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Poor Queer Studies: Class, Race, and the Field

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Abstract

This study asks, What are the material conditions under which queer studies is done in the academy? It finds a longstanding association of queer studies with the well-resourced, selective colleges and flagship campuses that are the drivers of class- and race- stratification in higher education in the U.S. That is, the field of queer studies, as a recognizable academic formation, has been structured by the material and intellectual resources of precisely those institutions that most steadfastly refuse to adequately serve poor and minority students, *including poor and minority queer students*. In response, “Poor Queer Studies” calls for a critical reorientation of queer studies toward working-poor schools, students, theories, and pedagogies. Taking the College of Staten Island, CUNY as a case study, it argues for structural crossing over or “queer-class ferrying” between high-status institutions that have so brilliantly dominated queer studies’ history and low-status worksites of poor queer studies.

Keywords: queer studies, higher education, socioeconomic class, race, class stratification, LGBT studies, College of Staten Island, CUNY, queer case study

Queer Dining, Queer Thinking

“One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well,” wrote Virginia Woolf in her touchstone 1929 study of gender, class, and genius, *A Room of One’s Own* (2005, p. 18). The fictional context for Woolf’s maxim about the intellect and the gut was a comparison of two meals, a lunch at a fantastically resource-rich men’s college, “Oxbridge,” and a dinner at “Fernham,” a meagerly-funded, upstart women’s college. The stringy beef and watery prunes served to the young women at Fernham stand up poorly against the partridges in cream and the meringue-crested desserts served to the young men at Oxbridge, where gold and libraries produce the educated gentlemen of the Empire. The men’s food does not only look and taste better; the Oxbridge meal also lights a little fire in the spine (there was wine, I should mention), the glow of which travels upward toward a greater purpose: powering the queerly androgynous, incandescent mind. To the contrary, among the women at Fernham the evening conversation flags, their minds dulled by those prunes. A clear-eyed, unsatisfied guest, Woolf hesitates only a moment before writing of the women’s college, “The dinner was not good” (p. 18). Good queer thought requires, at minimum, good food.

In this essay I take up the question of the material conditions under which queer studies is done in the contemporary academy, a question contextualized above by Woolf’s historical connection between gendered thinking and dining in the university. My own college, the College of Staten Island, will provide the institutional location from which I engage in the work of mapping the overlooked queer-class coordinates of the field. If queer studies has over the past 30 years successfully argued, elbowed, and snuck its way into the university so that its courses can be found in both likely and unlikely places—not only at our Oxbridges and Fernhams but at our Bloomsbury Community Colleges—we might shift attention, à la Woolf, to the question of the

resources with and without which queer students and professors think and work across higher ed. What does Queer Studies have to say about class sorting and the upward redistribution of resources in the academy? What is the role of the field within the processes of stratification that can be said to divide the field from itself along the lines of class and institutional status? How might queer collaboration across peer and non-peer institutions offer a model for the redistribution of intellectual and material resources, and how can that positively impact attendant racial disparities in higher education?

The immediate context for this question is my home institution, the College of Staten Island (CSI), a senior college within the City University of New York system. At CSI, another dinner scene comes into view, grounding my material inquiry. A vending machine stands half empty. Dinner waits behind glass, unspoilable. The new slot for credit cards blinks. It is nearing 6:30pm, and this is night school. Students enter my black queer studies classroom, sit, unwrap their candy bars and wrestle open their bags of chips. They've come from work, or directly from another class. We will be in class until 9:50pm. We'll get hungry. During our ten-minute break at 8pm the vending machine pushes more cookies off its shelves. We turn back to Lorde or Baldwin, Nella Larsen or John Keene. In fact the evening's text is Barry Jenkin's *Moonlight*. I turn on the projector. It doesn't work. The tech person responds immediately, fixes the problem. When the projector stops working again, a student stands up: "I'll find another room." She returns and tells the class the number of the empty room. We pack up and file out, 40 of us. We turn the corner and see another class entering our intended destination. Their projector was broken too, and they beat us to the new room. Eventually we watch *Moonlight* in a third classroom. The projector works, but the sound is screwed up, a mere whisper. We watch breathlessly, not daring to crinkle the candy wrappers, not daring to eat our dinner. No time for

discussion. Class dismissed. This is the College of Staten Island, a scrappy, smart, deeply underfunded college in the City University of New York system. We serve the “whole people” of New York. And this is the queerest school I know. But queer studies would never know it.

