

Book Reviews



Jane Ward, *Not Gay: Sex between Straight White Men*, New York: New York University Press, 2015.

Jane Ward, the author of *Not Gay. Sex between Straight White Men*, is employed by one of the State of California's ten universities, which are, of course, funded by taxpayers. Professor Ward was awarded three degrees in sociology at the Santa Barbara campus of the University system and now is Associate Professor in the Department of Gender and Sexuality Studies at the Riverside campus. Her dissertation, "Beyond the Rainbow: Diversity and Inequality in Lesbian and Gay Organizations" (2003), was directed by Beth Schneider and published five years later as *Respectably Queer: Diversity Culture in LGBT Activist Organizations* (Vanderbilt University Press 2008), a revision of a dissertation "that never felt like my own project" (ix) [all subsequent page numbers are from *Not Straight* (New York University Press 2015)]. She is also founder of the blog *FeministPigs.com*. *Not Gay* is dedicated to the author's "partner, Kat Ross," with whom she is raising "our child," a daughter (xi). (Additional biographical material may be found at 201-204.) At UC Riverside, Professor Ward teaches courses in feminist, queer, and heterosexuality studies. Among them is "Introduction to Gender Studies," which the author reports to have consisted of "approximately four hundred students" one semester (195). Responses of students in that class are some of the data of the author's research leading to the publication of the present volume.

Not Gay was "supported by grants from the Wayne F. Placek Foundation [administered by the American Psychological Association (2005-2006)] and the UC Riverside's Queer Lab" (x). The

book contains 21 black and white photos of males of various ages, many of them performing forms of oral-genital or anal-genital sex. The cover is a color photograph, by Janet Kimber, of two young shirtless males seated beside one another out of doors. (Their heads have been cropped for the image.) The book is one in the series “Sexual Cultures” published by New York University Press, two of whose editors, Ilene Kalish and Eric Zinner, are singled out “for their excitement about this book” (x). The series includes a volume by Judith [Jack] Halberstam, a professor of English at the University of Southern California, who is cited in the text along with other scholars and researchers in the field of gender studies, including sociologists Michael Kimmel and CJ Pascoe (specialists on boyhood and young manhood) and Robert W. [now Raewyn] Connell (a transsexual who was the first to use the term “masculinities”), and philosophers Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva and Slavoj Žižek. Catalogued as about “1. Men—Sexual behavior. 2. Gay men. 3. Heterosexual men. 4. Homosexuality” (iv). The volume is described as a book about “white dick” (x). It “is based on the premise that homosexual contact is a ubiquitous feature of the culture of straight white men” (7; cf. 216, n. 38). The author claims that “if we view homosexuality as a constitutive element of hetero-masculinity, a central ingredient in the making of heterosexual men, we can then look closely at what homosexual sex *does for* heterosexual men, and for heteronormativity more broadly” (118). It is also a book that “attends to the ways that whiteness intersects with masculinity and sexuality, shaping the relationship between men’s homosexual sex and their sense of ‘self,’ their status as ‘normal,’ and their position within structural hierarchies” in order to add to “a growing body of work that racializes [male] whiteness and un.masks its delusions” (26).

The author asserts that the contrast heterosexual/homosexual, which was invented during the last years of the 19th century by male psychiatrists, is spurious because it was politically motivated. She substitutes for it the conceptual contrast queer/normative precisely *because* it is politically charged, apparently believing that activism and scholarship (peer-reviewed published research) cannot and should not be separated.

We are in the world of a “queer feminist” (180) who is “of the poststructuralist persuasion” (127), an educator in a tenured university position who has a special interest in “postmodern sexualities” (2), pornography, and “critical whiteness studies” (150). One must be familiar with postmodern jargon in order to follow the discussion in many places: binaries, theorizations, narratives, signifiers, scripts, constructions, tropes, representations, logics, sites, circuits, lenses, registers, “rhetorical spaces” (124); foreclosure, deployment, recuperation, inscription, erasure, elision, performativity, intersectionality, staging. The reader will find a host of neologisms: identitarian, exceptionalism, heteronormativity (“the investment in sexual normalcy” [30]), sexual fluidity, heteroflexibles. Some locutions are difficult to make sense of, for example, “exceptionalizing logics” (81) and the “heteromale festish [sic]” (30). A new discipline, “gay biology” (85), is mentioned.

