

## **Deceptive Sexualities, Nonconformity, and Racial Binaries: An Examination of 'Appearances' in American during World War II**

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**Abstract:** World War II brought issues of gender, sexuality, disability, and race into the spotlight of American civic life. The war effort united Americans under the guise of defeating Nazism in Europe, while also highlighting existing fractures among racial and gender demographics. While thorough, the historiography of this phenomenon has largely undervalued the fundamental through-line: the importance of *appearances*. To control undesirable identities while maintaining the war effort and perceptions of a strong, united, heteronormative America, the U.S. military attempted, and ultimately failed, to manipulate appearances of sexuality, disability, and race. This paper examines the existing historiography on attempts to control, categorize, and subjugate sexuality, disabilities, race and gender during World War II in order to unveil the underlying and connecting theme of appearances across diverse texts.

World War II brought issues of gender and sexuality into the spotlight of American civic life. The war effort united Americans under the guise of defeating Nazism and restoring peace in Europe, yet also highlighted existing fractures among racial and gender demographics. While thorough, the historiography of this phenomenon has largely undervalued the fundamental through-line: the importance of *appearances*. In an attempt to control undesirable identities, state institutions like the military shifted to weaponize “appearances.” For this paper, appearances will be defined as how things look or seem based on external and superficial characteristics such as clothing and physique. From exclusionary legislation against “weak” homosexuals to building the appearance of a “strong” heterosexual, able-bodied America, appearances became a fundamental focus across diverse contexts during World War II. This paper examines the existing historiography on attempts to control, categorize, utilize, and subjugate sexuality, gender, race, and disability during World War II to unveil the underlying and connecting theme of appearances across diverse texts. As such, the arguments made in this paper are threefold: First, the institution of the U.S. military during WWII provides a critical lens through which to understand attempts to control expressions of gender and sexuality. Ultimately, the institution failed to repress and control gender and sexuality because they fostered spaces for gay interactions, and were unable to accurately identify gender and sexuality from physical appearances. Second, appearances allowed soldiers of color to appear as patriotic, ideal Americans, despite discrimination, and third, appearances were critical for disabled veterans attempting to maintain traditional masculinity. Consequently, this paper demonstrates that the current historiography would benefit from a deeper analysis of appearances’ complex role in expressing and controlling sexuality, race, gender, and disabilities during WWII.

### **Identifying and controlling appearances of homosexuality**

Throughout WWII, the military utilized perceptions of the model American citizen to weaponize its legislative power against homosexual soldiers. This is most aptly explored by Margot Canaday in *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*. Canaday investigates the state strategies utilized to deny homosexual soldiers the same benefits received by their heterosexual colleagues. In short, the state excluded them from benefits that their American citizenship should have entitled them to. For example, in 1945, the Veterans Administration released a policy barring any soldier discharged as undesirable “because of homosexual acts or tendencies” from the GI benefits bill, creating a “clear line between homosexuality and heterosexuality in federal citizenship policy” (Canaday, 2009, p. 138). Homosexuals were perceived as undesirable, in part for their restricted performance of masculinity through appearance. Masculine appearances connotated actively penetrating rather than being passively penetrated, a binary that homosexuals subverted. These divisive understandings of sexuality functioned to reinforce traditional perceptions of masculinity, with the military seeking out prime masculine and heterosexual men, which did not include those exhibiting ‘weak’ traits like homosexuality.

In *Coming Out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War*, Allan Bérubé complicates Canaday’s discussion of the relationship between homosexuals and the

military/state. Bérubé writes that many soldiers were surprised to find that the military service gave them opportunities to begin a “coming-out” process far away from the constraints of home (Bérubé, 1990, p. 6). The large numbers of soldiers within barracks — with some reaching 100,000 members — allowed queer communities to form, and new cities facilitated networking with other gay people seeking queer experiences (Bérubé, 1990, p. 99). For soldiers from smaller, closely knit communities, relocation to large urban spaces through the military provided the anonymity to experiment with sexuality. This is further reflected in the changing geography of gay nightlife in the 1940s, as the movement of young men across cities caused them to rely on establishments to locate gay life in new places. Gay bars therefore became central sites for facilitating gay interactions. Thus, despite the state’s attempts to control homosexuality through exclusionary welfare systems, the military also unwittingly acted as a space far from home for soldiers to explore queer identities. As such, the military could only in part control masculine, heterosexual appearances, which were not reflective of the queer reality of many soldiers.