Stratification in Higher Ed: Rich White Fortification vs. Low-Income High Achievers

To capture the urgency of my inquiry, it is necessary to first step back to provide a broader context. It is difficult to find an institution in the U.S. that sorts people by socioeconomic class as effectively as higher education, even as it simultaneously, if partially, fulfills its democratizing promise. As a steady stream of educational data have shown (Mullen, 2010; Cahalan & Perna, 2015; Carnevale & Van Der Werf, 2017), the tiered U.S. educational system does not merely reflect class disparities; it actively reproduces them by rewarding the most affluent students with admission to prestigious colleges and by channeling the poorest students and students of color into two-year and unranked four-year schools and, even more insidiously, into exploitative for-profit colleges (Cahalan & Perna, 2015). Attending two-year and lower-tier colleges dramatically reduces student graduation rates, even as it increases student debt. Our poorest high school students are largely excluded from higher education altogether. Young black men from low-income families are at particular risk of being excluded by systems of higher education (Harper & Griffin, 2011). Their relative absence from selective colleges starkly reveals, for Kiese Laymon (2017), that “no matter how conscientious, radically curious, or politically active I encouraged [them] to be, teaching wealthy white boys...[at Vassar] meant that I was being paid to really fortify, and make more responsible, [their] power.” Laymon makes operations of power visible, naming the ways demographic and institutional data translate into support of white supremacist, classist institutional culture. The material conditions of racism—literally, the

material absence of black male student bodies—shape the possibilities for what counts as the “good work” of education. Laymon now teaches at the University of Mississippi.

The mechanisms of rich/white fortification and poor/black exclusion are complex and the statistics staggering. One study put this state of affairs succinctly: “White Flight Goes to College” (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). The authors found that “[t]he tracking of white students into the top-tier colleges perpetuates greater rates of white college completion, especially at elite colleges” (p. 2). Prestigious schools actively cater to wealthy, mostly white students and their families, who can pay for college prep courses, tutors, tuition, and alumni donations. Legacy admissions provide an affirmative boost to the historically monied classes. Top schools recruit from well-known “feeder” high schools, many of them private, expensive, and staffed with knowledgeable college counselors. The result—and I could choose any number of figures here—is that at the most selective institutions, there are 24 times as many high-income students as low-income students (Glynn, 2017). In many cases, these same institutions enroll more students from the top 1% (with family incomes over \$630,000) than the bottom 60% (with family incomes under \$65,000) (Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner & Yagan, 2017). While nearly 40% of college students receive Pell Grants (used by researchers as a proxy for low-income status), at top colleges only between five and 20 percent of students receive Pell Grants (Carnevale & Van Der Werf, 2017). Though studies use slightly different definitions for “low-income” students and “selective” colleges, there is widespread evidence that top-tier schools amplify rather than redress the problem of class stratification. By many measures, in higher education riches harm the poor.

One way to address this problem, at least in part, would be for resource-rich schools to admit more low-income students. Unfortunately, those colleges continue to fall far short of their

commitment to higher education equity. One 2016 study found that the “[r]epresentation of low-income students at selective colleges and universities has not changed appreciably in ten years despite selective institutions’ well-advertised, increased commitment to ‘need-blind admissions’ and ‘no-loan financial aid’ packages.” (Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016, p. 37). That the most selective colleges cannot figure out how to admit more smart, qualified, and interesting poor students who are also outsiders to the college application process reflects the intransigence of academic elitism. One study of the “hidden supply of high-achieving, low-income students” who do not apply to selective colleges argues that “the number of low-income high achievers is much greater than college admissions staff generally believe. Since admissions staff see only the students who apply, they very reasonably underestimate the number who exist” (Hoxby & Avery, 2013, p. 3). To my mind, this underestimation is far from very reasonable, especially given the authors’ estimate that for every two qualified rich students there is one qualified poor student (p. 9-10). Though very selective colleges excel at locating donors, they don’t look very far or wide for poor students: “[M]any colleges make great efforts to seek out low-income students from their metropolitan areas. These strategies, although probably successful, fall somewhat under the heading of ‘searching under the lamppost.’ That is, many colleges look for low-income students where the *college* is instead of looking for low-income students where the *students* are” (p. 44). In other words, poor students are hidden *by* elitist educational institutions, not *from* them.¹

In Degrees of Inequality: Culture, Class, and Gender in American Higher Education (2010), Ann L. Mullen examined the what, where, and who of the class-stratified academy. She argued that “because of the hierarchical nature of the U.S. higher educational system and the

¹ For an accessible report, see Benjamin Wermund’s “How U.S. News College Rankings Promote Economic Inequality on Campus.” <http://www.politico.com/interactives/2017/top-college-rankings-list-2017-us-news-investigation/>

disparities in the rewards that it offers, it is no longer enough to simply look at who goes to college and who does not. To fully evaluate the promise expressed by the expansion of postsecondary education, one needs to examine the opportunities students of different backgrounds have to attend the various institutions within that system. In other words, we need to look not just at *who* goes to college, but at who goes *where* to college” (p. 5). High-socioeconomic status students attend highly selective institutions (e.g., Yale) where they study the liberal arts. By contrast, low-socioeconomic status students attend less selective institutions (e.g., Southern Connecticut State University) where they choose preprofessional majors. Mullen further suggested that the practice of critiquing the academic production of knowledge reflects a high-class intellectual positioning. In their privileged environment, “Yale students felt comfortable, or entitled, to critique the programs of study put together by Yale’s faculty” (198), who themselves are typically the product of elite education. At the working-class Southern, students evaluated the usefulness of knowledge based on “how readily the content could be applied” rather than for its “intrinsic qualities” (p. 192). Different futures open up for wealthy and working-class students based on undergraduate institution, major, and students’ relationship to knowledge production: “[N]early eight times as many liberal arts graduates enroll in PhD programs as do preprofessional graduates” (Mullen, p. 157).

