

Homosexuality: The Criminalization of Love from Hollywood, the Government, and
Popular Culture from 1945 to 1961

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Introduction

"O Heart O Love everything is suddenly turned to gold! Don't be afraid, don't worry the most astounding beautiful thing has happened here!"¹ In writing to his homosexual lover, Peter Orlovsky, in 1958, Allen Ginsberg detailed the passionate, whirlwind love affair that would define both their identity and "criminal" behavior. Looking specifically at Ginsberg's informative letters to his "life-long love," an essential focus of the historiographical record allows historians to discern love, identity, and the dichotomy between straightness and homosexuality in the mid-twentieth-century.² Ginsberg, a prominent American poet of the Counterculture, enables the methodological study of homosexuality to pronounce itself. The combination of romantic, sometimes sexual letters, denote that queer males needed to not only stay hidden from the fear of social alienation, but also from facing punitive sentences with the law. In the post-war, conformist society that characterized 1950s America, engaging in sodomy (the anal-copulation between males during intercourse), threatened to leave anyone engaging in these sexual acts felons within various states.³

So, when Orlovsky openly discussed his homosexual fantasies with his lover in explicit detail, both his safety and personal sovereignty were at risk. While the torrid love affair between Ginsberg and Orlovsky only constitutes one example of gay romance in the face of social and penal oppression, their narratives, letters, and sexual exchanges fully highlight an essential study of homosexuality, and how the government perceived this sexual orientation. As the American

¹ Allen Ginsberg, letter to Peter Orlovsky, January 20, 1958.

² Ibid.

³ "History of Sodomy Laws and the Strategy That Led Up to Today's Decision," *ACLU Online*, accessed November 3rd, 2020. <http://www.aclu.org/other/history-sodomy-laws-and-strategy-led-todays-decision>

sociopolitical portrait began to shift following the transition into the second half of the twentieth century, a desperate need to define normalcy and the American identity became paramount.

While Ginsberg and Orlovsky continued to exchange letters of their unconditional love for one another, the American political machine continually manifested into a conservative, intolerant obstacle to their romantic expression. With the increasing levels of paranoia and distrust within Congress' legislative body, men like Joseph McCarthy fanned the flames of prejudice that impacted both queer communities and those ascribing to "communist" ideology. The Red Scare of the 1950s examined a critical discourse in how American identity defined individuals and their connections with their communities.⁴ For men like Ginsberg, the McCarthy era and the witch-hunt against supposed communists would orchestrate an intricate, systematic class of violence against the LGBTQIA community. Linguistic phrases like "sex perverts" continually sought to link communism with the amorality of homosexuality.⁵ Moreover, these phrases constituted only one facet of the notorious Lavender Scare that plagued homosexuals throughout the country. Much like the Red Scare, the Lavender proponent hoped to discover, interrogate, and punish those deemed subversive and deviant in the eyes of the government. Furthermore, the Lavender Scare, and its insidious history, operated as a vessel for structural homophobia to destroy the lives of thousands of gay men within government, media, and corporate America.

The investigation into the Lavender Scare, and the blatant homophobia it sponsored, leads historians to an important glimpse of why homosexual men became the targeted demographic. What dangers did homosexuality pose to the perfect world of the hyper-masculine

⁴ Terry Calvani, "Homosexuality and the Law," *Stanford Law Review Vol. 26, No. 4* (1974): 965-970, accessed November 8, 2020.

⁵ Clyde R Hoey, "Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government,(Report, Washington, D.C., 1950), 1-2.

patriarchy? The concise answer lies in its inherent rejection of a multitude of American ideals on family, duty, and patriotism. The linkage between communism and homosexuality both presented inherent dangers to the growing capitalist sentiment within governing institutions. For example, while the Korean War violently demonstrated the lengths the capitalist west, specifically America, would go to protect democratic ideologies in a fragile, war-torn Eurasia, the threat of communism seeping into the foundations of American consciousness presented a pressing danger. Men like Ginsberg and his lover threatened to overturn the substantial conformity that ruling institutions needed to maintain to vanquish communism. Furthermore, because communism and homosexuality underscored insubordination to capitalism's established order, their perceived identity as "un-American" incited panic and investigation: the birth of the Lavender Scare finds its beginnings due to these ideological threats.

