

QUEERING CITIZENSHIP

Politics, Power, and Justice

What does it mean to be a “citizen,” and are there better and worse ways to be one? What does it mean to be a “queer citizen”—and is being a queer citizen different from being a good citizen? The language of citizenship pervades daily life—and it is sufficiently powerful that, at the height of the first wave of the AIDS epidemic, in 1990, four leaders from the HIV/AIDS activist group ACT UP decided to form a broader organization, which they called **Queer Nation**, to address the kinds of physical, social, and structural violence they were witnessing against LGBTQ+ people. The epidemic brought with it a return of the kinds of tactics used during the 1950s by Joseph McCarthy and the “witch hunters” of the Red Scare, which also targeted queer people as being both sexual and political deviants. Just as the Red-baiters used the term **comintern** to designate those involved (or believed to be involved) in an international conspiracy to spread communism in the West, so the term **homintern** was used as early as the 1930s to add the layer of sexual “otherness” to often phantasmic figures.

The term *Queer Nation*, then, was an intentionally provocative one: the word *queer* was only then reentering the vocabulary of LGBTQ+ people as one with potentially positive power, especially when embraced by those who usually heard it as a slur. Queer Nation used the language of nationhood, which has long been central to concepts of patriotism, and also claimed space for queer citizens in the democracy that the United States identifies itself with. At the same time, its foregrounding of *queer* marked a territory—political and social, rather than geographic—with all that goes with territories—boundaries, admittedly shifting and sometimes contested, as well as features that bind citizens together.

What makes someone a citizen, anyway? There are, of course, a number of different ways to answer this question. Someone is usually conferred citizenship automatically by dint of being born in a specific place or to parents who have been identified by rule of law as citizens of a specific place. Thus, the whole “birther” issue surrounding Barack Obama, both

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING AND VIEWING

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