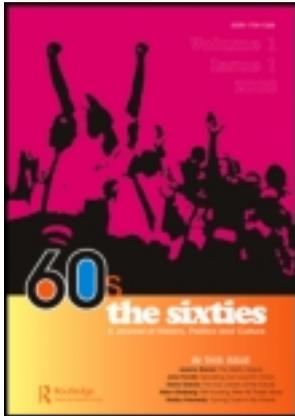


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Erotic city: sexual revolutions and the making of modern San Francisco

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accusatory book on Fonda's "aid and comfort" to North Vietnam was published by right-wing Henry and Erika Holtzer. As late as 2004, Democratic presidential candidate Senator John Kerry was still compared to Fonda for lies about his Vietnam service and role in the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). The "official" site on Fonda, hanoijane.net, yielded 11,800 entries in 2000 and 113,000 five years later, numbers which demonstrate that despite apologizing and distancing from the left, the Fonda's myth still perpetuates long after the end of the war.

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Erotic city: sexual revolutions and the making of modern San Francisco, by Josh Sides, New York, Oxford University Press, 2009, 304 pp., \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 9780195377811

Over the past 20 years, historians charting the shifting geographies of twentieth-century sexuality have made some of the field's strongest contributions. George Chauncey's landmark publication *Gay New York* (1995) pushed back against notions that pre-World War II homosexuals languished in isolation and obscurity, presenting a coded gay subculture that clearly occupied a place in the public sphere. More recent works by Nan Boyd (2005) and Daniel Hurewitz (2007) focused primarily on first half of the twentieth century. Each employed approaches that placed homosexuality squarely in the public spheres of their respective cities, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

In many ways, Josh Sides' work *Erotic City: Sexual Revolutions and the Making of Modern San Francisco* follows in this tradition. If Boyd's *Wide Open Town* stopped at the edge of the 1960s, Sides picks up where the San Francisco State Professor ends. Charting San Francisco's sexual history from the 1950s through the 1990s, Sides examines the emergence of vibrant gay and lesbian communities from earlier waves of "sexual radicals" which included the controversial Beats and hippies. Like Chauncey's Greenwich Village bohemians, the Beats and the counterculture rejected sexual and domestic normatives exploring not only non-traditional heterosexual encounters but also homosexuality. In combination with the burgeoning burlesque and topless shows of the 1950s and 1960s public acceptance of a visual sexuality emerged. No longer was the sex industry confined to the former "Barbary Coast." Here Sides parallels Hurewitz's *Bohemian Los Angeles*. Both authors trace the development of a gay community that had become intertwined with populations that also pressed for greater presence in the public sphere. Hurewitz's protagonists were the artistic and communist communities of Edendale. The ideas of each influenced the simmering homophile movement. Similarly, the public sexuality of Sides' "sex radicals" created a broader space that homosexuals came to occupy. Moreover, just as the "politics of authenticity" came to intervene in the identities of Hurewitz's subjects, Sides reveals similar dynamics at work in San Francisco's gay and lesbian communities, as some in each community sought to establish norms.

Notably, Sides points out that San Francisco's image as a gay Mecca was only recently acquired. Furthermore in the immediate post-war period, the general sexual permissiveness associated with the city did not exist. Before the war, San Francisco's gay community remained distinct but small. However, during and after, the presence of the US military helped to alter these conditions as the city served as a point for those being shipped to the Pacific and others dishonorably discharged for homosexuality. As well, Sides traces the negative reaction of some San Franciscans to the growth of both a visible gay community and open expressions of sexuality, straight and gay alike, on the street. Like other cities of the period, San Francisco's moral reformers continued to battle what they perceived as vice and immorality as evidenced by post-war anti-prostitution efforts.

In the early 1960s, San Francisco's place as the USA's gay capital began to come into being. The homophile movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s established communication networks and a public presence that rejected earlier images of gays as isolated, perverse, and deviant. The resurrection of Los Angeles's Mattachine Society in San Francisco (1953) and formation of the Daughters of Bilitis (1955) were two prominent examples of these developments. Their influence contributed to the 1964 formation of the Society for Individual Rights (SIR). SIR forthrightly refused to apologize for homosexuality. Eclipsing the earlier homophile organizations, SIR quickly emerged as leader in terms of membership and visibility. Ultimately, all these organizations served as stepping stones toward a more assertive gay presence that manifested itself in the gay liberation movement.

