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[ARTICLE+ILLUSTRATION]

Bringing the Red Light District Home



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THE PROBLEM WITH NORMAL

Entering a gay bar in the French Quarter of New Orleans last week, my alternative spring break group was suddenly surrounded by (unfortunately tacky) gay porn on the walls. Later a few of the straight guys in the group began talking about the porn splashed across a large screen in the club (oh, the things straight people miss out on). Although all the guys were “gay-friendly,” the experience clearly made them somewhat uncomfortable. The situation like so many others, made me wonder: what does it mean for straight people to truly “accept” gays?

At its most basic level, queerness is sexual. If I didn't enjoy having sex with men, I wouldn't call myself gay. Yet, if a straight male can only hang out with me when the interaction is completely devoid of any images or ideas of gay sexuality, am I being accepted at the expense of my sexuality? Why can we talk about identity only when it's devoid of sex?

Discomfort with sexuality, regardless of who is having the sex, is certainly not an issue exclusive to LGBT people—everyone suffers from our societal aversion. New York, supposedly America's liberal cultural capital, has an unfortunately overlooked history of sexual repression. Under the Giuliani mayorship of the 1990s, the city began widespread crackdowns on New York City porn and sex-related businesses, most prominently in Times Square. While sexual images still emerge safely from the pages of magazines and the comfortable distance of television screens, the public supports the stigmatization of venues that actually facilitate sexual expression. What public interest was so threatened by having what was essentially a “red light district” in New York? Michael Warner, a Yale professor, notes the importance of these venues as

essential and traditional footholds for the growth of alternative sexual cultures, as well as an entry point for many people of stigmatized sexual identities to engage in a sexual expression that is often otherwise unavailable. The AIDS crisis of the '80s and '90s illuminated the role these porn and sex shops often filled as thresholds for creating a culture of safer sex and spreading important health information.

While Giuliani's campaign may have made some sex-averse New Yorkers more comfortable walking around Times Square, the ramifications of his actions also had a damaging effect on many New Yorkers. Sex work was pushed further underground, away from potential protection and regulation by authorities. The trope of the Giuliani campaign was the notion that public sexuality has an adverse impact on economics, community, and family life. The Dutch experience of legalized and protected sex work, as well as a relatively mainstream and public sex industry, lends a strong critique to these assumptions. Amsterdam's famous Red Light District helps promote a sex industry in which workers are often unionized, personally and professionally empowered, and have ample access to the police protection and health care necessary for their jobs. The Dutch system helps ensure that sex workers are not exploited or part of human trafficking networks. The American system, further antagonized by the Giuliani campaign, helps ensure that a sexual culture which always has and always will exist will continue to function as a system that is both exploitative and dangerous to sex industry workers and consumers.

You don't have to far from campus to find evidence of a troubling difficulty to substantively deal with sexuality. The latest edition of the *Barnard Bulletin* includes an embarrassingly narrow article by Dani Peterson about one-night stands. While one might assume that breaching the "sensitive" topic of one-night stands would signal a certain comfort and intellectual interest in the politics of sexual mores, the piece exhibits the opposite. It fails to see beyond traditional, heteronormative understandings of sexuality based on the ideals of loving coupledness.

and monogamy. Peterson notes that societal norms taught her of the “unacceptable” nature of one-night stands, presumably because of our idealization of “good” and “safe” sex as coming through couples engaging in “loving, heterosexual” sex.

While a vast academic and intellectual body of writing which addresses sexual expression and its contemporary societal limitations exists, Peterson relies on popular media such as *Sex and the City* and *Cosmopolitan* as the impetus for challenging the aversion to casual sex outside of a relationship. The article offers silly examples of alcohol-induced one-night stands, leaving the reader to believe that sex that is fulfilling, truly consensual, and satisfying can only happen within a heterosexual, monogamous, traditional relationship. Had Peterson done even the most cursory of research, she would have discovered not only gender and sexual theorists who offer substantive questions of the sexual politics creating shame and stigma around casual sex, but also vast networks of people from across the sexual spectrum who engage in non-traditional sexual practices which they find fulfilling, satisfying, and consensual. (Swingers, anyone?) The extreme limitations of the article illuminate the inability among even young college students to seriously address issues of sexuality in a substantive manner.

From Eliot Spitzer to a teenager coming out as queer, our inability to deal with sexuality can alter the course of lives. The very notion of a gay pride parade illuminates the deep sexual shame which makes it necessary. While Disney will probably dominate Times Square for many years to come, we each have the individual power to create strong, open, informed, publicly accessible, and wild sexual spaces. A constant intellectual discourse and discussion of sexuality and sexual acts, along with a vigorous engagement in diverse and enjoyable sex, can only lead to a more fulfilling world.

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The Problem With Normal runs alternate Mondays.

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