

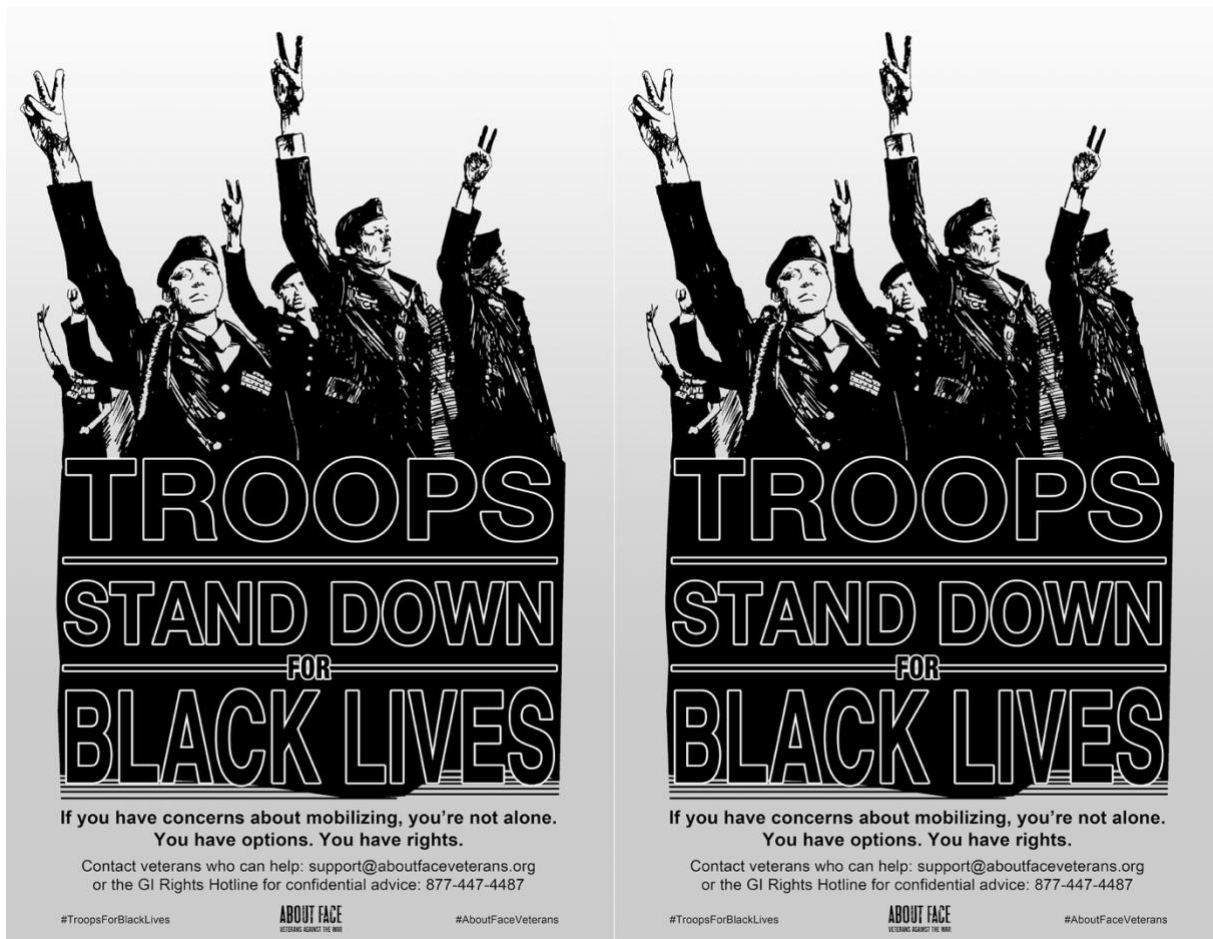
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review

Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University

Reviewed by Sarah Chinn



"TROOPS STAND DOWN FOR BLACK LIVES" BY AARON HUGHES. I HAVE BEEN HONORED TO MAKE A SERIES OF GRAPHICS FOR ABOUT FACE: VETERANS AGAINST THE WAR. OVER THE COURSE OF THE CURRENT UPRISING FOR RACIAL JUSTICE ABOUT FACE HAS BEEN REACHING OUT AND SUPPORTING SERVICE MEMBERS REFUSING TO DEPLOY AGAINST DEMONSTRATIONS FOR BLACK LIVES.

