



2018

## Q & A with Donna Freitas, Author of *Sex and the Soul*

Donna Freitas  
*University of Notre Dame*

Lisa Day  
*Eastern Kentucky University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://encompass.eku.edu/tcj>

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [Physical Sciences and Mathematics Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Freitas, Donna and Day, Lisa (2018) "Q & A with Donna Freitas, Author of *Sex and the Soul*," *The Chautauqua Journal*: Vol. 2 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://encompass.eku.edu/tcj/vol2/iss1/17>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Encompass. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Chautauqua Journal by an authorized editor of Encompass. For more information, please contact [Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu](mailto:Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu).

DONNA FREITAS AND LISA DAY

Q & A WITH DONNA FREITAS, AUTHOR OF *SEX AND THE SOUL*

*As part of your methodology for your research and your writing of *Sex and the Soul*, how did you choose the participating universities? Did you consider any Bible Belt schools? Do you think Southern schools might align more closely with purity culture at religious schools? Have you visited any schools that presented different results from the predominant paradigm?*

For this study, I chose the participating colleges and universities based on a number of factors: religious affiliation or non religious affiliation (Catholic, evangelical, private-secular and public), size, geographic location and whether the school was primarily a campus where students lived (as opposed to commuting). Another consideration was simply the amount of campus interest there was to participate in the project. If my contact at a school was strong and the school wanted to be a part of the study, this was helpful of course. Also, at all the schools the study itself has to pass through an internal review board.

What I found was that religious affiliation at Catholic schools matters very little as far as hookup culture goes—Catholic schools may as well be private-secular or public when it comes to attitudes about both sex and faith. I’ve also found that really, the only significant factor that affects the existence of hookup culture is if the school has an extremely strong, dominant, devout community of students. Evangelical colleges everywhere have a purity culture, not a hookup culture, regardless of whether the college considers itself liberal or conservative in terms of the Christianity they practice. I still have yet to find a Catholic, private-secular or public university where purity culture dominates, though I would imagine that there would be a similar culture at a school like Steubenville in Ohio, with its *extremely* conservative Catholic population.

*Your research has allowed you to define a “classic hookup” in the following terms: 1) vague in the kind of sexual intimacy, from kissing to different types of sex, which women*

*can play down and men can play up; 2) brief—from ten minutes to a one-night stand; and 3) casual and only physical. Yet your female and male interviewees fairly evenly report that they truly want a relationship. What do you think it will take for the students to discover that “sex” and “the soul” are not divided entities?*

Honestly, when I was doing the on-campus interviews and as I listened to student after student complain about hookup culture on their campus (both women and men), I wanted to tell them simply that—even though they didn’t believe this—just about everyone around them also secretly didn’t like hookup culture and wanted a relationship. A part of me thinks that really, all we need to do is tell the students that, in so many ways, hookup culture is a culture of pretend—everybody pretends to be into it, while privately everybody wants to date and have relationships. Could it be as simple as this? I’m not sure. That would be nice.

I also think that faculty and professional staff at universities and colleges need to open the door for students to enter into romantic relationships differently. Students need *permission* to think of their campus as a campus that dates, not merely one where everyone only hooks up. They don’t *believe* their peers want anything other than hookups, especially the men on campus. We need to provide them opportunities, programs, courses where relationships are discussed, that give them a structure to help them think differently about the possibilities for sex, romance, and dating on campus.

*Throughout Sex and the Soul you note that “hookup culture” is gendered: hookups are about finding a boyfriend for women and, in fact, most college relationships begin with a hookup. Does this phenomenon encourage women to participate more actively in hookup culture? How do the women know when a “serial hookup” has become a boyfriend? For men, you suggest that hookups are about proving one’s self as a guy. How do the men know when they have “proven” themselves?*

All students are faced with hookup culture in some way shape or form—even if they don’t actively participate. Students, whether men or women, are surrounded by it everywhere they go—those who do actively participate, as well as those who passively participate through gossip and such. Women will publicly say that they want

relationships and that their only way into one is through hookups, so they will also say (in general) that, if they do hook up, it's in the hope of a hookup turning into a relationship—even though they also know this is illogical given what a hookup is.