As queerness and communism operated as the same malevolent force for the general public, it remains essential to look at why these unrelated concepts became so strictly grouped. Exploring the methods employed by Hollywood, the federal government, and the reactions of queer individuals to these conservative sanctions, allows for a fuller understanding of homosexuality's criminalization by the public. Because the post-war, boomtime economy of the 1950s relied on American ideals of patriotism, breaking away from these nationalistic expectations indicated a proclivity for treason and betrayal. Stepping out of these critical, well-defined gender confinements countered the idea of the real American. Queer people, like Allen Ginsberg and his lover, Peter Orlovsky, could never fit into this ideal because their existence acted as contrary to the true American family. The examination of letters, government propaganda, the perusal into the United States legal system, and media's influence, allows for a fresher, more nuanced understanding of homosexuality, heteronormativity, and the

criminalization of gay males between 1945 through 1961. Through these analyses, a more intersectional portrait of queer existence develops.

Historiography

For decades, popular and academic historiography ignored homosexuality, queer narratives, and America's dynamic gay cultures. Even with the rise of discipline-shaking historical thought, as with the emergence of social history, a branch of academic history that utilizes social theory to examine structures and systems, the study of queerness and homosexuality have been left underrepresented. The introduction of contemporary, fresher methodological studies within historical discourse has allowed the examination of sexuality to fully encapsulate romantic and sexual patterns deemed taboo by previous sociopolitical dogmas. These new methodologies allow investigating historians to understand and observe an intersectional history erased by popular cataloging. When discussing this methodological trend, it is crucial to underscore the influential works that have allowed these ignored narratives to break into academic and public consciousness. For Michael Bronski and his explorative, discipline shaking monograph *A Queer History of the United States*, the unsaid history of gay culture falls into a more specialized focus. Recounting the queer narratives and stories that the previous historiography rejected, Bronski detailed the authentic lives of gay Americans from the cessation of World War II to the last years of the twentieth century.⁶ Within his explorative monograph, Bronski allowed the historical discipline, and the reader to fully explore how the culture of homophobia of twentieth-century America inadvertently created the various cultures, habits, and idiosyncrasies of queer identity and spaces.

⁶ Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011).

Moreover, throughout Bronski's work, his attention to underscoring the importance of these narratives, such as the investigation into the achievements of various queer Americans, allows for the history of this particular marginalized group to significantly add to the canon of academic history. Bronski's informative monograph not only ushered in a critical discussion on the significance of studying the LGBTQIA+ community, his work constantly enabled both academic historians and casual readers a fresher understanding of how queer communities operated within these homophobic systems. However, the most crucial proponent of this monograph derives from its impact in telling the stories of queer Americans and what these narratives continue to offer the discipline. Bronski's lived experiences, and the incorporation of them into his historical study, highlight how queer Americans perceived their environment, while also discussing the reasons for the gradual explosion of gay spaces. Bronski's monograph not only validated queer achievements, stories, and events, his influential work pushes the historiographical record to reach outside of its established canon. By fully incorporating these erased experiences, Bronski investigated why queer-American history needed more attention. Future scholars must utilize his revolutionary monograph to continue to push the boundaries of historical understanding.

Following Bronski's lead in underscoring the lives, tribulations, and experiences of queer individuals before the Stonewall riots of 1969, the historian St. Sukie de la Croix encapsulated a vital facet of queer history in his revolutionary monograph *Chicago Whispers: The History of LGBT Before Stonewall*. Within his crucial addition to the historiography of sexuality studies, Sukie de la Croix ushers his audience into a history left undiscovered by previous academic cataloging. Unlike Bronski, however, Sukie de la Croix centers his argument around the city of Chicago. From its humble beginnings as a fur-trading post to its transformation into a mighty

metropolis, Sukie de la Croix offered his readers something revolutionary- the study of developing queer cultures and communities.⁷ As his work spanned from the sixteenth-century to the 1960s, Sukie de la Croix impactfully illustrated the brutalities queer communities faced from law enforcement, doctors, and the media. Sukie de la Croix crafted an exceptionally linear work that details how the gay community established itself, evolved, and transformed into an essential tenant of urban existence. Sukie de la Croix pioneered queer history and all that this discipline could encapsulate by incorporating critical primary sources from police records and news articles. Much like Bronski's monograph, *Chicago Whispers* allows both academic historians and novice readers to engage in the lives, experiences, and tragedies that all queer individuals faced before the advent of the Gay Liberation Movement in the 1970s. Moreover, by refusing to engage in explosive, controversial Stonewall Riots, Sukie de la Croix flawlessly investigates how queer communities and singular queer individuals navigated Chicago's sociopolitical system before "coming out of the closet" (when queer individuals publically announce their sexual/gender identities) and what these communities offer the historical record.

