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Book Reviews

Melissa Hackman, *Desire Work: Ex-Gay and Pentecostal Masculinity in South Africa*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018). pp. 216.

Aditi Paul

Melissa Hackman's *Desire Work: Ex-Gay and Pentecostal Masculinity in South Africa* is an ethnographic study of Pentecostal Men in ex-gay ministries in Cape Town, South Africa. The book examines Pentecostal ministries which "heal" homosexuality through theological and psychological narratives as well as self-help. Hackman writes an admirable introduction on the vexed history of race and democracy in South Africa. She describes the origin of neoliberalism and takes us through the rise of Pentecostal ministries that shape masculinity in men and femininity in women. Organized in five core chapters (excluding introduction and afterword), the book explores the pressures and incentives for joining an ex-gay Pentecostal ministry. Hackman's investigative approach is three-pronged: 1) seeking reasons for why gay men join Pentecostal ministries and put themselves under surveillance; 2) understanding the techniques employed by Pentecostal ministries to change one's homosexual orientation; and 3) questioning how Pentecostal ministries define their success.

A strength of *Desire Work* lies in understanding ex-gay movements beyond the United States. Hackman researches Pentecostal ministries, particularly Healing Revelation Ministries (HRM), to examine the participant observations in the ministry's twelve-step therapy. Hackman discusses the intersectionality of race and identity in the multiracial state of South Africa, the power the intersectionality exudes, and how it limits the space for alternative sexualities. Hackman highlights that South Africa is a secular and democratic country while questioning the extent of homophobia in South Africa, given that the LGBT community is legally protected there. Hackman notes that gendered notions are fixed and sexual behaviors are socially guarded in South Africa. This forms the premise for the book, which is an interesting ethnographic account on belief systems of an ex-gay ministry.

Hackman's methodology involved conducting interviews from 2004-2013 with members of HRM and collating their anecdotal experiences with the existing literature on ex-gay movements and Pentecostalism. Chapter 1 examines the reasons for the success of

HRM. Hackman notes that HRM flourished because it was socio-culturally relevant. Since its inception, democracy ushered an era of “self-making” in South Africa.¹ HRM became part of that “larger democratic cultural shift in sexual discourse.”² Hackman opines that “for the men in HRM, like for other South Africans in democracy, being a modern citizen meant identifying, speaking about, and analyzing their sexual desires in new ways,” and because the “ministry offered a cultural space for men to be public about their desires and to work on them,” it became the reason for the growth of HRM.³ Chapter 2 locates the strategies of Pentecostals to radically “transform” homosexuals and instill heterosexual desires. Herein Hackman describes the concept of “intimacy disorder” which they define as childhood trauma caused either by poor parenting or sexual abuse. Hackman observes that in Pentecostal ministries, the leaders sought to resolve intimacy disorder in the participants in order to build heterosexuality. Chapter 3 analyzes how Pentecostal men understood homosexuality as a “demonic contamination.”⁴ The chapter reflects upon the domination of white South African men in ex-gay ministry and their ideas on *sin*. Hackman asserts “Pentecostals believe that they live in a ‘fallen’ world where demons and Satan attempt to get Christians to embrace ‘sin’ and stop living a morally righteous lifestyle.”⁵ The romanticization of Jesus Christ in this chapter deserves closer attention. Pentecostal ministries emphasize the key role of Christianity in constructing the ideal man and woman. Hackman states that “the men in HRM understood themselves as actively involved in transforming their masculinities in a Christian context where God was said to be able to make anything possible.”⁶ While Hackman’s theological references and citations could be strengthened, she argues that the participants’ therapeutic labor combined reading of the Bible with perfecting heterosexuality by adopting a masculine voice and style of walking as well as learning provocation towards women. On the other hand, Chapter 4 reveals the Hackman’s findings that after the ministry dissolved, most participants returned to their gay lifestyles and called themselves “ex-ex-gay.” Finally, Chapter 5 summarizes the experiences of gay men in HRM and their understanding of self-making. Hackman argues that while the participants failed to adopt the sexual norms of the ex-gay ministry and the church, “as people they felt successful . . . (and) left HRM with the tools to process emotions.”⁷

The book is an inquiry on homosexual men and Healing Revelation Ministries' desire to transform them into heterosexual men through emotional, bodily, and religious work. The book is also about the power and growth of Pentecostalism across Africa. Since Hackman mostly uses primary sources for analysis, the book becomes an account of the challenges confronted in conducting complex research on spirituality and sexuality. Hackman's narrative about her experiences conducting this research makes *Desire Work* an even more engaging text. In sum, this study of identity construction in the context of sexuality and religion contributes to the burgeoning literature on gender, sexuality, racial, and religious studies.

Notes

¹ Melissa Hackman, *Desire Work: Ex-Gay and Pentecostal Masculinity in South Africa*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 7.

² *Ibid.*, 9.

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 163-164.

