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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Anna Vida is an artist, teacher, and writer from Vienna, Austria, whose work engages with various sociopolitical themes, with a special focus on queer feminism.

7 Roundtable

Queer and Class in Theory and (Academic) Practice

Tamara Radak (convener), Maria Alexopoulos, Tomasz Basiuk, Susanne Hochreiter, Ludmiła Janion, Eveline Kilian, Karolina Krasuska, Anna Kurowicka, Julia Lingl, Krystyna Mazur, and Tijana Ristic Kern

This roundtable emerged through two in-person workshops in Warsaw and Vienna (2023), as well as written correspondence. It elaborates on questions, theories, and topics explored in the individual chapters of this volume and provides further reflections on the relationship among the concepts of queer, class, and precarity both on a conceptual level and with regard to academic practice. The collective nature of this text is itself meant to performatively embody our understanding of academia as a collaborative praxis: its web of connections, interrelations, and cross-references is emblematic of our joint work as a research network in its various shapes and forms, highlighting the importance – indeed, the necessity – of such networks in times of increased individualization and precariousness within the academic sector at large and the humanities in particular.

Tamara Radak:
How did your previous work in queer studies inform your current research and the theoretical ideas for this collection on queer and class?

Tijana Ristic Kern:
The relation of queer and class came up in my work somewhat unexpectedly when I was working on my master's thesis and writing about the concept and uses of violence in Jeanette Winterson's texts from the late 1980s and early 1990s. The thesis investigated how literary writing engaged with the "feminist contentions" of this period, specifically between "radical feminism" and post-structuralist feminism and queer theory. These contentions revolved around issues of the materiality of gendered existence and embodiment in the context of queer theorization of gender and sex construction (e.g., in Judith

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Research Group *Queer Theory and Literary Studies:* Roundtable Collaboration

Artwork: Anna Vida, *Entanglement*, University of Vienna, November 30, 2023

Butler's work on gender performativity), and the issue of violence was one of the central points of the theoretical debates. It was actually the question of class and the notion of sex difference as class difference as theorized by Monique Wittig in *Straight Mind and Other Essays* (1992) that helped me think about "queer" in relation to embodiment. What does queering do to a subject of violence – and by that, I mean different "kinds" of violence: symbolic violence, material violence, state violence, physical violence, and the violence of gendering? How can we consider the material and economic implications of symbolic violence, such as discursive violence? Wittig's "material lesbianism" frames the constitution of gender opposition "in terms of class conflict" and approaches sex difference as produced in exploitative economic relations, and within this framework, she considers heterosexuality as a political relation of domination that establishes divisions at the material and economic level (2). Her critique of heteronormative theoretical and cultural discourses that perform "material oppression" and violence on individuals and her analysis of their implications in terms of material realities of economic, classed existence (25) enables a queer analysis that does not ignore embodied existence. In that way, class as a concept helps me to think in terms of lived, material experience when thinking about queer, and I see it as a way to negotiate the ongoing discussion about the question of embodiment in queer theory. Thinking of how gender, sexuality, race, and class shape subjectivity in terms of the implications of their interactions for material existence and embodiment is central to the interrelations I see between class and queer theory. Because the way I think of these questions is still very much influenced by Wittig's literary and theoretical writing, as well as by material lesbianism and radical lesbian feminist theorizing and activism, I was very glad to return to this topic in the present publication, and especially to work on it in collaboration with Krystyna and Maria.

Tomasz Basiuk:

A decade ago, as I was working on my monograph on gay men's life writing in the U.S., I wrote a long chapter on Edmund White, whose work also engages with class – in fact, he has even been called a chronicler of class in America (Bynum). And then, as I was reading critical responses to White's first gay novel, *A Boy's Own Story* (1982), I came across a chapter by Robert McRuer, who unfavorably compares it to Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling Of My Name* (1982). McRuer contends that White fails to address class or race, as opposed to Lorde. Part of my chapter on White was a response to this criticism, which I did not think entirely justified. That was the first time I wrote about class in a disciplined way.

