

Sex & Surveillance:

Gender and Sexual
Deviancy in the Era of the
Comstock Laws

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My research on this theme pertains to the Comstock Laws, enforcers from the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, and law enforcement acting under the umbrella of morality and these connections to both the world of prostitution, pornography publishers, sexual minority groups, as well as the birth control movement of the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth century in New York City. Comstock was part founder of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice (NYSSV), this society was created to enforce the “suppression of trade in and circulation of obscene literature, and illustrations, advertisements, and articles of indecent and immoral use, as it is or may be forbidden by the laws of the State of New York or of the United States.” (NYSSV Annual Report, 1873) This specific field of history is a topic of political urgency today. Gender and sexual deviancy in the United States today continues to be surveyed and policed under the laws and orders of the Federal Government. The rights and freedoms of gender and sexual freedoms today are in a fragile state.

Intellectual Foundations

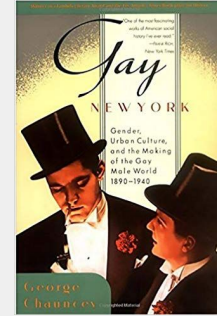
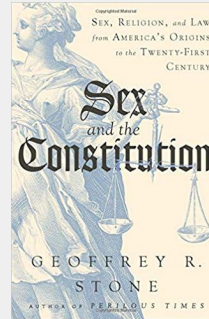


Public History

When it comes to defining public history, practicing public historians might be tempted to recall the United States Supreme Court justice who offered this provocative short-hand definition of obscenity and pornography back in 1964: “I know it when I see it.” For veterans and new professionals in the field, this might be good enough. But for those unfamiliar with the term, a little more elaboration is in order. - National Council on Public History

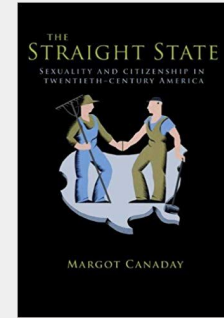
<https://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/>

Queering History



Connection to the Present

Questions of Race & Class



Podcast Episodes



A New Era of Obscenity

- ◆ **The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice & Anthony Comstock**

Family Matters

- ◆ **Planning, pamphlets, and policing of information through the postal service**

Smut Suppressed

- ◆ **The pornography industry and the question of art in the 19th century**

Androgyny, Fairies, and Queers, Oh My!

- ◆ **The fluid public and private world of sexuality and performance**

Vice & Disease

- ◆ **Rhetoric surrounding public health, vice, and morality in the public sphere**



Feminist Leadership:

- Subject matter
- Mentors
- My own work
- Sharing ideas

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“

*This law often placed
“pornographers, social
reformers, advocating free
love, birth control, and sex
education” under one
legal umbrella. (Dennis)*

—◇—

TABULAR STATEMENT, showing a part of the work of the
New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, from its
organization.

DESCRIPTION.	Prior to January, 1882.	1882.	Total.
Persons arrested in U. S. Courts.....	248	10	258
" " State Courts.....	334	108	442
Discharged by committing magistrates... juries.....	27 0	8 17	45 17
Convicted or plead guilty.....	281	30	311
Sentenced.....	251	22	273
Prisoners absconded.....	19	1	20
" rearrested.....	25	3	28
Disagreement by juries.....	12	.....	12
Convicted on second trial.....	5	.....	5
Bail bonds forfeited.....	\$50,000	\$2,500	\$52,500
Years of imprisonment imposed.....	Yrs. mos. days.	Yrs. mos. days.	Yrs. mos. days.
Amount of fines imposed.....	151 11 23	3 20	155 13
Convicts paroled.....	\$63,931	\$1,325-07	\$65,256-07
	17		17
STOCK CONFISCATED.			
Books and sheet stock seized and destroyed.	27,584 lbs.	2 lbs.	27,586 lbs.
Obscene pictures and photos.....	203,258	1,301	204,559
Microscopic pictures for charms, knives, etc.....	7,400	.....	7,400
Negative plates for making obscene pho- tographs.....	1,700	.....	1,700
Engraved steel and copper plates.....	352	.....	352
Woodcuts and electro-plates.....	536	3	539
Stereotype plates for printing books, etc....	14,495 lbs.	.....	14,495 lbs.
Number of different books.....	165	.....	165
Lithographic stones destroyed.....	20	.....	20
Articles for immoral use, of rubber, etc....	64,836	.....	64,836
Lead moulds for making obscene matter...	700 lbs.	.....	700 lbs.
Establishments for making same closed.....	5	.....	5
Indecent playing cards destroyed.....	6,122	.....	6,122
Boxes of pills, powders, etc., used by abor- tionists.....	4,125	.....	4,125
Circulars, catalogues, songs, poems, etc....	1,376,939	50	1,376,989
Newspapers containing unlawful adver- tisements or obscene matter.....	22,354	.....	22,354
Open letters seized in possession of persons arrested.....	105,280	121	105,401
Names of dealers as revealed by account- books of publishers.....	6,000	.....	6,000
Obscene pictures, framed on walls of salo- oons.....	27	.....	27
Figures and images seized and destroyed...	569	93	662
Letters, packages, etc., seized in hands of dealers ready for mailing at the time of arrest.....	3,421	.....	3,421
Names and P. O. addresses to whom cir- culars, etc., may be sent, that are sold as matters of merchandise, seized in hands of persons arrested.....	976,125	2,885	979,010
Obscene plays stopped, or places of amuse- ment closed.....	4	.....	4
Miles travelled by agent outside N. Y. City,	173,992 miles.	16,206	190,198 mi. &c.