Brim, Matt. *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

In a recent article in the *New Yorker*, Corey Robin, who teaches Political Science at Brooklyn College, part of the City University of New York, pointed out that CUNY was probably the institution of higher education hardest hit by COVID-19. Given that New York has been the epicenter of the epidemic nationally, and that hundreds of thousands of students study at and tens of thousands of New Yorkers are employed by CUNY, and, finally, that CUNY students are mostly working-class and poor (hence more likely to be employed in the high-risk service and health sectors), the university has become, in Robin's words, "a cemetery of uncertain dimensions, its deaths as unremarked as the graves in a potter's field." At the same time, he argues that the public conversation about higher education is too often limited to the experiences of students and faculty at elite institutions: small, well-endowed liberal arts colleges and large, research-heavy public and private universities. Ultimately, he maintains, "The coronavirus has revealed to many the geography of class in America, showing that where we live and work shapes whether we live or die. Might it offer a similar lesson about where we learn?"

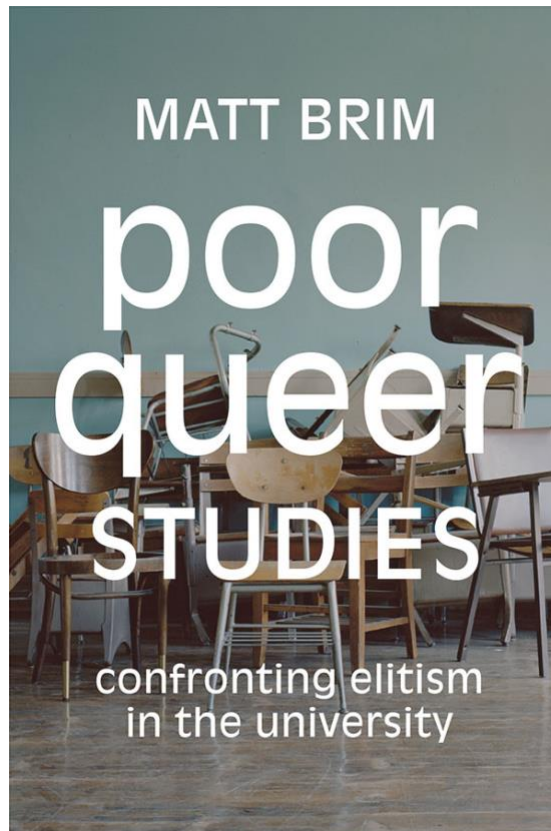
It is this challenge that Matt Brim's bracing new book, *Poor Queer Studies*, takes up. After all, as he says, "it is difficult to find an institution in the United States that sorts people by socioeconomic class as effectively as higher education" (4). To prove this crucial point, he offers meticulously researched breakdowns of who goes to which colleges, what they study, and where they end up. For all their claims to diversification, elite institutions enroll more students in the top 1% than they do those from the bottom 60% of the population, financially speaking. They also struggle to enroll Black and Latinx students and retain faculty of color. Beyond the usual suspects, elitist attitudes from the selective senior colleges within CUNY have pushed SAT scores up by up to 30 percent, as enrollment by Black and Latinx students has dropped. By contrast, the open-admission College of Staten Island, the CUNY school where Brim teaches, has seen a rise in the enrollment of students of color since 2008: Latinx enrollment alone has increased by 12 percent, and white enrollment dropped by almost 20 percent. It is hard, in the end, not to see "class stratification [within academia as] an intentional, defining, structural

feature of the U.S. academy" and one that, almost needless to say, "overlaps with race sorting" (8).

