

Book Review Symposium – Queer Geographies

David K. Seitz, *A House of Prayer for All People: Contesting Citizenship in a Queer Church*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-1-5179-0214-8 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-5179-0213-1 (cloth)

David Seitz's *A House of Prayer for All People* paints a portrait of the possibilities for radical forms of citizenship through the lens of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) of Toronto, Canada. In this LGBTQ-centric Christian congregation, Seitz interrogates the possibilities for queer theory to inform questions of citizenship, drawing primarily from and significantly contributing to geographic thought and theory. Offering a new and important theoretical perspective, the reader is asked to conceptualize citizenship that does not privilege the nation-state. A queer, cultural, and urban geographer, Seitz contributes "to the ongoing critical reevaluation of both citizenship and religion as 'bad objects' for queer theory" (p. 3), and, in so doing, argues that religion is also a worthy subject of geographical study. His research demonstrates that the tensions and reconciliations between queers and the church can generate possibilities for a liberatory and queer subjectless conception of citizenship beyond the fixation on the state alone.

Seitz begins his arguments from a reading of political scientist Cathy Cohen's "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens; The Radical Potential of Queer Politics", a classic queer of color critique text, to help flesh out the potential for a queer subjectless critique. Cohen insists that "[o]nly by recognizing the link between the ideological, social, political, and economic marginalization of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens can we begin to develop [effective] political analyses and political strategies ..." (1997: 462). In other words, queer subjectless

critique, as we stated in the introduction to this selection of reviews, does not focus solely on the queer subject but seeks to utilize queer principles of non-normativity, disrupting binaries and exploring multitudes of desires and deviances as a generative source of potentially liberatory contestations and practices. This perspective is especially useful for geographers who can make more expansive and much needed use of queer theory beyond the study of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender subjects alone.

Citizenship for Seitz “encompasses sociocultural, affective, and economic domains alongside and intertwined with the juridical register, and proves geographically wily, diffuse, and multiscalar”. As Seitz’s congregation explores the affective dimensions of citizenship, he asks a compelling question: why does nation-state violence holds a monopoly on defining and negotiating citizenship? Through the discipline of geography and the queering of citizenship, Seitz finds a relationship between a queer subjectless critique and citizenship. This intertwining of – at first glance – seemingly incongruous terms leads Seitz to make clear he is not implying citizenship could or should be viewed from a subjectless perspective. Rather, he advocates for a queer approach to citizenship which might “map queer practices, concepts, and spaces of solidarity, sympathy, redistribution, and rights-claiming that do not (necessarily) take the nation-state or LGBTQ identity as their exclusive or primary referents” (p.10).

A concept central to Seitz’s analysis of religion is literature studies scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (2003) call for “reparative practices”. Quoting Joshua Chambers-Letson’s (2006: 173) work with Sedgwick’s term, Seitz writes: “Reparation is not about being able to repair oneself into some kind of mythical (and impossible) whole subject ... but about finding ways to live and love in relation to the injuries of our pasts and futures” (p. 15). He particularly takes up Sedgwick’s argument that social theory is filled with “paranoid” practices and affects which linger in uncovering presumptions of badness. Rather than repeating this narrow departure in his research, Seitz agrees that “paranoia comprises only one kind of critical interpretive orientation”. Reparative reading “shares paranoia’s critical allegiances but none of its conspiratorial

pretenses” (p.13). Choosing reparative practices enable Seitz to find a space in which citizenship, queer theory, and religion – as well as geography – need not be incompatible.

Seitz utilizes interviews from MCC Toronto attendees and archival material for this text. He began collecting interviews in his home of Toronto, Canada in March 2013, seeking out those who he felt had a developed perspective about citizenship including members the Refugee Program and Social Justice Network at MCC Toronto. The majority of his interviews were with people of color, immigrants, and female-identified individuals. It is these participants and their experiences that shape Seitz’s vision of citizenship and liberation.

He begins by arguing that a key part of radical politics is to become comfortable with the idea that efforts to be the wholly inclusive and welcoming will never be fully realized. He asserts that religion and citizenship are “good enough” objects for a queer theoretical analysis (Winnicott 1953). He devotes an entire chapter, “Pastor-Diva-Citizen”, to examine how to come to grips with the changing nature and limits of a public minister’s radical politics: “when an object disappoints, it is extremely tempting – and perhaps unconsciously irresistible – to split it in two. Living with a whole object, by contrast, means living with the pain that comes in de-idealizing it” (p.86). In other words, we must recognize that no one person or process is perfect, but when we recognize one another as imperfect, we can act on behalf of justice through wholeness. Seitz navigates the feeling of being disappointed by the current politics of the minister at MCC Toronto, while using archival material to question whether the minister’s past radical politics from the 1980s were ever as radical as he once thought.

In the third chapter, “Why Are You Doing This?”, Seitz lets the reader into his own internal conflict with the Christian church. While he appreciates the potential of radical queer politics within a church as a queer person himself, he details his struggle with evangelism, or spreading the church around the globe. He argues that church expansion does not need to be seen only as sinister; rather, it can be aspirational when attached to radical queer politics. Drawing especially on interviews he conducted with immigrants and refugees in this chapter, Seitz then

asserts that queer politics work for all people, including non-queer refugees: “By refusing to police the ‘true’ sexual orientation and gender identity of participants ... the MCCT refugee peer-support program steps back from that dangerous, arrogant biopolitical premise” that there are “authentic” refugee claimants who have “well founded” persecution because “their LGBTQ-ness is transparently ‘real’” (p.224). Finally, Seitz hopes that he has challenged the privileging of the nation-state as the only level of analysis for citizenship through creative imaginings of community, belonging, and exercises of solidarity.

Academically rigorous and ethnographically tender, carefully analytical and deeply personal, Seitz’s generous text threads a delicate line to argue that de-centralizing the nation-state from conceptions of citizenship through leveraging queer theory allows for new opportunities of belonging. He creates cozy nooks of compassion and empathy while divulging his frustrations and sharing moments of profound personal growth. Seitz’s major contribution to queer geographic literature in this book is not only his merging of geographic and queer theories, but also his willingness to dive into the realm of faith and spirituality, which has perhaps been given most consideration by the studies of black geographies or issues related to immigration (cf. Eaves 2017; Hopkins 2017; McCutcheon 2015). Few geographers are inclined to tackle faith, religion, and/or spirituality in their work beyond using spiritual affiliations as ethnographic descriptors. *A House of Prayer for All People* certainly takes on this call.

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