

# What's Left of Queer?: Immigration, Sexuality, and Affect in a Neoliberal World

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## Contents

- [My Story, Part 1](#)
- [My Story, Part 2](#)
- [Gay Marriage and "Gay" as \(...\)](#)
- [Queer Immigration Issues](#)
- [What Cost Labor?: Neoliberalis](#)
- [What Kind of Story?](#)

## My Story, Part 1

"You should know more about Islam." I was at an anti-war event organized by my friend D., and was being admonished by a smug, white, almost-retired Marxist professor, the kind that's all too common in the Rogers Park neighborhood, an area known for its vaunted progressive politics. He'd just been introduced to me, with my noticeably Muslim first name, and had promptly asked me to clarify some point about Islam. I'd told him I didn't know, a response which drew the aforementioned words from him. I wanted to sear Mr. Marxist (henceforth to be known as Mr. M.) with angry barbs. D. and I both started to tell Mr. M that I'm an atheist, and I also wanted to turn the tables on him: How dare you, I wanted to say, assume anything about me, based on the color of my skin and my name? And even if I were Muslim, why should I know more about Islam? You're white, so you must be, oh, a Protestant? But I didn't, mostly because he was quite old, approaching 80 perhaps, and I was afraid of giving him a heart attack. And, I'll admit, because I didn't want to "make trouble" in what was partly a social setting.

The man looked at me, and then turned away dismissively. I had failed to capture his interest. He'd clearly hoped to impress me with his recognition of my Muslim name, and to then proceed to a conversation about how oppressed Muslims and immigrants (my accent gives away my foreign origins) are by white America (to prove his lefty credentials). But I had failed him miserably. I didn't fit the mold. I was not abject enough for him.

In speaking about immigration rights, activists and supporters for the same often decry the "Right," that hazy entity they see as the scourge of a progressive immigration reform agenda. The lefty-liberals who populate Rogers's Park and my own adopted "homeland" of Uptown have kept the city a blue dot in a sea of red, but they're also a smug lot. I moved here from Indiana, and I'm still constantly appreciative of living in a place where there is at least some form of progressive politics. But, over the years, I've grown tired of the smugness of the lefties and have even come to appreciate the forthrightness and sheer clarity of the "Right."

That's not to say that I support the minutemen, or that I care for the paranoid narratives about immigration promulgated by Rush Limbaugh and Jim Oberweiss. But at least I know what to expect

from them. With the putative left, I'm constantly being blindsided by its sheer smugness and arrogance, as was evident with Mr. M. The left doesn't know what to do with the immigrant bodies it encounters on a daily basis, outside of the prefabricated narratives of pathos and abjection it reads in "progressive" narratives about immigration. It's a profound symptom of neoliberalism that the "left" is as problematic on immigration as the right. It seeks the comfort of legibility in immigration battles.

Hence Mr. M's desire to fix me as the Muslim woman with a tale to tell about Islam. Faced with a quandary as simple as a woman with a Muslim name who wasn't Muslim and an atheist, he preferred to simply turn away. The legibility of the story that I, in his mind, ought to have presented - the abject Muslim woman who could be the authentic native informant on Islam - was now muddied and unclear.

It may seem like a stretch, to use a random brief conversation to extrapolate a larger text about the left's failure to fully engage with the politics of immigration. But part of the problem with Chicago politics in particular and left politics in general is that its adherence to a sentimental and nostalgic view of the Other is deeply embedded in a politics of abjection and rescue. And this failure is manifested in the everyday encounters like the one I describe above, even as marches, rallies, and anti-war events portray a strongly analytic anti-establishment "left." There are consequences to pay for this perception of what immigrants should be like. Immigration rights activists like myself find themselves having to define themselves within preconceived narratives while struggling to craft alternatives paradigms for a truly progressive reform agenda. As a result, we're often forced to "tell our stories" in abject and humiliating ways that render us apolitical creatures, in need of rescue by our white allies.

Such narratives of abjection cast the immigrant in affective terms - as the kind of person with a story to share, or as a native informant who provides an authentic narrative of immigration. It blinds us to the fact that immigration today is about the quest for cheap labor, and that the immigrant is primarily a worker caught in that quest. In the context of queer immigration reform, as I'll indicate below, such affective story-telling denies that queers are anything but bourgeois subjects whose lives are divorced from the murky realities of labor organizing.

For the remainder of this piece, I shall use the words left and right not in the sense of any fixed ideologies but as the hazy memories of what used to be an ideological divide. Neoliberalism's gift is that the distinctions no longer matter.