We have here a window onto higher education’s “prestige pipeline,” the name I give to the system that produces academic knowledge as a function of its underlying institutional commitment to the overrepresentation of affluence, whiteness, and gender normativity at the most well-resourced elite colleges and flagship university campuses. That fact that socioeconomic status, more than any other factor, influences whether and where one goes to college and what one studies there has important implications for the professoriate. In their study

of “the new academic generation,” Finkelstein, Seal, & Schuster (1998) found that “academic careers are increasingly attracting entrants from higher socioeconomic backgrounds” (p. 37). Overlapping with but separate from individual class status, protocols of academic pedigree operate with dazzling efficiency in the academic job market to produce fields of study as sites of exclusion and elitism. Colander and Zhuo found that in English graduate programs (which have substantial overlap with queer studies), “the top-six programs get almost 60 percent of their tenure-track professors from other top-six programs and over 90 percent from programs ranked 28 or higher. They get no professors from programs ranked below 63 [out of 130 programs total]” (2014, p. 142). Emerson (2018) found a similar answer to the question “Who Hires Whom?” in sociology (another field with which queer studies shares an institutional footprint). Unless we are naïve, the pertinent question is not *does* queer studies participate in the prestige pipeline but, rather, what can be done to interrupt that participation?

“We Have Been Implicated”: Rich Queer Studies

If racialized class stratification is an intentional, defining, structural feature of higher education in the U.S., operating at the level of undergraduate and graduate admissions as well as faculty hiring, what is the role of queer studies within that systemic problem? Although it has long been associated with academic elitism—primarily with reference to its outsized interest in white gay male cultural production, the inaccessibility of its “high queer theory,” and its anti-identitarianism that can discredit LGBT lived experiences—queer studies has less often been framed as a mechanism for *producing* class inequity within higher education. Queer studies has, in fact, consistently presented itself otherwise, as an anti-normative, disruptive cog within the system. Queer studies practitioners, such as myself, have pointed to our silo-busting

interdisciplinarity and our embrace of “non-academic” objects of study. We’ve told the story of our radical activist beginnings, frequently tracing queer studies back to ever earlier grassroots political commitments. In doing so, queer studies has positioned itself as ever-more against the grain, *athwart* the academy. Though higher education may present us with the neoliberal problem of incorporation, administration, and the management of queer radical possibility, we have, by taking that institutional cooptation as one of our objects, allowed ourselves to continue to imagine that a defining feature of the field of queer studies is to fuck up the academy. We position ourselves as subversives, thieves, and vandals, committed to egalitarianism.²

The problem with our story is that when Robin Hood stole, he gave to the poor. And he didn’t get paid to do it.

If the disruptive democratization of higher education has been queer studies’ stated goal at least since the first conference of the Gay Academic Union in 1973, we have failed.³ *The field of queer studies, as an academic formation, has been and is still defined and propelled by the immense resources of precisely those institutions of higher education that most steadfastly refuse to serve representative numbers of poor and minority students.* We can concretely associate the discipline of queer studies and the queer professoriate to the institutional prestige pipeline in any number of ways. Most dramatically, the citational practices of the field (as a search for “queer studies” in a database such as Google Scholar reveals) constitute queer studies primarily in reference to work produced by scholars at elite and flagship institutions of higher education. As I show below, the act of anthologizing and collecting queer studies produces and reproduces acts of class-based inclusion/exclusion. The top publishing awards in queer studies go with

² See Kadji Amin’s *Disturbing attachments: Genet, modern pederasty, and queer history* (2017), especially the introduction, for an insightful rendering of queer studies’ complicated commitment to egalitarianism.

³ *The universities and the gay experience*, the proceedings from the November 1973 Gay Academic Union meeting, are available at OutHistory.org. <http://www.outhistory.org/files/original/b865f2369f78c02b4d2727b996c86c43.pdf>

predictable regularity to deserving faculty at those schools.⁴ Queer studies programs, though found across institutional strata, tend to be formalized as such at more selective institutions.⁵ Citation, anthologizing, awarding, formalizing: these are the class- and status-driven mechanisms of field production. Though my ultimate interest will be in dramatizing the many exceptions to this queer-class rule and, even more so, in elaborating the relationship *between* exception and rule, I begin by more fully fleshing out the association of the field of queer studies with privileged sites of material production of queer knowledge.

