Reading Literature and Theory at the Intersections of Queer and Class

Class Notes and Queer-ies

Edited by Maria Alexopoulos, Tomasz Basiuk, Susanne Hochreiter and Tijana Ristic Kern

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This collection stems from a years-long collaboration among scholars from Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, the University of Vienna, and the University of Warsaw. Since 2017, members of this research group – *Queer Theory and Literary Studies* – have met for regular workshops. The book emerges from the discussions and papers presented at these events, which culminated in three workshops held in 2022 and 2023, where the authors discussed the intersections of queer and class, workshopped each contribution, and conducted a two-part roundtable discussion.

Contributors to the collection articulate multiple perspectives on the relationship between queer and class. Each chapter focuses on a reading of a literary text or set of texts, which represent a range of genres: fiction, life writing, essays, and manifestos. This diversity of genres and approaches to reading them – the differences between them and their partial overlaps – is reflected in the dialogue that unfolds in the final chapter, a roundtable panel with a focus on methodologies of queer and class-inflected analysis.

In many ways, the subject matter attended to by the book is circumscribed by the unique conditions of its emergence. The participants were determined by the already-established collaboration, one taking place in a Central European, predominantly white, academic context. The collection is certainly not comprehensive and does not attend to all of the multiple and dynamic identity categories that intersect with class in literary texts. Instead, the volume is intended as an exemplary exercise in queer reading, establishing class as a key analytical category. One that, we hope, will be helpful in making space for other vital perspectives.

We would like to extend a special thanks to Kathrin Tordasi, who was a long-standing member of the reading group and helped formulate our focus on queer and class for the volume. We would also like to thank all those colleagues who have been involved in the reading group, especially Melissa Jacques, who has contributed to the topic of "queer and class," and Anna Vida, who created the illustrations for this book.

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Research Group *Queer Theory and Literary Studies*

Artwork: Anna Vida, *Café Gagarin*, Vienna, November 29, 2023

Introduction

Maria Alexopoulos, Tomasz Basiuk, Susanne Hochreiter, and Tijana Ristic Kern

The current sense of precarity experienced by many around the world reflects complex and sometimes contradictory circumstances. These include the climate crisis, ongoing and emerging military conflicts, disparities in income and wealth – both within and among national/regional economies – the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of fascism and far-right politics, globalization, and sometimes perceived threats to and from globalization. Within these myriad crises, the intersection of queer and class has become a salient topic. Exploiting the legitimate anxieties these issues provoke, populist politicians and their supporters on the right often juxtapose the so-called gender ideology (which includes issues as diverse as reproductive rights, self-determination of gender, access to vital health care for transgender youth, marriage equality, and gender and queer theory itself), against the interests of the increasingly precarious working class.[1] This sets up a false class/queer conflict, which is used to bolster the agendas of conservative and far-right political actors and create a contemporary version of the culture wars of the 1990s and early 2000s. This sociopolitical and discursive context makes it more urgent than ever to examine the intersections of queer and class. Such an examination became more visible with the attention garnered by Didier Eribon's memoir *Returning to Reims* (2009), which explores this prominent queer historian and philosopher's working-class background and the shame it caused him. Eribon sought to obscure his class origins in the early stages of his career but later overcame his unease to address and theorize class-based inequalities, especially in education. This gesture exemplifies the possibility of class reflexivity as a generative site of academic research.

This volume combines research on class from cultural and literary studies with queer political and theoretical perspectives. As most contributions addressing issues of social class, including those within queer theory, come from the social sciences, a perspective that critically illuminates figurations and narratives of social distinction within literary and artistic work is often missing. An examination of literary and artistic engagements with this topic involves asking which images, figures, narrative patterns, linguistic, and aesthetic practices have emerged as part of European and North American

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discourses about class. More specifically, how do these aesthetic practices shape the discourse on social belonging, privilege, poverty, and life perspectives? Each of the six readings in this volume puts forward class, its manifestations, and its effects, as central to queer analysis of literary texts in historical and contemporary contexts. The roundtable discussion centers queer and class in academic institutions and practices, for example, through attention to elitism and precarity. As the title of the collection suggests, we wayfind through these complex contexts with the aid of Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality. Crenshaw coined the term in 1989 as a corrective for the single axis of identity framework that delegitimized the experiences of those who face discrimination based on multiple identity categories, particularly black women ("Demarginalizing").