While Bronski and Sukie de la Croix established and expanded the historical canon by incorporating queer narratives into the backdrop of American history and then discussing their significance, the historian Margot Canaday offered a more nuanced addition to the sexuality discourse. Within her monograph, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*, Canaday provided her audience with the reasons behind homosexual discrimination and marginalization within the sociopolitical structure. As Canaday focused on the American government and how the perceptions of queer communities, individuals, and practices transformed into policies of oppression. Within her monumental work, Canaday

⁷ St. Sukie de la Croix, *Chicago Whispers: A History of LGBT Before Stonewall* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012).

investigated how systematic prejudice against homosexuals, especially men, created the atmosphere of intolerance that contemporary America continues to perpetuate.⁸ In analyzing her methodology, Canaday breaks away from the linear timetable that Bronski and Sukie de la Croix rely on, choosing to focus instead on how welfare, the military, and the government came to oppress and discriminate against members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Moreover, Canaday's work underscored how the federal government, who created regulations and sanctions that negatively impacted queer Americans, transformed these communities, a facet that both Bronski and Sukie de la Croix fail to establish.

In understanding, investigating, and incorporating these works into my thesis, the importance of carving why the government and media established a culture of heteronormativity and intolerance allows for a fuller understanding of homophobia in post-war America. While Bronski and Sukie de la Croix both analyzed the importance of communities and the blatant homophobia they faced, they fail to underscore Hollywood's impact in maintaining these standards of 'normalcy.' Moreover, Sukie de la Croix focused specifically on Chicago and cultural progression into a gay haven. This facet enabled him to dive more specifically into personal narratives, but stopped him from addressing prejudice and conformity outside of his geographical focus. By expanding on *Chicago Whispers* by underscoring government sanctions and the role Hollywood played in maintaining nation-wide homophobia, my thesis will expand how scholars understand the severity of prejudice and intolerance by looking to the media and government for answers.

The incorporation of Canaday's work offers a different perspective, however. As aforementioned, Canaday discussed the federal government and how different sects, such as the

⁸ Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

military, continued to punish men and women for their sexual orientation. Investigating both Canaday's methodology and her important contributions to historiography offer my thesis an essential step in understanding the foundations of structural homophobia. Using her refined research, her additions to the discipline ultimately help me highlight, and carve out, more specifically, why the government deemed homosexuality dangerous and the measures various committees implemented to address these imagined threats. I will expand on Canaday's findings, adding to historiography how the media, specifically Hollywood, and the federal government worked in tandem to quell the menace of homosexuality.

The Lavender Scare, Government Discrimination, and The Identification of the Homosexual

With the cessation of World War II in August of 1945, the American war machine was finally able to turn their focus on the domestic sphere and their growing international prestige. As the Allied nations formally moved the exhausted world into the next epoch of history, the American people were left with many pressing concerns. As consumerism, materialism, and the capitalist system fully motioned the growing superpower into the next phase of industrialization, the growing influence of communism in Europe terrorized American notions of democracy and self-determination. An intrinsic need to define American identity in the midst of growing communist sentiment helped to denote the beginnings of post-war discrimination for the gay community. In analyzing, the government document "The Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government," the notion of swiftly developing homophobia became fully pronounced. When communism centered itself as a danger to the liberties of the American people following Germany's splintering into two zones, Congress became increasingly

aggressive in determining domestic dangers to government, economy, and the general public's moral health.⁹ Men like Joseph McCarthy, an American senator notorious for the Red Scare's witch-hunts, outlined a strong trend in how legislative homophobia metamorphosed into physical discrimination. The government investigation into the "homosexual male" bolstered the use of harmful stereotypes and codified hypersexual behavior as languid and immoral. For example, take the official distinctions between the "passive homosexual" and the "active homosexual."¹⁰ According to the subcommittee that explored government members accused of engaging in queer, sexual relationships, the passive gay male exhibited effeminate behavior, a need to get along with women, their scorn for the female anatomy, and their non-confrontational nature. For the active gay man, however, the stereotyping underscored something far more sinister. The "active gay male" exhibited predatory, pedophilic behavior for young boys, their distrust of women, and their ability to camouflage themselves within normal society, denoting their danger to peaceful communities.¹¹ The attention to bisexuality remained of paramount importance to these legislators because it fully encapsulated the danger these men conducted within their communities. Homosexuality, therefore, not only represented a danger to children, these sexual practices determined that all queer men were unable to reach "sexual maturity."¹²