To what extent does academic queer studies trade on the value—and therefore the values—of its wealthy institutions, thereby sustaining its commitment to structural inequality? Renn (2010) argued that “colleges and universities have evolved to tolerate the generation of queer theory from within but have stalwartly resisted the queering of higher education itself.” “What is more nonqueer,” she asked, “than traditional doctoral education or the tenure stream?” (p. 132). It is not quite clear, though, how or whether queer studies is a protagonist or an antagonist in this institutional narrative. We don’t have queer studies Ph.D. programs, after all. Neville Hoad (2011) thus wondered whether queer theory ever *happened* in the academy (p. 139). It’s an interesting question not because queer theory has been impossible to miss but because, if queer theory happened, it did so at precisely those locations from which Hoad and his fellow contributors launched their query, *After Sex?*: Chicago, Berkeley, Toronto, Austin, Tufts, Stanford, Santa Cruz, Davis, Emory, Harvard, Penn, NYU, Amherst, Columbia, Bryn Mawr, the CUNY Graduate Center, and Bates. If queer studies happened, it happened at the places we are used to noticing. And that class-based spectacle has made a difference. Now, perhaps more than

⁴ See, for example, the lists of finalists for the annual Lambda Literary Award for “LGBT Studies.” <https://www.lambdaliterary.org/complete-list-of-award-recipients/>

⁵ See John G. Younger’s invaluable website, “University LGBT/University Programs.” <http://www.people.ku.edu/~jyounger/lgbtqprogs.html>

ever, queer studies has a high-class pedigree. Crucially, academic pedigree also tends to make poor and working-class histories invisible. Insofar as those histories intersect with histories of institutional racism, pedigree can erase racial as well as class disparities that determine access to the prestige pipeline in the first place.

Poor Queer Studies: Naming a Thing that Exists

Queer studies has sometimes attended to queer-class intersections, with Lisa Henderson's *Love and Money: Queers, Class and Cultural Production* (2013) and work in the areas of queer labor and black queer studies being notable recent examples. Henderson helps me define class less rigidly than some of the studies I cite above, since "class categories work in the vernacular and analytic ways to mark a cultural universe" (p. 5). Class is, for Henderson, "the economic and cultural coproduction of social distinction and hierarchy" (p. 5). Queer studies, I argue, is a site where social distinction and hierarchy are produced—and where they therefore can be produced differently. Already, queer studies scholars have collaborated with experts outside academia to consider, as an early book on the subject declares, "homo economics" (Gluckman & Reed, 1997). Or we have looked to community workers, activists, and artists such as Eli Clare, Samuel Delany, and Leslie Feinberg to articulate the need for queers to recognize and address not simply queer-class connections but queer poverty. But often, queer studies' negotiations with class translate as LGBT scholars studying communities extrinsic to the academy but with whom and which we feel a personal/political connection and an intellectual attraction. Wiegman (2012) has thus asked, "[g]iven that subjects of knowledge are never fully commensurate with the objects they seek to authorize, what tactic is on offer from within identity knowledges to handle the contradictions between the educated elite and the subalterns we study and represent?" (p. 7).

Cathy Cohen, reflecting on the institutionalization of black queer studies, has noted that, on the one hand, the field “extends beyond the classroom into the streets [and] into movements...on behalf of and in partnership with black people who may never see the inside of our classrooms” (2016, p. xiii). On the other hand, Cohen cautions that “as we descend deeper into the ivory tower we must ask ourselves at what cost. To what degree does incorporation challenge our relevance to the same communities who find themselves at the heart of our research?” (p. xii). Each of these approaches has contributed to the articulation of queer-class intersections, and much more bridgebuilding work needs to be done across the academy/community divide.

I frame my project, however, by considering class differences *within* the queer academy. Because higher education is one of the most hierarchical institutions in the U.S., and because queer studies has been incorporated—unevenly, to be sure—into curricula and research projects by teachers and scholars at every tier of academe, we have been remiss in failing to interrogate the relationship between queer studies done at colleges across class-based educational tiers. My hunch is that asymmetrical institutional statuses, the high and the low, can make for interesting, partial starting points for all involved. Such situated lessons will, I hope, resonate with instructors and students at schools that have been left out of the story of queer studies, as well as with readers throughout queer academe who wish, in queer fashion, to see the field otherwise. My guiding question is, how can rethinking the work of queer studies in the context of students’ relative material need and lived precarity, academics’ professional liminality, and underclass institutional identity inform and potentially enrich the field by identifying the nascent queer-class knowledge project that I call “Poor Queer Studies.”

Resilience: Queer Professors from the Working Class (Oldfield & Johnson, 2008) stands out among academic narratives in its confrontation of class and queerness within higher

education. In *Resilience*, professors turn back toward their lower-class roots, extending that history into what for many is an ongoing sense of professional marginalization and economic precarity. Re-historicizing queer studies—and writing a new future for our field—depends on our willingness to tell such class stories and to be implicated in our current institutional positions, including what Ruth Gordon in an analogous context calls “the hierarchies we believe in” (2012, p. 327). Poor queer studies tethers the queer ideas that inspire us to the material conditions of our work lives and not merely to the fierce intellects of our most comfortably situated scholars.

