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A house of prayer for all people: contesting citizenship in a queer church

by David K. Seitz, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, $27.00 (paperback), ISBN-13: 978-1517902148

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BOOK REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

A house of prayer for all people: contesting citizenship in a queer church, by David K. Seitz, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, $27.00 (paperback), ISBN-13: 978-1517902148

Messy institutions, social movements, and the difference religion makes

David K. Seitz's book, *A House of Prayer for All People*, investigates alternative forms of citizenship as it relates to participation in the Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto (MCCT). I read Seitz's book with an eye to its contributions to queer theory, social movements (church-based activism), and racial/ethnic studies. Richly theoretical, and ethnographically grounded, Seitz constructs a geographical framework by which to understand what he calls improper queer citizenship. This book is a tour de force that brings together queer theory and geographic thought in order to offer innovative forms to study politics, belonging, and community-making.

Conceptually, this book rethinks narrow definitions of citizenship that are almost always yoked to the nation-state, or with homonormative forms of belonging. Seitz proposes an analytic, improper queer citizenship, that departs from "the comfort and stability – the surety – of identity that characterize identitarian and homonationalist renditions of belonging, citizenship, and home" (17). In Seitz's account, there is no proper way of being a citizen nor being a queer subject. In order to advance his analytic of an improper queer citizenship, Seitz pushes queer studies toward what theorists have described as a subjectless queer critique (191). Put simply, a subjectless queer critique applies queer theory on people and subjectivities that do not identify as queer. This approach highlights non-normative ways of being in the world that provide alternative forms of desire, belonging, and even different forms of being deviant. However, despite advancing a subjectless queer critique, the researcher is not subjectless in this book. Seitz does a fantastic job at showing readers how his positionality as both a queer cis gendered white man and an antiracist set in place specific lines of inquiry, analytical frameworks and ways of engaging in ethnographic and archival research. Seitz's focus on his positionality is commendable and methodologically rich as he shows how it shaped his analysis and geographic imaginary.

For Seitz, geography is not just a subject of study, it is a powerful analytical framework that allows him to make important contributions to queer theory. Seitz takes us on a tour of Toronto's varied and racial, gendered, and classed landscapes, showing how they influence church-goers' quotidian practices. His careful attention to these places allows him to convincingly detail the expansive ways in which people enact forms of citizenship that do not always fall within what we would consider political terrains mediated by the state. He describes the church as a "chaotic urban assemblage, a specifically religious queer space where people congregate in their vulnerability" (23). By both contesting, working through the state, and engaging in transnational politics, church members show us the more ordinary ways of being improper queer citizens. This brings forth a queer theory and politics without proper objects or subjects. It also allows us to imagine more egalitarian and socially just spatial relationships and ways of being in the world that prophetically gesture more towards a future not yet in existence.

As a social movement scholar, I was intrigued by Seitz's care for unpacking the messiness of activist-based practices and spaces. Firstly, I would like to briefly reflect on why I think this

book is fundamentally about social movements. In both academic and popular conceptions, activism is rarely equated with the church or religiosity. In fact, most people would gravitate to highlighting the more conservative nature of "the church", whatever the denomination. This is especially the case in the United States in which certain forms of evangelical Christianity are ardently Republican and support the actions of conservatives and racists in power such as Donald Trump. In my own research on social movements I write about how we need to broaden the scope of what we consider "activism", and who we consider an "activist". Seitz joins in this endeavor of creating a more robust picture of activism and of what constitutes a social movement.

Additionally, I appreciated the deftness with which Seitz addresses the tendencies of social movement analysis to wax nostalgically on a radical past. The good old days were in the past. The past was more radical and held the most potential for societal transformation. As Seitz argues, this can foreclose the possibility of fully engaging with the radical potential of the present and future (88). By seriously considering the activist past, present, and future potential of the church, this book pushed me to think more critically about the role of faith, religiosity, and the forms of improper queer citizenship that it can offer. Thinking about the power of church and faith-based organizations in the production of space, social relations, and power, opens up a rich register through which to analyze human experiences. As a Latinx geographer, I am surprised at how seldomly religiosity factors into most analyses of Latinx experiences, especially when it comes to social movement activism. Yet one cannot drive through most Latinx neighborhoods without seeing the prevalence, and thus the influence and power, of the Pentecostal churches, as well as the continued traction of the Catholic church in shaping Latinx subjectivities. *A House of Prayer for All People* has made me appreciate more fully these connections, and also the influences of faith to both mainstream civil rights and radical imaginations of the world. Most of us forget that many of the most influential social movements of the 1960s were so powerfully shaped by church-based activism. We also tend to lose sight of the fact that most contemporary movements for social justice also summon up religiosity and the forms of sociality it sets forth.

