

## Book Review

*Steel Closets: Voices of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Steelworkers.* By Anne Balay. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. 192 pp. Hardbound, \$34.95.

In a time when so many in the mainstream LGBT community are arguing that “it gets better,” Anne Balay offers *Steel Closets*, an honest and intimate window into the lives of hard-working, queer steelworkers whose lives stray far from the gets-better narrative. She demonstrates how for steelworkers, and many other working-class queers, visibility more often hurts rather than helps, driving them further into the closet rather than out of it. With the publication of *Steel Closets*, Balay adds the voices of working-class LGBT people to a historical record largely dominated by urban, middle-class, white gays and lesbians. Focusing on rural, working-class queers in the diminishing US steel industry, she deftly navigates the complex intersections of class, race, work, sexuality, masculinity, and gender expression in the mill. More than just preserving the life stories of LGBTQ steel workers, she troubles the standard LGBTQ progress narratives.

Balay interviewed forty LGBTQ-identified steelworkers, mostly in northeast Indiana, who face violent homophobia every day in the mills. All but a few narrators are closeted and hide their queer lives from other steelworkers. While many queer people find community in gay bars and community events, steelworkers, because of their demanding and inconsistent work schedule, find their main support systems among their coworkers. Yet this support is limited—Balay’s interviewees discuss the dangers of sharing personal information, which forces some to lie or not share at all. Balay’s analysis shows how this isolates queer steelworkers, and the secrecy about their lives serves to push many further into the closet.

*Steel Closets* offers a sustained discussion of masculinity, a central lens for understanding mill workers. Balay found that women and lesbians, only a small fraction of the mills’ workforce, are more accepted because of their masculinity; this seeming contradiction can function in their favor. Women continue, however, to experience extremely high rates of sexual harassment and violence in the mill, and are met with little support. For many gay men, doing the dangerous work of the mill is a way to establish their masculinity. Gay men therefore downplay any effeminacy at work, performing instead an exaggerated masculinity. For others, masculinity was established in the mill through “male-male sexual play” (103). In fact, many workers discuss same-sex sexual contact that occurred

in the mills. As in the social milieu George Chauncey describes in *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), the same-sex sex that Balay found in the mills does not necessarily indicate a gay identity. At the same time, her interviewees provide numerous examples of the rampant, aggressive, and often violent homophobia of the mill which requires that straight men distance themselves from any association with gayness and that they punish those who are associated with any LGBTQ identity.

Balay used her own life experience as a queer woman working blue-collar jobs to connect with her narrators, recognizing that this history is what often made her trustworthy to them. She acknowledges the differences in the consequences of her queerness (inexplicably not receiving tenure) and the consequences of the steelworkers' queerness (violence, harassment, rape). The empathy she has, however, is rooted in her own life experiences, and gives the entire book a sincere and compassionate quality. She also provides a model for navigating the difficulty and necessity of anonymity before, during, and after obtaining oral histories that, without their continued anonymity, could result in extreme forms of violence for her participants.

A truly interdisciplinary text, Balay's *Steel Closets* is easily situated within the scholarship on both queer and oral history, bringing two often separate bodies of work into conversation. Utilizing tools from both genres, she clearly articulates the interconnectedness of class, race, and sexuality for her interviewees. The narrators of color, and some of the white narrators, discuss histories of racism that continue to inform who works where in the mill and for how much pay. These realities further complicate the relationship among race, class, and sexuality for the steelworkers who are not straight and white, and Balay is intentional about including these conversations. Her work also adds to the growing scholarship on rural queerness. She does not mention the concept of metronormativity directly, despite her reference several times to normative understandings of the urban nature of LGBTQ communities. This absence, though, belies the theoretical underpinning of her work, one that is wholly accessible. She still unquestionably disrupts metronormative understandings of LGBTQ identities, lives, and communities. *Steel Closets* serves as a model for how to do queer oral history that attends to voices that are often unheard, but Balay also attends to the silences—the stories, experiences, and lived realities *not* discussed by her narrators.

Echoing sentiments expressed by queer theorists such as Eve Sedgwick, Balay argues that “whom we have or want to have sex with does not much affect our daily life . . . yet sexual orientation, as a means of defining who we are, affects everything” (160-1). The brilliance of Balay's work is her focus on the specificity of those affects for the steelworkers. Sexuality, Balay argues, cannot be understood separately from “the spatial context in which it emerges,”

and this is nowhere more true than in the isolation and danger of the steel mills. The compelling histories, quoted at length, are at times funny and light-hearted, and are at other times tragic; they challenge readers to rethink who desires queer identity and where, as well as who has access to such identity in the first place.

Useful for both undergraduates and graduates, this short book will incite conversations in the classroom and expose students to engaging stories of queer life in steel mills. Balay provides readers with insight into the “complicated, messy, biting funny experiences of steelworkers . . . which complicate our understanding of what it means to be . . . queer everywhere,” and pushes readers to incorporate these narratives into how we conceive of queer identity and sexuality in general (154). Through her preservation and analysis of these amazing life stories, Balay destabilizes dominant, and dominating, understandings of queerness, and where queer politics stand in our current historical moment.

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