

Eros in the Sunshine State

On Tuesday, February 14, 2018, at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL, a boy shot and killed seventeen of his classmates. Several of the survivors swiftly emerged as smart, outspoken, fierce advocates for changes in US gun laws, determined against the possibility of anything like what happened to them ever happening again. However, like all of the many survivors of mass shootings before them, they face obstinate resistance from lawmakers on all sides.

I know Marjory Stoneman Douglas from her activist work. She is the reason there is anything left of the Everglades. She fought real estate development's headlong sprawl into the swamp. She renamed the Everglades "the river of grass" so people could imagine it more accurately. She convinced President Truman to make it a national park. The high school sits at the edge of the Everglades and rampant South Florida's coastal developments. That irony and the history of the school's namesake are not lost on me. The violence of colonization and development make both mass shooting and activism seem like logical outcomes.

The media loves to tell us tales of Florida as a zany, lawless party place. It never tells us of Florida the police state or of Florida where the Trail of Tears began or of Florida's youth activism. I first came to Florida five years ago, at the time of the George Zimmerman trial. That trial might have been deferred forever without intense pressure from a group of young activists, who called themselves The Dream Defenders, who, tired of waiting for the state to bring charges against Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin, organized a march from Daytona Beach to Sanford to demand Zimmerman's arrest. About thirty students walked forty miles in three days, spending the nights in A.M.E. churches along the way. Up north we never hear of Florida youth activism, we only hear of addicts and wasted parties getting into absurd accidents.

On Tuesday, February 21, 2018, just a week away from the shooting, the students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School traveled to the state Capitol in Tallahassee to stand and witness a vote on an assault rifle ban. They believed their presence would force lawmakers' consciences on the issue.

The Florida House session opened with a prayer led by a reverend from a baptist church. (Side note: is it legal for prayers to be said in government assemblies? I guess it is. But should it be?) After prayer, lawmakers voted on whether to debate a bill that would ban assault weapons and large-capacity

ammunition magazines. But the motion to debate the bill required a two-thirds vote, and the vote failed 36-71. The assault rifle ban was not even entered into discussion.

But what comes next is even more strange. Immediately following their refusal to hear the merits of the case on assault weapons one week after a bunch of their own kids were murdered at school, Florida lawmakers followed the down-vote by introducing and voting for a bill declaring pornography a public health risk. How many kids have died, all at once, in one day, in school, from porn? Did the shooter mention porn in his diaries? He did not. But Florida lawmakers actually voted to support the bill, right there with the students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas sitting in front of them. What message did they want to send these students? That porn is more dangerous than guns? Or was it a referendum on sexuality in general, since some of the outspoken teen activists are openly gay?

"How could they do that to us? Are you Kidding me???" tweeted student Emma Gonzalez after the House vote, "the Anger that I feel right now is indescribable." It really is twisted. If lawmakers want to talk about public health, what about the mental health effects of consistently facing how much our own leaders, whose salaries our taxes pay, do not think our lives are meaningful or valuable, that our sudden and violent deaths are easily disregarded.

The bill "recognizes public health risk created by pornography and acknowledges the need for education, prevention, research, and policy change to protect citizens of this state." Use of the word "protect" here is galling. Teens do not need protection from guns, they need protection from porn? The concern, they say, comes from a 2012 study sponsored by *Men's Health* claiming that, based on totalling numbers of porn DVDs purchased, rented or streamed, of adult entertainment stores per mile, of porn searches on Google, and of Cinemax-subscribing households, Orlando, FL ranks #1 of all major cities in the USA for the number of users of pornography. In the minds of the Florida House, people in the Orlando area jerking off at home is a bigger threat than automatic weapons in the schools.

(Side note: I realize that somewhere in the back of my mind, I believed the porn capital of America would be either sex-positive San Francisco or New York, or perhaps Las Vegas, maybe Los Angeles' famed "San Pornando" Valley. As Florida goes, I remember during a Republican convention one summer that Tampa was both the heavy metal and the strip club capital of America. But Orlando, with its Disney-employee-covered and poverty-stricken south side, huh.)

One cannot help but feel cynical, imagining that not only will lawmakers do nothing to ensure that children are not in danger of mass shootings in school, or that they won't grow up to be working and poor, as the vast majority of people in South Orlando are, but also my bet is that the upshot of this bill's passing will be that the Florida House allocates a bunch of tax dollars for the lawmakers themselves to study porn in detail -- a huge amount of detail.

Florida House members will all get free Cinemax subscriptions and a discretionary budget for "internet research." They'll use tax dollars to view, annotate, describe, and discuss porn at length. They'll stay up late into the night working up categories for different kinds of porn. They'll convene weekend workshops to share their results. Reports will be written. Transcripts will be made available on the internet. At best they'll invent new ways to chastise it, unique slanderous condemnations for every different kind of sexual enjoyment on film that they can find. At worst it will be the same old, same old sex negativity we could all laugh at, if we weren't too busy crying, or dead from gun violence.

Lawmakers in Tallahassee -- and everywhere in the US -- have shown us, the people, over and over again, that they don't actually care to protect us, that's just language they use to scare us into their laws. As Brecht said, "the law is written by those who benefit from it." So they get to watch all the porn, and we get -- what -- the news that not only do they not want us to experience pleasure, but that they seem to think it's perfectly fine for us to live in terror, starting at a very young age, and to die randomly from preventable violence. We could make different laws, we could create a different world, we could base it in love, joy of sex, bliss of embodiment, a community of the spirit where no one goes unnourished. There is enough housing, enough food, enough care, enough cash, enough space, and enough work for all. Lawmakers, if they must exist, and perhaps they must not, all we would want is that they allocate resources equitably. But instead, the world they write into existence protects automatic weapons and surveils our Google searches for porn.

They write the law, reserving the rights to pleasure for themselves, and they do it on our dollar. Their message is clear: Pleasure is outlawed, Forgiveness is only for them, Death is free and easy. Where's the love? It seems like they love nothing. It's so fucking dark.

We, on the ground here, in the schools, churches, homes, parks, cars, adult books stores, cable box dispatch centers ... at every level of life in the USA and over the whole world, we want each other to live, and to live as long as possible. We want dignified deaths. We want to love and to know we are loved and

to live fully. We want life. And every time they shove the question of our deaths in our faces, as if none of us matters a whit, we love each other more. We want each other to live.