In addition to helping bring back faith-based activism into social science research, *A House of Prayer for All People* offers important methodological insights for writing about the messiness of institutions. Seitz takes us into the very entrails of one particular faith based organization, The Metropolitan Church of Toronto. By taking us deep into the institutional structures and operations of the organization, we also find a plethora of internal contradictions. Mainly for churchgoers, issues around gender and racial equality come to the forefront. But instead of rejecting the organization because of its lack of gender and racial diversity, churchgoers of color continue to attend. They see the potential, and the promise of a future yet to come. Seitz draws attention to the fact that MCCT is a heterogeneous and incomplete organization in both time and space. Quoting the late geographer Doreen Massey, he tells us that "MCCT can be a space of misrecognition, inclusion, and policing that aims toward a normative distribution of bodies". Yet "it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed" (71). That radical spatiotemporal interdeterminacy, coupled with its utopian, loving theological, ethical, and political promise, grounds his interview subjects' complex affective orientation toward the church, and his own as churchgoer and researcher. This is where the heart of Seitz's spatial analysis shines through. Spaces are never a completed whole. Instead, space is always under production.

I conclude with one observation that represents more of my own intellectual concerns as an ethnic studies geographer. As I read this work I wondered about the origins of queer theory and the way that we often anchor the tradition in the work of white theorists. Women of color feminists had elaborated important concepts of queer theory long before the rise of

theorists that we now regard as the innovators of queer theory. Take, for example, the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, and Cherríe Moraga, to name just a few. How might a reconceptualization of the origins of queer theory, and the thinking regarding queer subjectivity change if we take seriously the works of these scholars? This is not Seitz's intellectual project, but one that I think might be interesting to consider in relationship to geography and queer theory.

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Can (queer) church be a good object?

Is the church good? Can it be? Can it redeem its past sins? As someone preparing for a career in ministry, with awareness of its many different and complex forms, I'd like to think about how *A House of Prayer for All People* contributes to and challenges the responses to these questions in this review. While it is my hope that some of these reflections may extend across traditions and communities, it is important to note that, as a student in a Christian seminary and with experience in church spaces, this essay speaks from and about certain particularities within my own experience in a progressive Protestant context.

Two questions, which touch on themes and areas in *A House of Prayer for All People* that illuminated new directions, thoughts, and inquiries in my line of ministry work, will guide this essay. First, can the church, broadly conceived, be a site where we can imagine new, more liberative worlds in our futures? And second, how might the church do the work of engaging its own suffering?

As I considered the first question, I had the sinking suspicion that perhaps Judith Butler was right when she said that normalizing the queer would be its "sad finish" (Seitz, 6). Church is just about as normalized as it gets. Spending Sundays in church pews and Wednesday nights at Bible study fits quite nicely into the narrative of "normal" – of dominant culture. As a queer seminarian, you can imagine my disappointment at this thought. But then I wondered, just as Seitz touches on in his book, if the church normalizes the queer, then what does the queer do to the church?

Churches, like many institutions, thrive on doing things just as they've always been done. Adhering to tradition is essential. But could the queer open space to reconsider the ways "tradition" has failed so many? Could the queer shake the church loose from its commitment to the status quo? Could queering the church actually usher into life the radical, non-hierarchical, and justice-seeking community of faith that we see reflected in the ministry of Jesus in sacred scriptures?

