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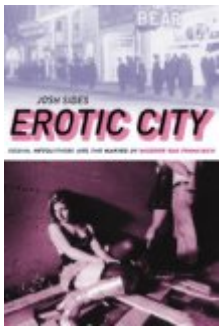

Josh Sides. *Erotic City: Sexual Revolutions and the Making of Modern San Francisco.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 292 pp. $21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-987406-4.

Reviewed by Jerry Thomas

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Commissioned by Timothy W. Jones (University of South Wales, & La Trobe University)

Josh Sides's view of San Francisco's sexual revolution during the latter twentieth century is interdisciplinary and complex. His account is one in which the increasingly public nature of sexuality is forged and constrained by legal, economic, cultural, and political factors. Additionally, he considers numerous perspectives to public sexuality, including feminism, race, sexual orientation, gender, government, religion, commerce, geography, media, and popular culture. This interdisciplinary and multi-perspective approach is surely Sides's greatest contribution to our understanding of how public sexuality emerged in the "Paris of the West." Concurrently, this multifaceted approach, at times, lacks urban development focus. *Erotic City* is rich with data and humanized, personal stories that detail the complex ebb and flow of public sexuality. Set against postwar San Francisco's physical space--myriad neighborhoods, Golden Gate Park, a port--Sides shows how sexuality became visible through prostitution, free-love hippies, pornography, AIDS, birth control, bathhouses, and bars. It is a treasure trove of data and characters.

The example of one shrewd 1940s-era revolutionary, Sally Stanford, typifies. Stanford, San Francisco's leading brothel owner, was pitted against police departments under the direction of counterrevolutionary mayors. Stanford attributed her success as a brothel operator to meticulous management, sensitivity to men's needs, and a sixth sense for impending trouble. (Stanford went on to be mayor of Sausalito after retiring as grand madam.) For years, she staved off shutdowns through "protection payoffs," but brothel closures were imminent. An unintended consequence of the brothel closures was increased prostitution visibility. It forced prostitutes into bars and streets. The counterrevolutionary response to this visibility granted the San Francisco Police Department authority to implement a quarantine policy for suspected venereal disease carriers. Persons suspected of having a venereal disease were quarantined in jail for seventy-two hours, without bail, pending results of a mandatory medical exam.

This abused authority granted the police department a "highly effective way to deal with socially undesirable women--including prostitutes, well-known alcoholics, and women who were known to be promiscuous--under the guise of health enforcement" (p. 27). In sum, it gave law enforcement greater power to regulate the behavior of women in public spaces. ***Erotic City*** is replete with examples showing tensions between those who preferred to publicize sexuality and those who preferred to conceal it or contain it within a specific area of the city.

Sides is persuasive in illustrating public sexuality's complexity, but it is difficult to situate his theory of urban development among this complexity. As he "explores the fertile nexus of geography, morality, sexual desire and behavior, and law enforcement," he sets out to chart new directions for the postwar American metropolis (pp. 9–10). At the outset, he challenges "the notion that race was always the prime mover in postwar urban history by arguing that it was the shifting ***culture*** of cities that more directly influenced their destiny." I am unconvinced that Sides meets his objective. While it may be true that "desire for sexual knowledge and stimulation, and the countless exchanges and transactions that desire has inspired, shapes cities as well," Sides needs an additional chapter to expound and apply his "shifting culture" model of urban development (p. 10). There is no discussion of this theory beyond the introduction.

Sides may have overlooked an opportunity to expound his shifting culture model in the chapter "Taking Back the Streets of San Francisco." Having elucidated the visibility of sex and sexuality in Golden Gate Park and the Castro, he describes counterrevolutionaries hellbent on rolling back these visibility gains, for example, Dianne Feinstein who pushed for stricter pornography reforms; and Latino youths who intimidated and murdered white gay men to preserve machismo in the Mission. There is ample "taking back the streets" in San Francisco's history. An important question for urban development might have been, to whom do the streets belong?

Normatively, one might answer that the streets belong to everyone. Empirically, this is inaccurate. Sides's San Francisco is one where groups claim for themselves particular neighborhoods and frequently vie to keep others out, using whatever means available--political, violent, economic, legal. Certain Castro streets do not belong to moralists who prefer not to see pornography. Certain Mission streets do not belong to gay white men who display affection for one another publicly. Some streets in the Tenderloin belong to prostitutes. Castro's bathhouses do not belong to women of any sort. Anyone murdered during the sexual revolution, arguably, can claim no street. If one wants a particular street (a public space) in San Francisco, Sides's cultural history suggests that you will have to take it. Taking back the streets is a common revolutionary theme, but I would have preferred more help understanding how these cultural dynamics inform a theory of urban development.

Notwithstanding this preference, Sides is highly successful in detailing the revolution's sexual heterogeneity. The sexual revolution cut across all segments of San Franciscan society and affected nearly everyone: those who fought for sexual visibility, those who fought to contain it, and the 7.3 million nationwide who read about it in ***Life*** magazine.

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