The absence of a more fully-formed poor queer studies paradigm that might help us understand the class stakes of the field is particularly curious because concerns about academic elitism are a part of the field’s history. Perhaps we used to hear those charges rather more often than we do now. Speaking in 1995 at the Cornell University “Constructing Queer Cultures” conference, working-class independent scholar Allan Bérubé enjoined his academy-based audience to act:

What does [the] massive redistribution of wealth and widening of class divide have to do with queer studies? It just happens to be the twenty-year moment when a gay rights movement and the field of queer studies have both emerged. There’s no inherent reason why queer studies and gay politics would not reproduce the racialized class inequality and confusion that structure the larger society. But unfortunately, we can’t enjoy the luxury of standing on the sidelines as innocent bystanders. We have been implicated. (2011, p. 241)

Queer studies has been implicated, for it has indelible, field-defining, field-sustaining material and psychic associations with the most elite colleges and universities in the U.S., including the campus at which Bérubé delivered his talk. Indeed, the early nineties was one flashpoint for this critique, with “queer theory” already asserting the outsized presence in queer studies. Stein and Plummer (1994) characterized queer theory as “an elite academic movement centered at least initially in the most prestigious U.S. institutions.... Queer theory emerged in the late 1980s, publicized through a series of academic conferences held at Yale and other Ivy League universities, in which scholars, primarily from history and the humanities, presented their work on lesbian/gay subjects” (p. 181). Stein and Plummer’s vision for expanding the disciplinary uses of queer theory also implicitly recoded its class locations as, potentially, someplace other than “Yale and other Ivy League universities.” Disciplinary crossing-over, however, quickly subsumed class-based crossing-over as the dynamic institutional queer move.

Like several authors in *Resilience*, Heather Love attends to the ongoing ambivalence of queer studies toward class difference within its ranks. She notes the value of examining queer-class connections from within queer studies *as class-based scholars of the field*, while noting that queer theoretical conversations about “materialism and crisis” are more likely to be centered around critiques of capital than around individual and collective class histories (see roundtable discussion between Crosby et al., 2012). But problematically, for scholars for whom “queer studies was a route to upward mobility”—and I join Love in counting myself among this group—the fact of academic elitism in queer studies disorients at a level of lived experience that can make a class critique of the field less, rather than more, possible.

Love, an English professor at an Ivy League school, turns to deviance studies in sociology to find a language and method by which queer studies might understand not only its

deviant objects but also the material realities that quietly enable its constitutive claims to deviancy: “Queer theory was a revolt against scholarly expertise in the name of deviance, yet it resonated in many ways with academic norms. Queer academics might also be activist, organic intellectuals, radical experimenters in their personal, professional, and political lives, but they are also superordinates in the context of the university: professional knowledge workers, teachers, and administrators.” (2015, p. 87). Love’s insights about the need to make our institutional and queer disciplinary affiliations explicit resonate with the project of poor queer studies because they encourage a queer method of professional hair-splitting that might proceed, for example, with descriptive accounts of intra-academy differences among queer studies’ people and places. Or, to begin again, queer dinners. What if we connected our queer ideas and pedagogies to the material realities of their production (our research budgets, our course loads, our embodiments, our leave time, our library holdings, our raced environments, our salaries and second jobs, our service work) in order to understand those ideas and pedagogies as class- and status-based knowledges? What can telling the material histories of queer studies do to address the problem of class-stratification in higher education? What if queer studies can *fix* the academy, not fuck it up?

Tops, Bottoms, and the Structures of Queer Studies

I am arguing that we should, in this urgent moment, define the field of queer studies by its *material, structural conditions* as a way of contextualizing its ideational problems, its so-called “troubles.”

I blame, in part, our aspirational mood for blocking this work. Just as we learn to say the words that rich queer studies makes for us, so too we aspire in our own work to speak in that language. Aspiring (and frequently perspiring) becomes the thinkable mode of doing queer

studies. In such an aspirational mode, researchers (to take one example) think to begin a study of the most LGBT supportive campuses by consulting a list of “top universities” predetermined by a media company that, arguably, does less to assess academia than to hold it hostage. That is, we look for the top queer studies programs at the top. Everyone look up: “The purpose of focusing on the top-ranked universities in this research is to provide benchmarks and best practices that may lead to development of positive trends in practice *since other lesser-ranked universities and colleges regard the top-ranked as aspirational institutions and role models, more often than not emulating and replicating their efforts and strategies*” (Mehra, Braquet, & Fielden, 2015, p. 21, *my italics*). The problem, which I worked to contextualize above, is that the top schools are the unambiguous drivers of class stratification in higher ed. If the top schools leave poor and minority students behind, they also leave poor and minority *queer* students behind. Yet these are the schools being recognized as the top queer schools, period. Poor queer students, and poor queer studies, get erased.