There were a number of men who spoke of how, once a guy is able to boast to friends about the number of hookups he's had (say, ten), then a guy can “cash in” his hookups for a relationship. He's justified himself as a guy by having enough meaningless sexual encounters that now he's allowed to have some meaningful ones.

Both men and women commented that (more or less) the way you know a serial hookup is headed toward a committed relationship is the moment when you realize you've hooked up sober. Most hookups happen around the party scene where there is a lot of alcohol, and alcohol is seen as an essential ingredient to the meaningless of all that happens (as well as the fact that alleviates responsibility for what happens). So when two students “hook up” sober, it's a game changer.

*At what point in a student's college education do you see hookup culture becoming pervasive? Are incoming first-year students already familiar with the culture? By the time students are seniors, have they outgrown the tradition?*

Hookup culture is pervasive the minute you walk onto campus. It's also the most intense for students their first year of college. Most students see (and are told by peers) that your first-year of college is your year to party the hardest. To many students, especially men, being free and open to hooking up is understood as essential for participating in the party scene your first year, and the way in which you meet people. For example, if a student comes in with a boyfriend or girlfriend from home, this is often seen by peers (and the student eventually) as an obstacle that is going to get in the way of them effectively meeting people and establishing a social life at college.

Young adults today are becoming familiar with hookup culture as early as middle school, it seems, so yes, I think most students are coming in with exposure to hookup culture. But nothing prepares a young adult for what hookup culture is like on a residential college campus. The fact that you are *living* 24/7 in the midst of hookup

culture ratchets up its intensity in a way that is very different from the kind of hookup culture that exists in middle or high school.

Your question about whether hookup culture loses its luster by the time a student is a senior is a good one. A lot of students spoke about how the expectation to participate is at its most intense in first-year and sophomore year, and then drops significantly by the time you are a junior and senior. It is considered more acceptable to be in a committed relationship toward the end of college by most students. Although, they will also tell you that the pressure is on again for many students spring semester senior year, since this is considered their “last chance” to party and be crazy—their last chance to hook up like college students are “supposed to” hook up.

*Have you interviewed anyone who transferred from public to private/religious or vice versa because of hookup culture or religion?*

There were some transfer students that I interviewed who compared attitudes about both hookup culture and faith at their old school with their current one (for example, a young woman who’d gone to a large public university who transferred to a small evangelical college), but none of these students specifically said they *left* one school for the other for these reasons.

It was more common for students to say they chose a school from the very beginning based on factors having to do with religion—at evangelical colleges, almost everyone said they chose their college based on the faith attitudes of their fellow peers, faculty, and staff. This was much less a factor, though, at Catholic colleges. Some students at the smaller schools commented that they were happy not to be at big public universities because they felt it was easier to avoid the *really* crazy party/hookup scene they knew they’d find at the larger schools—that they chose their schools based on wanting to avoid this.

*With the emphasis on critical and creative thinking in higher education, what do you think is the impact of students' spirituality and their sexual behavior on their academic performance?*

Well, I think the problem is more the following: that students at college—despite all the emphasis on critical and creative thinking in higher education—are not encouraged or taught how to put those classroom/thinking skills into practice in other areas of their life. I think there is a big gulf between those wonderful skills we try to impart to our students and their actions/thinking/behavior beyond the classroom. One of the biggest challenges for universities today (in my opinion) is to wake up to this unfortunate reality. We always talk a good game in our mission statements about turning out good, responsible, respectful and thoughtful citizens, but there are generally very few faculty who truly empower students to put their classroom skills into practice. Academia discourages the personal as a sphere for rigorous thinking and as a result (whether wittingly or not) helps cause this divide between critical and creative thinking within the classroom and its lack beyond the classroom.

*Do you think hookup culture and the purity movement are heteronormatively focused? Have you found heterosexual students who don't readily include homosexual experiences in their sexual history?*

All campus sexual cultures—whether purity or hookup dominated—are heteronormative. Within hookup culture you will find pockets where there are populations of LGBTQ students who create spaces where this is not the case, and you will find heterosexual populations here and there who make an explicit effort to be inclusive when they talk about their ideas regarding sexuality. But in general, your average student speaks heteronormatively about sex regardless of their culture, and especially within purity culture.