The linkage between pedophilia, sexual immorality, and the inherent danger to municipal structures' moral fiber underscored the need to apprehend and punish homosexuality entirely. The creation of these subcommittees, which hunted down queer men, reflected the American sociopolitical machine's growing intolerance. This metastasizing prejudice against queer communities often left them victims of hate-crimes and professional blackballing due to their

⁹ Clyde R Hoey, "Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government, (Senate Report, Washington, D.C., 1950), 1-2.

¹⁰ Ibid, 4-10.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, 4-5.

"perverted" nature. As these subcommittees, like the one outlined in this 1950 document, came to define the nature, appearance legally, and behaviors of homosexuals, a causal relationship between vigilante justice and legal discrimination comes into full focus.¹³ A perfect example of this sort of governmental prejudice unveils when investigating the appearance of the Johns Committee. A governmental committee established to uncover, investigate, and swiftly punish those believed homosexual, or having pro-homosexual leanings, the Johns Committee acted as an inquisitorial and disciplinary vessel against the dangers of the homosexual. Just as the government document, "The Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government," hoped to define the attitudes, behaviors, and immorality of homosexual men, the Johns Committee of the University of Florida applied their findings with malicious fervor. For students and staff who engaged in supposed homosexual activity, the Johns Committee presented an immediate danger. This clear danger materialized fully for the tenured geography professor, Sigismond Dietrich on January 19th, 1955. Receiving a call from his university administration, Dietrich met with members of the state's investigative body that evening to discuss his rumored immorality and connections to homosexuality.¹⁴ After a daunting ninety-minute interrogation of his personal life, his relationships, and his out-of-office behaviors, the investigators alerted, to Dietrich's horror, that a member of his institution's staff had witnessed Dietrich engage in illegal acts of sodomy with another male. Reluctantly, Dietrich confessed to engaging in homosexual behavior with another male, knowing his position at the University of Florida was over.¹⁵ Through this personal account of homophobia, the notion of government and the Lavender Scare unveil the impacts to the at-risk demographic.

¹³ Ibid, 7-15.

¹⁴ James Anthonoy Schnur, "Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South," in *Closet Crusaders : The Johns Committee and Homophobia, 1956-1965*, ed. John Howard (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 130-132.

¹⁵ Ibid, 132-136.

Diettrich received a call from the President of the University, J. Wayne Reitz, and the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, informing him of his employment's immediate termination. The importance of this termination cannot go overstated. Diettrich later swallowed a handful of aspirin and attempted to commit suicide. His entire livelihood, his reputation within both academic and personal circles destroyed, an overwhelming sentiment of hopelessness consumed him. Fortunately, the attempt to take his own life failed, giving the historiographic record a critical account of how these practices of homophobia impacted various members of the gay community.¹⁶ Moreover, Diettrich's reaction to his investigation and the Johns Committee's decision delivered an emotional example of how dangerous structural homophobia remained to those targeted.

Governmental sanctions against the LGBTQIA+ placed queer men in immediate danger. Committees like the one seen at the University of Florida acted as bureaucratic forms of structural oppression that endangered men's lives like Diettrich. Following this example, many members of the gay community within Florida retreated into hiding, concealing their true identity from the general public and their workforce members. Explicit activity, such as meeting with another male, late-night liaisons, and even overly-friendly gestures between two members of the same sex threatened not only the employment of these men; many men faced penal sentences as sodomy remained illegal under the law. While many of those investigated by the Johns Committee did not resort to suicide after their interrogation with state officials, they saw their entire lives destroyed, just as Diettrich had. By investigating the interrogation of Diettrich, a fuller picture of structural homophobia unveils. While Diettrich's investigation and narrative represent only one account of the personal destruction that institutional paranoia, his experience with the Johns Committee highlights the panic gay men felt throughout the country.

¹⁶ Ibid, 133-136.

The Lavender Scare sought to purify America's ruling pillars by vetting immorality, blaming gay men and communists alike for the tarnishing of American culture. More importantly, the Johns Committee acted as a vestige of rampant homophobia in government. This investigative task force did not just operate within the confines of the University of Florida; however, members seeking to expunge homosexuals from the mechanisms of medicine, schooling, and municipal government traveled to spaces known to harbor and protect gay men. Members of the taskforce, Mark Hawes and Remus Strickland, understood that queer individuals often met at places around campus. For example, gay men found solace at the local institution, Burger House, a restaurant bar close to campus.