Far from singling out a particular research study for criticism, I suggest that it represents an instance of the mundane coincidence between top LGBT schools and the top schools generally. And I suggest that this coincidence is made possible by the deep material resources that nurture the aspirational mood that makes all such “top” lists possible. For savvy queer college applicants, participation in the consolidation of the field of queer studies around a select few schools that can offer queers “the best” becomes the unquestionable path toward the queer academic good life to which all those below should aspire.

And this is no less true for savvy queer studies scholars. Queer though we are, we forget what Lynn Arner (2017) reminds us should be obvious:

[G]ood pedigree does not guarantee anything: there are strong and weak students in all doctoral programs.... I also would advise working-class Ph.D. holders that, although less prestigious, teaching at big state universities instead of private research universities can be a blessing, for there are many more working-class students and colleagues at such institutions. In such settings, working-class faculty members are typically subjected to less classism and would likely find it more rewarding to teach large numbers of their “peeps.” *The downside of this distribution, though, is that these placement patterns reproduce a highly classed tier system.* (my emphasis)

I appreciate Arner’s upending of assumptions about the naturalness with which we assume and assign value within the academic hierarchy. I like her rejection of classism and her vision of how making good decisions around class-based collegiality might be crucial to professional fulfillment. And yet, it is difficult to research and write within a scholarly field without imagining oneself in conversation with *that* field. More precisely, it is difficult to do queer studies without reference to the field of queer studies *as it comes to one wearing its class regalia*, in the form of its foundational texts and authors, its vanguard figures and propositions, its places and publishers. It is difficult to imagine *not* being part of those conversations and still being *in* the field, close to what Erica Rand calls “the queer-theory action” (2011, p. 272).

Problematically, we most readily reimagine the field with reference to what are now its given, classed markers and protocols. Our bibliographies bear witness, as do the titles of conference talks by aspirational scholars, where we see perhaps the best evidence of the ways trickle-down, rich queer studies manages the discursive terrain that comes to signify as “the field.”

From the perspective of poor queer studies, *the* field of queer studies often seems far afield. Yet working-class university worlds undeniably constitute *a* field within which queer

studies happens. But what is this second field, and how is it constituted? The dissonance between fields makes me wonder: I'm a queer studies professor, but how do I stand in relation to the field that names my position? It's clear that rich queer studies professors and I don't have the same job. But do we even have the same career or career field? And if we do, is such a convergence only accomplished using the terms of rich queer studies as our common tongue? To use Arner's language, are rich queer studies professors and poor queer studies professors queer peeps?

Why "Poor"?

My argument is not that queer studies *only* happens at rich schools. Indeed, my re-tooled question, "What's poor about queer studies now," comes from the opposite impulse: to take into consideration queer studies elsewhere and otherwise in the class-stratified academy. That work is being done, in volumes such as *Expanding the Circle: Creating an Inclusive Environment in Higher Education for LGBTQ Students and Studies* (Hawley, 2015). That collection, with authors from across institutional strata, serves as both evidence and counterevidence for my argument that while LGBTQ *programs and curricula* dot the educational landscape, the *field* of queer studies comes into view much more narrowly.⁶ The collection marks an energetic shift away from rich queer studies even as it shows the difficulty of that reorientation. One sticking point is that local or regional knowledge remains invisible while knowledge produced at tier 1 institutions is readily promulgated. Not only do local, under-resourced queer knowledges fail to register in the broader field but, at high-class sites of queer knowledge production, new practitioners are inevitably *trained away* from local, and often poor, queer pedagogies. Paula Krebs (2016) reports a failure within the professorial pipeline to prepare graduate students to do anything but the kind of work reproduced at high-profile institutional locations. While queer

⁶ For example, the previously mentioned study by Mehra, Braquet, & Fielden appears in *Expanding the Circle*.

theory has claimed a certain everywhere-ness and everything-ness as part of its expanding critical project, that expansive project of field-building masks operations of institutional, class-based exclusion. Expanding the circle that materially delimits the field—the work of poor queer studies—is, largely, work still to be done.

But why “poor?” Laden with stigmatizing connotations, “poor” has fallen out of critical use, replaced by analytics such as “precarity” and “resilience.” “Poor” therefore seems an improper word to anchor a new queer studies knowledge project. But I have several reasons for using the word. Far from flatly derogatory, my terminology, “poor queer studies,” invokes a complex and contested set of meanings. Uncomfortably, it foregrounds a term associated with an outmoded figuration of socioeconomic hardship. “Poor”: “Of a person or people: having few, or no, material possessions; lacking the means to procure the comforts or necessities of life, or to live at a standard considered comfortable or normal in society; needy, necessitous, indigent, destitute. Sometimes: *spec.* so destitute as to be dependent upon gifts or allowances for subsistence. Opposed to *rich*” (Poor, n.d.). Surely many of my students, in their pursuit of a degree that can potentially confer middle-class status, would reject this definition, which becomes sharper in tone as it proceeds until it ends in the most undercutting of insults, “opposed to rich.” The term “poor” tethers them too statically to the wrong end of a social mobility narrative premised on a college degree.

