It began on the morning of 5 June 1968, in the Bayside neighborhood of Queens, New York. Veronica Lueken, a Catholic housewife, prayed to St. Thérèse of Lisieux, “The Little Flower of Jesus,” to intercede on behalf of the mortally wounded Robert F. Kennedy. Upon so doing she was “overcome with the smell of roses” (30). Kennedy, as we know, died in the early hours of the following morning. Lueken’s anomalous experiences, however, would intensify and carry on for nearly thirty years, until her death in 1995. In this time Lueken held frequent vigils, in the course of which she encountered numerous visions of heavenly figures, among them St. Thérèse, Moses, Joan of Arc, Michael the Archangel, Jesus, and most notably the Virgin Mary. Lueken delivered hundreds of “messages from heaven” depicting a compromised church, a society in moral decline, and a planet in peril. What is more, her messages drew liberally from “subjugated discourses,” incorporating spiritual photography (i.e., “miraculous Polaroids”) and elaborating claims about UFOs, satanic forces, and global conspiracies involving communists and Freemasons. Ultimately, Lueken forewarned of punishment by the hand of God, the coming of a great “Chastisement.” The vigils that occasioned Lueken’s messages, known collectively as “the Bayside Prophecies,” attracted droves of Catholic pilgrims from far and wide. The resulting Bayside movement, or “Baysiders” as they came to be known, in turn attracted considerable scrutiny and eventual condemnation from church authorities and Bayside residents alike.

Joseph P. Laycock’s *The Seer of Bayside: Veronica Lueken and the Struggle to Define Catholicism*, is a commendable book. Combining ethnography with oral history, extensive archival research, and lucid theoretical argumentation, Laycock’s careful consideration of Lueken and the Baysider movement stands as a model response to Jonathan Z. Smith’s oft-cited call for religious studies scholars to “render the strange familiar and the familiar strange” (19). Given the frequency with which journalists and cultural opponents have over the years sought to denigrate Lueken as a fraud and the Baysiders as a Catho-
lic “cult,” this merits especially heavy underscoring. No less problematic, however, has been the more genteel scholarly tendency to read the Baysider movement as a “localized variation of Catholicism,” a “deviant sect,” a form of “re-enchantment,” “folk-piety,” or even a “new religious movement” (10–11, 194). For as Laycock notes, each of these categorizations bespeaks the assumption that “Baysider Catholicism is not normative” (11). The wrinkle here is that the Baysiders identify as devout Catholics; in their view it is the Mother Church that has gone astray.

Foregoing categorization and its associated snags, Laycock reads Lueken and the Baysiders as participants in an “ongoing and asymmetrical” struggle with church authorities over what Catholicism “is” (12). Tracing the near half-century history of this definitional dispute, Laycock locates Vatican II at its center. Indeed, drawing from Benedict Anderson’s work on imagined communities, Laycock contextualizes Lueken and the Baysiders within the space of the Catholic identity crisis that ensued from the liturgical changes introduced by Vatican II. As Laycock stresses time and again, the vernacular mass, receiving communion in the hand, and a growing contempt for Catholic devotional practices—all moves on the part of the Church to modernize—had especially alienating effects, and for many lay Catholics, Lueken among them, constituted a rather horrifying “betrayal of Catholic tradition” (4, 57). Laycock interprets Lueken’s visions and prophecies as rejections of, attempts to negotiate, and calls to reverse these changes. He demonstrates how the refusal of local priests to take Lueken seriously had the effect of “pushing” her away from the Church and into the embrace of alienated lay Catholics who affirmed and shaped her anomalous experiences. Culturally primed by a shared history of Catholic devotional practices and popular accounts of key events in Marian lore (e.g., apparitions at Guadalupe, Lourdes, Fatima, Garabandal, and Necedah, Wisconsin), Laycock shows how Lueken was effectively “pulled” into the social role of a Marian seer, i.e., a “channel for popular dissent over the reforms of Vatican II” (20), and how the Baysider movement, eventually global in reach, consolidated around her visions and prophecies.

This “push” and “pull” dynamic is one notable example of the considerable attention to context and relational processes that Laycock maintains throughout *The Seer of Bayside*. Another is the paradoxical nature of the Baysiders’ relationship to the Catholic Church, and the place of Lueken’s visions and prophecies as both instigators and mediators of this relationship. The key event here is the “Battle of Bayside,” which saw simmering tensions between Baysiders, Church authorities, angry Bayside residents, and cultural opponents of Lueken erupt into open conflict, and which ultimately eventuated in
censure and the forced relocation of Lueken’s vigils from St. Robert Bellarmine’s, her home parish, to Flushing Meadows Corona Park in Queens. In the aftermath, and quite tellingly, Lueken called on Baysiders to remain loyal to the Church. Laycock punches up the significance of this position by drawing out comparisons between the Baysiders and the sedevacantists, traditionalist Catholics who took Vatican II as evidence of corruption, and thus cause to abandon the Church. Lueken, by contrast, advanced an account of Vatican II as the outcome of a sinister conspiracy perpetrated by imposters who had managed to infiltrate the church hierarchy. As Laycock convincingly argues, the conspiracy narrative has allowed the Baysiders to openly defy Vatican II while at the same time maintaining an understanding of themselves as devout Catholics, loyal to the Church. Set within the temporal orientation of Lueken’s prophecies, this paradoxical relationship, which Laycock aptly characterizes as a “dance of deference and defiance,” will continue until the imposters are ousted and the Mother Church once again comes to embody the normative Catholicism to which the Baysiders have so steadfastly held.

_The Seer of Bayside_ is an excellent book, and I recommend it highly. Laycock’s study has much to offer beyond its obvious contributions to scholarship on American Catholicism and post-Vatican II devotional cultures, however. Indeed, students and scholars alike will find in _The Seer of Bayside_ an exemplary model for engaging with subjugated discourses, and more broadly groups and practices that are, as Laycock puts it, “understudied, misunderstood, and maligned” (ix).