed identity categories (race, class, gender, ability, etc.) interact and contribute to social inequalities. Kimberle Crenshaw introduced intersectionality as a feminist social theory in “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color;” Patricia Hill Collins popularized the term in her 1991 *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. As per Collins, intersectionality “refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice” (1991, p. 18).

<sup>28</sup> Thinking critically about race is just as important – and just as challenging – as thinking critically about sex. In previous classes, I’ve used Peggy McIntosh’s “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” to introduce the topic of white privilege. The reading sort of works: the students usually get the point, but the item my students seemed most consistently surprised by was the bandage issue (“#26 I can choose blemish color or bandages in ‘flesh’ color and have them more or less match my skin.”) Bandages did illustrate institutionalized commercial racism, but the reading didn’t have quite the impact I hoped for. In teaching “Sex and American Religions,” I used Tim Wise’s “Imagine: Protest, Insurgency and the Workings of White Privilege.” In this piece, Wise asks the reader to imagine that hundreds of black or Arab-American protesters marched on Washington D.C., carrying AK-47s and calling for political revolution (recalling the gun rallies in D.C. and Virginia led by white second amendment activists in April 2010). “Protest is only seen as fundamentally American when those who have long had the luxury of seeing themselves as prototypically American engage in it,” Wise insists. “When the dangerous and dark ‘other’ does so, however, it isn’t viewed as normal or natural, let alone patriotic.” Though more conservative students might find Wise’s political bias off-putting, this reading brought home the material consequences of white privilege in a way McIntosh did not.

Students at Earlham College created a “sexual orientation” version of the “Invisible Knapsack” to address “straight privilege,” which also might be of interest to instructors. The document is available [here](#).

<sup>29</sup> On this point, see also Edward Curtis’, “Islamizing the Black Body: Ritual and Power in Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam” (2002) as well as “The Ethics of the Black Muslim Body” (2006, pp. 131–74). In both, Curtis discusses Nation of Islam members’ deployment of traditionally Protestant “black uplift” techniques like sexual propriety to “reform the black body, which was depicted as a main battleground for the black soul” (2002, p. 169).



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