I argue, however, that “poor” is far from a static term; indeed, it accomplishes a good deal of descriptive and conceptual work, especially as it intersects with queer. As it foregrounds the lack of access to material resources that provides one of the most powerfully recurring threads in my queer classrooms, it also connotes other impoverishments. Poor queer studies names the pedagogical convergence of a field of study, typically imagined elsewhere, with my

students' socio-economic as well as socio-affective states. "Poor" names a dimension of experience that, perhaps more than any other structure of difference *including sexuality*, forms the basis of my queer pedagogy at the College of Staten Island. I cannot overstate this fundamental point. Though my pedagogical refrain (the explicit course topics, readings, vocabulary) is queerness, the base notes for my queer studies pedagogy at CUNY are the socioeconomic, material, and psychic realities through which reverberate that most freighted meter of class status. In the following sections I want to play a few of those notes so that the sense of my chosen terms, and their real definitions, can emerge. To that end, I offer a brief case study of CSI and CUNY in order to ground my argument in the local and to highlight the value of cross-class, cross-institutional queer studies.

The College of Staten Island: Realizing Poor Queer Studies

There are the statistics. The College of Staten Island, the site for my reorientation of queer studies, is a deeply underfunded, open admissions, public college in the working poor City University of New York system. CSI has a student population of about 13,000 undergraduates and 1000 graduate students and 364 full-time faculty. About half our students are low-income. More than 70% of our first-time freshmen enter as associate degree students. Strikingly, CSI students have the highest family incomes in the CUNY system due in large part to the demographics of the island's population. While CSI's student body overall is less racially diverse than its peer CUNY schools (50% white, 18% Hispanic, 16% Black, 12% Asian), we have much higher rates of traditionally under-served white ethnic students, primarily Italian Americans, who are a protected group at CUNY. Like their peers across the system, CSI students work, often full time. In one of my recent queer studies classes, students worked for money an average of 32

hours per week, in addition to taking care of children and/or parents, with whom most of them still live. By the numbers, CUNY students are among the poorest in the country (Cooper, S., 1998, p. 19).

And then there are the qualitative data, collected in Table 1: “Realizing Poor Queer Studies.” Each row marks a unique queer-class connection, and these intersections are made busier by race and gender dynamics. In truth, these small observations and anecdotes are where the poor queer studies project began. Long before I poked my nose into the institutional research, I was continually engaged in conversations with and about my students. These moments did not come to me in a coherent narrative. Rather, they create the background, foreground, and ground upon which poor queer studies is done at my college. Working at an institution with a lot of poor and working-class students, you come to understand the incredible drama of class mobility. Ironically, that drama often registers as boring, if not wholly unremarkable. The reality, the poor-ness, is often pieced together only later. The arrows in Table 1, intentionally positioned askew, indicate the circuitous nature of that knowledge. It took me seven years at CSI to realize I was teaching poor queer studies.

Table 1: Realizing Poor Queer Studies

<p>It looks like: stasis, a Latina student in her seventh year of school.</p>		<p>When in reality: she is terrified of graduating and of being single, fat, and childless without the excuse of college to defend her against her parents’ heteronormative impatience.</p>
<p>It looks like: a meeting with a student group and then, as you exit</p>		<p>When in reality: you remember that</p>

the meeting, bumping into a former student.

the student you just bumped into was homeless when they took your course. This fact is brought to mind because one of the students in the meeting you just came from discussed being, currently, homeless.

It looks like: a student bringing her four-year-old to class to avoid domestic violence.



When in reality: the child's presence prompts a spontaneous pedagogical innovation. The queer studies students, in solidarity with their distressed peer, organically adapt to the changed classroom space by spelling out all the S-E-X words in our discussion.

It looks like: failure, an "F" paper written, judging by the punctuation, on a cell phone and pasted into Word.



When in reality: he works two jobs and must use his phone as his computer, thumbing in his essays during breaks between deliveries.

It looks like: a continuing education student, her children now graduated from high school, who works for the College and can take classes for free.



When in reality: she and three other returning students, all heterosexual fifty-something Italian American mothers, perceive your failings as a queer studies classroom disciplinarian and, quite unqueerly and to your delight, instruct their much younger peers "to show a little respect."

It looks like: the gender-conforming student who never says anything.



When in reality: they are transgender and need to leave home. But they never tell you, their queer studies professor, either of these things until years later, in an email from across the country.

It looks like: tiresome responsibility, a young single mother.



When in reality: she makes the decision to leave her children with their grandmother so that she can

study abroad for a semester.

It looks like: a student who comes out as having an HIV+ mother and father.



When in reality: though he knows more than any of his peers about HIV/AIDS, he thinks Magic Johnson is no longer HIV+ because he was rich enough to afford “the cure.”

It looks like: a moment of bonding after class between a gay professor from the sticks and a butch working-class lesbian student.



