

on these topics provide good historical and documentary information. Several chapters illuminate the work, thought, and life of W.E.B. DuBois; others engage questions of gender within and across the BGLOs, including a comparative chapter on black and white “sweetheart” or “little sister” organizations, and a study of the American Council on Human Rights that indicates this umbrella organization broke up over gender issues, but does not elaborate. The chapter on “Racism, Sexism, and Aggression” substantively engages questions similar to those considered by Syrett, explicitly comparing white Greek men with their black Greek counterparts. Black, Belknap, and Ginsburg’s review of contemporary literature and their data indicate that alcohol is a larger part of white fraternity culture, as are levels of sexism and aggression (causality between these two variables is likely significant). Overall, the two books share a concern with the levels of violence that take place within

college fraternities, but they diverge in their optimism about the future of the organizations. Brown, Parks, and Phillips believe BGLOs show evidence of a willingness to address violence; Syrett concludes by noting how much white fraternities continue to focus on maintaining their members’ hegemonic power on campus through domination and exclusion. The two books allow for a thoughtful consideration of the future of raced and gendered Greek organizations in a higher educational environment increasingly intolerant of essentialist definitions of these two categories.

STEPHANIE M. MCCLURE is Associate Professor of Sociology at Georgia College and State University. She has written several articles on the black Greek student experience including “Improvising Masculinity: African American Fraternity Membership in the Construction of a Black Masculinity” (*Journal of African American Studies*, 2006).



### *Perfectly Average*

#### *The Pursuit of Normality in Postwar America*

By Anna G. Creadick

(Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010. Pp. xii, 191. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth-bound, \$80.00; paperbound, \$26.95.)

It was once commonplace for scholars to characterize the postwar United States as a “consensus” or “containment” culture, one obsessed with (and largely successful in) enforcing narrow behavioral, gender,

and psychological norms. Perhaps mistaking the products of the 1950s—television shows like *Ozzie and Harriet*, Hollywood movies such as *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, and blockbuster books like *The Lone-*

ly *Crowd*—for lived reality, many viewed the years following World War II as a cloistered and repressive era, the perfect foil for the rebellions of the 1960s. This simplistic image persists in popular culture, a source for parody and nostalgia alike.

For historians, however, the postwar period has become much more complicated. This is one of the themes of Anna Creadick's absorbing new book, a study of the politics of "normality" in U.S. culture between 1943 and 1963—when the concept "was most fully articulated and deeply inscribed into everyday American life" (p. 2). Like other recent scholars, Creadick takes the apparent sameness of the age as an invitation to question normality's appeal even for those seemingly most in its thrall.

Creadick traverses multiple domains—medicine, statistics, sociology, criticism, film, and literature—in her own pursuit of normality as cultural force. Building on work in disability studies, queer theory, and whiteness studies, her five chapters examine the anxious postwar scientific and literary quest for normality in the form of bodies, character, class status, sexuality, and communities.

The book opens with Robert Latou Dickinson's anthropometric models of the average American body, "Norman" and "Norma," whose public display at the Cleveland Health Museum in 1942 enabled a concrete visualization of the typical (and in an important slippage, ideal) citizen. Creadick next examines the Harvard

Grant Study of Normal Men, its results first published in 1945, which sought to define the inner character (rather than external proportions) of an entirely unrepresentative sample of 268 Harvard sophomores, and in the process "to normalize Americanness itself" (p. 43).

The remainder of *Perfectly Average* focuses on more traditional literary texts. The ubiquitous gray-flannel men's suit, elevated to cultural icon in Sloan Wilson's 1955 novel and subsequent film, helped to normalize middle-class status in the postwar years—so much so that it could be equated with classlessness itself. Shifting from social class to sexuality, Creadick examines James Jones's best-selling novel of 1951, *From Here to Eternity* (and its subsequent screen adaptation), which helped to cement for moviegoers "the 1950s as the decade of heteronormativity" (p. 116). The book closes with a discussion of the new suburbia, as viewed through another bestseller-turned-movie (and eventually, television series), Grace Metalious's 1956 *Peyton Place*. Although set in the 1930s and 1940s, the novel was both intended and read as a contemporary critique of peer conformity.

The sociological critique of suburban "normality"—present nearly from the inception of the building boom—reminds us that postwar norms were always less stable and widely embraced than they seemed. On the one hand, scientific investigations were frustrated by the

immense variety to be found even in “normal” populations like young Harvard men, making significant generalizations impossible. On the other, although observers regularly conflated the typical and the ideal, *too much* sameness was understood to be confining and even un-American. As Creadick observes of the tightrope that came with the white-collar uniform, “conformity was part of the process of becoming middle class, yet individualism was its dominant ideology” (p. 88). Even a domain where norms closed in most tightly—the policing of the heterosexual-homosexual binary—could be unsettled by the “broader understanding of sexual behaviors” (p. 90) supplied by franker fiction and sociological studies. In a final irony, even for those ostensibly described by it, normality was nearly impossible to achieve—and if attained, seemed to lead only to alienation. By the early 1960s, if not before, “normality” had acquired a distinctly negative connotation.

*Perfectly Average* is briskly written and terrifically suggestive. One wishes at times that Creadick had

pursued some of her insights further: the relationship of normality to war, for example, or the ability of women rather than men to embody the “average” in particular contexts. More attention to how her case studies fit together—how norms of body, character, nation, sex, and class interlaced, or contradicted one another—and to how popular meanings radiated outward from scientific or literary texts would have also made for fascinating reading. But Creadick succeeds wonderfully in upending any lingering verities about the complacent 1950s. In tracking the fortunes of normality, she recasts the period as “neither fully progressive nor repressive,” but a time of “complex transition,” shot through with “self-reflexivity and critique” (pp. 90, 116, 146). As a result, the postwar era looks much less normal, but far more interesting.

SARAH E. IGO is Associate Professor of History, Sociology, and Political Science at Vanderbilt University. She is the author of *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens and the Making of a Mass Public* (2007).