While the lesbian and gay communities cooperated in the early stages of gay liberation, sexism and the influence of cultural feminism operated as political wedges between the two groups. Uncomfortable with the hyper masculinity, sexism, and what some lesbians perceived as an overly hedonistic gay male identity, many lesbians broke away, organizing a more politically oriented movement. However, while cultural feminism encouraged a more political, unified approach that emphasized feminine difference, equality, and sisterhood, it sublimated sexuality. Definitions of what was and was not acceptable sexual behavior marginalized individuals. Bisexuals, transgenders, and others found themselves excluded. Sides argues the proliferation of more overtly sexual lesbianism in the 1990s stemmed from an inability to do so in this earlier period.

Erotic City also attempts to illustrate how various social, political, and economic changes continually altered San Francisco's "sexual geographies." Though Sides acknowledges the Castro's place in the lexicon of gay history and dutifully documents its development, he also notes that several other areas contributed to San Francisco's emergence as a gay capital including Polk Street, the Tenderloin, and South of Market; each of which displayed its own sense of public homosexuality often informed by class, race, and sense of style. Sides does utilize Castro to illustrate that not only public homosexuality bothered blue collar and older city residents. The process of gentrification attributed to gays, forced many working class and immigrant families to move.

If the Castro exhibited an unmistakably gay male orientation, the Mission, which had become home to many of the city's lesbians in the 1960s and 1970s, provided a very different example. Sharing the Mission with a significant Chicano population and making up a smaller proportion of the neighborhood, many lesbians became influenced not only by feminism and the anti-war protests but also the burgeoning Chicano movement. Many lesbians exhibited a greater sensitivity toward

multicultural issues, suggesting that gay men illustrated sharper instances of racism or racial fetishization. Sides acknowledges that tensions did emerge in the Mission between lesbians and Chicanos, but that such conflicts were at the very least, mitigated by a lesbian population more sensitive to issues of race.

Nor does Sides ignore the darker side of sexual radicalism. Anti-prostitution efforts disproportionately affected African American women. Even more problematically, many urban renewal advocates argued the presence of prostitution in the predominantly Black Western Addition provided a legitimate reason for renewing the area through economic development. Undoubtedly, white johns drove the city's prostitution industry, yet black women and communities remained the target of law enforcement and renewal.

The sexual radicalism of free love proved problematic as well. Women soon discovered that their male counterparts may have been liberal about sex but they were conservative about gender. Others viewed hippies and other sex radicals as easy marks. Though these radicals helped usher in the sexual revolutions of the late 1960s and 1970s, criminal exploitation followed them as rapes and sexual assaults increased. Regrettably, rapes doubled twice in the period from 1970–3.

Perhaps the book's darkest example occurs in the early 1980s with the onslaught of AIDS. AIDS leveled San Francisco's sexual geographies. Yet, Sides gleans some sense of the positive from these developments. The rise in sexual assaults in the 1970s and the presence of feminists, straight and lesbian, had, by the 1980s, resulted in a coordinated public health response that resulted in the creation of numerous female centered clinics, health facilities, and women's centers. The tragedy of AIDS helped to create a broader alternative sexuality community that now included bisexuals, transgenders, and others. Employing the term "queer", this new membership recast social relations in the last part of the twentieth century, creating new solidarities. From a public health perspective, methods and programs established in San Francisco to deal with AIDS were then implemented in other cities. Unfortunately, race remained an intervening factor. Throughout the 1980s, due to cultural reasons, political leadership, and inadequate education about the disease, the Black community suffered rising rates of infection. Furthermore, like others before him, Sides argues that the media's early focus on gay white males distorted the disease's victims as it ignored IV drug users and minority populations subject to different economic conditions and subjectivities.

Much of *Erotic City* complements and builds upon recent works on sexuality and gender in the twentieth century. However, in some moments Sides' arguments are less persuasive. For example, Sides attempts to supplant the importance of the Stonewall Rebellion arguing that San Francisco protests three months prior over the wrongful termination of a gay employee provided the real spark for the gay liberation movement. Granted, one might suggest Stonewall's deification has been problematic and numerous voices including Sides have made this point. Yet Sides' argument seems to rest on the influence that organizations like the Gay Liberation Front cast. A reasonable observation, but Stonewall had a large discursive effect as well; one as difficult to measure as that of the Gay Liberation Front. It remains unclear whether or not the three month difference should be seen as distinct or part of a larger collective moment.

Ultimately, Sides' insights broaden our understanding of the period and its actors. Undoubtedly, *Erotic City* performs a valuable historical task by beginning to unravel the meaning and exploring the manifestations of modern sexualities in the urban

built environment. The contributions and setbacks of the twentieth century's final decades need to be debated; *Erotic City* deserves to be a part of this discussion.

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