Homosexual interactions within the military were not officially tolerated, and being caught would likely result in dishonourable discharge, making any gay interactions highly dangerous for employment and social respectability. Bérubé asserts that gay military employees essentially fought two wars: one against the nation's enemies, the other against the persecution they suffered within the armed forces (Bérubé, 1990, Chapter 7). While Bérubé’s book unveils the painful oppression of queer life during WWII, he largely documents the courage and self-respect of gay soldiers. Specifically, rather than directly following the history of oppression, Bérubé documents ways in which gay soldiers manipulated their contexts to still use their appearance as a form of self-expression. For example, gay soldiers took advantage of military shows, which required men to play female characters, often in exaggerated drag performances. Bérubé asserts that drag performances opened a secret social space for gay men to explore their own culture. Specifically, he writes that in these performances, the audience was unaware that “a subplot about homosexuality was being created right before their eyes” (Bérubé, 1990, p. 72). Notably, much of Bérubé’s book covers white gay soldiers and comparatively holds limited information on the experiences of Black gay soldiers. In part, this is due to his mainly white archival material; nevertheless, I argue that the scholarship on the appearances, self-expression, and oppression of gay soldiers requires greater attention to racial minorities. This would provide more nuance to the historiography, which currently still mainly centers on white experiences.

The desire to identify and control homosexuality through physical appearance was also depicted in the US military’s psychological screenings of potential recruits. Bérubé details these medical procedures in his book and describes how psychiatric examiners forcibly engaged with potential candidates in intense face-to-face confrontations (Bérubé, 1990, p. 21). Alongside psychological analysis, men were stripped in an attempt to locate the “naked truth” from their bodies, since the state assumed that homosexuality could be physically determined (Bérubé, 1990, p. 75). For example, homosexuals such as “fairies” were thought to have more feminine traits, such as certain distributions of body hair and body fat. The military assumption that masculine, heterosexual men could be selected from lesser homosexual men based on physical appearance depicts the traditional view of homosexuality as being a defect from the normative.

Yet, it also demonstrates the military assumption that non-heterosexual men were too weak to fight, placing them on the same side of the binary as women who were also excluded from military conscription. Bérubé's case studies demonstrate how military officials attempted to control homosexuality; yet self-expression was not stifled, and ultimately, the institution provided spaces for homosexual relations to flourish. Appearances were simultaneously controlled and categorized forms of self-expression, yet also misleading when attempting to identify homosexuals since the military failed to remove and repress queer relations.

Fears of deception by outer appearances were demonstrated in the military's campaign against venereal diseases, as analyzed by Hegarty in *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes*. Campaigns attempted to move away from the stereotype that only impure and dirty women carried such diseases, and instead began to portray glamorous and beautiful women in their adverts to spread awareness. The slogans exhibited the deceiving nature of women's appearances and were critical to delivering the message that many women could be carrying venereal diseases. One pamphlet cautioned, "You are badly mistaken if you think you can tell whether or not a girl has a [venereal disease] by her looks or her clothes or by listening to her story. You can't." (Winchell, 2008, p. 114). This argumentative phrasing depicted the shift away from previous conceptions of femininity, where exhibiting modest beauty, restraint, and submissiveness connotated purity. Instead, advertisements about venereal disease emphasized that even when women appeared to be pure, they still posed a risk. Thus, Hegarty argues that the campaign attempted to protect soldiers from diseased prostitutes, while also asserting authority over women's sexual behaviors. These adverts targeted and protected men from women, thus asserting their sexual agency while ignoring the agency of women. Hegarty asserts that officials during the war targeted not just prostitutes, but "the promiscuous girl, the khaki-wacky and the girl who has become unbalanced by wartime wages and freedom," or as Otis Anderson of the United States Public Health Service termed them, *patriotutes* (Hegarty, 2010, p. 144). Women's sexuality went from mobilized actors during the war to being criminalized, while male (hetero) sexuality was understood as normative. Again, this example demonstrates how appearances were intrinsically tied to government attempts to repress and control the sexualities of both promiscuous women and homosexual men.