This book complements a burgeoning body of work within Queer Studies concerned with the connections between queer and class. Notable among these are Yvette Taylor's *Working-Class Queers: Time, Place and Politics* (2023) and Matt Brim's *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University* (2020). Each attends to different areas; Taylor examines British working-class queer politics, whereas Brim critiques the American neoliberal university. Alongside Brim's monograph, there are several noteworthy essay collections examining queer and class within the context of academia: Kenneth Oldfield and Richard Gregory III Johnson's *Resilience: Queer Professors from the Working Class* (2008), a collection of personal stories written by self-identified "poor queer" academics; Churnjeet Mahn, Matt Brim, and Yvette Taylor's *Queer Sharing in the Marketized University* (2022) and *Queer Precarities in and out of Higher Education* (2023). Other notable titles in the field include two editions of Rosemary Hennessy's *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (2000 and 2018) and Lisa Henderson's *Love and Money: Queers, Class, and Cultural Production* (2013). Hennessy's work takes a Marxist feminist approach to examine late capitalism's effects on sexual identity, while Henderson's monograph attends to the intersectionality of class and sexual identities, specifically through the lens of culture and representation in a U.S.-American context.

Feminist research has a long tradition of reflecting on class but less frequently with a focus on lesbian women, who, as discussed in the first chapter, generated a number of meaningful analyses of class. In her seminal essay, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics" (1997), Cathy J. Cohen calls for queer theory's "return" to intersectional analysis and politics that conceptualizes queer positionalities in terms of their relation of power rather than solely in opposition to heterosexuality. She advocates for "a left framework of politics" specifically foregrounding the economic and material implications of domination and marginalization (443). Cohen emphasizes a specifically *queer* leftist politics, "one that designates sexuality and struggles against sexual normalisation as central to the politics of all marginal communities" (444). For her, queer theory and queer

politics' opposition to heteronormativity necessitates consideration of both race and class.

Linda Garber makes similar observations in *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory* (2001). She reads lesbian poet-activist-theorists whose work counters the narrative that lesbian feminism and queer theory exist in opposition to one another, specifically by bringing the issues of class and race into the discussion of gender and sexuality. Garber argues that lesbian feminist theory is inherently a social constructionist project that exhibits a "simultaneity of staunchly grounded identity politics and fluid positionality" (1). She also recognizes 1970s Black lesbian theorization and their "deessentialized identity politics" as based on an intersectional analysis of oppression (7). For Garber, it is the exclusion of Black lesbian working-class voices from lesbian feminist theory that creates the contentions between lesbian theory and queer theory, and she calls for a focus on "pivotal writings of working-class/lesbians of colour whose articulations of multiple, simultaneous identity positions and activist politics both belong to lesbian feminism and presage queer theory" (8). Following Garber, in this volume, we read literary texts as important sites for the production of a queer theory of class.

A queer theory of race *and* class is developed by Chicana lesbian/queer feminist writers throughout the 1980s, most prominently by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga. In *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Anzaldúa outlines the revolutionary and resistant "new consciousness," "*la conciencia de la mestiza,*" which breaks down the binaries of race, gender, sexuality, class, and culture. Similarly, in her essay "La Güera" in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), Moraga explores her in-between identity of "la güera" (the fair-skinned Chicana), whose white-skin privilege disappears once she embraces her lesbianism, and who experiences queerness as a bridge to understanding race and class oppression. For Moraga, all forms of oppression take a material, economic form, as she writes that in the U.S. "lesbianism is a poverty – as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor" (26).

