

Book Reviews



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

Jane Ward's *Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men* aims to demonstrate the thesis that straight men who have sex with men are acting on homosexual desires and, further, that homosexual desire lies at the core of what she calls "heteromascularity." To accomplish this, Ward sets forth a number of examples of ostensibly homosexual acts between otherwise straight men. These range from institutionalized homosexual practices, such as hazing rituals, to individually pursued sexual relations, exemplified in a collection of personal ads garnered from craigslist.org.

Though this thesis may be said to be the central focus of the book, Ward sets her sights beyond this singular aim. In addition to her "effort to catalogue a broad and diverse range of accounts of straight white men's sex with men" (p. 8) Ward is also striving to bring to light the cultural foundations of the relationship between straightness and queerness. Further, Ward has yet another, more vital goal in mind: "... to redirect our attention away from soothing tales of sociobiology toward the more complex, intersectional, and culturally embedded human strivings for straight and queer ways of life" (p. 50).

While Ward does indeed provide a fairly varied array of accounts of straight guys having or seeking sex with men, the success of her other efforts is quite debatable. This qualification is necessitated by a number of very salient and potentially fatal problems with Ward's demonstration. For the sake of brevity, I will highlight only two of these issues: clarity and consistency.

First, the clarity of the book is compromised by a lack of forthrightness regarding key terms and

counterintuitive methodological commitments. The former is evidenced from the beginning of the text, which opens with a personal anecdote about how the author became interested in the topic of sex between straight men and an example of the latter. Ward then jumps into her past self's interpretation of the example, which is immediately followed by her present interpretation of the same, all without any clarification of the terms used in these interpretations, despite their usage in senses beyond those of common parlance.

Specifically, Ward analyzes the phenomenon in question by means of terms that are likely unfamiliar to both laypeople and scholars working in fields other than her own and, in addition, uses conventional terms in unconventional senses. For example, the adjective "white" is closely related to and nearly synonymous with the word "productive" (p. 4) in contrast to its more common use as a descriptor of physical appearance.

Another issue regarding terminology is that Ward never defines "sex" or "sexuality," despite the fact that the book is ostensibly about these topics. While Ward does offer a "Note on Key Terms" 37 pages into the book, she does not define therein "sex" or "sexuality," but merely notes that she "... used the term 'sex' to describe behaviors that participants themselves understand as something else, something nonsexual." The justification she offers for this usage is only that she does not trust straight men to lead her to "heteroerotic homosexuality" (p. 38). This is not very informative, as the latter is not only among the phenomena under investigation, but also a potentially oxymoronic term that is liable to confuse readers if left unclarified.

Of course, the book does not set out in search of the foundations of sexuality, so there is no problem in the lack of a detailed analysis of such. However, sexuality is not even defined by supposition for the purposes of the book. That is, Ward leaves us with neither a demonstrated nor a hypothetical definition, explanation, or description of sexuality as such. Rather, the reader is left to conjecture about her meaning based on context clues.

This curious omission may be due to the fact that this book is not, at its core, about sex at all. At bottom, it is about culture and behavior, but not sexuality *in vivo* or sexual experience. Rather, it is about sexuality insofar as it is culturally implicated in behavior. Ward provides few accounts of actual men's sexual experiences, leaving it unclear how these relate to or inform sexual behavior. Accordingly, readers should not expect a peek into the psychology and perspectives of straight white men who engage in homosexual acts.

This particular terminological deficiency dovetails into a methodological anomaly. The absence of any concrete or even hypothetical (e.g. by thought experiment) investigation of the experience of straight white men leaves out a key perspective: that of the individuals whose behavior is being explained and examined. This reveals one of Ward's more tenuous biases: the confinement of the subject matter to the sociocultural sphere. Admittedly, psychology, biology, and history are not included among the methods that Ward claims are necessary to investigate the matter at hand (p. 8).

The second set of problems encompasses the eclipsing inconsistencies of Ward's demonstration and may be exemplified by two cases. In one example, her premises obscure a core argument for her thesis, while in another she seems to switch between two opposing positions at the very end of the book.

The first case starts with Ward's postulate that all men, whether gay or straight, have homosexual desires and engage in activities at the behest of these impulses. However, she says, these desires are not in any way rooted in biology. Rather, men choose their sexual investments and behaviors, though these choices are made upon the basis of partially homosexual bedrock. In

support of this position, Ward asserts that “... even men’s repulsion with a sex object... [does] not preclude men’s desire or erotic engagement” (p. 18).

This suggests that despite a man’s agency and conscious efforts to avoid certain acts with other men, he is nevertheless driven by homosexual desires. Nevertheless, such men are in fact straight, because “... heterosexuality is defined by investment in heterosexuality” (p. 116). At the same time, Ward holds that “straight white men’s sex practices... are shaped by the culture in which they are situated... [a] culture of white heterosexuality” (p. 150).