In the same monograph, I also looked at Samuel R. Delany, one of the two authors I discuss in my chapter in our volume. Delany's focus on interclass contact, including sexual contact, seemed unlike anything I had come across before. It was different, for example, from how class difference substitutes for

sexual difference in some discussions of Oscar Wilde. Delany's approach is non-identitarian in that he looks at urban space and infrastructure, and at both formal and informal social institutions in New York City, reflecting on how they facilitate or prevent interclass contact. His approach seems pertinent to what we have been addressing in the context of queer studies because he does not foreground identity, offering instead a material analysis of some conditions for cross-class contact. For Delany, class is not primarily a matter of identity or "habitus" (Bourdieu, *Outline* 86), as it is for White, and this offers interesting avenues for thinking about queer and class, in my view.

Julia Lingl:
I first started thinking about class in a seminar held by Jens Kastner at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna concerned with arts and the theory of society, when I was reading Gramsci and Bourdieu for the first time as a student. I was very excited when I started reading Bourdieu because I was feeling insecure all the time in the university setting. When we were discussing class and habitus in this course, I started recognizing and understanding what was going on with me and that helped me to find security in the university context. One concept that I particularly related to in this regard is Bourdieu's "hysteresis effect" (Bourdieu, *Distinction*), which suggests that if you change the field you have been growing up in and the habitus you have been learning to adopt, the kinds of practices you do, then your habitus lags behind and that is why you feel insecure. This corresponded to my experience at the time.

Karolina Krasuska:
Two decades ago, I was writing my PhD on transnational modernism and questions of gender, sexuality, and nation were central aspects of it. The question I started asking myself at that point was, in a nutshell, how can all these people, including expat Americans – people like Nancy Cunard, or Bryher – afford to be jetting around or spending ample time on ships; where did their funds come from? I remember reading Else Lasker-Schüler's letters, in which she writes about her daily struggle with earning money, and realizing that these letters concerned the question of how the author was going to put food on her table the next day. And then there was the question: How does my reading of these letters influence my reading of Lasker-Schüler's performance of masculinity? How does it influence my readings of her Jewishness? Then I started wondering more broadly to what extent the economic is a factor in these authors' lives as well as their literary work. It made me aware that class is not a foregrounded aspect of transnational modernism, yet it nevertheless had a significant impact on the authors' work.

Anna Kurowicka:
Like Karolina, I do not think I had employed class analysis in much of my previous work. The first time I engaged with the topic directly was in my article on the erotics of intense friendships in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* and

Tana French's *The Likeness*, where I argued that economic and racial privilege were the necessary conditions for attempting to form alternatives to normative lifestyles. This insight has provoked further interest in how queer upper-class aesthetics are coded in dark academia, a topic I explore in my chapter in this collection.

Susanne Hochreiter:
I have been working in queer and gender studies for a long time and one thing that became particularly obvious to me when working on the paper for the present collection in a way it had not been before is that concepts of homosexuality are always a class issue. We cannot think of homosexuality or queer identities as being beyond class. All characters, figures, and types that we see in history, may it be in literature or in medical discourses, are shaped by certain concepts of class. In my impression, this aspect has often been sidelined, which is why I believe it is particularly important to shine a spotlight on it now.

Krystyna Mazur:
I remember encountering commentary on issues pertaining to class when I first read Lisa Duggan's influential 2002 article on "new homonormativity" and, around the same time, pursued an interest in the 1990s queer community in San Francisco. Duggan argues that the more "assimilative" tendency within the LGBTQ+ community not only undermines the more radical claims of queerness but also negatively impacts those who are either unwilling or unable to assimilate – among them, queers who are not part of the middle class. The "ability" to climb the social ladder is, obviously, contingent on the raced, ethnic, gendered, able-bodied contexts one inhabits. By creating a new, well-assimilated middle and upper-middle class, the (mostly white, mostly cis) gays and lesbians create a new outside, a new nonheteronormative social other toward whom homophobia is redirected. Duggan's claims resonate with the political stance of, say, Michelle Tea or Matilda Bernstein Sycamore, who write about the radical queer community that flourished in 1990s San Francisco. For both of those writers, the struggle to maintain the San Francisco community includes other inhabitants of the Mission District, who are not part of the queer community, but for whom it has been an affordable place to live and who now face evictions.