Throughout the war effort, women's appearances continued to be reconstructed and controlled. Megan Winchell's book *Good Girls, Good Food, Good Fun: The Story of USO Hostesses During WWII*, comprehensively analyzes the role of the United Service Organizations (USO). The USO provided recreation and aid to US troops and employed women as hostesses to complete its work. Selections of women to employ were based on the social appearances of the women including their sexual respectability (Winchell, 2008, p. 21). Naturally, appearances were a large factor in the decision-making of which women to hire. For example, women older than 30 were chosen as senior hostesses, who were simultaneously perceived as asexual mothers to the men and as objects of sexual desire. Within their role, male perceptions of the women upheld the binary of good girl/bad girl, while the USO also used the women's appearance to maintain their image of respectability.

## Asserting masculinity despite disability

Like disabled and emasculated men, wounded veterans threatened American appearances of masculinity, as explored by Sonya Michel in “Danger on the Home Front: Motherhood, Sexuality, and the Disabled Veteran in American Postwar Films.” Michel argues that the appearance of disabilities held connotations of weakness and failure and implied their “feminization and emasculation” (Michel, 1992, p. 110). Consequently, disabled veterans required women to “resexualize” them, re-establishing and confirming their manhood, and to care for them as a mother would (Michel, 1992, p. 116). In turn, the lovers of disabled veterans had to “transcend the Madonna/ Whore split,” while maintaining their all-important appearance of respectability as women (Michel, 1992, p. 116). In *Male Body at War: American Masculinity During World War II*, Jarvis also notes that while the Office of War Information attempted to limit American exposure to wounded bodies, postwar texts like *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) and *The Men* (1950), offered alternative forms of masculinity and strategies for masculinizing disabled men (Froula, 2007, p. 72). Upon the end of the war, the strong image of masculine America softened, and issues of emasculated disabled men reentered public discourse. According to the Library of Congress, 224,000 men returned home from the war with a permanent physical or mental disability. Disabilities were, therefore, too common to not garner more public attention after the war. Ultimately, while Jarvis and Michel investigate their respective topics in a nuanced manner, I argue that connecting their arguments with Hegarty’s scholarship unveils the conflicting, and at times similar, role of appearances. None of these scholars utilize appearances as their focal point of analysis, yet its prevalence across their work proves its importance in understanding the intersections of appearances in issues of disability, gender, and sexuality throughout the war effort.

Able-bodied men returning from war also faced challenges in asserting their masculinity. Specifically, WWII veterans struggled to maintain their traditional masculinity in the wake of feminized work environments. According to Julie Berebitsky in *Sex and the Office*, “one in five privately employed Americans work[ed] for one of the top two hundred corporations” causing “the independence of the nation’s men” to be at risk of becoming “soft” (Berebitsky, 2012, p. 141-42). Having exhibited the ultimate masculinity on the battlefield, many men perceived postwar employment as emasculating since it consisted of routine work without the possibility of glory. While corporations and the military both utilize strong hierarchies, office work did not offer the promise of showcasing one’s bravery and masculinity, nor did it provide the societal status of a wartime hero. Instead, postwar corporations sought out conformity rather than individuality or bravery and thus did not require men to exhibit dominant masculinity as they did on the battlefield. Moreover, these fears of emasculation were exacerbated by women who increasingly espoused masculine behaviors and social norms, such as through working in previously all-male sectors of employment. Actively earning money was traditionally perceived as masculine, while women maintained the domestic sphere. During the period following WWII, women continued to defy traditional gender roles by using their new independence to increasingly take up space in previously male spaces, from the workplace to social scenes.