Lori Fox's recent collection of non-academic essays, *This Has Always Been a War: The Radicalization of a Working Class Queer* (2022), remobilizes Anzaldúa's and Moraga's revolutionary affect and politics for a radical queer critique of capitalist patriarchy that sees heteronormativity interlinked with class as axis of systemic violence. Likewise, Yvette Taylor's *Working-Class Lesbian Life: Classed Outsiders* (2007) represents a continuation of the body of writing and politics articulated by writers such as Cohen and Garber. She argues that the intersection of class and sexuality has rarely been made visible. In her book, she explores this absence by centering the experiences of working-class lesbians. By engaging with this varied and intricate body of work on queer and class, we seek to incorporate various historical, theoretical, sociopolitical, and identitarian concerns into our readings of literary works.

(Re)conceptualizing Queer and Class

A reclaimed term, "queer" has variously signified strangeness, the abject, the homophobic, and most recently, the intellectual and political paradigm of "queer theory." Resistant to categorization, at both the level of institutional disciplinarity and individual/collective identity, queer theory has nevertheless gained a significant institutional foothold, usurping its predecessor Gay and Lesbian Studies. Heather Love writes: "While old school lesbian studies remained institutionally marginal, chronically underfunded throughout the 1970s and 1980s, queer theory, with its Foucauldian pedigree, its critique of identity politics, has had an easier go of it" (102). If queer theory can be understood as having an origin, it might be Teresa de Lauretis's coining of the phrase in 1991 as a title for a special issue of the journal *differences*. In this choice, de Lauretis emphasized her intention to signify a differentiation from Lesbian and Gay Studies, particularly the disciplines' presumed prioritizing of white, middle-class, masculinity. It is significant to our collection that intersectionality was embedded in the term queer theory from the time of its inauguration. De Lauretis described queer theory as attentive "to race and its attendant differences of class or ethnic culture, geographical, and socio-political location" (viii).

Queer theory has come to signify a number of identities and practices. Indeed, Annamarie Jagose's 2015 claim that "[i]t seems everyone knows – or no one much cares – what queer means these days" (26) might resonate even more today. Even the one definitional continuity – "queer" as "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (Halperin 62); "queer theory" as synonymous as a "critique of the normative" (Eng 193) – no longer holds. Indeed, in 2015, the very journal that inaugurated the discipline published a new special issue: *Queer Theory Without Antinormativity*. The issue recognized "[h]eteronormativity, homonormativity, family values, marriage, and monogamy" as the central "objects of sustained queer critique" and asked how the discipline might proceed without this "primary allegiance to antinormativity" ("Queer").

The concept "class" is not any less wrought than the hoary concept "queer." In socioeconomic terms, class has two primary modalities. On the one hand, Marxist political economy focuses on who controls the means of production. According to this logic, one is among either the "haves" or the "have-nots." As the latter possess only their own time, they must exchange it for wages, allowing business owners to pocket any profits. On the other hand, class implies belonging to a social stratum, as discussed by Pierre Bourdieu under the aegis of habitus and of distinction, which is to say that such belonging is a matter of recognition by others.[2] A sense of belonging to a particular social class may result in political self-consciousness of the kind which Marx hoped to see motivating the workers' revolution. It may also remain latent, failing to manifest as a political stance.

Such historical, political, and theoretical distinctions do not hold for more contemporary labor arrangements in any precise way. To illustrate, one of the chapters in the present volume offers a reading of a German novel from the 1930s about the *Angestellte* (salaried, or white-collar workers), a category complicating Marxist analysis. Similarly, the present-day neoliberal economy dictates that employees should save for their retirement by investing in means of production, for example, by buying stock, which technically makes them capitalists, albeit on a miniscule scale. The recently popularized term "precarity" not only reflects this new socioeconomic condition but also lacks specificity with respect to who qualifies as the new "precariat," which is so clearly different from the Marxist "proletariat," as it encompasses many who are self-employed. It may even be said to encompass the rich whose fortunes are insecure due to shifting global economies or due to their own misguided decisions. Moreover, precariousness sometimes describes the human condition as such, notably in work by Judith Butler, who uses this term more broadly, giving it a universalizing sense while simultaneously offering it as a rallying cry of those economically and otherwise oppressed. Precarity and other novel ways of addressing class distinctions illustrate the shifting socioeconomic grounds which undergird definitions of class.