At the time, I probably understood this radical strain to be the result and logical consequence of queer politics that began with the Stonewall Riots and grew with AIDS activism. With time, however, when my interest in queer feminist film took me back to its beginnings in the work of Barbara Hammer and Su Friedrich, I (re)discovered the work of the lesbian feminists from the 1970s, for whom – particularly for lesbians of color – intersectionality was the necessary condition of political consciousness and political activism. I always knew that about the radical claims of second-wave feminism, but it took me

a long time to realize that it is actually such an important precedent for queer politics. Maria, Tijana, and I talk about these interconnections in our chapter.

Eveline Kilian:
In my previous work, class came up as an important factor in the formation and expression of queer desire in Maureen Duffy's *The Microcosm* (1966) and Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993). They give visibility to working-class butch and femme identities, and especially in Feinberg's text, the protagonist's political activism combines their fight for transgender and workers' rights and envisions a kind of common solidarity. And in a book chapter I wrote on Christopher Isherwood's life writing, class played a particular role in his literary avatar's sexual preference for young working-class men, which helped him to repudiate his British middle-class habitus and values. He fetishizes the lower class as less inhibited and more directly in touch with their sexual drive, a stereotype that has had a lasting impact on British gay literature (for example, E.M. Forster or Alan Hollinghurst).

I became again intrigued by class more recently when reading Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims* (2009), which also received some critical attention in our group discussions. Although I have many misgivings about this text, it has also proved singularly inspiring for me. Since it is a social mobility narrative, it inevitably sets class boundaries in motion. Eribon is still very much invested in fairly fixed class concepts, however, and mostly concerned about never quite being able to "pass" as middle class. I am less interested in his self-stylization as an, actually very successful, "failure," but would like to think more about exploring the possibilities and creative interventions opening up in these transgressive movements and spaces, for which Chantal Jaquet coined the term *transclass*. Moreover, it seems to me that taking a queer perspective to class, "queering class," as it were, might help to undo an apparently clearly compartmentalized class structure and render its internal and external boundaries more permeable. In my view, this is a precondition for a more comprehensive intersectional analysis that will necessarily turn "class" into a more dynamic reference point with different impacts in different contexts.

Maria Alexopoulos:
I started researching the relationship between lesbian feminism and queer theory and politics – the topic of the chapter Tijana and Krystyna and I are writing together – during my PhD. I was examining lesbian literary texts from the 1970s onward, and as I was reading I found that in these narratives, class almost always figured prominently. In fact, class was often at the center of how writers and fictional characters anchored their identities, experiences, and analyses. Across genres, in these texts, class is inextricable from other major themes such as sexuality, race, trauma, violence, intimacy, and friendship. Sometimes class appeared in these texts in ways that surprised me. For example, in her 2014 novel *Adult Onset*, Ann-Marie MacDonald thematizes

the unexpected affects produced by the upward mobility suddenly available to (some) gays and lesbians. Her protagonist, a lesbian writer who finds herself living in the affluent suburbs of Toronto, with a wife and small child, experiences intense disorientation and alienation, both from herself and from former experiences of queer community. I was fascinated by this unpredictable relationship between class and affect, and how it complicates our understandings of both queer and class politics.

Tamara Radak:
Where do you see the potential where these two critical lenses mutually enrich each other or where they possibly impinge on each other?

Tomasz Basiuk:
When talking about queer as well as about intersectionality, we keep returning to the question of identity. A question that imposes itself on me is, what happens to identities when we talk about class? To what extent can we talk about class-based identity and to what extent are we talking about something other than identity? On the one hand, of course, class *is* a matter of identity. Take Bourdieu's "habitus," for example: people may recognize each other as belonging to a particular class by the ways that they, perhaps inadvertently, mark their status in everyday life. Similarly, class consciousness is of great importance to Marx because belonging to a certain class carries a revolutionary potential only if people are aware of their class positionality, so they can rebel against the powers that be. So, there is obviously a way in which class is related to identity, but then again, class is also something else. It has to do with economic structures and various interdependencies. This economic side can be quite nuanced, and it will likely vary with socioeconomic context. Two individuals may be grouped together in one context but perhaps not in another context, which has to do with geopolitics and with our national economies. You could belong to one class at home but to another when you are spending a year abroad, for example. I think that this complicated relationship with identity makes considering class somewhat similar to queer theory, and it promises that an encounter between queer and class should be interesting.

