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Queer Precarity and the Myth of Gay Affluence

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The LGBT movement's laser-focus on marriage equality propagates the myth of gay and lesbian affluence as political strategy, leaving aside any analysis of class or economic inequality or poverty—much less an analysis of capitalism. LGBT people are typically depicted as affluent consumers with high disposable incomes, yet this is hardly the norm. The majority of LGBT/Q people are poor or working class, female, and people of color, who struggle to get a job or hold onto one, to pay their rent and care for themselves and the people they love.¹ Yet that reality remains unseen by mainstream LGBT activists and activists in allied movements, including the progressive and activist labor movements of which we are a part. The myth of LGBT affluence is particularly destructive for labor organizers because LGBT/Q people make up a disproportionately high number of the people in many low-wage sectors. It means that much of the labor movement never has to “see” who they are organizing or reaching. It renders queer class and race issues invisible or non-existent in the movements in which we participate, leaving us more vulnerable in our jobs and workplaces, apartments, shelters, streets, and neighborhoods, targeted by homophobia and transphobia as it weaves throughout our lives. This myth allows both the LGBT and the labor movements to overlook the rising *queer* precariat.

LGBT/Q people make up a disproportionately high number of the people in many low-wage sectors.

Queer precarity is a reality. As the wealth gap continues to grow, LGBT/Q people struggle with

increasing hardships and economic crisis, alongside the majority of working-class and poor Americans. Economic precarity has necessitated new forms of labor organizing, including worker centers and union–community partnerships. Recent campaigns to organize domestic workers, livery and taxi cab drivers, retail workers, and formerly incarcerated workers, and the explosive fight of low-wage workers for a \$15 per hour minimum wage are examples of new political struggles that have emerged to combat continuously rising global precarity—made worse in the aftermath of the 2008 economic recession. But the particular struggles of queer and gender non-conforming people remain sidelined, both in scholarly work and in the LGBT and labor movements themselves.

Class, race, the erotic, gender identity, sexuality, desire: how are these issues intertwined and interlocked in our analysis and in our organizing? An analysis of *queer precarity* centers LGBT/Q lives, as our multiple genders, sexualities, and orientations intersect with the lived realities of class and race. Rather than perpetuating the myth of LGBT affluence by painting LGBT people as discerning consumers or a new market niche, and rather than simply celebrating the recent Supreme Court decision around same-sex marriage as a political victory, this essay connects economic justice issues to

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LGBT issues to forefront the particular vulnerabilities of LGBT, queer, and gender non-conforming people to the current economic transformations.

LGBT/Q Economic Injustice: What Does It Look Like?

Queer economic injustice is when we work at Walmart or at H&M for a minimum wage, and every day our supervisor calls us a *faggot* or a *bull dyke* or a *HOMO-sexual* or asks us *what we are, a man or a woman?* It is when the other people with whom we work look embarrassed or remain silent. It means that, every day, we are *queer* workers, whether we claim that as our identity or not. We are a *butch* truck driver, a *bisexual* domestic worker, a *swishy queen* who cleans a straight person's house, or a *dangerous predator* if our employer wants to fire us when we ask for a pay raise or try to organize other child care workers to resist how we are collectively treated.

LGBT/Q people who are low-wage workers, immigrants, and people of color are already economically vulnerable; gender and sexuality add new layers of vulnerability that target us and keep us isolated from others who face similar circumstances. The only strategy we have had is to try to hide our gender differences or sexual orientation, to keep our heads down and our erotic desires distant enough from our supervisor's gaze to stay employed, to try to survive in any way that we can because we have to eat and pay the rent. But whatever happens, every day is dangerous. Fifty-two percent of LGBT people live in states that do not prohibit employment discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.²

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This information is not new. But old-style identity politics are not adequate to understand how the complex multiplicities of gender, race, sexuality, and class interlock and play out,

changing the ways that queer people can move in the world or are vulnerable to attack. Differences like gay, lesbian, queer, black, female, transgender, or immigrant cannot simply be named or added to existing organizing strategies. Instead, we must understand that these differences, and the lived realities they represent, can fundamentally change an LGBT/Q person's openness or resistance to collective organizing. Organizations need to learn the realities of these differences and how to speak to queer people through those differences. *LGBT/Q differences are both the injury and the opening.* But the invisibility that is imposed by not recognizing those differences marks LGBT/Q people even as it renders us racial and class ghosts in our struggles to survive.

