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Erotic Power and Political Subjectivity in *Citizenship from Below*

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Mimi Sheller, *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 346 pp.

Recent years have seen a marked increase in scholarship on the subject of citizenship, sexuality and the Caribbean, from the likes of Jacqui Alexander, Cecil Gutzmore, Tracey L. Robinson and Thomas Glave among others. Mimi Sheller's new book, with its emphasis on embodied practices, forms a significant new addition to the field. Strongly rooted in archival and historical work, this text offers a considered and, at times, provocative theorisation of 'citizenship from below'. Sheller synthesises and extends studies of labour history and the popular public sphere with current debates in feminism and queer studies. Her stated task is to explore 'how freedom is exercised and enacted as a complex set of embodied relations in diverse contexts of activation – bodies not simply marked by race, sex, and class [...] *but active inter-embodiments that bring different bodies to the social (and political) surface through their intimate relations to each other in both private and public encounters*' (17). As Sheller herself readily admits, accessing the subaltern voices crucial to such an investigation leads to problems of methodology. The history she wishes to excavate, is that: 'etched by everyday actions, scrubbed by washerwomen's hands, dug into small plots of land, sewn into new fashions, danced to sacred rhythms honoring ancestral spirits' (23). Her solution is to begin with more focused studies of post-slavery Jamaica and Haiti – two locales not often considered simultaneously – before moving forward chronologically to the present day and widening in scope to the Caribbean region and beyond. Her chapters explore Jamaican Afro-Caribbean women's resistance; subaltern masculinities in post-Emancipation Jamaica; the Morant Bay rebellion; militarism and manhood in Haiti; Haitian peasant agency; relationships with land; and travel writing and tourism. As this diverse range of subjects suggests, Sheller's sources range far and wide, from colonial materials, local press, court reports and petitions, nationalist historiography and popular oral history, to photography and the material landscape. Sheller reads all of these sources against the grain, for their silences and occlusions as much as their seeming facticity.

These apparently diverse topics form a lively and coherent whole, as Sheller carefully returns to and expands on a number of central themes. Two key strands anchor the book: first, a questioning of citizenship itself as outlined in chapter one and second, a discussion of erotic agency in its final chapter. Together, these sections successfully frame the book's wide-ranging content, providing a clearly structured argument as to what 'citizenship from below' means and how it operates. In the first chapter, Sheller makes clear the

extent to which ideas about citizenship shift depending on time, context, locale and positionality; how an ex-slave conceived of the day-to-day meaning of freedom would have been very different to the sense of individual agency championed by an abolitionist campaigner across the ocean. Sheller's debt to Judith Butler is clear in statements such as: 'one of the key arguments of this book is that to act and make claims as a free citizen, political subjects must first position themselves as raced, gendered, national, and sexual subjects of particular kinds [...] in discursive performances that always rest on the exclusion or repulsion of others [...] Citizenship can be understood as a set of intertwined practices and collective repertoires for defining, legitimating, and exercising the rights of some bodies against others' (21). Accordingly, she reads her archival sources with a keen eye for 'not just the "lower orders," the subordinate, the common people, and the subaltern' but also 'the lower body, the vulgar, the sexual, the impure, and the forbidden' (30). This process yields rich results, as when (in chapter three) she mines Jamaican court reports for evidence of women's formative role in urban public disturbances of the nineteenth century. Or when, in chapter six, she draws out the traces of Haitian peasant autonomy in the face of power struggles with new local elites. The citizenship she evokes stands in relation to, but also to one side of state action, necessitating 'a theorization of counter-publics and the racialization of space, which broadens understandings of the forms and styles of embodied political discourse, including its performativity, whether in speech, in habit, in dance, or simply in bodily comportment and verbal and non-verbal expressivity' (39). This also involves 'placing sexuality (and erotic agency) at the center of our understanding of what freedom means and how it might be embodied and performed' (39). Unlike recent postcolonial scholars such as Robert J. C. Young, Ann Laura Stoler or Robert Aldrich, who have tended to present sexuality as derivative of or following from political control, Sheller remains optimistic that, as well as sometimes reproducing 'governing ideals of respectability', such intimate bodily encounters can also 'deploy sexual and erotic agency to undo the gender, racial, and sexual inequalities that uphold normative orders' (22).

In chapter nine, Sheller further unpacks this notion of 'erotic agency', building on the work of that underused figure in theorisations of Caribbean sexuality, Audre Lorde. She summarises Lorde's influence as follows: 'erotic agency, in sum, is the antithesis of enslavement. It appears not only in the context of other forms of creativity, including all kinds of work. It is an empowerment of the "I" but also a turning towards the "world" and, moreover, toward the divine. Erotic knowledge, according to Lorde, is the bridge between the spiritual and the political' (245). Drawing correspondences between Lorde's thought and that of recent scholars such as Jacqui Alexander, Sheller then reflects back over her chapters, emphasising the 'erotic knowledge' generated by the struggles of her archival subjects. She argues that embodied freedom can be 'understood as a continuum that ranges from the negative liberties of freedom from constraint to the most positive liberties

of participatory action and agency, recognizing the fundamental matrix of the body as the basis for any exercise of freedom. Citizenship is not only embedded in local contexts of action. It shapes bodies to those contexts of interaction as a condition for entering public discourse' (246). Her use of Lorde here is productive, shining new light on the preceding arguments. It would, however, have been helpful to know Sheller's views on Lorde's presentation of the erotic as a specifically *female* power, a subject on which she is oddly silent considering the careful consideration of masculinity offered by the text as a whole. Would male eroticism, for example, prove qualitatively different from those values outlined by Lorde? Sheller then discusses the subjects of female birth control and queer subjectivity in the twentieth century Caribbean, making a persuasive case for 'the power of the erotic as a potential for freedom' (248). Although careful to note that this emphasis should not 'undermine or displace the need for collective projects of political mobilization', Sheller draws together recent feminist and queer theory to offer an important – and timely – rationale for why a greater consideration of the erotic serves as an 'expansion of our understanding of the impetus for political subjectivity and the matrix in which political agency can arise' (248).

