This spring, The Sexualities Project was pleased to host renowned historian Joanne Meyerowitz, Professor of History and American Studies at Yale University, as keynote speaker and panelist at the “Epistemologies of Desire: Beyond Single Discipline Approaches” workshop. Meyerowitz’s research and teaching is attuned to the interplay of gender and sexuality in U.S. history, and she is the author of *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Harvard University Press, 2002) and editor of critical historical texts including *History and September 11th* (Temple University Press, 2003) and *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Temple University Press, 1994). Across these and other analytic works, she explores the ways in which 20th-century constructs of gender, sexuality, and nationality are multiply constituted, highly contingent, and ultimately rooted in complex genealogies.

In her keynote address, titled “The Curious History of ‘Sexual Repression,’” Meyerowitz traced the shifting meanings of sexual repression as a culturally distinct yet uniquely plastic boundary-marking mechanism. Beginning with the ways in which cultural commentators have used sexual repression as a way to explain terrorism in the post-9/11 U.S., she highlighted the work that “sexual repression” performs in separating “us” from “others,” or “those who are free” from “those who are repressed.” Meyerowitz focused specifically on discourses around homosexuality as framed by scientists and public intellectuals beginning in the mid-20th century, deftly exploring how these social actors deployed sexual repression first to explain the pathology of homosexuality, then to point to the source of homophobia, and, finally, to mark the U.S. as the landscape of sexual freedom relative to a range of repressed inter- and intra-national others. Throughout her talk, Meyerowitz retained a focus on the function of sexual repression as a conceptual device that differentiates the normal from the abnormal and effectively erases the complex politics always lurking beneath the surfaces of what seem to be obvious sexual identities, categories, and practices.

Meyerowitz traced the curious history of social constructionist thought in her talk at the workshop, “Sex, Race, and the Biopolitics of the Social,” which explored the ways sex and race were co-constituted in discourses of the Culture and Personality School (CPS), beginning in the early 20th century. She argued that initial critiques of eugenics, which posited race and sexuality as socially constructed, were later eclipsed by CPS public intellectuals who used social construction as a disciplining concept, the goal of which was to produce normal (appropriately raced, gendered, and sexualized)
children, adults, and, ultimately, culture. As the cultural relativism present in early social constructionist thought was eliminated by mid-century CPS theorists, Meyerowitz argued that “the biopolitics of child-rearing replaced the biopolitics of child-bearing.”

In both of her talks, Meyerowitz reminded us that these kinds of critical genealogies make visible the hidden epistemologies of desire and the complex politics embedded therein, particularly as cultural constructs change to accommodate shifting and overlapping historical contexts. Her work prompts us to consider the concrete consequences of ignoring these histories, such as the frequently subtle, occasionally overt disciplinary practices made manifest in individual- and culturally-oriented violence. As identities, bodies, and practices continue to operate as sites of conflict, Meyerowitz’s “curious histories” offer an opportunity for reflection and a path toward answering a deceptively simple question: how did we arrive in this very strange place at this very strange time?