

## Book Review: Desire Work: Ex-Gay and Pentecostal Masculinity in South Africa by Melissa Hackman

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**Melissa Hackman, *Desire Work: Ex-Gay and Pentecostal Masculinity in South Africa*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. xvi + 195 pages. Paperback, \$23.95.**

In post-apartheid South Africa, Cape Town became the perceived epicenter of sexual liberation. Like most African countries during the turn of the twenty-first century, South Africa experienced political and cultural pushback against the protection of members of the LGBTQ+ community. Melissa Hackman, a cultural anthropologist, examined the ex-gay movement in South Africa by working with the "Healing Revelation Ministries" from 2004 to 2013 and subsequently published her observation in *Desire Work: Ex-Gay and Pentecostal Masculinity in South Africa*. Hackman's fieldwork revealed a complex process of masculine identity formation within religious space that sought to suppress same-sex desire through spirituality and constant self-development. She argued that the political uncertainty that emerged in post-apartheid South Africa resulted in a crisis in the perception of masculinity that resulted in the desire to obtain sexual and gender identity aligned with traditional notions of heterosexuality. This cultural shift allowed religious organizations, particularly Pentecostal, to establish therapeutic spaces where men and women could participate in what Hackman calls "desire work."

Hackman's approachable narrative introduces readers to Brian, a white American man, who founded Healing Revelations Ministries to help save gay men and women in Cape Town. Each chapter details the processes of "desire work" and the ex-gay men's embodied experiences who attempted to reject their same-sex desires. Leaders of HRM adopted the practices of twelve-step programs to promote self-work amongst ex-gay members of their program. The process of self-making in HRM was laced with religious rhetoric that shaped the experiences of ex-gay participants. Hackman's contextualization of the self-making process revealed that "desire work" involved performing gendered acts under church leaders' surveillance. These acts included changes in demeanor from feminine to masculine and shifting sexual thoughts from men to women. The

most intriguing aspect of Hackman's recollection of her time with HRM was the constant need for confessing sexual “falls.” Her work uncovered how HRM, and broader society, used shame and surveillance to push ex-gay men into heterosexuality. At the end of the book, Hackman revealed that only four ex-gay men maintained heterosexual lifestyles, which showed that the practices of “desire work” within HRM were inherently ineffective in changing these men's true nature. She does emphasize that HRM did provide participants with tools to handle past trauma and their emotions better but had little effect on their same-sex desire.

This ethnography presents the reader with a detailed and passionate account of the lived experiences of Pentecostal “desire work” participants. The initial introduction of Adrian and the subsequent stories of other ex-gay men throughout revealed the power dynamics associated with ex-gay rhetoric that required gender performance levels as individuals' progressed through the program. Her work is primarily based on her observations and interviews conducted during her time in South Africa. This evidence provides readers with several first-hand accounts. Hackman noted that the information that she obtained shifted once she was no longer associated with HRM. This revelation exposed the presence and power of surveillance in the ex-gay process of desire work. Hackman's ability to articulate each ex-gay person's experience's nuances is a significant strength of this work. Although this is an excellent recollection of Hackman's fieldwork, there is room for further discussion about the impact of settler colonialism on the perception of masculinity and how her work aligns with the current discourse on gender performance. Her argument that the ex-gay movement was in response to political uncertainty is compelling. However, her focus on the process of “desire work” leaves space for more analysis regarding this movement's history. Hackman provides brief excerpts of the historical context of post-apartheid South Africa. However, the complicated legacy of colonialism that influenced this region's socio-political

makeup is not fully discussed. This gap, though, makes her conclusions and analysis palpable for a knowledgeable audience and not a novice reader.

Hackman positioned her ethnography in conversation with Saba Mahmoud's work *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. In her fifth chapter, Hackman detailed the similarities and differences between ex-gay Pentecostal men and Muslim women in Egypt's piety movement. She noted that a significant difference between the two groups was that the Muslim women's efforts fulfilled normative gender roles within the Islamic faith. Simultaneously, the ex-gay men were perceived as being outside of traditional concepts of masculinity and acceptable behavior. Hackman's use of Mahmoud is beneficial, but there is significant room for discussion of theorists such as Judith Butler and Michael Foucault. The ideas of Maria Griffith also influenced Hackman's research. Throughout the narrative, Hackman references Griffith's book, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity*, when discussing religion's influence on concepts of self. When explaining the process of "desire work," Hackman described bodily actions that marked ex-gay men's pursuit of heterosexuality. The ex-gay men's bodies played a role the Hackman's observation of "desire work." Yet, I would have liked more discussion about how Hackman's ethnography fits into conversations about the body and embodied experiences. Her fieldwork and book provide a rich example of the interconnection of gender, body, and identity within religious spheres, however.

Despite my critiques regarding the need for broader theoretical and historical discussions, I thoroughly enjoyed reading Hackman's book. Her detailed description of "desire work" within the ex-gay Pentecostal movement would be beneficial to individuals with an understanding of the socio-political history of South Africa and the concepts of gender and sexuality.

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