This was a difficult book to read, not because of the jargon but, rather, because of its underlying tone of disparagement of young men. It is primarily a discussion of hazing in fraternities and in the military (Chapter 6). Earlier chapters treat the sexuality of bikers, oral-genital encounters between men in public bathrooms, and liaisons between men who have met on internet websites (Chapter 2). Other material considered includes the film *Humpday* (2009) directed by Lynn Shelton (Chapter 4, where there is a reference to *Brokeback Mountain* [2005]). The fraternity hazing

ritual singled out for most attention and that seems to hold a special fascination for Professor Ward is called the “elephant walk.” Witnessed by a young man whom the author had been dating, it was recounted to her and supplemented with snapshots taken during an episode. In the “elephant walk” incoming fraternity members “were required to strip naked and stand in a circular formation, with one thumb in their mouth and the other in the anus of the young, typically white, man in front of them. . . . they walked slowly in a circle, linked thumb to anus, while older members of the fraternity watched and cheered” (2). (The photo documenting the “elephant walk” (Fig. 1.1) is captioned “1970s . . . Indiana University.”) Four “assorted screenshots from Haze.Him.com” are also reprinted (178), as is one from the same site captioned “Brad, Ramon, and another pledge being hazed” (183). Also provided for illustration are seven photographs said to picture men in the military involved in the “crossing the line ceremony” and engaged in practices alleged to have occurred in Afghanistan (159, 171, 173, 174). Other than the cover photo only the one of “Ben” and “Andrew” (from *Humpday*, “discussing whether or not to have sex”) and the one of the cast of *Jackass*, a television series, suggest any camaraderie or warmth between the figures. The two lead male characters in *Humpday* are described as “exemplifying the ambivalence within hipster heterosexuality” (121). (In describing the “pivotal moment” of the film, which occurs at a “queer party,” the author recounts noticing “a sign on the front door [of the apartment] . . . [that] read ‘DIONYSISIS’ [sic]” (120). In fact, the sign reads in Greek capital letters the Latin spelling of the god of passion: DIONYSUS (Δ ι ó ν υ σ ο ς). The author and editors may not be familiar with this figure from Antiquity. “In *Jackass*, sexual contact between straight men is reconfigured as an extreme sport . . .” (125), says the author.

The book is framed by two theoretical essays: Chapter 1 (“Nowhere without It: The Homosexual Ingredient in the Making of Straight Men”) and Chapter 6 (“Against Gay Love: This One Goes Out to the Queers”). The point of view of the author is found in the first, where she tells us she “was repelled by the heteromasculine culture of abjection and aggression” (3) in which hazing rituals she had been told about take place. Overcoming her revulsion, she persevered. “Taking sexual contact between straight white men as my point of departure, my aim is to offer a new way to think about heterosexual subjectivity—not as the opposite or absence of homosexuality, but as its own unique mode of engaging homosexual sex, a mode characterized by pretense, disidentification, and heteronormative investments” (5). The evidence (data) brought in support of the author’s hypothesis is meager for the weight her conclusions. (a) “In 2005, some friends of mine brought to my attention some personal ads they had discovered in the ‘Casual Encounters’ section of the online bulletin board Craigslist Los Angeles” (127). Subsequently, an analysis of this material from “the performative world of online personal ads” (127) was carried out: “research assistants and I” (224, n. 6) studied 118 personal ads from Craigslist that appeared during a ten-day period in January 2005 and 125 ads placed on the same website during the period May-July 2006 (224-225, n. 6.) The author dutifully notes: “Both studies received approval from the University of California Internal Review Board for the use of human subjects (although I did not contact or interview human subjects)” [225]; (b) Next are the results of an “exercise” called “Gay or Straight?” that the author carried out in her large class of 400 students, “Introduction to Gender Studies,” in which she asked her the students to “shout out” how they understood “various ‘circumstances’” including “straight-identified who kiss each other at parties while men watch and cheer”; “straight-identified men who kiss each other at parties while women watch and cheer”; “young boys who touch each other’s penises while playing”; “men who have sex with men while in prison but know they are on the out-