Moreover, and more pressing to Hawes and Strickland, men often attended 'purple passion parties' where they would binge drink in "dimly lit rooms" and engage in what these investigators believed polyamorous sexual liaisons.¹⁷ Understanding that these men investigated well into the private spheres of men within their communities underscores a complete breach of liberty. However, because both the federal and state governments encouraged, and even supported, the investigation into men's intimate lives to protect the moral fiber of America, the distressing nature of homophobia becomes more understandable. The men attending these parties not only represented deviancy that soiled the reputation of American superiority, many members of the state legislature feared a more treasonous reason for these outings. As aforementioned, communism and homosexuality existed as the same destructive force for government officials. Therefore, men like Hawes and Strickland, had a responsibility to seize and punish homosexual men for their dangerous behaviors.

The linkage between homosexuality, communism, and American identity cannot go overstated. The witch-hunt of gay men within government, and their subsequent termination,

¹⁷ Ibid, 133-140.

demonstrated the power that systemic power had over the general populace. The Lavender Scare denotes an important, understated narrative within queer history. The American political machine became obsessed with the discovery of perversion within all levels of government. James Thomas, an investigative member of the G.A.O, a subcommittee tasked with finding criminal deviance, noted in a memorandum that over ten homosexuals within his workforce, represented a momentous victory.¹⁸ Stating, "The G.A.O. had no record of the charges in these cases and were glad to receive the information concerning them," Thomas underscores the elation in discovering and punishing those deemed predatory threats.¹⁹ It is within this instance of institutional discrimination that the panorama of homophobia fully pronounces itself. The Lavender Scare linked homosexuality to treachery and danger, a development unprecedented in the American legal system. Unlike governmental practices of the early twentieth century, which tolerated and sometimes celebrated queer identity, defining what constitutes a gay man and their sexual behaviors underscored a significant shift into both the definition of queerness and its impacts on the perception of sexuality.

In the beginning of the twentieth-century, sexual orientation and identifying as queer represented something utterly divergent from the definitions of the mid to late-twentieth-century. In his revolutionary monograph, *Gay New York*, the historian George Chauncy offers historiography a better understanding of how the public perceived sexual orientation. While modern sensibilities denote that queerness applies to any sexual or romantic activity with someone of the same sex, the early twentieth-century offered a more complex, more intimate denotation of identity. For example, the phrase "coming out of the closet" is the public,

¹⁸ Judith Adkins, "'These People Are Frightened To Death:' Congressional Investigations and the Lavender Scare," *Prologue Magazine*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Summer 2016).

¹⁹Ibid.

unabashed announcement by a queer individual of their identity within the LGBTQIA+ community. “Coming out of the closet,” often a terrifying, traumatic experience for many adolescents coming to grips with themselves, represents an act of public proclamation that they exist outside of the heterosexual norm.²⁰ However, according to Chauncy “coming out of the closet” represented something far different for New Yorkers in the early-twentieth-century.²¹ For those men, coming out meant stepping out of the world of what queer individuals called “the normals” and asserting their spot in “homosexual society.”²² Moreover, queerness held different evaluations in a pre-war America. For example, men that acted as the provider during intercourse defined themselves as masculine and, consequently, not “fares.” Meanwhile, for the men that received during intercourse, the label of “fairy” and “queer” became an important part of their identities. Understanding this facet of identification and personal agency, highlighting of how masculinity and femininity participated in early forms of homosexuality helps historians underscore how codes of gender and their consequential expectations came to transform societal perception of sexuality.

As the importance of appearing like an “true American” became the standard for citizens across the country, essential gender confinements began to develop. Men of the 1950s now found that traditional forms of masculinity controlled almost every aspect of their lives. For example, having a wife, children, and acting as the breadwinner for one’s family underscored important notions of public maleness that all men participated in. While Chauncy illustrated that

²⁰ It’s important to note perspective while adding this footnote. While no sources can fully underscore the trauma in “coming out,” my first-hand account of the experience helps me to further explain why it should be treated seriously. For millions of gay men and women across America, the notion of publicly announcing their homosexuality is often met with ridicule, shunning, abuse, and sometimes violence. America still holds deep-seated notions of homophobia that endanger these adolescents.