## **My Story, Part 2**

I came out of graduate school with a degree in English, specializing in critical theory; I was the bastard child of queer theory and deconstruction. After moving to Chicago to work as an adjunct in University of Illinois at Chicago's (UIC) Department of English, I became weary of the intellectual paucity of queer theory. Busting binaries had seemed like a meaningful struggle in graduate school, but that does nothing to address economic inequality. I was tired of the futile, gerundive act of "queering" that theorists delighted in, of projects undertaken in the naïve belief that simply finding a queer subtext in any narrative could lead to some vaguely articulated radical change. I turned to forms of activism and organizing, only to be faced, eventually, by the political bankruptcy of a gay movement that was hurtling towards gay marriage as the only worthwhile cause to embrace.

I've been against marrying and marriage since the age of eight, and yet I don't see marriage or married people as the central problem. If you'll forgive the cliché, many of my dearest friends - and quite a few of my lovers - are married. But marriage ought to be a social and cultural issue. My

problem with the gay marriage movement has been that it argues for the prioritizing of coupledness and “committed relationships” as a substitute for any substantial change. It’s one thing to argue that gays and lesbians ought to be able to marry because everybody else can. But it’s quite another to argue that gay marriage is the capstone of gay organizing, or that gays and lesbians ought to be able to get married in order to garner the benefits of their spouses, or that gays and lesbians in relationships deserve more than their uncoupled brethren. The arguments for gay marriage ignore the basic truth that not everyone has a job that gives them benefits, leave alone allowing them to share the same with partners. And people should not feel compelled to marry for benefits, especially in a time when the institution of marriage is less attractive than ever before. The idea that marriage should give you something as simple as health care directly contradicts the struggle for universal health care. Health care should go to everyone, regardless of marital status.

I eventually turned to organizing around queer immigration issues. This came about in part because the queer radical organizing scene in Chicago had imploded under the weight of gay marriage. I was, from 1999 to 2003, a member of the now-defunct group, Queer to the Left. I’d joined Q2L because of its strong critique of mainstream gay organizing which, even before gay marriage, was obsessed with cultivating an image of gays and lesbians as bourgeois subjects who deserved “a place at the table” for being normal and nice. In its heyday, Q2L critiqued the gentrification efforts of wealthy lesbians and gay men in Uptown, and it worked in solidarity with organizations like Community of Uptown Residents for Affordability to preserve low-cost and affordable housing.

But gay marriage soon took over national and local organizing in the gay community, and the group filled up with white gay men for whom this was a defining issue. Contrary to the group’s original anti-capitalist and anti-heteronormative principles, this new set of members began working on pro-marriage initiatives, all of which became too much for me to stomach. By then, I was also the only woman, the only brown person, and the only lesbian, leading a friend to dryly comment, “If you leave the group, we’ll lose at least three of our major constituencies.” I left shortly before Q2L imploded on its own, struggling to define itself as a left-queer group despite its new pro-gay-marriage plank.

Around the same time, I was feeling the pinch of exploitation at my “job,” one which mimicked the structural responsibilities of a tenure-track position but with more onerous responsibilities (adjuncts taught three classes per semester, faculty taught between two to none). Being an adjunct showed that academia had already become a neoliberal fantasy with its massive exploitation of cheap labor, a condition that closely replicates the kind of labor exploitation that haunts immigration. My life as a queer is inextricably interwoven with my life as an ex-adjunct and as an activist with a history in local organizing, with all its muddiness and frustrations.

I bring all this to bear upon my discussion of what a progressive and queer immigration reform agenda should look like in order to demonstrate that there is no pure “queer” agenda here and that the categories of “queer” and “immigrant” are intertwined in ways that the gay movement and those who claim to fight for a queer agenda refuse to recognize. I also want to demonstrate that the personal is not political but, rather, that only the political is political and that personal narratives are a distraction from issues of labor. I could tell you that I lived, loved, and lost and lived and loved again and detail my personal life as a queer who happens to work on immigration.

But that would be irrelevant to the larger struggle on immigration which remains, properly, not an affirmation of the status quo for the documented, but a mass mobilization of the millions of undocumented who are targeted and brutalized even as their labor is extracted and exploited. A progressive - and queer — immigration reform agenda sees the exploitation of immigration labor as its paramount concern, and understands that the personal stories it elicits from immigrants cannot sustain a long-term reform package. These stories might provide comfort about what we know about immigrants. But they disable our understanding of the economic crisis of neoliberalism, of which the

battle over immigration is a symptom. In the context of the gay movement, immigration is overcast by the new reality of what it means to be "LGBT" today - to be defined by a class category rather than any sense of politics.