side”; “two women who have lived together for thirty years and sleep in the same bed but do not identify as lesbians”; “two men who have lived together for thirty years and sleep in the same bed but do not identify as gay”; “a young woman who has sex with two women in college, and then marries a man after she graduates”; and “a young man who, while being hazed by a fraternity, strips naked and puts his finger in [sic] other guys’ anuses” (195-196). (Just how the responses yelled out were collected and organized is not revealed, although basic research practices require knowing about data collection methodology. I assume that Professor Ward has IRB consent forms from those who shouted out, although we are not told this.) (c) Finally, there are two studies published in peer-reviewed journals that are given detailed attention: Eric Anderson’s “‘Being Masculine Is Not about Who You Sleep With . . .’: Heterosexual Athletes Contesting Masculinity and the One-Time Rule of Homosexuality” (2008), a study of 68 heterosexual football players who decided to become cheerleaders (age 18-23) and Steven Zeeland’s *Sailors and Sexual Identity: Crossing the Line between ‘Straight’ and ‘Gay’ in the U.S. Navy* (1995), which is based on 125 interviews with men age 18-22 (see 214, nn. 11 and 18, for full citations).

The author takes up the basic question “What Is Heterosexuality?” (26-37) in this section of the introductory chapter and in “A Note on Key Terms” that follows it, Professor Ward provides an account of her understanding of the concept that will guide the subsequent moments of her “project.” “Homosexual encounters between adult heterosexuals constitute a unique erotic domain that is characterized by many of the features of childhood sexuality” “because homosexual sex enacted by heterosexuals—like sex between children—occupies a liminal space within sexual relations, one that sits outside of the heterosexual/homosexual binary and is barely perceptible as sex” (27). Males are driven to live out “compulsive heterosexuality [borrowing Adrienne Rich’s term].” This is because “most of us have, in fact, been oriented toward straightness. Most of us have been required to inhabit heterosexuality from early childhood, even if we’ve never engaged in heterosexual sex” (33). How we are to understand how one “inhabits” a concept remains unclear, but the idea seems to be that because 95-97% of the population is heterosexual popular entertainment must understandably feature stories about male/female romance and sex in order to draw viewers. As a result, however, “most of us” have been “oriented” to seeing such relationships and behavior as normal, which from the author’s perspective is not desirable. Much as homosexuality and heterosexuality are opposites, queerness and normalcy (straightness) are also opposites. Normalcy (heterosexuality) is not desirable. Queerness is.

In this section, the author refers to Freud’s famous developmental account (the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* [1905]) of how sexual orientation comes about. She misunderstands Freud, however. When Professor Ward mentions the “polymorphous capacity to experience pleasure in response to a broad range of stimuli” (“polymorphous perverse” sexuality) that Freud attributed to children, he had in mind children *before* they had discerned the differences between the sexes. However, Professor Ward is writing about the gender dimorphic world of “girl” (female) children and “boy” (male) children, not the sexually non-differentiated infant and young child (29). In this passage the notion of “opposite” sexes is challenged, but the author later refers to “the same or opposite genitals” (195) of human beings which are the “primary sexual characteristics” of the two sexes that first bring up for a child the question about the differences between males and females.

Professor Ward does not consider that the sexes may be complementary and not opposite. Queer-

ness and normalcy and must also be opposites and cannot be complementary. In the world of opposites, one of the two can easily be “bad” and the other “good.” And so it happens that heterosexuality is “bad” (perhaps even evil) and queerness is “good” (perhaps even desirable). The metaphor of a battle between opponents dominates much of the genre of which Professor Ward’s book is an example. It is a world in which all males are said to be violent towards females and females are encouraged to be on the defensive (and, more recently, offensive) with respect to males. The language of *Not Gay* is misandric especially about young white men especially. It echoes the language of Michael Kimmel (*Guyland* and *Angry White Men*), whom Professor Ward cites with approval. (A separate review of the theme of male “whiteness” in *Not Gay* is warranted but must wait for another occasion.)

