

*Steel Closets: Voices of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Steelworkers*

By Anne Balay

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. Pp. xi, 172. Illustrations, appendix, works cited, index. \$34.95.)

In 2010 and 2011, Anne Balay interviewed forty gay, lesbian, and transgender steelworkers in and around Gary, Indiana. They are the narrators of *Steel Closets: Voices of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Steelworkers*. While Balay was conducting her interviews, the national movement for LGBTQ rights was making strides. LGBTQ people today are generally more open about their sexuality and their relationships; our society displays more tolerance of sexual difference. But this is largely an urban middle-class perspective. The men and women Balay interviewed tell another story: there has been no emancipation for working-class queers (to use Balay's shorthand terminology) in the hyper-masculine industrial workplace epitomized by the steel mill. For LGBTQ steelworkers, the fear of being outed is still so great that only one narrator—a Canadian steelworker who is transgender—is identified by her real name. Most interviewees, Balay says, were "incredulous" to discover they were not alone.

*Steel Closets* makes important contributions to the fields of queer and working-class studies as well as to labor studies. A major strength of this book is the extent to which it expands our understanding of who LGBTQ people are; where they live and work; and how their sexual iden-

tity and sexual practices are shaped by the culture of their workplaces and communities—in this case, the steel mills and working-class communities of northwestern Indiana. Another of the book's strengths is Balay's effort to explain why, in a period of progress for the broader LGBTQ community, the closet door is shut tight for queer steelworkers and, by extension, other workers in similar circumstances.

Balay uses the steel mill—a unionized workplace with good pay and some of the best benefits in the region—as a framework for her study. Most steelworkers cannot afford to lose their jobs, but without protected status under federal law and without an anti-discrimination clause in the union contract, LGBTQ workers are vulnerable. The shop floor is a dangerous place and workers rely on one another—to be alienated from the crew is to risk life or limb. LGBTQ workers remain in the closet, under constant pressure to participate in an ultra-macho culture.

*Steel Closets* is a study in contradictions. Balay skillfully analyzes the plant's complex and often ambiguous gender and sexual dynamics. The lesbians she interviewed are among a handful of women working in a male domain. As such, they are subject to daily hostility and even systematic

oppression, worst for women of color who generally hold the lowest-paid, most backbreaking jobs in the mill. The narrators report varying degrees of sexual harassment by male co-workers. But for some lesbian workers—especially those who identify as butch—working in a “man’s world” can have its rewards. By adopting a rough, “one-of-the-boys” demeanor, they can fend off assaults and gain the respect of their male counterparts in the process. Mill work can be an opportunity to pursue and enjoy masculine desires and behaviors that are more acceptable in the mill than in the outside community.

In contrast, gay men, surrounded by male co-workers, must be very guarded in how they respond to co-workers they find attractive. As Balay notes, some conceal any telltale hint of gayness behind an exaggerated swagger. All of them endure almost constant homophobic banter. Meanwhile, a surprising number of homophobes engage in male-on-male sex in bathrooms or secluded spots in the mill—sometimes unwittingly with a closeted gay worker. These encounters are acceptable only because—presumably—they are between macho straight guys who, as one narrator puts it, just “like sex ... wherever and however.”

Working twelve-hour shifts, steelworkers spend more waking hours with each other than with their families. At work and in the local bars, they talk about their personal lives and problems. Many of the LGBTQ

narrators say they like their jobs and describe their co-workers as “family.” But there are painful exclusions. Despite the air of camaraderie, LGBTQ workers are alone in the crowd. They cannot even share their plans for Saturday night.

Finally, Balay examines the role played by the United Steel Workers (USW). She does so from a pro-union perspective, sympathetic to the problems the union has faced as the steel industry has radically declined. Among her narrators, most also support the union, although some are ambivalent. What emerges overall is a depressing picture. Most LGBTQ steelworkers do not file harassment complaints with the union—sometimes because they are afraid, and sometimes because they are skeptical of the union’s commitment to LGBTQ rights. At the time Balay conducted her interviews, the USW did not include sexual orientation or gender identity in the anti-discrimination clause of its contract. In 2014, however, delegates to the union’s annual convention passed a broad civil and human rights resolution that “support[s] legislative and collective bargaining initiatives that include sexual orientation and gender identity protections”—not a mandate but a big step forward.

In the end, the question remains: How do LGBTQ steelworkers get out of the closet? Certainly the union can do more; education also plays a role. And Balay is right to say that individual agency is important, that

sharing personal stories can lead to a collective movement. But she offers few predictions. Forty workers had the courage to come forward in a hostile environment. Now, with the USW's statement of support for LGBTQ rights, a strategic and coordinated "coming-out" campaign may be possible. First, get this book out to local unions and LGBTQ organi-

zations—and to their allies in the struggle for civil and human rights.

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### *Bluegrass Renaissance: The History and Culture of Central Kentucky, 1792-1852*

Edited by James C. Klotter and Daniel Rowland

(Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012. Pp. 400. Notes, illustrations, index. \$40.00.)

*Bluegrass Renaissance* consists of thirteen essays written by an eclectic group of scholars. Editors James Klotter, the state historian of Kentucky, and Daniel Rowland, a scholar in the University of Kentucky's history department, deserve credit for producing an impressive work. The well-crafted and well-researched essays illuminate the unique culture that flourished in the Central Bluegrass region during the antebellum era. Individuals who research and teach Kentucky history in the state's universities and public schools will find in these chapters a wealth of information and insight to share with their classes.

Klotter's opening essay, "Central Kentucky's 'Athens of the West' Image in the Nation and in History," portrays Lexington in the early 1800s, when it

was a swiftly growing city equipped with private schools, thriving businesses, and numerous cultural opportunities. Flying in the face of the city's progressive image, however, was the brutality of child labor and black slavery. Klotter points out that Lexington declined by the mid-1830s as a result of a stagnating economy, a devastating cholera epidemic, and the growing use of steamboats for travel and commerce. No large river ran past Lexington for the steamboats to ply. The essay deftly captures both the positive and negative features of life in the region.

Lexington was also home to Transylvania University, established in 1780. Mollie Eblen, a Transylvania University public relations officer, and Tom Eblen, a Lexington newspaper columnist, trace in their