## **Gay Marriage and "Gay" as a Class Identity**

In the United States, "Gay" has become a separate class identity. This is typical of a widespread feeling in the U.S., even among the most beleaguered workers, that they must distinguish themselves as professionals, separate from blue-collar workers. As an adjunct organizer at UIC (I was the Lecturer Representative), I once sent out an e-mail about unionization to which one person responded, "Are you trying to tell me that I'm the same as a truck driver?" (Answer: "Yes.") This discomfort about being classified as workers is a problem that threatens unionizing more generally, in a social context where workers' rights are seen as inimical to the "American Dream." Such an attitude is aided in no small part by megacorporations like Wal-Mart that threaten workers with layoffs if they join unions.

The "gay movement" of today strongly relies on the fiction and fantasy that gays are uniformly of the same class background and that they all desire one kind of life (bourgeois, happily married, and mysteriously and universally endowed with health care benefits). Some of the force behind the thrust towards gay marriage is based on emotion and sentiment, and those operate on the assumption that gays everywhere are the same in terms of class identity. In this fantasy land where every gay person automatically gets rights and benefits upon marriage, there are no layoffs or accidents at the workplace. In effect, to be gay in America is to be a separate class identity.

But what of poorer gays and lesbians? Factions of the movement already have an answer to that. One local group writes triumphantly that poorer gays and lesbians would especially benefit from marriage rights because it would give them access to benefits. But that presupposes that there are any benefits to share in the first, and that's less likely in the lower wage workplace. And we ought to ask: how is promulgating marriage as a cure for economic insecurity any different from the Right demanding that women on welfare undergo marriage counseling and making it difficult for single mothers to get assistance? Why should marriage, of all things be the savior of class-based economic woes?

The problem here is that, in the shadow of neoliberalism, identity - gender, ethnicity, race, or sexuality - has become separated from the pressing workplace issues that define us as workers. Under a neoliberal framework, your identity as part of a social and cultural group will be protected more readily than your rights as a worker. If your co-worker calls you a derogatory name that insults your heritage/sexuality/gender/race, he/she will be punished swiftly and perhaps face a termination of employment. If you get injured on the job, or fired without notice, the chances of any retribution for the same are difficult to impossible. This has far-reaching implications in terms of how we conceive of immigration rights, and the fact that we prefer to think of immigrants as persons with stories - not as workers. In the context of queer organizing over immigration, the movement has been hijacked by mainstream gay groups that define the agenda in very narrow terms, separating "queer" from "worker."

## **Queer Immigration Issues**

What are the issues taken up, recently, by queer groups that claim to fight for immigration? They are: the HIV bar, which disallows people with HIV/AIDS from entering the country or gaining

permanent residency (now lifted, in a fashion); bi-national couples; and asylum on the grounds of sexual orientation. The last is meant to benefit those persecuted in their home countries on account of their sexuality.

What are the issues for the immigrant rights community? At this time, one that leaves immigrants most vulnerable is that of “no-match letters.” According to recent legislation that’s gaining traction across the country, employers are bound to verify that all their employees have social security numbers that match their names. Those without a match are reported for deportation. The system is rife with problems, not the least of which is that even those with real social security numbers mistakenly get flagged. More importantly, it places the emphasis on catching “illegals” rather than on examining the systemic reasons why we have so many undocumented people willing to risk their livelihoods with fake social security cards. And then, of course, there are the raids on factories and workplaces across the country, which allow immigration officials to sweep in, arrest, and jail indefinitely/or deport thousands of low-wage workers. There is the brutalization of the undocumented and the fact that thousands are disappeared from low-income neighborhoods, never to be seen again by their communities.

Why do these two sets of issues seem so irreconcilable? Why does it seem like queer immigrants have nothing in common with immigrants? Why does the mainstream gay community, once able to forge alliances with labor, now pretend that work and exploitation are no longer part of a gay identity? To get to the answer, it’s necessary to understand how gay organizing has shifted over the past thirty years.