There was only one student in particular that I interviewed at an evangelical college who had only had homosexual experiences in the past, but who vehemently asserted he was heterosexual. Otherwise, students freely identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual, and spoke of all their sexual experiences openly.

*You've indicated that rape and sexual assault become "blurred" in hookup culture. In addition to the examples you've noted in Sex and the Soul, have you encountered a significant number of rapes or assaults in students' interviews? How did these experiences affect the students' beliefs about sexuality and spirituality?*

It seems that our cultural conversations around the nature of sexual assault—what it is, how it occurs, etc.—don't quite make sense in the midst of hookup culture. What I would define as a sexual assault (which would involve an unwanted sexual experience, or a nonconsensual sexual encounter) is something that occurs fairly commonly in the context of hookup culture. Students will talk about how they said "no" or were too drunk to say yes or no or anything for that matter, but will discuss this as if this is passé—really, just something par for the course and no big deal. So, what I would define clearly as a sexual assault, many students do not seem to see as a sexual assault, nor do they feel that upset about what happened. It's just the kind of thing that happens all the time within hookup culture, so it's not really beyond the norm of what they've come to expect a hookup will be like. These experiences certainly don't make them feel good, but they do not appear very upset or outraged about them. This dissonance really calls for a new, updated conversation about the nature and definition of sexual assault today, given hookup culture—in my opinion.

*Your publisher's website suggests that you're drawn to the "Big Questions," and I'm curious what you think about the effects of a patriarchal religion on young women and men. With the nearly 40% students in your study who acknowledge they are religious, do you think the masculine personification of God either implicitly or explicitly affects women's submissiveness to male figures in their life? How do you suggest our campuses might counteract this message to assure women that they can be religious and sexually active while they maintain their own agency?*

I think it absolutely affects both women's submissiveness and men's dominance—this comes through especially in the theme parties that are now ubiquitous at most schools. The "classic" theme party is the "Pimps and Ho's" party as far as the students are

concerned, but they have many variations—Professors and Schoolgirls, CEO’s and Secretary Ho’s, Millionaires and Maids, Politicians and Prostitutes, Football Stars and Cheerleader Ho’s. All of these parties literally put the man in the position of power, calling on him to dress and act the part of Professor, CEO, Millionaire, Politician, Sports Star, etc., and they literally put the woman in the subservient position, basically calling on her to dress the part of the sexually available whore. Even students who are in gender studies classes don’t seem to realize or to have taken time to reflect on the extremely gendered nature of their parties on the weekends.

Of course, this is an excellent example of where all of those critical thinking skills we should be imparting in the classroom are not making it beyond the classroom—I believe we must *encourage* the students to put their thinking into practice while they are in the classroom. If a gender studies faculty member learns about theme parties, how could they not begin a discussion that takes a theme party as an example with which they could discuss a syllabus reading that deal with the construction of gender? Or, if a business school faculty member learns of a CEO’s and Secretary Ho’s party, how could they not ask their women students (for ex), how it is that they are aspiring CEO’s during the day, yet when they go out at night they turn themselves into Secretary Whores? Wouldn’t it be good to ask our women students what, exactly, happens between the daytime and nighttime, encouraging them to directly reflect on the dissonance between what they are saying they want as women students, and then how they are dressing and acting as women in the social sphere?

Something to note: I actually first learned about theme parties during a classroom session where we were discussing how, if all language and images of the divine are masculine, then this effects how women’s bodies are valued (or devalued) in society. All semester we’d been discussing the power dichotomies of Man/Woman, God/Human, Public/Private, Rational/Emotional, etc., and this young woman’s hand shot up and she said, “You know: men make themselves into Gods at the parties on campus!” She’d begun to think of the dichotomies in theme parties, and plug them into the other dichotomies we’d been discussing.



*In your research, you have found that men feel they are not allowed to be public about their spirituality, while women aren't supposed to be public about their sexuality. What will it take for gendered boundaries to be erased from spirituality and sexuality?*

I would go so far as to say that men aren't allowed to be public about anything that might make them seem vulnerable! Anything associated with emotion they must hide—I've started to think of it as an "emotional glass ceiling" of sorts.