Maria Alexopoulos:
Picking up on Tomek's remark about the relationship between identity and class, it does seem that theoretical and political discussions about gender and sexuality very often return to the tension between essentialism and social constructivism. Not only as an ontological question but also as a question of political utility. Spivak's (sometimes misunderstood) notion of strategic essentialism is a helpful way to think about this. She proposes that shared, temporarily stabilized "essential" traits are the grounds upon which we can fight for different kinds of rights or be in relation to community. Discourses about class circle around different axes, and class is certainly not often viewed as a biological or essential identity. Rather, as Tomek pointed out, it is

associated, for example, with a particular habitus. It is also unstable, vulnerable to change, which can produce different affects. For example, one might experience anxiety about the downward movement of one's class identity and position, or be (cruelly?) optimistic about upward movement.

Krystyna Mazur:
Perhaps the question for queer studies in connection with the concept of class is the question about the "invisible norm" we all take for granted without being aware of it (very much as whiteness or cisness are often taken for granted) and what that norm marginalizes or what its constitutive exclusions are. In *Poor Queer Studies*, Matt Brim does make this argument about academia. He says, in a nutshell, that the theories we are engaging with come, for the large part, out of Duke University. He calls those "rich queer studies," pointing to the inequality in terms of resource distribution between "renowned" universities (such as Duke) and others. Brim contextualizes this discussion with reference to U.S. academia. Where would we place, then, Eastern European queer studies? Don't we often feel like "second-class citizens" in international queer academic contexts? I think these are questions that are worth asking, and the case of the U.S. is particularly interesting, because there used to be the illusion that it's a classless society.

Susanne Hochreiter:
I find it noteworthy that unlike other identity categories we have been thinking about, class is something that you can "climb out of" – or at least there used to be this narrative in the post-war "economic miracle" from the 1950s to the 1970s, and it is still a very present pattern of thinking in the neoliberal presence where everybody is supposed to be the architect of their own fortune. But there is a certain sense of potentiality inherent in this idea – you might be born one thing and then you might ascend into a different class identity. This would not be possible with race or gender – you don't have a similar kind of potentiality or promise in this sense because there is not the same idea of a linear trajectory there. I think there is a point to Andreas Reckwitz's argument that not only different gender orders but also different sexual orders emerge depending on class. It seems to me that these questions are closely intertwined and that we cannot easily separate them.

It also seems to me that we tend to forget that class was *always* also part of feminist debates (as Krystyna, Maria, and Tijana's chapter notes), but it had perhaps not been as visible in recent decades because class almost seemed to become invisibilized at a certain point in time in Western culture. Around 1900 and in the first half of the twentieth century, one's self-understanding of being a member of a certain class was developed much more clearly than today. People had a stronger sense of being working class, or being employees, or of being bourgeois. And yet class is becoming more central in debates nowadays, which is interesting to me, because it had almost been forgotten and then it re-emerged. That is why I think we have to distinguish between the

concept of class historically and how we experience it now. What exactly does it mean nowadays to say that somebody identifies as working class, vis-à-vis somebody being working class at a different time in history? Both as a society and also as researchers, we often seem to communicate as if it were clear what class means, when in fact, it is so contingent on specific historical, national, and personal contexts.

Karolina Krasuska:
Back in the early 2000s, we had similar debates in the "Gender as a Category of Knowledge" Research Training Group at Humboldt University in the context of queer and intersectionality, discussing how to navigate between these different concepts. I remember an article by Gudrun Axeli-Knapp about intersectionality, which argues that class is endemic to the German context and leftist theory-building in ways that "race" is not. Perhaps the invisibility of class that Susanne mentioned may be related to its interconnection with feminism, race, and queer within intersectional frameworks?

Julia Lingl:
The connection between class and other identity categories seems also to be central to Bourdieu's understanding of class, as he speaks of class on the basis of various characteristics (economic, cultural, social capital) and uses the concept of habitus to describe patterns of thought and perception that are typical of a class. Our way of perceiving the world, of thinking, our interests, ways of speaking, preferences, etc. are shaped by our social background. If we assume that gender, race, and class are intertwined in this way, this complicates the idea of "upward mobility" in the context of class. This also links back to Bourdieu's notion that there is no such thing as linearity or simplicity in declaring what class you belong to, because if you are defining your class according to the field or kind of work that you do, other categories that also influence your class such as your gender, your age, your religion, the kind of education you received, the education of your parents – which are all complex factors in themselves – become invisible. Criticizing the alleged simplicity or linearity of class affiliation is essential for understanding how those structures work.