How does this connect with Brim's focus here, the production and teaching of Queer Studies as a field? His argument is twofold. First, it is that "with notable exceptions, 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 students and to hire faculty without high-status academic pedigrees" (9). Moreover, those institutions – Duke, Berkeley, Yale, Columbia, to name a few – have low teaching loads, generous research funds, and (on the whole) an absence of the austerity politics that bedevil poorer regional and urban public colleges and universities.

Brim's second point is that Queer Studies is happening in less-resourced colleges and universities all the time, but it is Poor Queer Studies, a field defined by lack of resources, the financial struggles of its students, and the need to expand its purview beyond the theoretical. Unlike Rich Queer Studies, which rarely "conceptualize[s] its poor queer blindspots, making cross-class relationships and ideas less visible" (19), Poor Queer Studies is profoundly aware of class inequities in both theoretical and practical ways. What would happen, Brim asks, if we imagined Queer Studies from the perspective of its least privileged practitioners? "What," he wonders, "does the work of Queer Studies look like from the point of view of regional or mid/lower tier or unranked schools that occupy the margins of – or don't figure at all in – influential Queer Studies narratives and field assessments?" (33).

Poor Queer Studies does that important work. It privileges "the places where queer experience saturates education and should robustly inform the production of the field" (36). Brim is interested not only in the production of queer work and pedagogy, but also the conditions under which that work takes place, and how the realities of under-resourced institutions profoundly inform the kind of theorizing that emerges. For example, Brim takes seriously the motivations of his working-class and poor students to leverage their college education into class mobility and job placement. Rather than insisting that academic pursuits should not be somehow sullied by the reality of the marketplace, he explores how students versed in Queer



POOR QUEER STUDIES: CONFRONTING ELITISM IN THE UNIVERSITY BY MATT BRIM (DURHAM, NC: DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2020).

Studies might enter the workplace differently, how they might effect change on their jobs, how they might imagine gender, capitalism, desire, intellectual inquiry itself in relation to everyday lived experience. (I should point out here that this is a place where Feminist and Gender Studies has been far ahead of Queer Studies in bridging the theory/praxis divide). What would it mean, he asks, to have a “queer career” – not just a job in Queer Studies or a queer-oriented workplace, but a trajectory of labor (at the MTA, in the police force, as a nurse, in an office) fully informed by queer consciousness? Brim points to an encounter he had with a former student, a cop working on his beat, and recognizing that “this cop has queer knowledge with him on the job, and that is better than not, for him and for the rest of us” (113); in the wake of the waves of police violence in recent weeks, Brim’s realization has additional power: how might that queer knowledge reduce the occasions of police brutality, for example?

Brim looks for queer inquiry in unusual places – or rather, in places unusual for Queer Studies, not for faculty in working-class institutions like CUNY. For example, he claims that “where student mothers go, Poor Queer Studies goes” (137), if only because we have student mothers in our classes, absorbing queer material, thinking about the role of gender and sexuality in their lives. Poor Queer Studies is by definition Black and Latinx studies, and works “for, toward, and in the service of queer blackness,” if only because of the ways social class and racial marginalization map onto each other. But Brim isn’t satisfied with the “if only.” Student mothers, students of color, poor and working-class students *define* Poor Queer Studies in all meanings of the word: give it meaning, limn its boundaries, make it material.

Poor Queer Studies is as unconventional in its structure as it is in its subject matter. Sometimes this slows the book down: while I understand the political value of printing the cvs of Brim’s Queer Studies colleagues at the College of Staten Island to show that queer theorizing is thriving outside of elite institutions, that same information might have served just as well as an appendix rather than interrupting the rhythm of Brim’s argument. At the same time, poverty and austerity make for strange and unfamiliar formations, and do not follow a single narrative. We must think about their sites of articulation, the bodies upon which both poverty and queer knowledge leave their impression, and the work those bodies take up in the world -- hence chapters on the College of Staten Island, “the queer career,” and queer counternarratives that seem disjoined from each other but all follow the twisty logic of Poor Queer Studies. In *Poor Queer Studies*, Matt Brim offers up both a challenge and a model. We would do well to follow.



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