What I so appreciate about *A House of Prayer for All People* is that it does not foreclose this possibility. It dives more deeply into this question, broadening our vision of what it means to create church together and what it means to build queer identity together – and ultimately, what it means to do those two things simultaneously. In exploring my own calling to ministry, I resonate with what Seitz shares, when he writes:

> I yearn for a church that refuses to rest on its laurels but instead acts as though empire and capitalism are themselves the apocalypse, the ruins from which people might yet build something more heavenlike, or at least less hellish, on earth. And I remain stubbornly attached to the potential in faith-based queer community for a non-secular, non-rational critique of liberal progress and proliferation of desires for other worlds. (89)

For me, church is in constant motion, in perpetual flux, it is being created over and again in every moment we come together as parts of its whole. This means that it has potential for something so much more than what it has been and what it is today. And as Seitz argues, church has the potential to live into this idea of "improper queer citizenship" (49). As someone who is preparing for a career in ministry, that prospect is incredibly exciting, and it's an incredible challenge, too.

Throughout Seitz's ethnographic case study of the Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto congregation, we hear from voices of leaders of color who speak about the emancipatory potential that lives therein. They speak to the possibilities for something more – and it's that possibility that I believe both defines church and is also its mission. The phrase "come out and play" (58) that we hear from one of the MCCT's deacons is a fantastic rallying call.

And until that day where we realize this new, more liberative world that we've created together, we're called to do the work of prolepsis, or gesturing toward a future that has yet to come. Seitz writes about the lead pastor of MCCT doing this work persuasively in certain key moments on the national stage – of ushering into being a sort of new world that we can catch glimpses of in his church. *A House of Prayer for All People* speaks to these glimpses within the church throughout its history. And it also asks how we might burst those glimpses wide open into something that spans our entire horizons.

Queering the church, or embodying an improper queer citizenship within it, offers symbolic and actual pathways for me, and I hope others, in ministry. Reimagining church beyond what it's been in my own experiences, as neoliberal and heteronormative, is not only an imperative but it *is* the work of church. How do we create glimpses of new worlds that resemble freedom in worship, in small group activities, in justice movements and in youth education? How do we unsettle embedded theologies that do harm? How do we co-create new ones that are life-giving?

So, can the church be a site where we can see these glimpses? Can it be a site for this radical world-building? I think the answer is yes – it has to be yes. And I also ask, why *shouldn't* the church be at the forefront of this work? In my own conception of faith, it requires us to hold on to the belief of that which is just beyond our reach.

And in my own work in congregations and in university settings, I can see how *A House of Prayer for All People* can serve to open these conversations and spark imaginations. It provides examples and experiences with which we can start conversations around: who does get to speak and lead in the service? Why do we do it that way anyway? It provides theoretical grounding to chew on in congregational classes where we're discussing identity and progress – are those things we even want in the ways we've been taught to understand them? How does church become the continuous project of creating a house of prayer for all people? This and so much more is what I hope the queer can do to the church.

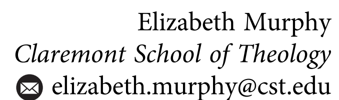
Turning now, then, to the second question I posed above: how might the church do the work of engaging its own suffering? It is no surprise to anyone here that communities of faith can be sites of violence for queer and trans-identified people. Speaking from my own experience, I know what it's like to feel like you've no longer got a place in a religious tradition you've been raised in and in which your family has been part of for generations.

Drawing on queer object relations theory, Seitz reflects on the church as a "good" or "bad" object. What might it mean to eschew good or bad, and instead embrace the good-enough church? What would it mean to maintain, as Seitz puts it, a "loving praxis" (82) in church, despite one's hesitations toward the institution's many flaws? This loving praxis comes into play in my work at the University of Southern California's LGBT Resource Center, where I meet with students who want to discuss the intersections of spirituality, religion, and queer

identity. In these spiritual care sessions, I hear story after story of the flaws of religious institutions: banishment, shame, violence. he common refrain I hear from this diverse group of young people is: They sent me away, but I still want to believe. These students yearn for the personal connections, vibrant music, spiritual growth, and perhaps most of all, the communal space to make meaning together.

What brought me back to church, and then to seminary, was this very thing. I finished several years of Catholic schooling, came out, dropped religion all together, and then I slowly, cautiously, anxiously crawled my way back as a young adult. I wasn't quite sure what the drive within me was to seek church out again. But I knew what I had been doing up to that point wasn't working. So one Saturday, I opened my laptop, hit enter on my Google search, and found myself taking a Buzzfeed-style quiz to determine where I belonged on Sunday mornings. And after that first service in this new church that offered a stronger sense of belonging than I had had in any other place in my life, I cried. I cried tears of relief, of surprise, of joy.