Ludmiła Janion:
Absolutely – and it's additionally important to note, I believe, that there is a distinction between post-Communist, post-state socialist class and Western understandings of class. In the post-socialist context, 1989 is an artificial but nevertheless important turning point in terms of the new production of class. The pro-market reforms of the late 1980s and the shock doctrine of the early 1990s led to impoverishment and massive layoffs, and, gradually, the middle class and new virtues, such as individualism, competitiveness, efficiency, and self-improvement, were expected to appear. The post-1989 transition project was to change at least some working-class people into the Western-modeled middle class. I study these ideologies of transition; specifically, I focus on

gay and trans identities in Poland. How were they produced at the turn of the 1990s as implicitly classed? For example, drag was imagined as middle-class, Western, and thus progressive, but everyday gender nonconformity was condemned as a sign of class failure; it was deemed Eastern or Soviet.

Eveline Kilian:

I would like to take up the various conceptual arguments that have been made for a more differentiated and complex notion of class and add a further perspective that specifically addresses the subject's own, potentially creative, management of class assignments. For this, we need to think of class as a generator of intricate and shifting identifications as well as dis-identifications that imply reorienting oneself or reneging on previous conscious or unconscious identifications. We need to consider class both with respect to social recognition and the way others read my class position, but also in terms of personal affiliation, of how I perform "class" and how I negotiate my "class" affiliations both affectively and intellectually. Eribon's *Returning to Reims*, for example, presents a subject that deliberately breaks with his working-class background in order to be able to embrace his homosexuality. This dis-identification complicates the whole tapestry of future identifications and dis-identifications. In fact, it could produce a very interesting epistemological position by situating the subject within reach of but never quite coinciding with a specific class. It allows a critical distance to both the working class and the middle class. And it is a way of reading class that takes its cue from the destabilizing and decentering dynamic associated with queer.

In the academic context, which is my professional "home," this state of limbo, this position of calculated distance, can be very useful. I suppose everyone here would agree that academia is defined by middle-class habitus and standards. This also implies that it polices behavior through expecting and privileging a middle-class habitus: If you don't behave in a certain way, you will not be part of certain coteries (but maybe of other, more interesting ones!); if you "misbehave," you will not be respected by your colleagues, etc. What the view from a certain distance also reveals, however, is that this habitus sometimes also functions as an instrument of power used by the institution to keep the voicing of criticism on a polite and practically inaudible and therefore also rather ineffective level. So inadvertently or purposefully "misbehaving" need not be seen as a class stigma but can become an effective means of intervention. I like this idea, because, without wanting to downplay the struggles and obstacles confronting working-class individuals in middle-class institutions, it stresses the position of these subjects as potentially resourceful agents rather than disadvantaged victims.

Tamara Radak:

One concept that comes up repeatedly within the collection apart from class is precarity and precariousness. How do you see the relationship between the two concepts and how did it inform your research for the present volume?

Eveline Kilian:
I want to probe the potential of terms like precarity and precariousness to address questions of social inequality, not least because they have been linked to queer perspectives (e.g., Deuber-Mankowsky and Hanke; Puar). Another reason is that I have profound reservations about concepts of class for several reasons. For one thing, we have seen in the German context that after reunification in 1989, East German ideas about class became obsolete and were subsumed under the Western European class concepts. This not only produced problems of classification but also showed how geographically limited and, in fact, hegemonic the class concepts are that we work with. And as scholars of queer studies, we may want to be a little more cautious of such hegemonies. Second, in the context of migration, subjects may have a very different class status in their country of origin than the one they are relegated to in the country of immigration. So how do we conceptualize these differences? On the whole, I think that "class" is not flexible enough to accommodate the complicated life trajectories we encounter, and it is actually not very receptive to intersectional transmutations. A good example to demonstrate this is British writer Bernardine Evaristo's recently published memoir *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up* (2021), where she explains the difficulties to determine her class affiliation on account of the intricacies of her family history: her father, a Nigerian immigrant, who came to Britain in the late 1940s, was predominantly determined by his race, which was deemed lower than the white working class, while her mother, coming from a white working-class background and moving toward the middle class through becoming a schoolteacher, was quickly declassed on account of her marriage to a black man. When Evaristo, a writer and academic, describes herself as working class, I read this designation first and foremost as a political and strategic move rather than an accurate placement in a recognizable class structure. Similarly, Isabel Waidner, who is the main focus of my chapter in this volume, uses the term working class as a denominator for somebody who is socially disadvantaged.

