Book Reviews

Citizenship in Question: Evidentiary Birthright and Statelessness

Benjamin N. Lawrance and Jacqueline Stevens
(eds), Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017,
ISBN: 9780822362913, 312 pp., Pb. £19.99, \$27.95

Reviewed by Nikolay Domashev

An Albanian student once accidentally threw away her passport while completing her International Baccalaureate studies at a Canadian college. Reissuing the passport and hence reconfirming her citizenship gobbled up a lot of her time and was undoubtedly stressful. It could have been worse. Much worse.

A statistical *tour d'horizon* of five European countries demonstrated that Roma child mortality rates are two to six times higher than those of the majority population, because of a lack of fundamental human rights that stems from the denial of efficacious citizenship to the Roma.

In Thailand, scores of people who can prove their and their relatives' residence in the country for generations have official household registrations, and who even pass required DNA tests, still do not qualify for citizenship.

Fierce struggles over who deserves to be a citizen might spark a civil war, as was the case in Ivory Coast in 2011. Or tightened regulations over who has the right to request a passport might deny citizenship even those who have legitimate birth certificates, as clearly shown by the class action suit *Castelano v. Clinton*, which was filed in 2008 on behalf of individuals of Mexican descent who were born in south-western US border states.

These and other cases are discussed in detail in *Citizenship in Question*. Its contributors teleport the reader from picturesque regions of northern Italy to the Himalayan foothills in northern Thailand, from a large humid plateau of Ivory Coast to the flood-plain draining into the Rio Grande River on the US–Mexico border, in order to bring forward engaged anthropology par excellence. The authors skillfully

weave together the social, economic, cultural and psychological implications for the numerous groups of people in various parts of the world who for one reason or another have been denied 'the right to have rights'. The researchers meticulously document how immigration officials and judges often make decisions which are remarkably inconsistent at best and downright subjective at worst. In doing so, the government officials mistake their own citizens for strangers with all the pernicious consequences this entails. In their analysis of contemporary citizenship, the scholars hover above challenging theoretical terrains of Giorgio Agamben, Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt. Ultimately, the contributors choose not to engage the seemingly appropriate paradigms of biopower and governmentality resident in Foucault's writings, but instead audaciously deploy Jacques Derrida's rendering of Plato's philosophy. Specifically, they decide to conceptualise citizenship as a *pharmakon*. This metaphor captures the dual nature of citizenship: it can be a "poison" (i.e. by rendering individuals vulnerable) or it can be an "antidote" (i.e. by shielding individuals from harm), depending on the local circumstances.

Does the *pharmakon* act as a vehicle for deliberate governmental policies? The surprising answer is 'no.' Instead, every time the *pharmakon* emerges, it does so out of chaotic and incongruent local manifestations of the government's power. The authors emphasise that these practices mostly operate independently of any standardising discourse. Furthermore, these practices are not channelled through professional or government networks whose concepts might be puzzled together in any resemblance of a pattern, albeit a fleeting one.

The present anthology dives deeper than other books on nationalism, state-building and citizenship-as-taken-for-granted. It challenges the ordinary meaning of citizenship as something that one either has or does not have. Instead, the present compendium brings to light all those twilight areas of legal practice, where seemingly objective and rational citizenship regulations break down. These regulations

break down, when citizenship *de jure* bogs down in the local contexts of borders, laws and (family) life, all tightly interwoven in the Gordian knot of 'effective' citizenship. Effective citizenship here means a person's actual access to rights, which might have nothing to do with the declaratory nature of legal citizenship. Similarly, 'effective statelessness' arises when individuals cannot prove their citizenship in the country of their residence and yet the government does not grant them stateless status, which in turn precludes these persons from having protections offered by international law precisely to the most vulnerable group of people – stateless persons. The localities for citizenship disputes significantly vary and might include homes, workplaces, civil hearings, immigration jails or court proceedings.

The above-mentioned dilemmas are aptly illustrated by a number of cases, which are grouped in three parts. The first part reflects on the interplay between international/regional laws and citizenship determinations. The second part examines how frontline officials directly operationalise citizenship conundrums. The third part takes a look at electoral politics and campaigns which problematise the citizenship of leaders and populace, thereby fuelling the debate about the importance of such distinctions.

In toto, the present book is a major milestone in our understanding of interactions between institutional agents and ordinary people on the edges of citizenship. It reflects on inequalities of ethnicity, race and sex that emerge when human rights protections become unenforceable. The profound analysis of these issues and the sustained focus on personal narratives make this book a welcome addition to the bookshelves of scholars of law, political science, psychology, sociology and anthropology.