Economic Vulnerability: Who Are the Precarious LGBT/Q?

Research from at least the mid-1990s shows that queer and gender non-conforming people are more vulnerable to poverty than their straight and traditionally gendered male or female counterparts.³ The image of the "typical" gay or lesbian person is a white, middle-class professional who lives without kids in a city, yet U.S. census and Gallup polls show that LGBT/Q people are more racially and ethnically diverse than the general U.S. population: 33 percent of LGBT people identified as people of color, there are an estimated 904,000 LGBT adult immigrants in the United States, and LGBT people are geographically dispersed, many raising children and caring for other kin.⁴ Histories of housing, employment, educational, and health care discrimination; harassment, violence, and targeting; and diminished or threatened family support combine with racialized and anti-immigrant violence to make LGBT/Q people more vulnerable to economic insecurity.

Queer, trans, and gender non-conforming youth face discrimination and violence in families and schools; they are bullied and harassed, subject to violence and sexual abuse, and denied gender expression. A 2009 report shows that 80 percent of gay and transgender students of color have been verbally harassed, while 33 to 54 percent of LGBT students of color report physical violence.⁵ Trans youth report

extremely high rates of harassment and discrimination (90 percent), sometimes by school personnel; over half report physical harassment and over a quarter report physical assault at school.⁶ Unsafe schools and persistent harassment threaten LGBT/Q youth's academic performance, leading to missed classes, and, for some, dropping out of school entirely—a history that contributes to economic insecurity later in life for LGBT/Q adults. A national 2011 study found the average income for all adults without a high school diploma was \$7,840 less per year than those with a high school diploma, and \$27,390 less than college graduates.⁷ Securing a decent job in our low-wage economy is a struggle for anyone; these specific educational barriers make finding work that much more difficult for LGBT/Q adults.

LGBT/Q people also face increased criminalization and homelessness. Harsh discipline and sanctions (such as suspensions and expulsions from school) disproportionately criminalize LGBT/Q youth of color—particularly black boys and gender non-conforming girls (the latter are three times more likely to experience harsh disciplinary treatment by school administrators than their ostensibly heterosexual counterparts).⁸ When rejected from their families of origin, many trans and queer youth become homeless: up to 40 percent of homeless children are LGBT/Q, many of them youth of color.⁹ LGBT/Q and gender non-conforming youth are over-represented in the juvenile justice system, accounting for 13 to 15 percent of all youth: approximately 300,000 gay and transgender youth are arrested and/or detained each year (60 percent of them black or Latino/a). Once in the system, these youth are “too often denied basic civil rights, wrongly categorized as sexually deviant simply because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender non-conformity, and even labeled as sex offenders.” They also face discrimination from law-enforcement agents, judges, and other justice system officials, leaving them even more vulnerable to abuse and neglect.¹⁰

Homelessness is not only an issue for LGBT/Q youth. A 2010 survey of 165 low-income LGBT/Q and gender non-conforming adults in New York found that the majority (70 percent) had been homeless at some point in

their lives;¹¹ data from 2011 show that 19 percent of trans people have been homeless at some point in their lives.¹² Job, health, and housing discrimination and harassment all produce inflated rates of homelessness among queer and trans adults.¹³ Homelessness also leads to increased interaction with the criminal justice system. This increased criminalization means that LGBT/Q workers are disproportionately hurt by the mandatory background and credit checks required for many jobs.

