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Tanya Erzen. *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. 293 pp. $19.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-24582-2.

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Published on H-Amstdy (August, 2006)

Queering the Ex-Gay Movement

Tanya Erzen's *Straight to Jesus* is one of those books that you hope someone will ask you about, when you are reading it in public. You simply want to share the complicated, seemingly contradictory ex-gay world Erzen so eloquently describes in her ethnography. You might tell of the former Jewish Queer Nation activist who converted to Christianity and took up the ex-gay cause or Evan, an Ivy League-educated, seminary-trained, politically progressive man struggling with his same-sex desires. *Straight to Jesus* provides a much-needed addition to work on queer religious lives. Moreover, that is exactly Erzen's point. The ex-gay movement, at least the philosophy espoused at New Hope and the people whop live in this residential ex-gay program, are queer. Caught in the gray area between being pitied (sometimes despised) by gay and lesbian activists and progressive Christians, while simultaneously being misunderstood (sometimes hated) by Christian fundamentalists and conservatives, ex-gay identities are always in flux; at the same time, ex-gay individuals claim a primary, yet conflicting, ex-gay identity. Erzen shows that black-and-white worldviews, especially understandings of sexuality and religion, are often contested.

Erzen spent eighteen months with the New Hope Ministry, a year-long, ex-gay residential ministry in San Rafael, California where men and women come "with the objective of healing their homosexuality, controlling sexual compulsions, becoming heterosexual, or even marrying someone of the opposite sex" (p. 2). Through extensive fieldwork and her relationship with group participants, Erzen concludes that transformation does happen for those in ex-gay ministries. Yet, change is usually not a move away from same-sex desire and behavior that participants hope for, but rather a personal, religious transformation. The meaning of "change" varies by individual and ex-gay ministry.

She begins with a history of New Hope Ministry, a profile of its founder, and the larger, diverse ex-gay movement made up of groups (oftentimes at odds) offering a plethora of treatments, philosophies, and definitions of what it means to claim an ex-gay identity. Despite some negative media attention, politically perceptive ex-gay groups realize any exposure is beneficial and such programs continue to grow.

It is Erzen's careful portrayal of the individual men at New Hope that shapes this engaging study. The thirteen men who started the program during Erzen's field study ranged in age and background, some coming from years of same-sex partnered relationships to those who had never had a same-sex sexual encounter. Most reject a homosexual identity and instead frame their same-sex desires in terms of feelings and acts. What the participants have in common is a lonely sense of "brokenness" and "woundedeness" they seek to heal, along with a religious worldview that frames the idea that no positive sexuality can exist outside of married heterosexual relationships. It is interesting to note that Erzen is one of two women that program participants have semi-regular contact with–the other being, Anita, who is the wife of the founder, Frank, and who takes an active role in New Hope. The women's residential program at New Hope was discontinued due to lack of participation and Frank's self-professed difficulty relating to and understanding lesbians.

Like coming-out narratives, the religious conversion narratives for New Hope participants testify to a troubled, closeted life, a time of crisis, and then a process

of self-healing and sexual awareness; at the same time they frame a new ex-gay identity rooted in a born-again relationship with Jesus. A New Hope participant's relationship with Jesus becomes paramount and the strength of the faith relationship measures one's progress. While a New Hope participant might commit a "sexual fall," his relationship with Jesus could be mended, strengthened, and transformed. "Jesus is the only person who can transform a person" (p. 175). Yet, each man at New Hope is also accountable not only for his personal spiritual life, but also accountable to others–all beliefs, thoughts, and actions are disclosed. Testimony becomes a form of therapy.

Over the course of a year, the men who stay in the program develop close family-like bonds, friendships, and a sense of belonging, which was often lacking before their experience at New Hope. Thus, they are rather isolated from the larger community in which they live, especially the gay and lesbian community. Most distrust popular culture as a distraction leading to a sexual fall. Instead, the men are to "rebuild masculinity through bonding with others," usually through performance exercises (sports, camping, hiking) that do not always correspond with what New Hope residents feel is their masculine potential (pp. 102, 108). The ultimate goal for many men in the program is heterosexual marriage, but many New Hope participants realize this is not a realistic goal. Participants realize that life outside the close-knit ex-gay community is difficult and many remain affiliated with New Hope, serving as counselors or leaders years after their year-long stint was completed. New Hope ultimately provides a sense of belonging.

Erzen does an excellent job demonstrating how the lives of individual men and women in ex-gay ministries subvert the larger political goals of the ex-gay movement and Christian Right organizations that support ex-gay ministries, especially ideas about rigid masculinity and femininity, and debates over civil rights. In addition, ex-gay individuals do not always accept the therapeutic discourse that explains their "disease" and "addictions." In opposition to the larger movement's language of total healing from homosexuality to heterosexuality, ex-gay individuals continue the queer conversations that "change is a process of sexual and religious conversion and that their identities are constantly in a state of flux" (p. 186). Thus, personal choices, fraught with some successes, but often relapses, are not always translated to political causes.

Erzen concludes with an optimistic hope that a diverse array of sexual identities, even complicated, non-static ex-gay identities, might become a part of a more inclusive political and religious culture. While Erzen has contributed a lively study to further understanding religious, gendered, and sexual lives in contemporary American culture, one cannot help but wonder if the underlying subtext of the work is that religious worlds and meanings are constructed in processes of wounding. Whether the process involves a conservative Christian with same-sex desires coming to terms with conservative Christian teachings on homosexuality by assimilating ideas of sinfulness (perhaps adopting an ex-gay identity) or abandoning a particular religious identity, each makes their religious worlds in the perplexing, cruel in-between times.

The separation between loving the homosexual and hating homosexual orientation and behavior is as confused as the conservative Christian who simultaneously "loves the sinner, but hates the sin." Annihilating the alleged evil and saving the humanity of the sinner has proven to be a historically futile task.

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Citation: Howell Williams. Review of Erzen, Tanya, *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement.* H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. August, 2006.

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