

# BOOK REVIEW

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

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 264 pp., ISBN: 978-1-4780-0914-6

As a study of class, race and gender and the intersecting effects these dimensions have on the author's discipline of queer studies, this is a powerful book, one which sets a challenge for a mature sub-discipline to apply its own analytical tools to itself. It is exemplary beyond queer studies, however, and its wider achievement is how it provides a model and set of resources for anyone working in higher education, irrespective of discipline.

Queer studies as a discipline has not reckoned with the wider institutional reality confronting many scholars after they receive their doctorates. His home discipline, Brim suggests, sees itself as taking place in a certain kind of elite institution, and which has been 'a vector for upward professional mobility for faculty' (3). But it also takes place 'elsewhere and otherwise in the class-stratified academy' (18); it is this 'other' that he terms 'poor queer studies'.

His use of 'poor' here is not 'flatly derogatory' (18), but neither is it a simple exercise in reclamation as is the case with 'queer'. As a 'far from a static term', it 'accomplishes a good deal of descriptive and conceptual work', allowing a clear distinction between rich queer studies and poor queer studies. This is a difference that euphemisms might seek to soften. It stands in contrast to the 'aspirational mood' attendant to and produced by so-called 'top' universities and to how this in important respects blocks students and scholars of queer studies.

This distinction *Poor Queer Studies* seeks to draw with its 'rich' counterpart is what may be of most interest to a wider audience. Perhaps unusually for queer studies, an institutional rather than sociological or cultural perspective is adopted, wherein Brim offers a strongly material analysis of his place of employment, the College of Staten Island (CSI), part of the City University of New York. It is an institution which is significantly underfunded by its political masters, where everything is done 'on a shoe-string

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budget, or no budget at all' (34). CSI is a place where poor queer studies is done and taught, and it illustrates how resources are at the root of the kind of work that can be undertaken in higher education.

The introduction, 'Queer Dinners', sets the tone for the analysis which follows in the first chapter. Brim presents it as a salient fact that a meal for his students, mostly working while studying, may come from a vending machine, in contrast to their peers at residential, four-year institutions. And indeed, at CSI the vending machine may be empty. The second chapter continues the rich-poor distinction, addressing the 'upward mobility myth' of rich queer studies as a sub-field. In so doing, Brim is 'queering the upward mobility that comes with earning a college degree' (61). The third chapter considers 'vocational queer studies' and students who are obliged to work their way through school (102). Here the rich studies discourse of 'preparing students for work' is insensate to the fact that '*poor queer students are already workers, paid and/or unpaid*' (105; original emphasis). The fourth chapter continues the focus on the poor queer classroom, considering how student-mothers have shaped the author's poor queer studies classroom and expanded his understanding of pedagogy, given that student-mothers, from a variety of backgrounds, are especially pressured students. The fifth chapter, considering race and developing a reader of Black queer literature, is closer to culturally, literarily centred versions of queer studies, and addresses the challenge of the unfamiliarity of those in the classroom with the Black queer literature being read and the difficulties of learning and teaching in such a space.

Throughout, *Poor Queer Studies* functions as a pedagogical text with a positive entanglement of writing and world. Brim draws on his own experience teaching poor queer studies, and his experience as a teacher has resulted in writing which is a model of clarity and generosity. There is a table of what 'realizing poor queer studies' looks like in practice (21), interrogating the complicated overlaps of class, race, gender and biography. Existing arguments and debates in the field are addressed, and the stakes of rich queer studies' theories are brought down to earth in the poor queer studies setting. Excellent examples of pedagogical practice are threaded into the text and would be of interest to anyone engaged in teaching in higher education but especially those in under-resourced and precarious environments. He asks: 'How do we teach queer theory to our students, who work for money full-time and take night class?' (41). Brim frames rich queer studies as being at a disadvantage when this class-conscious ques-



tion is asked – with poor queer studies as more than making the best of a difficult situation.

*Poor Queer Studies* is in sympathy with the project of critical higher education studies. The author notes that his analysis sits within the broader context of higher education. The next step would be for both ‘studies’ to get into a more direct dialogue; while there is reference to the scholarship of higher education in Brim’s book, it is only a kind of empirical scene-setting. This book does not avoid all the pitfalls of US scholarship – there are few if any references to other national settings – but this is ameliorated by embracing the institutional context of CSI. This is a virtuous parochialism on which readers can build, where it is not the United States treated as the world but the College of Staten Island taken as a world unto itself.

When Brim describes poor queer studies as a climate, and rich queer studies as a microclimate (141), he offers a timely metaphor and a question. Responses might include the urgency of considering what a self-consciously poor higher education studies can say to its rich counterpart. Allowing the concerns of scholars from rich higher education to dominate the field runs the risk of allowing the conditions of a few to dominate: ‘It doesn’t seem to me that we are all in the same boat, and indeed some of the loudest cries of scarcity come from dry land, that is, from the top of the academy’ (79). An awareness of ‘poor’ is a caution against becoming increasingly detached from the concerns of the wider climate and from the world researchers, students and readers all inhabit.

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