When in reality: she asks, “Professor, are we going to read any books by white people?”, revealing the moment to be one of shared white privilege forged through homosexual class identification.

It looks like: a three-hour commute from the Bronx.



When in reality: she is a young lesbian who is closeted at home, who wanted to go away to school but couldn’t afford it, and CSI is the furthest CUNY campus from her neighborhood. No one knows her at CSI.

Plenty of other data inform these moments, including middle-class and even upper-class messages and meanings. This other “noise” can often drown out the poor-queer data, which students and faculty are so incentivized to turn away from already. Even poor queer studies offers such an incentive, if for no other reason than this: a queer studies professor inevitably models a direction, a queer career. My very presence links queerness to social mobility and “superordinate” status. Queerness, when it looks like a queer studies professor, looks like a way out, a way up, away from “poor.”

Ferry Theory: Making Queer Connections Across Institutional Status

We are our institutions. We are not our institutions. But in important ways we are *of* our institutions. We have, according to Sara Ahmed (2012), institutional lives. If queer studies wants to disrupt the highly-classed system that unevenly distributes students, faculty, and resources alike, we might begin by facing the material facts of our institutional lives in order to envision the possibilities for elaborate cross-class connections. Poor queer studies can act, to adapt Lisa Henderson's (2013) phrase, as a "relay" across queer-class divides in higher education. Following Henderson, I ask, What connective relays operate within and across the field(s) of queer studies? Rather than a one-way narrative of de-centering rich queer studies, I offer poor queer studies as a narrative of ferrying across institutional waters.

My own academic history of arrival prepares me to ask about queer-class relays. Poor queer studies arises out of my experience of having taught queer studies across university tiers: as a graduate student at a flagship state university, Indiana University Bloomington (home to groundbreaking feminist literary criticism and the Kinsey Institute); as a postdoctoral fellow teaching queer studies at an elite university, Duke University (the "birthplace of queer theory"); and now at the College of Staten Island (where about 10% of our faculty are out and active on campus as queer). The economic and material disparities among these schools are striking, as are their different relationships to queer studies. The queerest of these schools is the poorest, and that makes its queerness invisible.

This miniature comparative institutional history leads me to another. CUNY has afforded me the opportunity to do queer studies from multiple locations. My primary appointment is at CSI, but I frequently have reason to be at the Graduate Center in Manhattan, home to most of the doctoral work at CUNY and without doubt the jewel in the CUNY crown. Like other faculty from the campuses, I am sometimes asked to teach there, though without official affiliation.

Doing so grants me access to the Graduate Center's Mina Rees Library, including its print holdings and electronic databases. This article certainly would have been much harder, and perhaps impossible, to write without that library's resources. Cross-campus access to them is a material condition of my queer professional livelihood. For six years I was on the board of directors of CLAGS: The Center for LGBTQ Studies, the first academic center of its kind, housed at the Graduate Center. For three years I co-edited (with Cynthia Chris) the journal *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, published by the Feminist Press and housed at the Graduate Center. These positions reflect structural possibilities for participating, in a recognizable way, in the larger field of queer studies. They have made a queer career imaginable, even when I lacked imagination.

But having the Graduate Center as a resource is only half the point, for the Graduate Center could never have provided me the resources I needed to write this essay and a larger poor queer studies project. The whole point is that academic formations such as the Graduate Center, its library, CLAGS, and *WSQ* facilitate dynamic movement *between* centers and margins of queer studies. They structure engagements with colleagues from CUNY's many two- and four-year campuses, as well as with distant colleagues from around the world, many of us with strikingly different institutional statuses. I therefore move, to speak personally, between my local commitment to poor queer studies at CSI, with its many queer faculty, staff, and students and an energetic institutional space at the Grad Center that feels like one of the beating hearts of queer scholarship. And this professional straddling across the New York Harbor, one foot firmly planted at CSI (through tenure, student mentorship, collegiality, and its own substantial queer studies scholarship) and the other (less firmly) planted at the Graduate Center in the city, provides the perspective from which I can theorize poor queer studies. The need for such

structural crossing-over among scholar-teachers working at different types of colleges and universities—a need magnified by Cathy Davidson in *The New Education* (2017)—can guide the field of queer studies not so much by moving beyond as by ferrying between the elite institutions that have so brilliantly dominated its history and the worksites of poor queer studies.

The queer-class compass guiding this study needs the coordinates it has me shuttling constantly between: my quirky margin-space at CSI—a school I had never heard of before I applied there—and the looming edifice of the Graduate Center that concretizes at least one well-known version of queer studies. This professional shuttling enacts a certain kind of knowledge production not thinkable at either margin or center. The only possible metaphor for this ferrying back and forth is, of course, not a metaphor at all but an actual ferry, the Staten Island Ferry, symbol of the poor queer studies commute. Huge, orange, and free, it connects my queer studies work on two very different islands. And while the ferry may be slow, the view of poor queer studies is all the better for it.

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