Bisexuals, lesbians, and gay men all experience higher rates of poverty than heterosexuals.¹⁴ One in four bisexuals receive food stamps, more than one in five LGBT people who live alone report an income at or below the poverty level, and children in same-sex-couple households are almost twice as likely to be poor as those in married different-sex households.¹⁵ A total of 2.4 million LGBT adults, or nearly 30 percent, “experienced a time in the last year when they did not have enough money to feed themselves or their family.”¹⁶ African-American children in gay male households have the highest poverty rate (52.3 percent) of any children in any household type, and African-American men in same-sex couples are more than six times as likely to be poor than white men in same-sex couples. Women in same-sex couples are more likely to be among the “working poor” than men and heterosexual couples; rates of poverty are particularly high among women in same-sex couples who have a disability, live in rural regions, and are older.¹⁷ Transgender people are four times more likely than the general population to live in poverty, and poverty rates among transgender people of color are particularly high—34 percent of black trans people and 28 percent of Latino/a trans people have household incomes of less than \$10,000 per year.¹⁸

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We know that queer and trans people face discrimination at work. Between 16 and 18 percent of gay men and lesbians report being fired or denied employment because of their sexual orientation; close to 40 percent report other

forms of harassment and discrimination on the job.¹⁹ Twenty-six percent of transgender workers report having been fired for being trans; 47 percent report other forms of workplace discrimination.²⁰ Queer and trans people of color face additional discrimination; one study found that 75 to 82 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander LGBT people have been discriminated against at work because of their sexuality. Gay and bisexual men experience a clear wage penalty, earning between 10 and 32 percent less than heterosexual men. All women continue to earn less than men. LGBT people, especially LGBT people of color, are more likely to be unemployed than heterosexual people; trans unemployment rates are particularly high.²¹ Finally, there are approximately 267,000 LGBT people working in the United States without legal authorization, many of whom are Latino/a.²² These undocumented, LGBT immigrants of color have few options aside from minimum-wage jobs and jobs that do not provide benefits.

These are the statistics of *queer* precarity. They tell us that LGBT/Q and gender non-conforming people are particularly vulnerable to economic injustice. And they also suggest that we need to understand how LGBT/Q people survive in low-paying and non-unionized service work and in street or alternative economies. While across the United States, many people suffer without stable employment, because of gendered and sexual discrimination, intensified neoliberal economic restructuring has had particularly harsh consequences for LGBT/Q people. In the “recovery” from the Great Recession of 2008, job growth has clustered in low-wage fields such as retail, health care, reception, child care, and cleaning.²³ These jobs rarely provide benefits like health insurance, paid sick leave, or retirement savings. Yet because of histories of discrimination and criminalization, many queer and trans people are funneled into low-wage jobs, or seek them out as sites where gender expression and sexuality will not be disciplined in the same ways as in professional jobs. Still, working at a gay bar or club, in retail, or in the cash economies around LGBT/Q neighborhoods yields little economic security. As a 2014 report

compiled by The Murphy Institute, Retail Action Project (RAP), and Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) notes,

Retailers’ demands for open availability and the use of unpredictable scheduling means that workers already struggling with low wages and discrimination in our economy—women, people of color, caregivers, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer workers—are left in a constant state of insecurity.²⁴

For LGBT/Q people with disabilities, including people with HIV and AIDS, satisfying work is even scarcer. Research shows that lesbian, gay, and bisexual people have a higher prevalence of disability than their heterosexual counterparts, due, presumably, to ongoing economic and health disparities and the lifelong toll oppression takes.²⁵ Among gay and bisexual men, African-Americans are the racial/ethnic group most affected by HIV, accounting for the highest number of new HIV infections in 2010.²⁶ These health disparities ramify histories of chronic physical and mental health issues connected to poverty, criminalization, homelessness, and discrimination.²⁷ As the social safety net continues to unravel, the barriers LGBT/Q people face grow.

Many queer and trans people turn to cash or alternative economies: exchanging sex or drugs for resources, even as they are often working full-time in low-wage jobs. A 2007 study found that 60 percent of transgender youth of color had engaged in sexual exchange for money or other resources, such as food or clothing—increasing their chances of run-ins with criminal justice systems.²⁸ A 2010 study found that 60 percent of respondents survived on a combination of formal and informal work (e.g., combining retail salary and sex for money).²⁹ But sex work exists outside of labor-law protections; workers lack the right to organize and are subject to criminalization, incarceration, and police violence. Yet the alternatives—underpaid, temporary, at-will employment where queer and trans workers face discrimination and harassment—are not necessarily better options.