And now, years later, I of course recognize the ways organized religion can be maddening. Sometimes it feels like it's all too much. But then there are days I remember that first sermon in that new church, and I remember how it made me feel. And I remember the looks on the faces of the USC students when I tell them that, yes, I'm going to be a minister, too, and that their choice to leave faith altogether, or to reimagine what it means to them is theirs to make – and any choice is going to be OK. Ministering from a starting point that church is neither good nor bad, but that it can be good-enough, is powerful. It's not an excuse to push off the work of imagining new worlds, but my work with these young people is a reminder that sometimes a starting point is all you need. In those meetings, we engage the suffering church has caused. It's sometimes wrenching, sometimes hilarious. But those moments where we make meaning together also bring alive this theoretical grounding in *A House of Prayer for All People*. In whatever is next in my ministry, I plan to approach church or faith communities as 'good-enough,' recognizing its clear faults and limitations – the suffering it can inflict – but using this starting point to transform it from its very core.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Queer activist ethics and the necessity of self-reflexivity

In an astute participant-observer ethnography of the LGBTQ Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto (MCCT), David Seitz explores how that community negotiates its aim of inclusiveness. He critiques the white-middle-class and identitarian limits to inclusiveness in the MCCT and he identifies moments where a more expansive "nonidentitarian potentiality" (46) is at work. Seitz is particularly interested in places where the church holds out possibilities for "transformative approaches to citizenship" and a "capacious politics emerging from LGBTQ religious activism" (3). *A House of Prayer for All People: Contesting Citizenship in a Queer Church* is a smart, sophisticated, extraordinarily theory savvy book. It is a pleasure to read.

Throughout the book, Seitz explores the question of whom the church serves and how it draws boundaries around the issues that it champions and the people for whom it advocates. The ethnography wrestles with places that the church could do better with respect to racial equality and decolonization. For instance, Seitz describes a Goldilocks approach to diversity (41–46), the unwillingness for vociferous support for Black Lives Matter Toronto (83–87),

and a mission for world expansion that can look dangerously colonial (144–163). He also finds moments and orientations "marked by a little more 'give,' humility, mutuality, and forbearance" (179). Challenging the church's limits to inclusion and envisioning its potential, Seitz queers the concept of citizenship, in a bid to subvert norms of identity and power.

The book's largest project therefore goes beyond MCCT to propose a queer activist ethics that requires those in social justice work to engage critically with the self and its desires. Rather than favoring identitarian claims and savior impulses, Seitz imagines a different way of being in the world. Seitz argues for a notion of "improper queer citizenship" that extends across racial and ethnic groups and across colonial geographies (4). Queer citizenship is not reduced to LGBT identity or national inclusion, but is rather imagined as joint recognition, struggle, and modes of belonging that are created in "coalitions among people with incommensurable histories of trauma and pleasure, alienation, affinity, and loss" (215). Queer citizenship requires "empathy with the vulnerability of the Other (including one's own alterity) … [and] relinquishment of fantasies of safe space or identitarian home" (227). In other words, it requires a great deal of self-reflexivity and work.

Methodologically, Seitz uses a reparative approach. He analyzes his fieldwork and his own ethnographic position through queer object relations, informed by Melanie Klein and Eve Sedgwick. Seitz asks how LGBTQ and racial minority queer people can deal with bad objects – those things or institutions that create feelings of loss, abandonment, or harm – for instance, church or status quo systems of citizenship. Psychic reparation negotiates with bad objects to create "good enough" objects. This strategy allows Seitz to point out some political shortcomings of MCCT and still identify spaces of success and hope; he offers critique without condemnation to a community of which he was a part. Seitz shows how members of the MCC Toronto congregation have managed to integrate good and bad objects. Self-reflexively, he reflects on his own attempts to come to terms with MCCT as a good enough object, especially in the face of his avowed wish for it to be a good, redemptive, utopic object (90–91) and his own disappointment at the church's more problematic stances.

The ethnography moves from local to global. The first chapter explores the place of racialized minority congregants within a mostly white church that does not always recognize their contributions or concerns. Seitz shows how his queer of color interview subjects – those most affected by MCCT's limited inclusion and political action – still find MCCT to be a good enough object. The church is a place where, despite their frustrations, they can have their spiritual and emotional needs met and provide support for other struggling racialized queer folk, either within Canada or internationally.