## ***Appearing American: overcoming the racial binary***

The military's obsession with appearances also played out in the broader social context. In *The Male Body at War*, Christina Jarvis asserts that American strength and citizenship became linked to heroic (white) manhood, causing the U.S. to cultivate the perception of being a "masculine nation in the wake of World War II" (Jarvis, 2004, p. 4). Moreover, Jarvis details that upon entering World War II, the military and federal institutions processed male bodies into physical categories, privileging strong, young, and specifically *white* bodies (Jarvis, 2004). In turn, these attributes strengthened America's image of youth, power, and whiteness following its "emasculating" weakness through the Great Depression (1929-1941). Jarvis highlights that appearances were critical to this perception and required the transformation of famous characters like Uncle Tom into a broader, more muscular figure for the state's war propaganda. Additionally, the appearance of the disabled President Roosevelt had to be reconstructed to appear virile and masculine, in line with the strengthening of America's strong, white male image. Connecting Jarvis' and Hegarty's arguments suggests that while ethnic minorities could appear to be masculine, patriotic, and brave through conscription, they were still unable to access the most desired characteristic of the ultimate American citizen: whiteness. Moreover, racist posters that highlighted white supremacy against the Japanese enemy were disseminated during WWII, especially following the attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese military in 1941. By dehumanizing Japanese men, these propaganda posters reinforced the white vs non-white binary, ensuring cultural hatred from Americans and distancing Japanese men from being perceived equally to white men.

Military conscription presented opportunities for ethnic minorities to prove their loyalty to the United States. Prior to the war effort, appearances of the ideal American citizen were based on whiteness, due to the long history of white supremacy and legal exclusion of ethnic minorities in the US. During the war effort, however, conscripting into the army opened a new opportunity to present as the ideal, patriotic American citizen, thereby wearing military uniforms provided non-white men with the *appearance* of being brave, patriotic Americans. This is succinctly investigated by Marilyn Hegarty in her book *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes*. Hegarty writes that for Japanese men, joining the military meant proving their loyalty to America, while for African Americans, it connoted inching closer to full citizenship rights (Hegarty, 2010). In short, before the war, appearances revealed that citizenship consisted of whiteness, masculinity, and economic privilege. But during the war, citizenship was democratized through equalizing uniforms that signified the appearance of serving the nation and being true Americans.

For African American men in particular, the draft offered the opportunity to depict their patriotism and worthiness for equal rights. Over one million African Americans served in the U.S. Army during the war, and over 2.5 million men registered for the draft, despite the irony that while fighting for democracy and against Nazism overseas, they were treated as second-class citizens in their own country. WWII saw certain similarities with WWI, regarding the opportunity for African Americans to appear patriotic, yet still facing discrimination. During

WW1, African American men eagerly joined the war effort even before Congress passed the Selective Service Act in 1917, which required all males between the ages of 21 and 31 to register for the draft (Bryan, 2017). In fact, within one week of Wilson's declaration of war, the War Department had to stop accepting Black volunteers because quotas for African Americans were filled so quickly (Bryan, 2017). Comparative to their white counterparts though, Black soldiers were not treated well by their white supervisors or the War Department. Discrimination was largely overlooked or condoned, and Black soldiers often went without proper clothing for long periods, with some reports stating they received old Civil War uniforms rather than new uniforms (Bryan, 2017). By comparison, during WW2, Black soldiers faced Jim Crow segregation and discrimination across all branches of the military, as well as harassment from white soldiers. Therefore, while the draft during WWII did offer Black Americans the opportunity to appear as ideal Americans in military uniform, their appearances of patriotism and contributions to the war effort during WWII, like in WWI, did not allow Black Americans to overcome the racial discrimination enshrined in US society.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, the historiography of gender and sexuality during World War II can be connected through analyses of appearances. In doing so, this paper has begun to address the complex question of *why* appearances became a dominant measure of control in American society during World War II? In a society defined by physical appearance — sex, ethnicity, clothing — an individual's appearance provided the most accessible and identifiable form of categorization. Through my analysis of the historiography, I have shown how time and time again, appearances were deceptive. In short, appearances were just *appearances*: deceivable, malleable, and put simply, often untrue. One's appearance after all does not necessarily correlate with gender or sexuality, and thus could not be used to accurately identify sexuality. Consequently, attempts to categorize, control, and weaponize appearances through legislation, screenings, or other measures ultimately failed concerning sexuality, although racial binaries were easier to reinforce. The historiography has successfully shown how appearances also affirmed identities, for example through Bérubé's analysis of military drag shows, and the military uniform asserting Americanness for ethnic minorities. As such, appearances in WWII held diverse and contradicting roles – they both affirmed and hid oppressed racial, queer, and disabled identities and were both used to control, and evade control, by the military.

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