

Balay, Anne (2018) *Semi Queer: Inside the World of Gay, Trans, and Black Truck Drivers*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC.

Review by Sara Smith-Silverman

Sisyphus,¹ one of the narrators in Anne Balay's 2018 book, *Semi Queer: Inside the World of Gay, Trans, and Black Truck Drivers*, explains why she and other transwomen choose to work in long-haul trucking:

I think a lot of transwomen choose this career because it's a place where we can work—we're by ourselves, no one's going to harass us while we're in the truck. When I worked in the printing plant, I was being harassed ... I had my tires sliced, I had nails put under my tires, I had hate messages put up. One day I walked into work and saw a sign: 'All fags must die.' That was in my face every single day. When I'm in the truck I don't have to deal with that. The fact that people hate me 'cause I'm trans, well then they'll hate me, but say hello to my truck. (Balay 8)

This quote by Sisyphus about her experiences as a transgender truck driver encapsulates the major themes explored in *Semi Queer*, particularly the seemingly contradictory fact that transgender women have, in recent years, been increasingly attracted to the masculine career of trucking typically associated with cisgender straight white men. Balay explains that this has only been possible because, as trucking has become more exploitative since the 1980s, it has become more available to workers from marginalized backgrounds who have few other options: transgender people, particularly transwomen, intersex, gay and lesbian workers, black and immigrant workers, and Muslims and Sikhs. As her title makes clear, Balay's focus is on queer truckers, some of them black but many of them white and a handful Latinx, rather than the full range of marginalized truck drivers. In the process of learning how trucking has become much queerer than it once was, we gain an understanding of how the conditions of trucking have worsened.

Like her previous book, *Steel Closets: Voices of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Steelworkers*, out in 2016, Balay's research is largely based on interviews. In this case, she interviewed 66 truckers, which helps the reader gain a better sense of what it's like to be a queer truck driver. Through the use of quotes by queer truckers on almost every page, Balay allows the subjects of her study to speak for themselves, illuminating both the pain and power that comes with being a queer trucker.

Balay's *Semi Queer* is a major contribution to the fairly small field of Queer Labor Studies, particularly for its focus on the experiences of transgender workers, a necessary intervention into

¹ Balay uses pseudonyms for her interviewees throughout the book protect to protect them from unwanted, and potentially harmful, attention.

a discipline so far largely focused on gay and lesbian workers.² As Balay explains, many queer truckers experience trucking as simultaneously empowering and oppressive. They might choose trucking because they can work in isolation, feeling mostly free of constant harassment by co-workers, bosses, and customers. Alone in their trucks, transwomen and men feel empowered to simply be themselves and still make a living. Like other truckers, they also experience the power of driving, single-handedly controlling a large machine as they sit above traffic: as Sisyphus emphasizes, people can hate her because she's trans, 'but say hello to my truck.' Understanding the empowerment felt by trans truckers goes a long way in explaining how it is that trucking has become a queerer kind of labor in recent years, as more trans workers have chosen to make their living in long-haul truck driving.

But because trucking is still dominated by cisgender straight white men who tend to be socially conservative, this isolation can cut queer truckers off from a sense of community with their co-workers. At truck stops many queer drivers stay in their trucks for fear of being insulted, or fear of being propositioned for sex, sexually assaulted, or subject to other forms of violence. Patrick, a black gay man, for instance, told Balay: 'Everybody just kind of assumed that I would blow them—like they were doing me a favor' (126). Gwyneth, a black woman, described how she was once mistaken for a prostitute at a truck stop (66). Liam, a transman—one of the few Balay interviewed—related that he felt safer than trans women truckers because he had an easier time being stealth: 'Oh man, there is no way I'm going to be an out-and-proud trans person out here ... I just feel safe because nobody knows' (16). And Hanna, a white transwoman, told Balay, 'I first knew other truckers read me as female when I got propositioned and then harassed. It's been an everyday part of my job since' (67). Trans truckers also told Balay about frequently being misgendered and the difficulty of accessing bathrooms that align with their gender identity.

Though Balay's focus is on queer truckers, in order to show why trucking companies were willing to hire workers from marginalized identities, *Semi Queer* also exposes the rapidly deteriorating conditions of trucking, what one scholar refers to as 'sweatshops on wheels.'³ Forty years ago, when trucking was more highly unionized and less regulated, truckers were better off. But now, with only 8% of trucking unionized, truckers work long work days (11-14 hours) for little pay (\$30-\$40,000 per year), and are overburdened by regulations that treat them like small children. As one trucker, Bridget, complained, 'I find it the most restrictive, the most unfree thing I have ever done' (5).