Chapter two interrogates the role of the longtime head pastor, Reverend Dr. Brent Hawkes, and his negotiations with law enforcement and state violence. In the past, when gay men were targeted in bath house raids in the 1970s and 1980s, Hawkes took a stand against police and state. In the 2000s, Hawkes took a more conciliatory homonormative "it gets better approach" to LGBTQ life and the police, without acknowledging continued police violence to black and trans people in Toronto. Yet in his reparative reading, Seitz resists a narrative that criticizes a neoliberal present by nostalgically longing for MCCT's unproblematic past. Rather he shows how many of the elements that he critiques in the contemporary moment were in fact present in the past; and he finds glimmers of something more like queer citizenship in the here and now.

The third and fourth chapters move beyond the confines of Canada to MCC's global engagements. Chapter three critically examines the MCC Church's denominational mission and expansion around the world and finds within that ministry identity-based evangelical expansionism that seems predicated on a "fantasy Canadian LGBTQ subject [who] seems to suffer no vulnerability … no queer damage … and no anxiety about a capacity to do harm.

It's only the world that needs saving" (161). Conversely, he finds instances when those involved in the global project exhibit hesitation and self-reflexivity, moving toward something like queer citizenship.

The final chapter looks at the MCCT's ministry to asylum seekers. Seitz finds there a willingness to go beyond only supporting asylum seekers identifying as LGBT, to supporting all refugees precisely because of their status as such. Here he finds a more capacious political vision: "Queerness lies in the geographical and psychic vulnerability brought about by the claim itself" (218). It is from moments like these that Seitz constructs the kind of queer politics for which he advocates. One gets the sense too that his analysis is meant to push the church further in this direction.

Although Seitz's disciplinary home is in critical geography, the book is exemplary of the best kind of scholarship in the emerging field of studies in queer religion. Seitz is thoroughly grounded in feminist, queer, and decolonial theories, as well as psychoanalytic and affect theories. In other words, he is fully immersed in the discussions taking place in gender and sexuality studies, including all those that contend with the racializations of sexual and gender expression and their colonial histories. Without awareness or acknowledgment of this genealogy, some discussions of LGBTQ sexuality and religion could make exclusionary and colonial moves that are similar to those Seitz critiques in MCCT. I have certainly encountered more than one North-American-exceptionalist argument that focuses on nonwestern traditions for being backward toward LGBTQ, or that does not show awareness of race and other colonial or geographic differentials of power. This book supplies a model for offering self-reflexive critique of religious traditions without vilifying them and further alienating queer people from religion.

A House of Prayer for All People is extremely productive both in its reparative reading and in its imagination of an activist ethics. If I were to ask a discussion question about the book, it might be about the status of the politically charged "bad objects" and "good enough objects". It seems to me that the badness of the political object in this case derives from racism rather than loss or the anxiety of the death instinct (as per Klein's theory). Perhaps at times the church as bad object is formed through the melancholic loss of a utopic object that never was (129); but many times the problem seemed to be generated by large scale liberal and neoliberal systems that are unwilling to ameliorate histories and present practices of racism and colonialism. Does the move from bad object to good enough object unwittingly preserve the badness of the bad object (racism) in a kind of sublatory move? Given that QOC congregants continue to push the church toward change, perhaps "provisionally good enough" would signal the ongoing problem. Seitz's work certainly seems to advocate that MCCT could make more movement in the direction of queer citizenship.

This discussion point aside, Seitz's book gives an excellent sustained example of reparative reading that is instructive for those of us who might default to clearly defined judgments of good and bad, and so throw out the proverbial baby (in this case an important LGBTQ religious and activist space of support) with the bathwater (white, homonormative, exceptionalist, identitarian politics). Instead Seitz urges to think more complexly and to cultivate queer citizenship by working against oppression and harm through mutual aid, reciprocal intimacy, vulnerability, and solidarity. Such an approach challenges activists, educators, and religious practitioners to increased self-reflexivity, humility, openness, and willingness to change.

