

Taylor, Y. (2022) *Working-Class Queers*. Pluto Press.

Review by Erin Heiser

Yvette Taylor's *Working-Class Queers* uses an original and unique methodology: she blends discussion of her own history and identity with archival material she collected, likely at first without knowing exactly what she would do with it, over the span of 20 years, from 2001 to 2021. Alongside interviews with working-class LGBTQ+ folks, Taylor presents twenty years of ephemera appearing in the form of posters and flyers from various lesbian feminist conferences throughout the UK, and snippets of drawings, writings, and photos collected in various working-class queer spaces. She uses all of this "data" as she situates herself as a researcher within the context of a particular geographical and ideological time and place -- the context of the UK (focusing mainly on Scotland and England) in the early 21st century, up to and including the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Taking her cues from Adrienne Rich's "The Politics of Location," Taylor begins by "starting with the geography closest in – the body." That is to say, early on in the book, she locates herself: "I can say I'm the first person in my family to go to university, and I can say that I am a university professor, a lesbian, a feminist, a queer (p. 4). And she asks "What happens when these backgrounds are put to work in foregrounding queer intersectional thinking?"

The book takes two marginalized identities—queer and working-class—and tries to see where they intersect in order to find out if we might create an overlap into a more cohesive political movement for queer-left futures in the UK. The Left presumably being folks who care about the labor movement and share a working-class consciousness of some sort, though Taylor never quite gives us a clear definition of what she means by the queer Left. Overall, the aspects of her discussion that center on queer identities feels more fleshed out than her discussion of class.

In Chapter 1, Taylor sketches out a map of the book and lays out some of her most pertinent questions: "What can we learn by using class as a lens to understand queer sexuality in the context of the nation state over the past two decades? If life really has "got better" for queers in the UK, what kinds of queers have been rewarded as good citizens? Who has been left behind? What happens when we lose class critique in queer politics and social analysis?" (p. 4).

As she traces out her "own research positionality and queer-class methods" in Chapter 2, Taylor offers a thoughtful discussion of how social researchers tend to conceptualize "data," noting that her approach is unique:

the meanings, selections, edits, and returns to and through the data surpass any straightforward count or static archive: I count data as mattering in the context of social, cultural, and policy shifts, while also querying the categories invested in, reproduced, and shaken off (as 'working class and queer) (p. 21).

In bringing together data from different fieldwork contexts and across time and place, Taylor takes a radically different and novel approach to research and conceptualizes the process as “*doing* data rather than just *being* data” (p. 21). This, she says, is something the queer Left can reactivate, and throughout the rest of the book she shows us how.

Taylor acknowledges the ways that certain groups of people – white, middle-class, cis gay men – tend to be overrepresented in research on sexuality. To contrast that, she says she has tried to make space for more under-represented groups -in very specific ways – such as pushing response deadlines back to make space for the folks who are not typically the first ones to respond in spaces like these... “The move to ‘think intersectionally,’ she reminds us, “means more than adding in a “Q” and “+,” (p. 22).

Indeed, Taylor’s analysis takes into account the ways that racism and whiteness play parts in the story of class and sexuality, signaling the ways all of her interviewees identify and noting the fact that people of color and white people often have different experiences, not just in the world, but also in the manner that sociological research is conducted. The experiences of people of color are all too often ignored, misunderstood, mishandled during field work and throughout other facets of sociological study, and Taylor rightly seeks to be aware of her own whiteness in the process of her research. “Naming the whiteness of queer-class presences and projects,” is essential throughout Taylor’s book as she considers the reality that “whiteness is fundamental to Britishness and Scottishness, and the incorporation of Black and Brown bodies has not significantly altered the white ‘face of the nation’ even as it has been obscured by ‘the cloak of the ‘post-racial’ or the rhetoric of the all-inclusive state” (p. 61, p. 81).

Throughout the book, Taylor’s tactic is to look, not necessarily at the UK’s history of policy change over the decades, but to represent the lives of individual working-class queer people living within the contexts of these circumstances. The questions laid out in Chapter 1 are explored most clearly in Chapters 4 and 5 which deal with post-Brexit UK and “Queers and Austerity,” respectively. Here specifically is where we see Taylor getting at her question from the introductory chapter: if things truly have gotten better for LGBTQ+ folks in the UK, what kinds of queers have been most rewarded? Spoiler alert: the answer is not working-class queer people of color. Nor is it immigrants or people who are trans. But the picture is not entirely grim. Taylor does acknowledge that in certain respects working-class queer life has become more “liveable... in and against the everyday scenes of... family life, religious practices,” and expanding LGBTQ+ spaces (p.107).

Much of the book will be unfamiliar to those not acquainted with the politics, activism, and daily living of folks in the UK or the finer distinctions between English and Scottish politics of the time, which is to say probably most readers in the U.S. But the book will be an interesting juxtaposition for folks paying attention to parallel spaces in the U.S. over the past two decades, and for those who care about the intersections in the fight for queer and class liberation.

The final chapter, “Towards a Queer Working-Class Reading List,” may be of particular interest to university instructors who are concerned with creating classrooms that are intersectional in their feminism and looking for foundational texts that remain relevant and useful for forming and informing a movement of today’s queer Left. As Taylor acknowledges her enthusiasm for the “politics of citation as ‘epistemic reparation,” this last chapter references many classic texts by

working-class women of color such as the Combahee River Collective Statement (1977) and Cherie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua's (1984) *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour*, as well as more contemporary texts, like Anne Balay's (2018) *Semi Queer: Inside the world of Gay, Trans, and Black Truck Drivers*.

This is a dense book that covers a lot of ground. And Taylor's mission is, in part, to create work that flies in the face of standard, pretentious academic "middle class propriety" (p. 109). Excerpts of the interviews are interspersed throughout the early chapters in ways that feel almost random, possibly meant to break up the flow of the academic conversation she's engaging in in order to remind the reader that amidst the social science analysis of the geopolitical landscape, there is a lived material reality, real people with real experiences. But as the chapters go on, Taylor gives more in-depth analysis on what her interviewee's stories tell us, only occasionally veering into language that feels like inaccessible theory-talk, as in the chapter on "Queer Anachronisms." The bits of the book that include Taylor's own lived experiences of class and sexuality stand out as incisive and telling. And she makes invaluable connections between the individual lives of the folks she interviews and the national politics and policies that shape them.

Reviewer Bio

Erin Heiser is a doctoral candidate in English at the CUNY Graduate Center and a long-time adjunct professor at CUNY and NYU. Her forthcoming dissertation looks at class and sexuality in the autobiographical fragments of Audre Lorde, Dorothy Allison, and Eileen Myles, and her own identity as a working-class queer.