²¹ George Chauncy, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 15-17.

²² *Ibid*, 6-8.

men of the past used their sexual positions to define both gender and their sexual orientations, the arrival of the 1950s created strict codes of gender expectations, and swiftly defined these identities. According to this new standard, any man who engaged in acts of homosexuality found themselves labeled as “gay,” or “faggot.”²³ While denoting insidious prejudice, these derogatory definitions also underscored how society’s perception of sexuality had transformed. Instead of the queer individual labeling themselves through dress, idiosyncracies, or public pronouncements, homosexual men found that society determined their identities. This critical development underscores the need for both the government and local municipalities to root out treacherous behavior of communism, immorality, and deviancy. Naturally, the evolving definitions of homosexual also needed to encompass queer individuals. It is here where homophobia and governmental prejudice carved new notions of queerness and its relationship to America as a whole.

Furthermore, before the 1950s, queer identity did not exist on the plane of strict dichotomy; rather, the concrete definitions between heterosexuality and homosexuality had not yet been conceptualized. Instead, queer people and the communities around them gauged sexuality based on behavior, dress, and whether they stuck to the hegemonic gender constraints found in the early years of the 1900s. For example, for “effeminate” gay men, their label of “fairy” or the now derogatory word “fag” exposed to the public their identity. Conversely, men who engaged in masculine behaviors, dress, and did not publicly solicit men in bars and clubs often found themselves without the labels their more effeminate counterparts held.²⁴ Lastly, Chuancy’s work helped to expose why the evolution of society’s perception of homosexuality transformed.

²³ Ibid, 10-20.

²⁴ Ibid, 7-15.

In post-war America, the desire and expectation to public operate as a “normal,” or heterosexual directly connected to one’s patriotism and commitment to American ideals of masculinity and femininity. More specifically, the celebration of the nuclear family, which constituted a husband, wife, and two children, underscored a vital ideal of American identity: the celebration and expectation of heterosexuality ultimately created an ambiance of intolerance to those who stepped outside of this patriotic duty. The days of ambiguous sexual identity and the celebration of queer identities had ceased. While queer individuals of the early twentieth century may have found solace in their gender expression, the push for normalcy, patriotism, and conformity ushered a new standard for sexual identity in post-war America: the gender binary.

Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Popular Culture

In discerning the impacts these governmental mandates had upon the general public, historians only need to focus their gaze on Hollywood and popular culture. High-profile celebrities who did engage in homosexual relations often split their public image and their private life. The characterization of this dichotomy stems from the public appearance of movie stars, musicians, socialites, and the meaningful private life of secrets, romance, and their authentic selves. This imperative separation becomes fully apparent when analyzing the life and legacy of 1950s movie star Tab Hunter. Born Arthur Andrew Kelm, Hunter found himself in the public eye after meeting with the prolific manager, Henry Wilson, who created the stage persona "Tab Hunter." A former World War II veteran, Hunter's clean-cut appearance and conventional good looks allowed him to ascend to superstardom in the 1950s and 60s with productions like *Battle Cry* and *Girl Left Behind*.²⁵ This public persona, however, demonstrated very little about

²⁵ Tab Hunter and Eddie Muller, *Tab Hunter Confidential: The Making of a Movie Star* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2006), 17-24, 104-109.

the true nature of Hunter's private life. For the fans of Hunter's movies, the blond heartthrob represented both ideals of beauty standards and favorable American identity. While women fawned at his superficial beauty and shy demeanor, Hunter harbored a dangerous secret, a secret that had the potential to ruin his budding career and endangered his civil liberties. Behind closed doors, Hunter engaged in various homosexual relationships with other members of the entertainment industry.²⁶ Within his 2005 memoir, *Tab Hunter Confidential: The Making of a Movie Star*, Hunter discusses how social pressures forced him to live "two lives at once."²⁷ In living two different lives, one for public consumption and one of his homosexual love affairs, Hunter's experience offers something important to the analysis of American culture and identity in 1950. His documented, secret relationships with fellow actor Anthony Perkins and figure skater Ronnie Robertson underscore how systemic prejudice forced men like Hunter to exist with a double identity. More importantly, however, Hunter's life exemplifies the characterization of homosexuality and Hollywood.²⁸

Much like the governmental structures that existed to hunt down queer professionals, the media's aggressive nature continually investigated Hunter's personal life and romantic relationships. Hoping to define his sexuality for themselves, tabloid journalists, and their invasive, practices highlight a significant cultural shift within America and clearly outline sexuality. For heterosexual couples, the flashing of romance sculpted a crucial identity because women and men existed as different labor beings to the capitalist machine. Take, for example, the gender stations that men and women existed within. In popular culture and everyday practice, men existed within the public sphere as businessmen, attorneys, construction workers, and authors. For women, however, the focus on homemaking and domestic work characterized

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, 501.