Tijana Ristic Kern:
The way that I conceptualize the relation between class and precarity or precariousness is not thinking in terms of "either/or," but seeing that they need to work in conjunction. I understand that precarity or precariousness can be seen as an ontological state of being – where we are all in a way precarious, in the sense that we are human beings and that we are subject to precariousness; whereas class as a concept and class constellations are actual materializations of specific cultural, historical relations of power and hierarchies within this precariousness, of these precarious states within specific power relations. The concept of class can help us to discuss specific existing constellations of power in specific contexts and bring these considerations back to materiality. With this "combined" approach, we can acknowledge that we, in this room, might all be precarious, but there are still different material, classed positionings, and power relations in play.

Tomasz Basiuk:
The term "precarity" not only addresses something like division into classes defined by economic exploitation but also addresses a dynamic related to risk and to risk management – for example, the concept of "risk society." We are seeing a lot of social mobility, not just upward but also downward. I think the word precarity addresses this aspect, which is an advantage of this term. But there is also a disadvantage in that the term does not point to inequality because precarity applies to just about everyone. Of course, people have different stakes: some are struggling just to make ends meet, while others take huge risks on big transactions. The word precarity encompasses both of these scenarios. And so, in a way, it erases class difference, which I think is a potential downside.

This ambiguity makes the word a fairly precise name for what is happening to the middle class, in my view: a class which is disappearing with economic polarization. It's not so much a matter of class categories disappearing but of a diminution of the space in the middle, along with the fading certainty that you will just continue to reside in that space if you are middle class. That, I think, is what many of us grew up with: the expectation that if you have a job and if you are making a decent living, you'll be okay. You don't have to be a millionaire, but you're not going to be destitute, either. But now this middle place is becoming much less certain, which is very troubling for political reasons, obviously, and for all kinds of practical reasons.

Eveline Kilian:
I'm not quite sure whether I would actually want to do away with the concept of class. I completely get the point Tijana and Krystyna have made earlier about its political function and about its "reality effect." But I do have a strong investment in examining it critically, historicizing it, and asking what it enables us to understand and where it becomes an epistemological impediment and for which cases we may require terminological adjustments. I find it much easier to refer to the working class when I look back to the past, my own past, for example. But in the present, the situation becomes a lot more blurred and messy. It is perhaps not by accident that Eribon's retrospective memoir sometimes reads like an exercise in conservation, an attempt to archive the existence of an apparently homogeneous working class that is on the verge of disappearing. In a similar vein, other writers have also complemented their own life narratives with separate biographies of their parents (e.g., Didier Eribon himself, Annie Ernaux, or Édouard Louis).[1] This resonates with Andreas Reckwitz's analysis of changing social structures and his observation that the decades of economic prosperity in West Germany after World War II saw the development of a growing middle class which largely absorbed the traditional working class. After the 1970s, he claims, the dynamics of a post-industrial and globalized world have eroded this structure again and introduced new vertical stratifications in this now larger middle class through upward or downward movements. No matter what we think of his model, what becomes clear is that

class concepts must be able to accommodate historical changes. So, for me, the question remains: What exactly does the term working class refer to today?

Susanne Hochreiter:
It seems to me that nowadays, class is only used as an expression for those who are less privileged because there is such a normalizing of non-class that makes this category invisible from the dominant bourgeois position. What seems to be happening at the moment is a kind of "re-classification," a reusing of the term, sometimes by those who feel precarious or precarized. This may be a bit of a provocative claim, but in my understanding, "precariat" is a term that mostly refers to people who are not underclass (in Marx's sense). I think precarity is a term that also refers to the idea that Tomek just mentioned with downward mobility. We see a situation that Reckwitz discusses, in terms of a new class society – a new bourgeois class, a new middle class that is much less stable than it used to be. Although the new middle class is increasingly affected by precarity, it also consists of very well-educated people, often with academic degrees, who tend to be liberal in terms of gender, sexuality, and relationship concepts. There is a big difference between people whom we would call working class today – as Eveline noted – and those whom Marx would call working class.