A number of other chapters stand out. In chapter three, Sheller usefully complicates recent work on marginalised black masculinities by Linden Lewis, Errol Miller and Rhoda Reddock amongst others, by highlighting the exclusionary politics practiced by those men identifying as black, British and Christian in the post-slavery Caribbean. As Sheller points out, subaltern black masculinity 'is often examined solely in relation to dominant white masculinity, with little indication that there might be multiple orderings of gender in relation to others who are marked as neither black nor white' (91), such as indentured Indians or liberated Africans. The chapter therefore focuses on how these men have been excluded from public discourse, an emphasis that can 'help us to understand how the dominant forms of modern heteromascularity arose through processes of stigmatizing other groups of men, including those identified as sexual or ethnic minorities' (92). As Sheller recognises, the silence of the archival sources means that 'we can only guess at the place of homosexuality' within the subject formations of the nineteenth century but, 'it seems plausible that the violent expulsion of men who have sex with men from the Jamaican public sphere today has its roots in these nineteenth-century formations of black Christian masculinity and its close association with heteronormative citizenship' (97). Rather than drawing a straightforward link between the family dysfunction created by slavery and present day homophobia, Sheller instead charts a nuanced line through the nineteenth century, taking into account those sexual formations central to the assertion of citizenship in the face of the colonial order. Chapter five also offers similar insights, but this time in a Haitian context. Sheller skillfully highlights the 'political paradox' that resulted from Haitian investment in 'a martial image of the male citizen', which undercut the 'egalitarian and democratic values of republicanism' (142). The 'paramount

sign of this fundamental contradiction' as she sees it, was 'the exclusion of women from the wholly masculine realms of state politics and citizenship' (142). Looking at the language of citizenship in official documents, newspapers and intellectual writings (by those both inside and outside of Haiti), Sheller convincingly outlines a gendered political history of the country, one dependent on the foundations of 'family rhetoric, militarism, and masculine identities' (143). Ultimately, the 'rhetorical construction of gender identities in Haitian nationalist discourse' was, as Sheller puts it, 'cynically manipulated by ruling elites to contain the currents of democratization that were surging through the Atlantic world' (149).

Citizenship from Below is infused with a lively scepticism about the limitations not just of sources, archives and fact-making, but also of theoretical terms such as citizenship and freedom. As such, it stands as a valuable caution to those of us working across various fields – history, sociology, anthropology, gender and sexuality studies and literature – to question the colonial, racial, sexual and gendered inheritances of the terms we so freely employ. As Sheller points out in her introduction, in 'taking up positions as free subjects, freed men and women at times had to (indeed wanted to) perform normative scripts of sexual citizenship such as the good mother, the respectable woman, the worthy Christian, or the father of a family. Yet there was always a tension within these performances, which involved the harnessing and simultaneous disavowal of the erotic potential of the body, including its spiritual dimensions' (10). This book asks its readers to consider what is lost in becoming a 'free' subject and to reflect on where such repressed energies resurface. The book is structured with great clarity and, appropriately for its concern with embodiment, Sheller herself is far from being a neutral or 'objective' academic voice. Instead, the text is permeated by her humanistic and warm tone, which complements the (inevitably) open-ended nature of some of her conclusions. The book's greatest contribution is in raising questions about the links between ideas of embodied citizenship and existing research on the performativity of other identificatory categories. As Sheller states: 'it is not sufficient to look at the letter of the law alone, or at the formal constitution of the state-citizen relations, without also understanding its situated practice, including among colonial and enslaved populations. This more cultural and discursive model of citizenship as locally instituted practice – spread across the metropolitan and colonial worlds – can be fruitfully combined with performative models of gender, racial, ethnic, and sexual subjectivity' (21). As these statements suggest, many of the book's insights can be applied to post-slavery societies more generally and Sheller proves particularly attuned throughout, to the African-American context. At times, *Citizenship from Below* perhaps displays too great an optimism as to the capacity of oppressed peoples to retain agency and even more material on the ways in which those 'from below' were factionalised or oppressed each other (as in the case of chapters three, four or six) would have been beneficial. Sheller's prising apart of the category of blackness in relation to the Morant

Bay rebellion in chapter four, for example, is particularly challenging in terms of nationalist historiography. In chapter six, her thoughtful consideration of the tourist 'gaze' might usefully have employed Laura Mulvey's (1989) later theorisations of 'transvestism' and the oscillation between viewing positions. Meanwhile, chapter seven, on trees, appears slighter in relation to the detailed archival work preceding it. Finally, much recent literary analysis of Caribbean queer cultures (by Alison Donnell, Evelyn O'Callaghan and Denise deCaires Narain for example) has presented the 'high-brow' arena of the written word as a counter to the more sexist or homophobic aspects of that popular culture, which Sheller delineates so well in her final chapter. As she herself makes use of a number of literary examples throughout, her conclusion might have benefited from greater consideration of how this literary work speaks to or raises questions about her project. These suggestions, however, are of the *more*, rather than less variety, indicating the value of this grounded, yet expansive contribution to the study of sexuality, citizenship and post-slavery societies.

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