Such a line of thought is confusing because homosexual desire is essential to heterosexuality, which is both formed and prescribed by culture, but, as lacking any biological foundation and persisting despite “investments” to the contrary, it would appear that homosexual desire is itself rooted in the imperative of culture at the same time that the very same culture proscribes it. Does culture push men toward homosexual desires or does it push them away from them? Yet, she also says that “... what counts as heterosexual versus queerness should be the cultural and relational investments of the participants” (p. 134).

To summarize, investments are what determine that a person is heterosexual and all men have homosexual desires. Moreover, whether or not a man is heterosexual is not a matter of biology, while culture shapes heterosexual practices. Accordingly, it appears that a man’s engagement in any given sex act is shaped by culture, but the sexual valence of such acts is due to “investments.” It is thus unclear whether these investments are the result of culture or some other factor(s).

Ward’s reasoning in this vein is further convoluted by her simultaneous commitment to the claim that men are compelled to be heterosexual by “heteronormative” culture and the assertion that homosexual desire and activity lie at the heart of heterosexuality. This leads to the implication that heteronormative culture compels men to behave in homosexual ways in order to be heterosexual. Thus, only thing that would appear to differentiate between homosexual men and heterosexual men are their “cultural and relational investments.”

This demonstration is not only difficult to follow, but leads to some conclusions that the average reader may find difficult to reconcile. For instance, Ward says that the heterosexual investments of men engaging in sex with other men are themselves realized by narratives that define homosexual behaviors as heterosexual (cf. Ch. 3, pp. 114-118). Without these narratives and their corresponding investments, men cannot be heterosexual. Moreover, Ward claims, such heterosexual narratives are the privilege of white men. Accordingly, it would seem that black men who engage in homosexual behaviors cannot but be homosexual, since they are culturally and systematically barred access to white male narratives, which are the route to heterosexuality. Though this line of reasoning may appear sensible at first glance, it does harbor a confusing inconsistency which may be illustrated by a hypothetical situation. Consider the case of an African-American man who engages in homosexual sex, yet remains invested in heterosexuality. According to Ward, it is this that investment defines him as heterosexual. However, since this man is not white, he does not have access to the heterosexual narratives available to white men, which Ward claims are also necessary to establish heterosexuality in the midst of homosexual behaviors. Unless “investment” is synonymous with “narrative,” we are left with a black man who is at once both heterosexual and homosexual, without the possibility of any determination being made due either to his biological makeup or sexual behaviors.

A second example of inconsistency is Ward’s vacillating position on the importance of circumstances in the determination of the valence of sexual behavior. In one place, Ward criticizes perspectives that “focus on the circumstances,” for such approaches presume a “... conflict between

homosexual behavior and heterosexual selfhood...” (p. 118). Yet, at the end of the book, Ward appears to take a contrary position when, after noting that most of her students agree that circumstances are meaningful when determining whether an act is homosexual or heterosexual, she takes this collegial concord a step further and says that “in fact, [circumstances] are everything” (p. 196).

One might suspect that this could be meant in a way that doesn’t bear directly on Ward’s prior claim that a “narrow and near exclusive” emphasis on circumstances is problematic due to its obfuscation of “... straight men’s agentic, subjectifying pursuit of hetero-masculinity” (p. 118). However, Ward definitively states that “... the line between a gay constitution and a straight one has always been... deeply bound by the circumstances in which homosexual sex practices occur” (p. 196).

In sum, Ward claims that men’s heterosexuality is at once inextricably tied to circumstances and yet definitively determined by subjective agency. While this, taken by itself is a rather moderate claim – most situations of human activity involve the influence of both circumstance and agency – Ward places confusing and inconsistent emphasis on each factor at different points in her presentation. In some places, it seems that agency and “investment” ultimately determine whether a man is gay or straight, while in others it is particular circumstances which are the deciding factors in making this determination.

It is also worth noting, in passing, that Ward makes a number of sweeping claims that some may find presumptuous and frustrating. If you are a man, be prepared to be told the meaning and motive of your sexuality - whether you consider yourself gay, straight, or otherwise. If you are a straight woman, be prepared to be called violent, misogynistic, and boring – or else resign yourself to the fact that you are not straight, if “straight” means “heterosexual.”

On the whole, *Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men* is a challenging and intellectually scattered book whose periodic insights are obscured by conspicuous and avowed ideological commitments and political aspirations. Many of the book’s weak points could be significantly strengthened by taking a broader perspective informed by a greater range of disciplines and approaches as well as the abandonment of political projects in favor of a thoroughgoing analysis of the phenomena in question, including the addition of a deeper investigation of the experiences of those whose sexuality is in question.

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