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Geontologies: A Requiem for Late Liberalism

Elizabeth A. Povinelli, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016, ISBN: 9780822362333, 218pp. Hb. \$99.95 / Pb. \$25.95

Reviewed by Priyanka Hutschenreiter

Geontologies is the newest addition to Elizabeth Povinelli's compelling mapping of late liberalism. Taking Michel Foucault's definition of biopolitics and biopower as her starting point, Povinelli argues for a different formation of power underlying 'late liberalism' and capitalism, one she calls 'geontopower'. Foucault's concept of biopower foregrounds the control over physical bodies as the basis of population subjugation – power here lies in the governance of life and in dealing out death. Povinelli argues that late liberal exercises in power are rooted in the distinction between life and non-life. In this imaginary, the vast majority of the world is relegated to the category of non-life, while humans crown the hierarchy of living beings. Geontopower is not a new form of power freshly emerging in twenty-first-century liberalism. Neither does it replace biopower. Rather, it has always been around.

With frequent reference to her previous books, Povinelli acknowledges that *Geontologies* is best read as part of her wider oeuvre, yet still hopes for its self-containment. Being new to her writing, I read *Geontologies* on its own. And the limitations of this are clear: for one, Povinelli's understanding of liberalism, neoliberalism and late liberalism are only outlined thoroughly in the conclusion. Here in particular, reading her previous work would seem helpful if not fundamental. Yet *Geontologies'* worth exceeds such limitations. It is decidedly political in its critique of settler liberal policies and capitalist essentialisation and exploitation of life and non-life. But rather than offering a similarly fixed sense of late liberalism, she sees it as an assemblage (following Geroge Deleuze) of events and quasi-events, the overlapping of formations of power and the governance of life, non-life and death.

Drawing on her ethnographic and, importantly, collaborative work with the Belyuen Indigenous community of Australia's Northern Territory, Povinelli offers her reader rich and complex illustrations to deal with a complex terrain. She states that her work is not about describing the lives and ontologies of her friends (interlocutors, colleagues, collabora-

tors) to an uninformed and unseen readership, but rather about the lives of her community shedding light on the formations of geontopower, which are omnipresent. The chapters of *Geontologies* are structured around her friends' engagement with five modes of existence, which is manifested in the physical landscape the community lives with, which is referred to as 'Dreamings'. Interestingly, she never gives us a clear definition of what Dreamings are. But rather than an omission, there is strength in this choice: she decides not to fetishise either her friends or Dreamings, allowing them to become through the descriptions and experiences offered to us. There is something intimate about this. And there is another reason behind this choice which comes to light as the book progresses: the relationship between physical land formations and the Belyuen community members in *Geontologies* is very much changing as the biological, geological, climatic, economic, social, cultural and experiential conditions of both people and place change. People are analysing the expressions of specific sites, estuaries and rocks differently, as they themselves are being analysed differently by the geological formations. Though they are not communicating with the words (*logos*), communication – bolstered by intention and agency – is happening between humans, animals, water, fog and rocks alike.

Povinelli's approach to the Belyuen community, the Dreamings, the land formations she maps out, and the concepts she uses (*logos*, *phonos*, *bios*, *geos*, ontology, the event, the sign, the signified, assemblage, liberalism) all come alive in an assemblage of their own. She thus maps a way for anthropologists interested in non-human anthropology and the intersections of people, place and world to approach these

objects as – if not speaking or moving, still – semiotising subjects. Particularly, place and the non-human, the not-alive, are invited to join the community of the living, the existing.

The penultimate chapter offers particular insights for anthropologists working on collaborative, practice-based research projects which involve non-humans and non-life. This chapter engages a GPS/GIS project mapping the rock weir and reef system of a small coastal point owned by members of the Indigenous collective Karrabing, which Povinelli is a part of. Here, people and place, state and community, life and non-life are mutually engaged through the technologies of informational capitalism. Capitalism is thus not merely an exploitative tool but literally imbedded in the atmosphere and in the substance of non-life.

By taking us into the depths of a conversation on life and non-life, *Geontologies* gives us a means for addressing issues of climate, liberalism, capitalism, non-humans and the human condition in such a way that decentres the human without giving away the sense of responsibility carried home in the term 'Anthropocene'. Moving beyond the human, Povinelli invites us to interrogate life and non-life and to question the powers that insist on their distinction. *Geontologies* is thus crucial for those of us working on and thinking about what it means to be classified not just as human or non-human, but as being alive.

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