

Josh Sides, *Erotic City: Sexual Revolutions and the Making of Modern San Francisco* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, \$29.95, pp. 292, 978-0-19-537781-1)

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San Franciscans have long enjoyed – or endured – their city’s reputation for sexual opportunity and tolerance of sexual diversity. For outsiders, its allure usually carries with it a whiff of the frontier. Josh Sides’s *Erotic City*, however, eschews talk of a ‘wide open city’; in this account of San Francisco’s postwar sexual and social transformations, the city’s sexual landscape is conceived as a patchwork of contested territories. Given its emphasis on localized resistance and struggle, it is not inappropriate that Sides’s history opens with a sketch of the activities of one of the less obvious players in San Francisco’s burgeoning public sexual revolution. The campaigns of Fred Methner, a seasoned defender of his Noe Valley neighbourhood from ‘uncivilised’ incursions, such as the public display of pornography and anything related to hippy culture, are for Sides typical of the territorial claims made by the city’s various inhabitants. A number of similar ‘counter-revolutionary’ figures populate *Erotic City* – church leaders, senior police officials, mayors, and sundry residents – yet it is clear that Sides’s sympathies lie rather with the city’s assorted sex radicals. Principally, though, his account of the fluctuating fortunes of those on either side of the sexual revolution allows Sides to draw an optimistic portrait of the city, one quite removed from the model of urban decline that dominates accounts of the postwar American metropolis. That said, there is no shying away from injustice and violence; Sides for instance points out the regular use of anti-prostitution laws to police the city’s racial divisions, as well as the frequency of homophobic assaults occurring on the city’s streets. Ironically enough, one of the book’s recurrent themes is the manner in which sexual conservatives – and no few business organisations seeking to regenerate déclassé areas of the city – have sought to

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associate public sex with the threat of violence precisely in order to suppress the former.

Mainly because it is heavily reliant on published sources, *Erotic City* lacks the richness and revelations of landmark urban sexual histories like George Chauncey's *Gay New York*. Some of the many voices recorded in its pages are ordinary ones drawn from oral histories; mostly, though, Sides relies on the accounts of leaders. Sometimes this imbalance seems to demonstrate contempt for particular groups: except for Jefferson Poland and a few early acolytes of the Sexual Freedom League, the arrivals on the Haight-Ashbury scene are depicted as a dumb mass. *Erotic City* necessarily covers a lot of familiar ground, with the Summer of Love and its gritty aftermath, the rise and loss of Harvey Milk, and the Castro as gay mecca then ghost town all predictably present. Fortunately, Sides is at least as attentive to struggles over sites and identities which have had rather less exposure, including the attempts of strip clubs to keep abreast of changing legal definitions of obscenity, the Golden Gate Park's history of public sex, and the continuation of the city's contribution to sexual radicalism by lesbian and bisexual women. These stories – sometimes intersecting, often entertaining – are never extensively theorised in a way which might advance our understanding of the relationship between sex and urban space. Sides merely asserts that sociality and sexual desire inform the city's physical and economic structure (10) – which perhaps explains why the effects of the 1990s-2000s housing bubble on San Franciscan bohemia are only briefly sketched. Usefully, though, the book's focus on contestation continually foregrounds the impact of inequalities of class, race and gender throughout the city's sexual revolution.

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