I don't know what it would take for gendered boundaries to be erased in these areas—I wish I did! That's what all of us in feminist theology have been trying to figure out for decades now.

*At several points of the book, you've suggested faculty's role in encouraging students' balanced sense of self through development of "a particular value system." What value system do you suggest? How do you envision this encouragement taking place? Which classes would be ideal for such conversations? What if some faculty aren't comfortable addressing sexuality and spirituality with their students?*

I am not going to suggest a particular value system as "the" answer. I would say that systems that push students to think critically and that empower *them* by providing structures to help *them* make decisions (as opposed to make decisions *for* them) are far more helpful.

Any class can open itself up to topics relevant to the topics from my study! Literature classes—which already often have at least a single *poem* never mind an entire collection of poems, a play or even a novel that deals with the topic of friendship, romantic relationships and/or sex—are classes where there is plenty of opportunity to open up even a single discussion to the notion of, say, romance (as one example). Really: this is not about re-inventing the wheel, it's about finding even the one class discussion (or two or three) where a faculty member might decide to ask the students a question about their personal experiences of relationships in relation to the material being discussed. This could happen in philosophy, theology, psychology, religion—you name it. It's more about empowering the students to draw in the personal to the textual—to root

the personal in the texts of the class, encouraging them to reflect in this way—as opposed to changing entire syllabi. My belief is that we already have the structure for a classroom response to hookup culture in our syllabi—we only need to shift a question or two and maybe an assignment to take advantage of this and for our students to get the benefit of this.

Not all faculty are meant for this sort of thing, either! It is not for everyone. But there must be *some* faculty who decide to become involved in these conversation. The students need at least *some* faculty to talk to about these subjects within the classroom and in light of their studies.

*After researching and writing this book, what parts of your methodology are you able to use as anecdotal instruction in your Honors classes? As a feminist researcher, what did you find most rewarding about working with research assistants and interviewing students from other colleges?*

I would say that this project has changed my teaching in the sense that, now, I realize very intensely how afraid my students are of truly saying something, anything really, that goes against what they perceive in the “normal opinion” of everyone around them. Students are so nervous to express a truly different opinion—so they stay silent, or pretend to go along with everyone, whether we are talking about sex or *The Odyssey*. I’ve started to think that my number one job is to provide a setting in which students can become empowered to express difference. Students need to learn how to do this, I think. They are coming in already afraid to do it. Conformity is king these days, sadly, and being seen as different terribly frightening.

As a feminist researcher, it was wonderful to find out how, with doing ethnographic research, as opposed to only working on the level of theory, I actually got to put the feminist methodologies I learned about privileging voice and storytelling into practice. It was an incredible thing to get to sit down with students and listen to their stories and do my best to provide them the space to speak something they’d kept silent elsewhere.

*What can you tell us about your follow-up book? What unanswered questions has Sex and the Soul raised for you? How have you changed your methodology?*

My follow up book is called *The End of Sex* (Basic Books, 2013), which is subtitled “How Hookup Culture is Leaving a Generation Unhappy, Sexually Unfulfilled and Confused About Intimacy.” When I say the “end of sex,” what the book is really discussing is the “end” of sex—given hookup culture today, it seems that we need to have a new conversation about the meaning and purpose of sex, and that this conversation needs to happen among the younger generations who are growing up within hookup culture, where they are taught that, ideally, sex is meaningless. I worry that, with every passing year, young adults are becoming “better” at hooking up—in other words, they are becoming better at being ambivalent about sex. This means that it is also becoming more and more difficult for students to be able to claim (or even desire and care about) having pleasurable sex, never mind connective sex. To take a term from Aristotle, they are developing bad habits in the realm of sexuality, habits that are difficult to break, even if they wish to or if they realize they are unfulfilled.

For *Sex and the Soul*, I dealt with many topics and my job was to give an overview of the major findings of the study, which included findings about hookup culture. But for *The End of Sex* I got to focus on hookup culture in particular, and this time, give my opinion on what I think of hookup culture, as well as suggest some possible responses.