"Precarity," as Butler uses the term in my understanding, avoids some of the issues that the concept of "class" has because of the blurriness of its referents. They note that precarity "has itself become a regime, a hegemonic mode of being governed, and governing ourselves. The all-pervasive sense of insecurity appears as an element in the formation of the subject" (vii). On this level, the term applies to everybody. But then, we obviously have to differentiate in terms of other levels and experiences and practices. And in this sense, the term transcends class structures, because even the life of somebody with a bourgeois background may be precarious because they are queer. This cutting across categories makes the term particularly useful, in my view.

Karolina Krasuska:
Precarity has also been relevant to my work, from a different angle with regard to class and queer. Narratives of progress and of success are quite often linked to economic progress or economic success. And just like many terms and norms are being transvalued by queer theory, one of these things is the narrative of failure that has been prominent in queer theorizing. Halberstam's "queer art of failure" is based on the idea of questioning linear narrative of success – it could be familial success, going back to the link between heteronormative family and economy and the idea of how failure is also represented in queer narratives. One of the texts I worked with recently was *Broad City*, a TV show about queer Jewish women, who economically fail and who do not want to embrace the middle-class habitus. This kind of link – not on a representational level, but on the paradigm level – in terms of ways of thinking about one or/and the other is a place of very interesting intersections. And

I think it's also important to think about how the post-2008 economic crisis strengthened this theorizing.

Ludmiła Janion:
There is also new precarity – instability and uncertainty – in personal life. In *The End of Love*, Eva Illouz explains how relationships under neoliberalism become more precarious because of technologies such as dating apps but also the rising role of consumer culture. We have gained freedom to have casual sex, to love and un-love as we wish, but the consequence is that love has become more elusive. There are also material consequences because single life is more expensive and romance – especially for women – was in the past a legitimate way of class advancement, but it requires a stable contract to work that way. So, precarity is not only about economy or employment but also about personal life. Here, queer theory provides tools to analyze these changes – for example, Berlant's classic insights into how intimacy is political and institutionalized. Maybe current ideologies of romance set people up for failure – just as the precarized labor market does.

Tamara Radak:
The "precarized labor market" inevitably seems to lead to questions of academic practice. How do you see the foregrounding of quantification and metrics in contemporary academia – a sense, perhaps, of "overproductive futurism" – vis-à-vis doing what one believes to be meaningful work within a specific field, such as queer studies? To what extent is it necessary to participate in certain forms of habitus to be able to do the work that we want to do and how do we straddle this contradiction creatively?

Ludmiła Janion:
The question is particularly pertinent today, because to be a successful queer studies scholar, you have to be productive: publish well, have a neoliberal nice resume, practically work overtime. The norms in academia are extremely inflated, and there is no place for "queer failure" here. You need to be extremely successful to receive funding for a huge project, so that you employ younger scholars who are promising to be very productive. I don't see any alternatives per se, but I do think it's important to acknowledge this tension.

Tomasz Basiuk:
On the upside, at least the current system functions according to fairly transparent rules: if you get cited more, if you publish in certain venues, you are more likely to land a job. We have not moved from an ideal situation to one that is bad but rather from a pretty bad situation, in which cronism played an important part, to one that is not ideal.

Anna Kurowicka:
I see similar frustrations with the current university system and its focus on (over)productivity reflected in the dark academia novels I analyze in my

chapter. Their appeal lies to a large extent in creating a romantic vision of the university as a space out of time, safe from the economic forces, where students and professors alike can devote themselves to studying and deep theoretical exploration. Not only does this have little to do with the precarious conditions of work and studying in contemporary academia, but arguably it is a fantasy even when it comes to the university in the past, where the institution only granted such privilege to the select few.

Tijana Ristic Kern:
It's also pertinent to ask, when we talk about academia and doing queer work in academia, what do we talk about exactly? Do we talk about ourselves as academics and employees of the liberal university, our economic existence and class positioning, our identities, allegiances and loyalties, our projects that are funded or not, how we are paid (or not), the hours we work, how much we are exploited, or something else? My sense is that we discuss primarily *our* position in the neoliberal university and how this affects *our work* in terms of research production, and that we rarely discuss teaching. Thinking of what we can do in terms of resisting or rather redefining the narratives of productivity, investing in teaching offers itself as an important avenue of queer work, and that's where I see a potential escape from the "vicious circle" of (over) productivity in academic contexts. By that, I don't only mean teaching queer theory and queering your syllabi and your teaching methods to the extent that you can "get away with it" but also that the decision to invest more energy and time in teaching can itself be a move that resists and pushes back against the relentless demand for productivity focused on research and publishing.

