

Book Review Symposium – Queer Geographies

Myrl Beam, *Gay, Inc.: The Nonprofitization of Queer Politics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-5179-0179-0 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-5179-0178-3 (cloth)

What happens when non-profits fail to enact the missions of social movements? More importantly, what if non-profits actually reinforce and further institutionalize the very inequalities that they seek to resolve? These questions, or as American studies scholar Myrl Beam suggests, this animating paradox, lies at the heart of *Gay, Inc.* Excavating and centralizing affect, Beam probes the political economy of feeling. In other words, Beam takes up how social movements are felt, contested, refracted, or lived with, and how these emotions maintain and contribute to the incongruous relationship between queer social movements and the non-profit system. Through case studies grounded in interviews, archival research and ethnography, as well as Beam's personal activism with four Midwestern LGBT non-profits, the findings of *Gay, Inc.* offer critical and ultimately hopeful insights into the political implications of locating social movements in non-profits.

Gay, Inc. is organized around four distinct but overlapping affective orientations: compassion, community, capital, and crisis. One of the most poignant examples in the book – where all four affective orientations (feeling, contestation, refraction, and living with) are scrutinized – is the exploration of sex trafficking and its discursive and material narratives. In a particularly gripping chapter, Beam skillfully weaves together the structure of law, funding demands for evidentiary data, and the complicit actions of non-profit staff members to demonstrate how all rely on and produce a narrative of an innocent, white, child victim of sex trafficking. Marketed to compassionate funders, this child victim is seen as struggling in a

moment of crisis and thus, marked as worthy and deserving of capital, is incorporated into a community of care. However, this narrative fails to attend to the lives, struggles, experiences, and bodies of young queer or trans people of color trading sex to survive. Subsequently, through capitalizing on the affective orientations produced by and through the child victim narrative, non-profits erase and enact violence upon queer and trans youth of color, isolating their lives and survival strategies from larger systems of inequality, poverty, homelessness, and the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. In other words, Beam compellingly argues that non-profits participate in and create a system that consistently directs queer and racialized bodies away from life and towards death; it reminds them that “*if you’ve actually done anything to ensure your own survival – to rescue yourself – you are no longer worthy of survival*” (p.111). Through this and many other evocative examples, *Gay, Inc.* demonstrates how non-profits can despairingly perpetuate biopolitical, violent, and capitalistic logics that further institutionalize the exclusion of those it reportedly seeks to help in the name of compassion and community.

While the contributions to geography work primarily at the scale of the local and US state, as well as the geographies of social movements, Beam draws on and contributes to larger debates around the role of non-profits in queer politics. The author situates *Gay, Inc.* in the broader critique of the non-profit industrial complex, identifying a lack of critical attention to US non-profits as a site of American exceptionalism. Engaging work by Janet Poppendieck, Jennifer Wolch, Dylan Rodriguez, and INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, Beam deconstructs this exceptionalism by tracing the development of the American non-profit system and investigating its connections to settler colonialism, capitalism, state power, and American ideals of volunteerism. This approach allows Beam to explore the structural implications that non-profitization has on queer politics.

Specifically, *Gay, Inc.* connects non-profitization with the homonormative turn. As articulated by Cathy Cohen and Lisa Duggan, this turn is a shift towards a narrow equality agenda, such as the right to marriage, and away from a more radical politics that challenges the

underlying and dominant heteronormative assumptions of such institutions. *Gay, Inc.* compellingly demonstrates the degree to which the institutionalization of queer social movements in non-profits facilitated this political shift. The consequence for Beam is that “a critique of homonormativity *must* incorporate a critique of non-profitization, as the two are bound together” (p.200). Such accounts must also include a critique of whiteness and middle-classness, as they are certainly bound together.