Whereas gay and lesbian identity politics were accused of ignoring categories of oppression outside of gender and sexuality, queer theorizing made a point of overcoming such blind spots.[3] In the ongoing cognitive mapping of power dynamics, class is rarely, if ever, simply absent. For example, class structure and certain familial forms are intimately linked: the patriarchal family, defined by paternal authority and the obedience it commands, finds itself replicated on the level of society at large in the relationship between individuals with seemingly legitimate decision-making powers over others and those expected to submit. Intersectionality has served well as not only a turnkey approach to the different planes of dominance and dependency which readings such as ours strive to illuminate but also a name for a complex web of crisscrossing scholarly, political, and economic interests that continue to evolve. Accordingly, this volume does not set out to secure any stable or consistent definitions of queer or class, or the relationship between them. Rather, in each chapter, the different ways that queer and class might signify, be inhabited, be transformed, or transform, unfold in the literary texts that they examine.

The term "class" also has linguistic resonances that evoke education and formalized indoctrination into normative social roles. This is a particularly literary way of thinking about language. Our collection is interested in the theoretical possibilities we can hear in these resonances. Similarly, our subtitle makes a literary play on the homophonic quality of *queer* – oblique and off-center – and *query* – to inquire. This gesture is intended to acknowledge that the theory literature produces is frequently aesthetic, occurring at affective registers often overlooked in formal academic theory.

Although the collection focuses more broadly on the categories of queer and class, the individual chapters demonstrate this intersection to be inextricable from other dimensions of identity and social hierarchies, especially race, gender, citizenship, age, and ability. The authors pay close attention to the intricate ways that the intersections of queer and class are articulated in each specific text, making sure not to produce readings that are overdetermined by the collection's focus. Queer theory's anti-identitarian impulses are sometimes positioned as incompatible with intersectionality's focus on discrete identity categories. Because the framework of intersectionality relies upon locating precisely how, where, and what dimensions of social identities intersect, it has been argued that an intersectional analysis requires an investment in (relatively stable) identities and thus in identity politics. However, we understand both queer theory and intersectionality as enabling a critique of forms of identity politics that focus on "one" axis of exclusion or uphold the idea of "unitary" marginalized communities (Crenshaw, "Mapping"; Sullivan). Crenshaw recognizes that antiessentialist perspectives (such as queer theory) have been useful for intersectionality as a framework, as they help inquire how socially constructed social categories are given meaning and assigned value by the hierarchies of power. As Crenshaw writes, "a large and continuing project for subordinated people – and indeed, one of the projects for which postmodern theories have been very helpful – is thinking about the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others" ("Mapping" 1296–97). Intersectionality and postmodern frameworks are therefore not contradictory but complementary, facilitating dynamic social analyses of the power relations and hierarchies that produce social categories. Furthermore, together they enable a comprehensive deconstruction of the categories at the conceptual level that opens a space for political engagement.

Elahe Haschemi Yekani, Beatrice Michaelis, and Gabriele Dietze suggest the concept of "corrective methodologies" as a way to make productive this tension between queer theory and intersectionality (80). They write that queer theory and intersectionality are similar in their critique of categorization processes but have been long separated by what the authors call a "double blank": the absence of the category of sexuality in the application of intersectionality in gender studies, and a "continuous silence on intersectionality in a predominantly white genealogy of queer theory" (78). Their concept of corrective methodologies aims to create a productive destabilization of both critical paradigms: queering can counter the solidifying of binary identities in intersectional analysis caused by the use of abstract social categories as categories of analysis, and an intersectional approach can help flesh out different and conflicting positionalities in queer theorizing (see also Dietze, et al.). "Corrective methodology" describes the ways in which each analysis (or the texts that are the object of analysis) endeavors to both queer the category of class and recenter class in queer theory's analytical challenge to heteronormativity.