²⁸ Ibid, 134-140.

their gender station. American society, therefore, continually reinforced the notion of separate spaces and separate duties between men and women, and, consequently, husband and wife.²⁹ Popular television sit-coms like *I Love Lucy* and *Leave it to Beaver* also helped craft this conformity persona. These shows depicted the separate duties of men and women digestible to everyone in a nuclear family, demonstrating that America's subtle brainwashing stemmed from popular culture and its various devices. Homosexuality, in turn, could not fit into this mold of gender expectations because, by its very nature, represented a challenge to the heterosexual family system. So, when observing the life and legacy of closeted homosexuals, like Tab Hunter, important social cues become more nuanced and contradictory. The refusal to depict a homosexual relationship in the media not only demonstrated fervent homophobia handed down from government discourse, but it also represented the American's populace's participation in these discriminatory practices. Hunter, therefore, was forced to engage in fake relationships with women like Debbie Reynolds to preserve his reputation and celebrity status. More importantly, however, these pretend romances offered him a modicum of protection against the rampant homophobia that plagued the entertainment industry.³⁰

Subtle homophobia within a popular culture constituted the bread and butter of the entertainment industry. Television, movies, and billboard charting music all underscored the normalcy of heterosexuality. By refusing to mention homosexuality as an alternative to this romance and sexuality system, Hollywood delicately provided the happiness example. However, propaganda films like "The Dangerous Stranger" underscored a more malicious, deliberate form of homophobic indoctrination. Within this propaganda feature, parents within all communities

²⁹ Joyce Lubold, "My Love Affair with the Washing-Machine Man," In *Women's Magazines 1940-1960: Gender Roles and the Popular Press*, ed. Nancy A. Walker, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998), 189-193.

³⁰ Tab Hunter and Eddie Muller, *Tab Hunter Confidential: The Making of a Movie Star* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2006).

were warned about the dangers of pedophiles and "dangerous strangers" creeping within their suburbs and streets. The male actors within these videos tricked male children into their cars and homes to abuse and attack them. It is within this particular presentation that the dangers of Homosexuality pronounce themselves to the viewer.³¹ Government documents like "The Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government" already underscored the pressing, urgent danger of homosexuals within the government. Propaganda series like "The Dangerous Stranger" helped to highlight these dangers in a manner easily understandable to the typical American. These ideological, homophobic public service announcements display how homosexual males slowly morphed into predatory beings of danger and immorality. When the public consumed this damaging information, they came to believe that their communities were in immediate danger, thereby becoming less tolerant of those who don't ascribe to heterosexuality.

For men like James Justin, the dangers of this developing homophobia transformed his worldview. As a gay man growing up in 1950s Wisconsin, Justin's narrative underscores the jeopardy all gay men experienced.³² According to his account, Justin understood that his fundamental differences could leave him as the victim of physical violence and hate crimes from an early age. While he did engage in love affairs, sexual partnerships, and even homosexual romances in his adolescent years, Justin understood correctly that the only avenue for protection came from self-defense and martial arts. Learning how to defend himself from violent homophobia became an essential part of his sexual awakening and safety. Having one of his boyfriends teach him self-defense, Justin's narrative underscores an influential proponent, and consequence, of propagandized heteronormativity and discrimination. As the media slowly

³¹ Orville H. Hampton, "The Dangerous Stranger," directed/produced by Sid Davis (1951; Sidney Davis Productions, 1951), video.

³² James Justin, interviewed by Miriam Frank, "We Just Stood Up for Our Own Self:" James Justin Recalls Growing Up Gay in the 1950s," Miriam Frank, 1996.

indoctrinated the public on the dangers of Homosexuality, queer men like Justin were left vulnerable to violence. This physical violence, supported by the media as a means to protect one's community, demonstrated that homophobia was not only the duty of the citizen but was a measure of one's commitment to their community. Hollywood, therefore, helped craft the social functioning of discrimination against queer individuals and communities. When the public becomes exposed to intolerance messages that justify prejudice, the notion of protection for one's community and family continually rationalizes violence.