Balay's discussion of the ways technology is used to control truck drivers' every movement is particularly enlightening. Electronic logging devices, for instance, transmit data about when trucks are moving, and speed limiters prevent trucks from going over a certain speed. Technology is being used, argues Balay, not for the purpose of ensuring safety on the road or protecting workers' rights,

² For further reading on Queer Labor Studies, see, for example, Anne Balay, *Steel Closets: Voices of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Steelworkers* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Allan Bérubé, *My Desire for History: Essays in Gay, Community, and Labor History* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Miriam Frank, *Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America* (Temple University Press, 2014); and Phil Tiemeyer, *Plane Queer: Labor, Sexuality, and AIDS in the History of Male Flight Attendants* (University of California Press, 2013). Also look for Margot Canaday's forthcoming book project, *Queer Career: Precarious Labor, Law, and Sexuality in Postwar America*.

³ See Michael H. Belzer, *Sweatshops on Wheels: Winners and Losers in Trucking Deregulation* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

but rather to maximize corporate profits. Balay convincingly argues that the decline in truckers' working conditions stems from over-regulation of individual truckers; however, her argument would have been strengthened by a more in-depth discussion of the role of unions in the industry, particularly the de-unionization of trucking starting in the late 1970s. This would have helped to clarify the complex set of factors that have led to the deterioration of trucking conditions, and the subsequent opening up of trucking to transgender, queer and other marginalized workers.

Throughout the book, Balay's careful treatment of race and racism in trucking is noteworthy. In her thought-provoking chapter analyzing the racist attitudes of mostly white—but also some who are black—trans and other queer truck drivers, Balay aims to reveal where these attitudes come from 'and what they mean to the people who profess them' (60), arguing that racism is fundamentally about truckers' anxieties about gender and sexuality. Queer white truckers, and some black queer truckers, reveal their racial resentments when they blame Muslim, Sikh, and Mexican immigrants for undercutting their wages by accepting low pay and by making trucking less safe than it supposedly once was. One white queer trucker, for example, complained that when a truck was pulled over on a shoulder—which was assumed to be unnecessarily dangerous—it was likely 'a hadji doing required prayer,' a racist reference to Muslims (72). Interestingly, contends Balay, queer truckers make arguments about the amplified presence of Muslim, Sikh, and Mexican truckers disrupting normative gender and sexual relations that are similar to those of a socially conservative straight cisgender white male trucker. For example, Maci says that immigrants started 'undercutting us' and now she and other truckers like her can't afford to maintain their own homes and are forced to move back in with their families. These are fairly familiar ideas driving the racial resentments of downwardly mobile working-class people; what's unique to Balay's argument is, as she writes, 'the extra layers of visibility and vulnerability' experienced by 'gay, trans, and black truckers' that add to their frustrations and, for some, bolster their racial resentments (83).

However, there is some room for improvement in Balay's treatment of race. The title of the book indicates Balay's intention to focus on the experiences of black truck drivers, but this aspect of her study is less developed. The revealing handful of anecdotes about anti-black racism, such as mentions of racist hiring and firing practices, and the ways in which black truckers feel unsafe among white truckers, feel too infrequent. Additionally, she mentions that there are increasing numbers of Somali immigrant drivers, as well as Middle-Eastern and South Asian truckers, but she didn't interview them. Balay explains their absences in two ways. First, none of the Somali drivers she talked to identified as queer, and thus were not a part of her study. And, second, she didn't have the cultural capital necessary as a queer white woman to start conversations with Sikh and Muslim truckers. I couldn't help but wonder, though, if Balay had looked a little harder, or asked for help from somebody who was Sikh or Muslim, if she would have been able to write a book more inclusive of this rapidly expanding population of truckers.

Overall, Anne Balay's *Semi Queer* is not only a much-needed contribution to Queer Labor Studies, but also a compellingly written book worth reading for anyone with an interest in working-class studies. It tracks shifting labor conditions in an important sector of the economy, as they deteriorate and attract workers from marginalized backgrounds. The study is at its strongest in Balay's discussion of trans truckers; her research clearly demonstrates that what defines an occupation as queer (or queer-ish) is evolving as more scholars explore the world of queer labor.

Reviewer Bio

Sara Smith-Silverman is an Assistant Professor of History at American River College. Her scholarship focuses on social movement and labor history of the U.S., with a particular emphasis on queer labor history.