Reading Queer and Class

In this volume, works by U.S. American, British, German, and French authors have been selected by contributors on the basis of their interests and scholarly expertise. Our authors read activist writing by U.S. lesbian feminists, particularly by women of color, as well as personal essays by U.S. gay men. A chapter on Isabel Waidner, a German author living in the U.K., another on Annie Ernaux remembering her deceased mother in her life writing, and a reading of Michelle Tea's picaresque memoir, offer (queer) alternatives to linear, teleological narrative forms. A comparison between Hans Fallada's canonical 1930s novel and Kristine Bilkau's contemporary rendition of precariousness in the neoliberal age traces the development of social class categories and of sexual mores in Germany over the past century. Furthermore, a reading of dark academia considers the queer politics of a genre which romanticizes the pleasures and privileges of academic life. This eclectic selection of primary texts hopes to afford multiple perspectives on queer and class while acknowledging the impossibility of a comprehensive perspective.

In the first chapter, "'And They Would Scream *Revolution!*': Radical Lesbian Class Action in 1970s Feminist Manifestos and Michelle Tea's *Valencia*," Maria Alexopoulos, Krystyna Mazur, and Tijana Ristic Kern recover and celebrate powerful early precedents for contemporary queer debates about class: lesbian manifestos of the 1970s. Looking at the historical context for contemporary analyses of queer and class, the chapter reads Radicalesbians manifesto "The Woman-Identified Woman" (1970), Charlotte Bunch's "Lesbians in Revolt" (1972), and "The Combahee River Collective Statement" (1977). To show the persistence of the manifestos' complex and intersectional queer/class theorizing, and to center the contribution of radical lesbian politics, the authors read *Valencia* (2000), a contemporary text by prominent U.S. queer activist and author Michelle Tea. Tracing radical political thought, as well as the sentiment and the affect of the manifesto genre through a contemporary example that intertwines life writing, fiction, and criticism, this chapter emphasizes the creative power of literary writing to articulate complex theoretical positions and mobilize political agency.

In "'Contact – however brief – outside the prison of my class is what I still desire.' Interclass sexual contact in personal essays by Bruce Benderson and Samuel R. Delany," Tomasz Basiuk compares personal essays by Bruce Benderson and by Samuel R. Delany which focus on public sex in New York City to address male–male interclass contact. Benderson criticizes the moral rigidity of identity politics which, limited by its middle-class provenance, is unable to account for the precarious existence of members of the underclass. Delany calls on Jane Jacobs to argue that infrastructure and institutions facilitating contact – sexual contact included – are likely to improve everyone's enjoyment of urban living. While Delany dedicates his essay to Benderson,

his approach is more consistently materialist and less romanticizing than Benderson's.

In "Empowering Aesthetics: Queer Temporalities and Precarious Existence in Isabel Waidner's Novels," Eveline Kilian focuses on Isabel Waidner's novels, comparing them to a more canonical approach to queerness and social mobility. Waidner disrupts the linearity of biographical and narrative time, as well as the psychological coherence of her (sometimes fantastical) characters to illustrate the precarity of immigrant existence and to allegorize economic exploitation and its effects on individuals and communities, as well as to suggest ways in which the powerless may exercise agency. Kilian contends that Karen Barad's agential realism and Jasbir Puar's supplanting of intersectionality with assemblage illuminate Waidner's experimental aesthetics as related to her politics.