The Invisibility of Class and Race in the LGBT Movement

In spite of the economic precarity these statistics demonstrate, the mainstream LGBT movement has veered away from poverty, class, and economic justice, dismissing the relevance of the economic crisis to LGBT/Q lives as though “economic justice is simply ‘not a gay issue.’”³⁰ The contradictions at the heart of neoliberal capitalism create new modes of inclusion and exclusion: inclusion of some LGBT citizen-consumers, and exclusion of queer and trans others. As Alan Sears argues,

in the context of commodification, a person becomes visible as “queer” only through the deployment of particular market goods and services. Others are invisible, either because they are literally left outside the door (for example, because they cannot afford the cover charge) or because they cannot look “gay” or “lesbian” if they are old, fat, skinny, transgendered, racialized, stigmatized as disabled or ill, or obviously poor.³¹

LGBT people are only visible in the marketplace; meanwhile, non-white, non-middle-class, non-gender-normative queer and trans people are *invisible* as good gay citizens and consumers.

This leaves the majority of LGBT/Q people out of the existing gay/lesbian movement. As Cathy Cohen argues, LGBT movements emphasize structural assimilation and an end to state discrimination (same-sex marriage, for example), rather than social or economic transformation.³² Yet the goals of mainstream LGBT activist organizations—same-sex marriage rights, military service, and adoption rights—are low on the list of priorities for the majority of queer and trans communities. Jobs and economic justice, health care, and violence prevention are the priorities of many LGBT people of color—goals that rank far higher than the white, middle-class’s “big three.” A 2014 study showed that HIV/AIDS, violence, equal employment rights, and bullying are higher priorities for black and Latino/a LGBT youth than same-sex marriage.³³ Transgender people name employment discrimination, access to health care,

hate crimes protection, and ability to change identity documents as main concerns.³⁴ The Welfare Warriors Research Collaborative respondents were particularly concerned with housing and homelessness, violence, and discrimination—and never once identified gay marriage as a priority.³⁵

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As long as the LGBT movement responds primarily to the needs and desires of wealthy, traditionally gendered, white gay men and lesbians, it cannot serve as a social movement for broad-based social or economic change. If class, race, and poverty are not part of the political work around queerness, the movement cannot contest the crisis facing queer and trans people today—it cannot even name or see it, preferring, instead, the myth of gay affluence. And indeed it appears, as Allan Bérubé writes, that “queer studies has mostly ignored the economy and queer activists promote our ‘community’ as the hottest marketing niche around.”³⁶ But this state of affairs inadvertently reinforces the precarious economic situation most queer and trans people face.

The Invisibility of Queerness in the Labor Movement

Because so many issues facing queer and trans people are economic, the labor movement seems an ideal place to look for solutions. But traditional labor organizing only rarely addresses the differences that gender and sexuality make for workers more generally. And even when labor organizing takes up these issues, it tends to focus on *inclusion* or identity politics: for example, organizations such as Pride at Work that seek to incorporate LGBT/Q people into already-existing labor unions. Other less traditional efforts, such as those to organize retail workers or excluded workers, only occasionally, if ever, address queer and trans people or gender/sexuality concerns.

Union organizing is crucial to contesting and expanding protections from the forms of

workplace discrimination LGBT/Q workers regularly face.³⁷ Yet without diminishing the important roles LGBT identity activism and union labor organizing have played, we need to ask not so much about bringing unions to gay workplaces or gay, lesbian, and trans people into union leadership; instead, we need to think about economic justice and queer sexual politics *together* so we might prioritize the lives of people for whom queer economic justice cannot be reached with gay marriage. We need to look toward organizing queer people whose survival struggles in precarious economies have not been addressed by traditional union organizing.

