



Online Book Reviews

The Tragedy of Heterosexuality. By Jane Ward. New York: New York University Press, 2020. 216 pp. \$26.95 (hardcover).

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Why do so many straight men hate the women they are supposed to love? Why do so many straight women sacrifice their happiness and health to please the men in their lives? Why does Donald Trump demean women while professing to love them more than anyone else? Why do women continue to be murdered by husbands and strangers in the era of #MeToo?

In her 2020 book *The Tragedy of Heterosexuality*, Jane Ward examines the contentious and damaged relationship between heterosexual men and women, tracing how an entire “heterosexual-repair industry” has evolved in American culture to overcome the “natural” and seemingly predetermined incompatibility between the two sexes. In so doing, Ward undermines the long-standing political narrative that positions heterosexuality as easier and preferable to queerness, instead embracing lesbian feminist thought about the violence of “straight culture” and the queer joy that comes with freedom from gender roles. Ward provides a powerful argument for decentering heterosexism in feminist social science, turning the analytical lens back onto the heterosexuals who have long critiqued queer lives and asking, “Are straight people okay?”

The Tragedy of Heterosexuality is a valuable follow-up to Ward’s previous book, *Not Gay: Sex between Straight White Men* (2015). In both monographs, Ward shows what critical heterosexuality studies can offer social science by questioning the self-evidently “normal” practices of straight culture (e.g., homosocial bonding around sexual violence, a

general disgust for anything feminine, the ritualization of anything gendered or sexual). Whereas *Not Gay* largely focused on the actions of cisgender men, *The Tragedy of Heterosexuality* considers how both cisgender men and women participate in a culture that trades happiness and sexual fulfillment for respectability and social power. In response to this “heterosexual misery,” Ward extends a tongue-in-cheek hand of “allyship” across the aisle, seeking to understand the practices and rituals of straight culture from a concerned (albeit confused) queer distance.

Ward begins this project in Chapter 2 by discussing the “misogyny paradox” of straight culture, wherein men are expected to (1) feel authentic love and affection for women while simultaneously (2) dominating them and rejecting anything feminine. To explain this paradox, Ward turns to twentieth-century self-help books, hygiene products, and other marital aids meant to help the emerging category of “the heterosexual” rediscover interest in members of the opposite sex. In addition to demonstrating the relative newness of “the happy marriage between husband and wife,” Ward further shows how the norm of heterosexuality has been promoted by missionaries of the heterosexual-repair industry: sexologists, social reformers, neoliberal self-help gurus, and eugenicists who viewed the animosity between men and women as a threat to the propagation of the “white race.” The chapter concludes by detailing how the heterosexual-repair industry continued to evolve throughout the twentieth century, with Ward examining and critiquing the claim that the “biologically determined” animosity between men and women can be resolved by simply buying more stuff.

While Chapter 2 largely focuses on narratives being sold to women, in Chapter 3, Ward examines what men are buying, including the growing phenomenon of “pickup artistry” and other self-help courses designed to teach men how to obtain sex through “dating science.” While Ward acknowledges the misogynistic and sometimes violent agenda perpetuated by these products, she also understands them as yet another form of the heterosexual-repair industry, meant to alleviate the “heterosexual misery” that affects many straight men struggling to win sexual intercourse. For example, Ward describes with equal measures of pity and feminist anger how the seduction industry has evolved in the #MeToo era to teach men about consent and female sexuality, albeit with the goal of helping participants have sex with as many hot skinny blonde girls as possible.

In the final two chapters of the book, Ward doubles down on her critique of heterosexuality, enumerating its many sins and offering advice on how to

resolve the tragic situation of lonely heterosexuals looking for love. In Chapter 4, Ward uses quotations from her network of queer friends to frame her analysis of straight culture as boring, oppressive, misogynistic, traumatic, alienating, ritualistic, full of bad sex, and just generally unimaginative. Building on those ideas, Ward “call[s] upon the wisdom of the dyke” (p. 115) in Chapter 5 to encourage straight men to adopt a lesbian approach to loving women: that is, actually loving women for who they are, body hair and menstrual blood included. Instead of accepting the normative and essentialized status of heterosexuality, Ward challenges straight people to question their own investment in heterosexuality and find what they actually enjoy about being attracted to people of the opposite sex. This “deep heterosexuality,” Ward argues, will allow for much greater cohesion than any kind of neoliberal self-help product on the market.

Throughout *The Tragedy of Heterosexuality*, Ward repeatedly highlights the different ways in which straight culture has been able to adapt to important political and social gains made by women and queer people. When 1950s gender roles proved to be unpopular in the era of “women’s lib,” the heterosexual-repair industry adapted, selling new products meant to allow women to reconcile their self-interest with the “natural” and “biologically determined” differences between men and women. When #MeToo changed the national narrative about consent, pickup artists changed, too, framing their products as compatible with women’s sexual autonomy. Some women in heterosexual relationships may know that they are not having good sex, but their straightness affords them a certain kind of comfort, security, and societal power that is hard for many to abandon. But despite all of these adaptations, straight culture for Ward remains both broken and omnipresent, a universal tragedy from which its adherents seem unable to escape.

While Ward mainly focuses on heterosexual and cisgender people in her book, many of the societal expectations she describes also can do tremendous harm to queer individuals. For example, many lesbian, gay, and bisexual people grow up with the expectation of heterosexuality and its accompanying gender roles (sometimes called “compulsory heterosexuality”) and have to navigate their way out of such norms, to differing levels of success. This phenomenon is also shared by some transgender people who feel pressured to conform to heterosexual relationship norms after transitioning. Organizations that sell harmful “conversion therapy” methods could also be understood as part of the heterosexual-repair industry, marketing expensive “solutions” that claim

to restore some kind of innate heterosexual harmony between men and women. And, as the recent political campaign of Pete Buttigieg demonstrates, some queer people (and perhaps especially gay men) still find tremendous value in replicating heterosexual norms about monogamy and domestic bliss that Ward's queer feminist analysis would find quite unimaginative!

In conclusion, Ward's book presents a compelling biopsy of straight culture that is simultaneously humorous, pitying, and scathing. Her book would be a strong addition to any gender studies course and will likely have a wonderful influence on feminist, queer, and masculinities research. In particular, *The Tragedy of Heterosexuality* provides a powerful example of how to adopt a methodologically queer approach to social science research and will hopefully be a model for further important critical research.


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A Populist Exception? The 2017 New Zealand General Election. Edited by Jack Vowles and Jennifer Curtin. Canberra: ANU Press, 2020. 286 pp. AUD \$60.00 (paperback), also available as open access e-book. <http://doi.org/10.22459/PE.2020>.

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Jacinda Ardern has been one of the more interesting women political leaders in office in recent years, lauded for her success in managing New Zealand's exposure to COVID-19 and for her attempts to pursue a kinder politics focusing on increasing national well-being. She also