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Author's response: genealogy, grief, transformation

I write with profound gratitude to Juan Herrera, Elizabeth Murphy, and Erin Runions for their insightful and intellectually wide-ranging responses to my work, and to the editors of *Theology & Sexuality* for their willingness to host a book symposium on *A House of Prayer for All People*.

I begin with the question of genealogy. Herrera offers a crucial question about genealogies of queer theory in the work of women of color thinkers – genealogies of queer theory "before" or "alongside" the normatively white canon as it is often constructed – and names Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, and Cherríe Moraga as exemplars. Although Herrera is quick and generous to note that this is not my intellectual project, it does prompt serious reflection for me on the limitations of my own citational practice. In my book, I cite Chela Sandoval's brilliant *Methodology of the Oppressed* – which outlines a theory of "U.S./Third World feminism", operating with a "differential consciousness" at the juncture of a number of ostensibly distinct political idioms (equal rights, revolutionary, supremacist, separatist) but irreducible to any one of them – as a crucial point of inspiration for what I call "improper queer citizenship".[1] In hindsight, however, given how often I find myself referring to Sandoval's insights in debates within the Left, particularly over engagements with a wide range of "bad objects", I realize now that I should have elaborated in the book on just how influential her work has been on my own thinking, an error I hope to correct in future work.

Herrera's question about the woman of color feminist genealogies of queer critique also helped me to think about the geopolitical stakes of *A House of Prayer for All People*. I mention in the introduction and first chapter of the book that I came of age in the U.S. during the bellicose and reactionary presidency of George W. Bush, that I first found progressive faith community so vital and revelatory at that time. Having mostly lived outside of the United States from 2009 to 2017, I have been troubled since moving back by the absence of a robust critique of U.S. imperialism on much of the American academic Left. Observing the tendency of both the academic and the movement Left to "roll … around hitting various issues", Black feminist Bernice Johnson Reagon notes, "there were a few people who kept up with many of those issues.[2] *They are very rare*. Anytime you find a person showing up at all of those struggles … one, study with them, and two, protect them" (363).

To take up just one of the exemplary figures whom Herrera names, Moraga richly, and in underacknowledged ways, models the practice of showing up for multiple, intersecting struggles. This is a practice that my book argues is central to an "improper queer citizenship", but it necessarily goes by many names. In her 2001 essay, "From Inside the First World: On 9/11 and Women-of-color Feminism", Moraga offers an unflinching indictment of ongoing U.S. settler colonialism, white supremacy, and imperialism in the occupation of Afghanistan, writing, "As a global citizen, Xicana, and passport-carrying 'American,' I am interested in the root causes of violence, especially those perpetrated in my nation-state's name" (22).[3] Contesting the territorial givenness and hegemony of the U.S. settler state ("American"), Moraga simultaneously confronts her own both vulnerable (Xicana) and privileged (passport-carrying "American" global citizen) position in manufacturing and refusing consent to imperial violence. She continues:

> The United States does not need to be defended; it needs to be cured. The collective denial of guilt in this country weighs so heavily upon its national psyche that soon the day will come when not one scapegoat (neither Muslim fundamentalist, Mexican immigrant, nor lesbian of color) will be able to carry it. I work forward to that day. (33)

Moraga's insightful use of psychoanalytic language to critique U.S. imperialism, I would argue, is more than passing or incidental. Here, a link can be made with Murphy's second question: "How might the church do the work of engaging its own suffering?" Judith Butler famously turns to psychoanalysis to critique the U.S. rush to war after the events of 11

September 2001.[4] Butler argues that this vengeful scramble was closely connected to a failure to genuinely mourn the dead, a decidedly masculinist refusal of what I refer to in the book as "queer damage".[5] Yet – and to Herrera's point – years before Butler, Moraga took that critique further, repudiating a broader failure to grieve or atone for the often-invisibilized losses of five hundred years of colonialism, white supremacy, and imperialism. Following, Moraga and Berlant, then, my book argues that it is to the domain of affect and psychical life that queer and other scholars must turn in making critical sense of violent, regnant spatial ideologies, and to imagine and forge geographies of justice.[6]