In "About Worlds and Words – Habitus and Precariousness in Annie Ernaux's *A Woman's Story*," Julia Lingl and Naomi Lobnig ask how literature can address the intersection of precarity, gender, and vulnerability, and thus be part of a practice of resistance. The authors offer a queer reading of Ernaux's *A Woman's Story* (1988) which they combine with a theoretical debate on precarity and vulnerability as articulated by Judith Butler. In the memoir of the life of her mother, a turn-of-the-century Normandy-born woman, laborer, then shopkeeper and wife, Ernaux negotiates the precariousness of her mother's living conditions and the class difference that grows out of her own social ascent. Her writing can be understood as a political act by means of which social inequalities are made visible, the prevailing social order is disturbed, and hierarchies and power relations are unsettled.

In "Happy Little People: Class, Gender, and Sexuality in Hans Fallada's *Kleiner Mann – was nun?* and Kristine Bilkau's *Die Glücklichen*," Susanne Hochreiter examines Fallada's novel, a classic of German-language literature. Published in 1932, the book responds directly to the economically catastrophic situation of the time, with unemployment and misery for large segments of the population. The protagonist is a clerk – one of the many white-collar workers who emerged as a new social type at that time. The central question in this context is how the new social type is conceptualized in literature with regard to desire and sexuality. By contrast, Bilkau's novel is set in the present and addresses the crumbling of the new middle class. Hochreiter examines how these two stories, constructed in parallel, are told, how they reflect political and economic discourses, and how the concept of class functions in each. Thus, the so-called social question and the question of gender and sexuality are critically presented in their interconnectedness.

In "Queering Dark Academia," Anna Kurowicka examines the genre of dark academia, whose appeal, she argues, lies in its upper-class aesthetics coupled with an (often illusory) promise of queer belonging. The protagonists of dark academia find themselves awed by the material and intellectual

pleasures of an exclusive university education. These pleasures are interwoven with a centering of queer intimacies. The university provides an escape from the pressures of heteronormative life in a spatial and temporal sense: the university lies in a "nowhere land" and is an opportunity for a socially sanctioned break from the expectation to lead a productive and reproductive life. Kurowicka reads Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) and Lee Mandelo's *Summer Sons* (2021), which illuminate the entanglements of upper class and queerness in dark academia, arguing that the intellectual and emotional pleasures offered by the academic institutions and queer communities turn out to be illusory.

The collection concludes with the collectively authored "Roundtable: Queer and Class in Theory and (Academic) Practice." The book contributors are joined by further working group members, which provides a wider scope for reflections not only on central issues of the collection but also on the question of doing queer theory work in the context of academic practice. The roundtable gives an insight into the way that queer theory research and work survive in increasingly neoliberal(izing) academic climates. This discussion is an example of how through collective praxis, connections, interrelations, and investment in small research networks, pockets of resistance can emerge to increased individualization and precariousness within the academic sector at large and the humanities in particular.

Notes

1 See, for example, Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender* (Penguin Books, 2024); Sonia Corrêa, "Gender Ideology: Tracking Its Origins and Meanings in Current Gender Politics." *LSE Blogs*, 11 Dec. 2017; Clare Hemmings, "'But I Thought We'd Already Won That Argument!': 'Anti-Gender' Mobilizations, Affect, and Temporality." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2022, pp. 594–615; Ivan Krastev, *Democracy Disrupted: The Politics of Global Protest* (U of Pennsylvania P 2014); Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (The New Press, 2016).

2 See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Harvard UP, 1996; Orig. *La Distinction: Critique sociale du jugement*, 1979); Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: A Critique of Political Economy* (Regnery Publishing, 1996; Orig. *Das Kapital*, 1867).

3 There were active attempts in various communities to be as inclusive as possible, and feminist and lesbian feminist groups addressed various dimensions of identity early on and reflected on them theoretically. Nevertheless, central lines of conflict still ran not only along the dimension of "race" in particular but also along the dimension of "class." One example of this is the historical devaluation of butch-femme cultures, which are often related to more working-class lesbians.

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