In his introduction to the volume, *Media/Queered: Visibility and Its Discontents*, Kevin Barnhurst writes incisively that “One outcome of gay and lesbian liberation has been the rise of the full-time homosexual, who works at the crossroads of queer and straight communities.” He also points to the rise of queer organizations in the wake of the AIDS crisis, when we had to seek and create our own health-care and advocacy services. In the long run, the creation of a cadre of LGBT professionals has benefited the community. But it has also meant that in order to be gay anywhere but especially in the workplace, we must repudiate or lose sight of other aspects of our lives, including, at times, our right to collective bargaining. In an essay titled “Professional Homosexuals,” in the same volume, Katherine Sender writes about an “engineer and cochair of a gay and lesbian employee group in a high-tech company” which “had banned such groups for years out of fear they would function as trade unions.”

In this way, what looks like a progressive agenda – enabling people to live openly within their identities – is in fact a classic neoliberal bait-and-switch. You can have your identity, or you can have your rights as a worker. But it’s increasingly difficult to have both.

## **What Cost Labor?: Neoliberalism, Immigration, and the Use of Affect**

Theorists of neoliberalism, like David Harvey and Naomi Klein, have explained its chief characteristic of intense privatization in terms of the financial institutions and structures that govern our daily lives. However, in order to survive as it does, neoliberalism also evokes affect and emotion. In other words, to dull and distract from the pain of privatization, we need to feel good about ourselves as human beings and as creatures of identity, people with stories. This is especially evident in the current discourse on immigration reform.

Immigration is often portrayed as a crisis. But the real crisis is that engendered by the thirst for cheap labor, legislation like NAFTA, and that people are compelled to move from north to south and from east to west at the risk of their lives in order to find a subsistence living. The unrelenting flow

of undocumented people between borders is a symptom of the crisis, not the crisis itself. The constant portrayal of immigration as a “crisis” allows for the dehumanization of immigrants.

In order to combat this dehumanization and to help the public make sense of undocumented labor, the left has seen no recourse but to use the rhetoric of “good” immigrants. This requires the use of affect and emotion packed into stories about worthy, hard-working immigrants who revitalize their neighborhoods and contribute to their local economies. In the United States, the concept of “family reunification” has long been the cornerstone of immigration reform attempts. The logic is that the plight of the undocumented would best be alleviated if their families were allowed to join them here. In the last round of immigration battles, several groups vehemently argued that the issues of H1-B workers were irreconcilable with those of immigrants torn from their families. This, again, placed immigration within the realm of affect and neatly erased the fact that immigrants with families are also workers, not just family members. “Family reunification” was the trump card of a large segment of the immigrant rights community - and it failed to get us anywhere.

With regard to immigrants in particular, the popular notion of “family” is one where a happy, cozy home, redolent with the scent of spices and home-cooked food, provides comfort and lasting values to generations of immigrants and their offspring. But what happens to those who can’t be defined by such families, by choice or otherwise? What happens to, for instance, queer immigrants who’re disowned by their families or have no desire to belong to communities where they can’t be openly gay? Or to those, queer or not, who face abuse in their families? Exclusion, homophobia, and abuse are not particular to immigrant families - so why do we assume that these are more idyllic and happier and safer than “American” families?

Moreover, the rhetoric of “family reunification” erases the labor issues that are integral to how families work within their adopted neighborhoods and cities. By rendering the family in affective terms, we’re allowed to forget that neoliberalism increasingly deploys entire families as labor. Take, for instance, the popular mythology of immigrant-run family stores that help to revitalize neighborhoods. In fact, these, like the low-paid immigrants who live in the surrounding area, help to prepare neighborhoods for gentrification. Eventually, the better-off immigrants might join the ranks of the gentrifiers, while the rest are pushed further into the outskirts of the city, bused in for construction work in “better” neighborhoods.

In such ways, the mainstream immigration rights community struggles with the question of how to make immigrants most legible to the “rest” of America (we haven’t reconciled ourselves to the fact that over 12 million immigrants are “us”). As things stand, labor is constantly divorced from the laborers themselves. Currently, in the wake of the unexpected failure of the 2006 negotiations, there are signs that labor-friendly groups like March 10 Movement are returning with an emphasis on immigration rights as worker’s rights. Such an emphasis is largely lost upon the queer community, which still takes on the immigration issues that can most widely evoke affect and, hence, are most likely to succeed.

## **What Kind of Story?**

What would it mean to craft a truly progressive queer immigration reform agenda, given the limitations that face us and given the fact that both the leftists among us and the mainstream press demand the more legible stories of pathos and abjection? Is it even possible to “tell a different story” and to persuade readers and fellow activists alike to engage in a more useful systemic analysis? Does and should “queer” matter? Given the mainstream and often pro-capitalist and anti-labor impulses of the gay movement, is it even useful to conceive of a queer immigration agenda?

