

CERIS CONFERENCE PRESENTATION NOTES

Citizenship Acts: Queer Immigrants Contesting the Boundaries to the Imagined Queer Community

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INTRO – The research that I am presenting is research that I am still currently engaged with in the writing of my Major Research Paper for my Masters Degree in Immigration and Settlement Studies at Ryerson. I would therefore be grateful for any feedback or suggestions after the presentation.

The goal of my research is to apply queer theory to the narrative of integration. I want to examine whether queer and post-structuralist thought challenging fixed identity constructs and the boundaries of community belonging, could be applied to queer immigrants experiences of integrating into the queer community. I want to gain a more nuanced understanding of the multiple ways that the boundaries to the “imagined” queer community could insidiously affect the shaping of queer immigrant identity. I also want to understand how these community boundaries are contested by queer immigrants claiming space in the queer community and resignifying queer identity.

My research over the summer will be a series of in-depth and semi-structured interviews one or two queer immigrants who are performing at Pride week. I will be approaching their performances as means to “claim space” in the queer community, contesting the imagined boundaries that shape the queer community and resignifying queer identity. What I am going to do in this presentation is take you through my basic theoretical framework for this research. I am going to present some ways to “queer” the integration narrative.

QUEER – McKenzie Wark (1997) said, “If we are talking about queerness as a sexuality then let’s sexualize the terms: if there is a point to queerness it is to fuck with straightness”. What Wark is suggesting, is that “queer” possesses a more insidious and convoluted meaning than is typically suggested in its substitution for “gay” or LGBT. “Queer” is symbolic of the fluidity of sexuality and the miscellany of divergent sexualities. Wark (1997, 6) continues by adding that, “... queerness is what escapes or eludes straightness. Sometimes it may even be a matter of escaping of eluding the straightness of gayness too”. The “straightness of gayness” that Wark refers to are the processes of “othering” that valorize certain gay identities over others, constructions of sexual identity that are fixed and bounded, precisely those forces of boundary construction and maintenance that relegate queer immigrants to the periphery of the queer community. So the goal of my research then, is really to examine some of the ways queer immigrants are using performance to “fuck with” the straightness of the queer community, to penetrate its boundaries and to experience both visibility’s pleasure through recognition and identity reaffirmation, and visibility’s pain in its summoning of the dominant voyeuristic gaze.

PERFORMATIVE IDENTITY - To understand this better, it is useful to turn to Judith Butler’s theory of performative identity. Butler argues that identities, such as gender or race, can be understood as the performative effect of reiterative discourse. She contests Foucault’s conception of bodies being written upon by culture and argues that there is no

pre-existing body, rather bodies are non-existent until shaped and bounded by discourse. It is important to mention that it is in “communities”, whether national, or local, or even “queer”, where these discourses take place. Thus, identity is shaped through interactions with community. As Shane Phelan (1994) argues, “identity does not pre-exist community”.

The performance of some identities can act to destabilize identity constructs by suggesting a porosity or fluidity to the boundaries of the body. For example, Butler (1990, 168) draws on Simon Watney (1988) to argue that the homosexual (male) body is threatening to heteronormative identity constructs in its performance of anal sex, an act which suggests a porosity to the body by its literal penetration of bodily boundaries. Transgressive performances of identity act to resignify and challenge identity constructs, making changes to their shape and character.

If, as structuralist theorist Mary Douglas argues, “the body is a model that can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious...”, then we can expand our use of Butler’s theory to the “imagined” collective identity of community. If the boundaries to the body are discursively constructed through reiterative speech, so too are the boundaries of community. And, if the performance of identities that do not fit the constructed bodily mould can act to destabilize identity constructs, then these same performances can act to contest the boundaries of the “imagined community” and claim space. However, we should not be so naïve as to imagine we have the ability to totally eradicate the boundaries to identity and community. Any performance that contests boundaries also necessarily redraws them in its repetition. We can through performance come to understand boundaries as fluid, constantly in negotiation, and open to resignification.

If we understand, the nation as a community, it is within this community that bodies are constructed as citizens or non-citizens. Here, the citizen-body is shaped as white, heterosexual, and Canadian-born. If we understand the nation as body, then performances of transnational identity from dancing at Caribanna to sending remittances, are destabilizing to its boundaries by suggesting that national boundaries do not entirely shape identity. In effect, these performances act to “queer” the nation. Similarly, we can conceptualize the queer community as constructing the queer body as gay, white, male, and necessarily “out”. Performances by queer immigrant performers in the queer space of Pride Week, can therefore be understood as contesting the boundaries of the queer community as a body. These performances work to challenge the visible images of “queer” by presenting alternative images and new queer identities.

Other scholars have reached similar conclusions by examining the performances of intersecting racial and queer identities. Rinaldo Walcott (2006), for example, analyzes the performances of a group of black drag queens in the Toronto documentary, *Divas: Love Me Forever* (2001), and argues that through their performances, the divas, “continually unwork community, identity, and nation.” He states that, “their utterances point immediately to community as political designation, as political problem, as something that must be worked, and as something more.” Integration is about achieving belonging and participating in community. If we “fuck with” this narrative, we can see that the boundaries of belonging are always already drawn. We should therefore think of integration as the willingness to take up the difficult task of contesting community, identity, and national boundaries.