Eveline Kilian:
Maybe it's not either the one or the other. I personally don't think there is anything wrong with productivity. It's over-productivity, overregulation of productivity, subjecting everything to the principle of productivity that is the problem. And we should not forget that, at least as far as German universities are concerned, standards of productivity are often set and enforced by our own peers. This is a good example of Foucault's principle of governmentality. We are often enough willing accomplices in that game. At the same time, the university is still a place that allows for thinking, reading, critical discussions, and engagement. And we need to cultivate these possibilities more consciously, both in our teaching and in our own work. Looking at current developments in higher education across Europe and the ongoing erosion of the humanities, it may require a more concerted effort to preserve these spaces of creative reflection and pockets of resistance. In a small (or maybe not such a small) way, I think we have achieved this with our regular group meetings over several years and across several countries. And it is worth pointing out that these workshops have not only been important in terms of personal and intellectual bonding and exchange, but they have also led to a successful funding application for a queer studies research project and to this collection – two outcomes that actually both testify to an impressive degree of productivity.

Tijana Ristic Kern:
You're right, the question is perhaps not one of "doing away" with the idea of productivity in all forms, but of challenging the idea of what constitutes productivity, and of doing away with the narrative of productivity that is measured in success, monetary value, and class privilege – or, in the academic context, by the number of publications in "appropriate" publication outlets, the number of prestigious grants received, by prestigious jobs at prestigious institutions. If that is the measure, then how do we measure up? And how do we want to measure up?

Karolina Krasuska:
It's crucial to examine economy in a broader sense as structuring both our research and the literary field and to think about the literary market, audiences, and the ways in which capital influences the texts that are produced, both the texts we read and where we publish our own work. And to also reflect on the not only symbolic but also material, financial capital that queer theory brings us as scholars. This is especially interesting with most of us being part of the grant that Eveline mentioned, which was funded after several attempts. So, I think there is also a larger question about production that is pertinent here – both of knowledge and of the kind of financing (or capital) that much of our work is immersed in.

Susanne Hochreiter:
I believe this point is very important because one of the things that we do at universities is discussing literature and for me, the question is: from what perspective are we teaching and what dominant kind of narratives can we see in literary texts? Literature is often considered a very bourgeois thing in general and, as Karolina mentioned earlier, it's essential to think about who is writing, who is represented, what or who is visible or invisible or invisibilized. It's important to be aware of the kinds of stories that are told or not told, published or not published, because these decisions might affect us in the way we think of others and of ourselves.

Julia Lingl:
I agree, it's vital to think about the aesthetics of literary texts, as well as the economic materialities of their authors. What kind of language or style is this story written in and how many people are represented? But also, how many people does a literary text reach? How "accessible" is it? In Ernaux's works, which Naomi and I are focusing on in this volume, sentences are sometimes very short and the texts are rather easy to read. Some critiques of her texts are, indeed, that they are *too* easy to read, that they are too "simple." So, I'm wondering what our taste in literature tells us about our own position in this field. Again, we can think of Bourdieu – the texts that we come into contact with, also in a professional capacity as literary scholars or educators, say a lot about our class. And even if the question of habitus depends on idiosyncratic aspects of our lives and this complex negotiation about what constitutes our habitus

within the field we are working in, I'm wondering, who are these literary texts addressing? Who are they meant for? And how does our own position as educators, but also our personal positionality enter into these questions when we are teaching these texts? We should keep returning to these questions in our daily academic practice, accepting that answers may change and always remain provisional to some degree.

Note

1 Didier Eribon, *Vie, vieillesse, et mort d'une femme du people* (2023); Annie Ernaux, *La Place* (1983; *A Man's Place*) and *Une Femme* (1987; *A Woman's Story*); Édouard Louis, *Qui a tué mon père* (2018; *Who Killed My Father*) and *Combats et métamorphoses d'une femme* (2021; *A Woman's Battles and Transformations*).

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