In 2008, a group of us from CLIA (Chicago LGBTQ Immigrants Alliance) organized a one-day forum titled *Immigration at the Margins: Day Laborers, Sex workers, Domestic Violence & HIV*. As one of the key organizers, I'd been especially keen on the topic of sex trafficking. My previous research indicated that much of the hype around the subject came about as a result of the media's fascination with the sexually salacious stories about beautiful young girls raped and trapped by greedy smugglers. I also knew that the stories about sex trafficking inevitably distracted from the issue of labor trafficking. Thousands of workers are smuggled across national and state lines every day, and housed in horrific conditions with little to no wages, but the media finds their stories not sexy enough.

But then we began hearing about day workers in California being compelled to perform sex work. Was there any truth to this, and would this somehow confirm the idea of sex trafficking as a widespread phenomenon? Jessica Acee, then of Latino Union, debunked the story as media hype but also astutely pointed out that, "In a sense, day laborers, doing sex work or not, are already selling their bodies, being exploited or being survivors." Acee's comments exemplified the primary purpose behind *Immigration at the Margins* and demonstrates a key point for us to keep in mind as we move forward in our discussions about immigration and immigrants: that there can be no neat divisions between the kinds of labor performed by immigrants, and we benefit from a renewed focus on labor and its connection to issues of gender and sexuality. Such a focus can only come about when we consider the queerly gendered contexts within which labor operates.

The case of sex trafficking, and the media obsession, is a case in point. As Acee pointed out, the stories both sexualize and demonize the immigrant, based on gender. Within this set of narratives, the victims are beautiful, long-haired, woeful women caught in networks of rape and torture. Over and over, the discourse on sex trafficking pretends that there is no labor involved. It does not acknowledge that women and possibly even men trade sex voluntarily, or that immigrants might also be sex workers, or that sex work is itself a form of labor. Sex, partly for salacious and pornographic reasons, becomes a way to imagine the sexualized immigrant woman or the dominant and brutal immigrant male (even though traffickers may in fact be significantly American). Sex, in this context, offers comfort about our views of immigrant women as abjected Others in need of rescue.

And such stories ignore the realities of sex trade for those who can not be classified or recognized as immigrants or queers. What do we do with the stories of young women and men, often queer, often not, who trade sex acts for protection from law enforcement officers? Who trade sex for not being turned in, and whose sexual identity cannot be counted because they don't care to be counted, or because their lives don't allow them the luxury of being out and proud? The gay community, in constant search of validating and respectable narratives, can't even see those who live multiple lives as low-wage workers, undocumented people, and sex workers.

And yet, these stories do count and can contribute to a larger systemic reappraisal of what counts as a progressive immigration reform agenda. It's important to remember that Acee, who is herself not queer-identified and represented a non-queer organization, brought to the table a stunning analysis of how gender, sexuality, and labor work in the framework of a neoliberal drive towards cheap labor. The point here is simply that a queer immigration reform agenda which centralizes labor has less to do with locating actual queers and narratives and more to do with the particular analytic and activist lens that's possible within a queer framework. To only emphasize our relationships, our families, and our love, such as they are, in uncomplicated terms that are both heteronormative and homonormative is to deny the potency of a queer analysis and to buy into a simplistic narrative about lesbians and gays being "just like us."

Personal stories can help to make systemic conditions more easily understood. But is there a way to use them without buying into pathos and abjection? As we move forward to what most progressives

are dearly hoping will be a full-scale change in administration, we might start to ask ourselves about the costs and downfalls of telling stories. What tropes and emotions govern them? If they came from angry immigrants who spoke up forcefully and not as abject humans, would we be inclined to listen? Can we assume that our leftist politics insulates us from the need to examine our own ideologies and othering practices? Can we work with stories that provide no comfort about the goodness of our land and the fairness of the American Dream?

We need to refuse the narratives of abjection that are routinely forced upon us. They only render us immobile creatures, begging for help. We are all neoliberals now. We're all selling our bodies, our lives, our stories to the media and to provide comfort to ourselves. Those stories have to be challenged and reworked or we lose sight of the larger story of economic exploitation, at our peril. And, unlike my response to Mr. M., we have to be prepared to make trouble in doing so.

**Yasmin Nair**

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**P.S.**

\* From Immigrant City Chicago:

[http://www.uic.edu/jaddams/hull/immigrantcitychicago/essays/nair\\_leftofqueer.html](http://www.uic.edu/jaddams/hull/immigrantcitychicago/essays/nair_leftofqueer.html)