It is only in reckoning with these losses that one can turn back to Murphy's first question: "Can the church, broadly conceived, be a site where we can imagine new, more liberative worlds in our futures?" To that end, Runions asks whether a "good enough" object-relation can come from an object (in this case, the Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto) that was never "good" to begin with, writing, "It seems to me that the badness of the political object in this case derives from racism rather than loss (as per Klein's theory)". Indeed, insofar as Klein's infant repairs a relationship to an *internal phantasy* of a bad object, rather than an object that is observably bad in external reality, Runions is right, and we must depart from Klein. But this is where Berlant's reformulation and rescaling of object relations is so vital, because she insists that empirically contradictory political objects are nevertheless neither "good" or "bad" in and of themselves; it is only an individual or collective psychical *relation* to an object that can be "cruel-optimistic".[7] As Berlant explained to me,

> I could love the state because it delivers resources to a whole set of people not really caring about the specificities of who those people are, and I could hate the state because it tries to produce universal citizenship. Those two conflicting thoughts don't make me psychotic: contradiction enables people to proceed wanting a whole set of things from their institution or from their object.[8])

In the case of the church, then, one might well hate it for its liberal political investments: Canadian homonationalism, "tolerant" police, and atmospheric racism and misogyny. At the same time, one might love it for its open communion, sex-positive theology, contradictory (and thus exploitable!) promise of a house of prayer for all; for a deaconate that, through considerable struggle and labor on the part of worship leaders of color, ministers to racialized, dispossessed, and migrant queers in the city of Toronto; and for an asylum ministry that supports all comers, refusing the state's use of "authentic" sexual, gender, or religious identity as a barrier to entry.

For me, then, there remains a broader, interpretive value in turning to object relations psychoanalysis, because it provides one set of tools for thinking about people's creative agency in unchosen, inadequate and even hostile environmental conditions.[9] As children, we don't choose our parents, we don't choose our neighbors, we don't choose our language, we don't choose our religious and cultural traditions, and we don't choose our political-theological forms of life, all of which precede us and form us without our consent. There can be no doubt as to the profound, some would say ontological, incommensurabilities in the extent to which forms of life and social death are unchosen, as Afro-pessimist scholars have argued.[10] And yet, as Katherine McKittrick demonstrates, even in the grisly and beyond-exploitative space of the plantation, there is nevertheless invention and creative rebellion, an ingenious Black repurposing of unchosen tools, including the theological and aesthetic trappings of Christianity.[11] Robin D. G. Kelley shows how Black workers in the 1930s Alabama Communist party refashioned Christian spirituals to new, emancipatory ends,[12] and Ashon Crawley points to the Muslim as well as Christian roots of what he calls Blackpentecostal aesthetics, which, for him, are necessarily fugitive, emancipatory, queer, oriented toward "otherwise possibility".[13]

There is profound resonance here with Sedgwick's turn to Klein:

> What we can best learn from … [reparative reading] practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them. (150–151)[14]

As Tiffany Lethabo King points out, Black, Indigenous, and other racialized scholars have refused "to accept white leftist discourses and imaginaries (i.e. Marxism, feminism and queer politics) as inherently liberatory",[15]), offering profound reformulations of those discourses, or leaving them behind altogether. As a white queer-feminist scholar and a socialist, I see it as my responsibility to, as Minnie Bruce Pratt puts it, "do my own work" (59, qtd. in Bulkin et al.[16]): To map the profound racial and colonial contradictions of Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytic, Christian, and queer discourses; to retain what is worth retaining; to contribute to the collective work needed to transform them; to help to realize their non-inherent emancipatory potential, taking direction from Black, Indigenous, decolonial, postcolonial and ethnic studies colleagues and knowledges. That *is* my book's project, and my project. These responses to my work help me to think about how I might approach it differently, and for the better, and for that I am indeed grateful.

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Notes

1. Seitz, *A House of Prayer for All People*, 49.
2. Reagon, "Coalition Politics".
3. Moraga, *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness.*
4. Butler, *Precarious Life.*
5. Seitz, "On Citizenship and Optimism," 161.
6. Moraga, *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness*; Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.
7. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.
8. Seitz, "On Citizenship and Optimism".
9. Butler, *Parting Ways*.
10. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.
11. McKittrick, "Rebellion/Invention/Groove".
12. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe.*
13. Crawley, *Black Pentecostal Breath.*
14. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*.
15. Sirvent, "Book Forum".
16. Bulkin, Pratt, and Smith, *Yours in Struggle*.

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