While Hollywood did continue to promote a steady wave of homophobia within America, the utilization of other tools of propaganda appeared on television screens across the nation. Instructors of secondary schools continually bombarded their charges with demonized views of homosexuality and these dangerous citizens' characteristics. In the 1961 educational picture "Boys Beware," the looming threat of the predatory homosexual man came into focus. In the film, an omnipotent narrator described an innocent boy-next-door by the name of Jimmy. After a day in the park, Jimmy hitched a ride to his home by a stranger, where they engaged in small talk and casual conversation. The following day, Jimmy again met this mysterious stranger at the same park, where he escorted him to a small pond to fish and have a picnic. As the conversation turned scandalous, the dangerous stranger offered Jimmy a glimpse at his pornography collection. In this instance, the narrator describes the sickness that the stranger suffers from-homosexuality.³³ The stranger hoped to lure Jimmy to a secluded location in the educational piece, gain his trust, and then sexually assault him. According to this specific propaganda, all homosexual men suffered from a medical malady, a sickness that compelled them to prey on innocent young boys.³⁴ With this specific primary source, the attitudes surrounding

³³ Sid Davis, "Boys Beware," directed/produced by Sid Davis, (1955; Sidney Davis Productions, 1961), Film.

³⁴ Ibid.

homosexuality demonstrate that this sexual orientation was not only taboo- it presented a danger to children within the community.

Propaganda tools, such as the video “Boys Beware,” underscored social attitudes towards homosexuality, most pressingly that this identity held inherent danger to the most innocent of every community. Specifically targeted at homosexual men, propaganda videos labeled as “educational” sought to insert ideological conceptions of why homosexuality was such an insidious hindrance in society. By instructing children that gay men existed solely to take advantage of their innocent and hurt them, adolescents nationwide began to perpetuate homophobic prejudices. Whether subconscious or otherwise, these blatant depictions of gay men as “sick” or “predatory” only served to boost the conceptions of heterosexuality as the proper path for normalcy.³⁵ Homosexuality, therefore, transformed into something dangerous, an entity that threatened to destroy communities, assault children, and undermine progress. It is critical for investigating historians to examine these types of propaganda tools when studying the structure of gender and sexuality within a conservative society such as 1950s America.

Conclusion

With the cessation of the Second World War, America found itself at the epicenter of a global transformation. As the next chapter of world history unfolded around the military superpower, incredible social augmentations began to happen within its domestic sector. While not a time of peace, the Cold War’s initiation against the Soviet Union propelled America to establish strict conservative ideologies. More pressingly, the need to define a cohesive, hegemonic sociopolitical order created an atmosphere of intolerance and paranoia. As the looming threat of communism entered every American’s mind, the importance of enforcing

³⁵ Ibid.

compulsory patriotism and American values became paramount. The federal government, and consequently, state governments, began to investigate and punish members of society who did not meet these strict standards of heteronormativity, gender assignments, or capitalist fervor. With the introduction of the Red Scare by senator Joseph McCarthy in the early years of the 1950s, the obsessive compulsion to weed out “un-American” activities, such as communism created an atmosphere of intolerance and distrust within every community, corporation, and committee. Moreover, the Red Scare’s odious appearance only acted as a catalyst for further discriminatory practices within government and in the private sector. The Lavender Scare, the systematic inquiry into homosexual activity within the government, universities, and business, sought to identify, interrogate, and punish homosexual behavior.

As queerness and communism operated as the same malevolent force for the general public, it remains essential to look at why these unrelated concepts became so strictly grouped. Exploring the methods employed by Hollywood, the federal government, and the reactions of queer individuals to these conservative sanctions allows for a fuller understanding of homosexuality’s criminalization by the public. Because the post-war, boomtime economy of the 1950s relied on American ideals of patriotism, breaking away from these nationalistic expectations indicated a proclivity for treason and betrayal. Stepping out of these critical, well-defined gender confinements countered the idea of the real American. Queer people, like Allen Ginsberg and his lover, Peter Orlovsky, could never fit into this ideal because their existence acted as contrary to the true American family. The examination of love letters, government propaganda, the perusal into the United States legal system, and the influence of the media, allow for a fresher, more nuanced understanding of homosexuality, heteronormativity,

and the criminalization of gay males between 1945 through 1961. Through these analyses, a more intersectional portrait of queer existence develops.

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