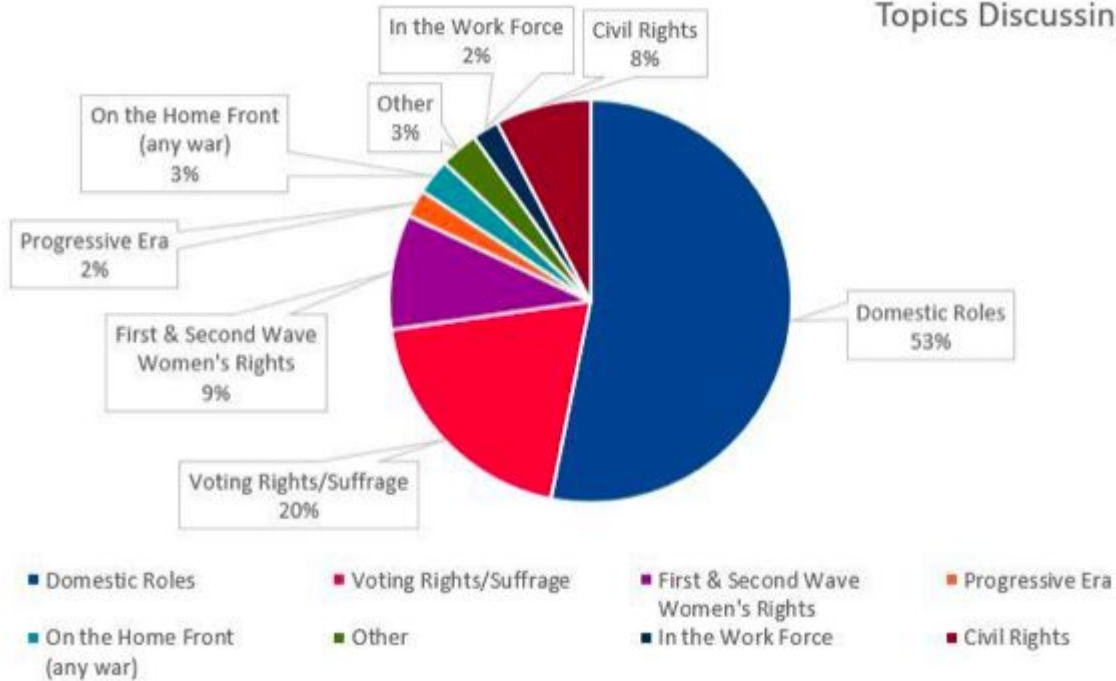
Lessons Learned:

- Moving away from the focus on women
- There's still so much work to do!



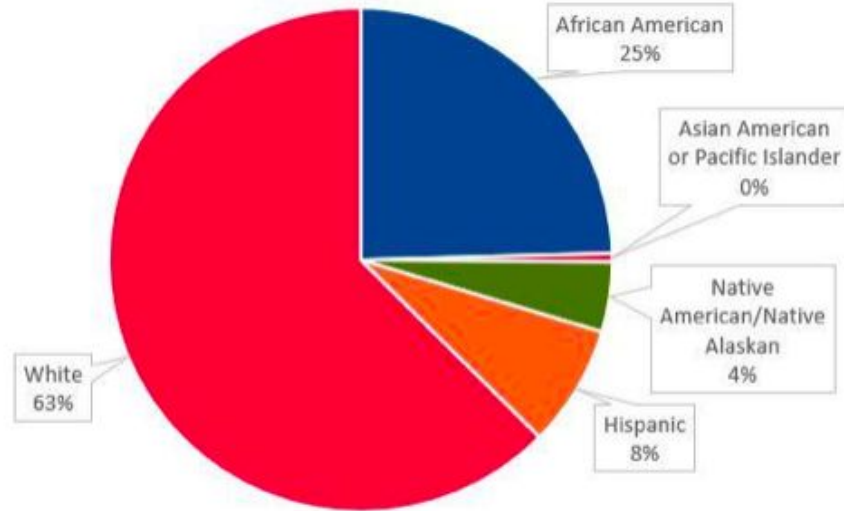
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Topics Discussing Women



<https://www.womenshistory.org/social-studies-standards>

Named Women by Race



■ African American ■ Asian American or Pacific Islander ■ Native American/Native Alaskan ■ Hispanic ■ White

<https://www.womenshistory.org/social-studies-standards>

Expansion of the project:



Impact:

- ◆ Making Connections to the present
- ◆ Continual research

Future:

- ◆ Continuing political urgency
- ◆ Expanding the Archive
- ◆ Ability to research and add



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