In the concluding section of the opening chapter of her book Professor Ward discusses “The Birth of the Congenital Heterosexual” (39-42) described by Jonathan Ned Katz (1996). She correctly notes that the term ‘heterosexual’ (adjective) was first applied disapprovingly to men with unusually strong sexual interests in sex (with women) but forgets to mention that Katz’s basic point is that the term was invented after the term ‘homosexual’ to denote a contrast (and opposite) to that behavior and, later, to individuals who displayed such behavior. Homosexual desire and behavior were mistakenly thought to be a manifestation of evolutionary regression and homosexuals were therefore judged by sexologists to be less than human. These linguistic barbarisms that combine a Greek prefix (homo- [same] or hetero- [other]) with a Latin root *sexus* have, in fact, proven to be less than helpful in distinguishing between an infant’s sex assigned at birth, a child’s understanding of sex differences, one’s self-identified sex (gender identity), and a adult’s sexual orientation. Introducing the fresh binary queer/(hetero)normative has not helped matters. Instead, long recognized ambiguities about body functions (especially sexual behavior) that adolescents in the developed West have been given the luxury of indulging in (and are dismissed by Professor Ward as a ruse that distracts all of us from seeing the evils of heterosexuality and challenging the presumption that procreativity is a natural tendency) are in the world of “queerness” the new norm for adult life, the norm “not-normal.” But there is a logical problem here, since we are evidently faced with a norm that is not a norm and an identity that is not an identity. Gender “fluidity” (“queerness”) precludes any fixed identity. Adolescent gender ambiguity has been elevated to protracted confusion legitimated by the disciplinary status of “gender studies” and “queer studies.”

The examples of homosexual heterosexuality provided in the middle chapters seem to be offered chiefly as entertainment, much like the practices themselves as they are pursued and experienced. The reader may spend time with them if he wishes. This reviewer would only like to point out that Professor Ward seems to be fascinated with anality and scatology. Perhaps these are the next frontier of “edgy” writing in “cultural studies,” but there is a certain adolescent quality about this writing that needs to repeat slang *ad nauseum*. What is “dirty” and what is “male” are equated for some reason in the author’s imagination. Having at one time found that men’s bodies “and masculinity more generally” were “hot” (201), the author tells us in her most extended autobiographical interlude (201 ff.) that now she is “attracted to the bodies (masculine female bodies; feminine male bodies) known within heterosexual culture to be tragic and ugly.” Her “first girlfriend” “was hot despite and because she was ugly to the straight world” (202), that is, to the world of heterosexual males and presumably females, too. The author does not have much to say about heterosexual women. Sexual desire for Professor Ward is “felt” for *ideas*, not for bodies. This is why careful

distinctions are made between straight, gay lesbian and bisexual, in order disavow identification with any of them: “I was queer,” she writes (203). And that, if I understand correctly, means without fixed gender identity. Again, however, we must consider the logical error of denying that not having an identity is an identity. It is what Erik Erikson called “negative identity,” a psychological status preferable to being “no one at all” and commonly enough found among antisocial adolescents.

The research methodology and data offered in support of this study of male heterosexuality are hardly careful and robust, respectively. *Not Gay* would appear to be an opportunity for the author to express her animus towards males, especially young ones. Professor Ward’s psychological and intellectual motivations are of no concern to me, but I am bothered by her contribution to the literature of misandry. It is unlikely that the cover photograph will serve the publishers well for long when it is discovered not to reflect the book’s contents. The subculture the author wants to suggest represents most young men—in college and in the military—certainly exists, but it is very small. Moreover, on the internet the practices cited most likely are designed to appeal to a small group of gay men who are fond of B/D/S/M practices. Fraternities have long since abandoned even modest hazing (paddling, forcing “pledges” to eat disgusting foods, etc.). Evidently, a few men in the military behave barbarously even with their comrades. Sanctions against torture are in place. If there is a moral question here, it will not be addressed by books such as *Not Gay* that demonize all young males. It is well known that men in prison rape one another, but no one would consider criminals to be representative of most males.

The author of *Not Gay* is deliberately vulgar as often as she is able to find an opportunity to be. As scholarship, it is mediocre, given the paucity of data. I wonder whether it is among the required books for any of Professor Ward’s courses. How it stands as literature in the social sciences alongside her masters—Foucault, Butler, Kristeva, Halberstam, Kimmel, Connell, Katz—must be determined by the reader. I would recommend borrowing a copy from your public library, even though the *Not Gay* is available for amazon prime customers for \$89.00 (cloth) and \$22.50 (reduced from \$25.00). A kindle edition can be had for \$12.50. xi + 239 pp.

Miles Groth, PhD, Wagner College, Staten Island, NY

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