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One potential place for this analysis is worker center organizing. Organizing the unorganized is at the forefront of new labor work today; it is especially crucial for the millions of workers who are excluded from the protection of U.S. labor laws (the right to organize, minimum wage, overtime protections, protection against being fired for sexual orientation or gender identity, and health and safety protections) “by design or by default.”³⁸ These include farmworkers, domestic and other care workers, day laborers, tipped minimum-wage workers such as restaurant workers, guest workers, workers in right-to-work states, taxi drivers, workfare workers, and formerly incarcerated workers. Such “excluded workers” are majority of color and often immigrant, and they include disproportionately high numbers of queer and trans people in the retail, health care, and service sectors.

Yet although worker centers have launched innovative campaigns that tackle the linkage of class with racism, exploitation of undocumented immigrants, sexism, and ageism, few organizers highlight or even address sexuality, queerness, gender non-conformity, or other LGBT issues. Organizers and workers alike must learn to see beyond the myth of gay affluence to connect gender and sexual justice to

economic justice. This might mean making the links between racial, sexual, and gendered discrimination visible, as when Restaurant Opportunity Center New York (ROC-NY) sought to connect front-of-the-house sexual harassment to back-of-the-house racial discrimination—an education in “seeing gender,” as one staff member put it.³⁹ It might mean keeping the focus on workers, rather than the affluent gay consumer. For example, in 2012, in the midst of a conservative backlash over J.C. Penney’s hiring of Ellen DeGeneres as a spokesperson and the use of lesbian and gay couples in their advertising, RAP issued this statement:

RAP stands by J.C. Penney’s use of LGBTQ spokespersons and couples in their advertising, and hopes this commitment to diversity extends to their LGBTQ employees in the form of gay- and transgender-friendly workplaces free of discrimination in hiring and promotions. However, J.C. Penney’s recent layoffs and elimination of commissions sales positions disproportionately affect minorities, such as LGBTQ workers who experience workplace discrimination in hiring, promotions, and pay. J.C. Penney should stand by their support of a diverse workforce, not just a diverse customer base, by reinstating commissions for their employees.⁴⁰

Yet we should be careful that we are not only celebrating the gay-friendly workplace policies of companies such as San Francisco’s Levi Strauss (in providing domestic partnership benefits, for example) while ignoring the work conditions of the people who make the jeans in sweatshops across the globe.⁴¹ Unless issues of gender and sexuality are understood as an integral part of the struggle—unless we keep our focus on both sexuality *and* economic inequality—the particular vulnerabilities of the queer precariat are likely to go “unseen” by organizers and scholars alike.

Queer precarity is invisible in much of our current LGBT and labor movement organizing. We need a queer economic justice campaign

that is genuinely *queer*—not about inserting gay and lesbian people into an existing set of rights and protections but about asking questions about power, sexuality, and desire that resist the easy satisfaction of incorporation and instead pursue the difficult work of transformation. How many of our campaigns for economic justice depend on assumptions that make LGBT/Q lives invisible—assumptions that the family is heterosexual, that we are able to work (the core definition of “ablebodiedness”), or that we have access to “free” privatized care work performed within the domestic sphere? The ongoing fraying of the social safety net means that LGBT/Q low-wage workers, despite working multiple jobs, often cannot support or shelter their families or buy food. To address these realities, we need a radical political vision that moves beyond identity politics to analyze queerness as it connects to work and the economy, while also insisting that economic questions are central to desire, sexuality, and intimacy. A queer labor perspective sees how gender and sexuality are central components of economic justice—from the very start.

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Notes

1. We use “LGBT/Q” (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer) as an inclusive acronym for a range of gender and sexual non-conforming people. We use “LGBT” to describe the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender movement (not the queer movement). When citing from reports and statistics, we retain the acronym used by the study’s authors.
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Margot Weiss is an associate professor of American studies and anthropology at Wesleyan University. Her scholarship includes *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Duke University Press, 2011) and essays on the sexual politics of late capitalism, queer activism, left intellectuals and the neoliberal university, and method in queer anthropology. She is at work on her second book, which explores the radical political imaginations of North American queer left activists at a time of economic precarity.