Although Beam highlights centralizing affect as *Gay, Inc.*'s key intervention, the book's strength lies in empirically examining how the paradox of the non-profit structure (the inability to enact the mission of social movements) is experienced, negotiated, and constituted by those embedded in non-profits. Given the book's title and blurb, the prominence of affect is both surprising, and somewhat disappointing for those seeking a key text examining why non-profits fail. The focus on affect resonates as Beam attempts to reconcile the desperate sadness and shame with the intense love and hope that he both experienced and witnessed working in LGBT non-profits. However, for readers unaccustomed to theories of affect, the four affective orientations may slip into the background as the powerful examples Beam draws on demand the most attention. More could have been explored with regards to the affective orientations of the funding entities themselves, perhaps complicating the narrative of philanthropic compassion. There is more to be written on the interplay between funders and non-profits, taking both as complex, dynamic entanglements embedded in but also always more than simply spaces of and for capital.

Gay, Inc. nevertheless opens a fracture in the progressive narrative of social movements, creating an opportunity to both take stock of the institutional landscape and perhaps envision something different. These openings are best exemplified in the case of the Vienna, the director of the Trans Youth Support Network (TYSN). Speaking to a ballroom of Minneapolis' finest LGBT donors in the fall of 2011, Vienna, a working-class, white, trans woman, demanded solidarity rather than charity. Critiquing the push for marriage and drawing direct connections

between the actions of the donors and their complicity in unjust global systems of oppression, Vienna stated: “if you achieve equality with this racist, transphobic ruling class, you have assimilated into my enemy. You have left a sea of bodies in your hurried wake” (p.171). As Vienna reflects on how the speech transgressed the normal expectations placed upon trans bodies often invited to and tokenized in spaces such as the ballroom – “sitting in the corner filling my pockets with bread rolls ... watching other attendees gorge on catered meals and open bars” (p.177) – Beam comments on the pedagogical dynamic of such spaces, noting how they entrench and perform the relationship of power that non-profits rely on and enforce. Non-profits are pedagogical because “they teach us how to relate to bodies with more or less than us, how to naturalize difference, how to grasp, how to be grateful, what expectations to have of those living in poverty ... [and] of those who ‘help’” (p.165). Through outlining the subsequent funding turmoil, organizational restructuring, and ultimate dissolution of TYSN, *Gay, Inc.* concretely highlights how social movements located in non-profits are fundamentally threatened by anti-racist and anti-capitalist visions of justice. For to demand solidarity requires, as Vienna suggests, “us all to reflect on our privileges and place within these systems of oppression” (p.172). This is a salient reflection for anyone, but in the context of *Gay Inc.* it is particularly incisive for those who donate to, work in, or fund non-profits.

The example of TYSN also speaks to some of the methodological strengths of *Gay, Inc.* Justifying the book’s intentional focus on the employees of non-profits, Beam outlines an ethical failure of research that demands “people who work every day to survive to let down their guards and expose traumas often held at bay, out of necessity, through sheer force of will, sometimes with the help of substances, simply so that someone could write a book” (p.15). *Gay, Inc.* therefore models how to conduct research that challenges an extractivist system of knowledge production. Similarly, Beam concludes by highlighting the possibilities of a productive attention to failure. Drawing on Jack Halberstam and the “queer art of failure”, Beam comments “by naming the toxicity, the cruelty of the non-profit form, this ‘failure’ did create a kind of queer

future, though that does not make it a capacious and progressive future, or even necessarily a life enabling one” (p.196). Through highlighting the opportunities in queer failure, *Gay, Inc.* gestures towards reimagining the structures of queer social movements.

For geographers, especially given the discipline’s legacy of radical critiques of power, capital, and race, *Gay, Inc.* is a poignant reminder of the ways in which we are not only embedded in institutional structures that may undermine or even work against the political potential of radical scholarship, but that our location in such institutions may also make us complicit in the erasure of and violence against those who our scholarship purports to benefit. As the discipline faces increasing pressure to produce socially relevant research, and to collaborate with various communities within and outside the university, *Gay, Inc.* compels us to remain critical, reflective, and humble.

Emily Barrett
Department of Geography
University of Kentucky
emily.barrett@uky.edu

April 2019