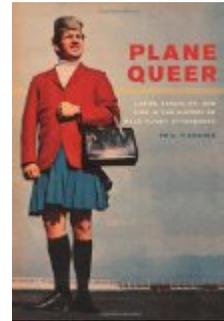


Phil Tiemeyer. *Plane Queer: Labor, Sexuality, and AIDS in the History of Male Flight Attendants*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013. xi + 288 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-27477-8.

Reviewed by Katherine Turk
Published on H-Law (July, 2013)
Commissioned by Christopher R. Waldrep



Sexuality, Labor, and the Law at Thirty Thousand Feet

In *Plane Queer: Labor, Sexuality and AIDS in the History of Male Flight Attendants*, Phil Tiemeyer situates the male flight attendant as both symbol and agent in the struggles over sex, gender, and sexuality in the law and in the workplace that defined the twentieth century. Using an impressive array of sources and alternating between fine-grained and broad, conceptual analysis, Tiemeyer details the “undulations of tolerance and discrimination” experienced by men who performed this feminized labor (p. 7). Tiemeyer demonstrates that male flight attendants’ fight against homophobia was a civil rights struggle that bore fruit for other minorities, just as fighting racism and sexism was essential to the fight for gay rights. A legal, labor, and social history that places sexuality at its center, *Plane Queer* is essential reading for scholars attempting to understand how the development of civil rights law, corporate strategy, and social movements have intersected to produce the freedoms and degradations American workers experience today.

Each of Tiemeyer’s eight chapters is grounded in changes in the aviation industry, gender norms, the law, and workers’ experiences. In the first chapter, Tiemeyer demonstrates that male flight attendants in the 1930s carved out a niche as dapper “stewards” of the cosmopolitan lifestyle that nascent carriers sought to peddle. Yet by the end of the decade, new technologies paved the way for bigger planes and more comfortable rides, and airlines took steps to rebrand flying as safe and appropriate for women and children. In renovated cabins

that were more cozy than austere, the appropriateness of “male hostesses” was cast into doubt. The second and third chapters explore the male flight attendant’s near-complete extinction at mid-century. Here, too, Tiemeyer shows how structural changes in the aviation industry and evolving gender norms were the cause. Immediately after the war, the glut of aircraft and intense competition within the industry forced airlines to streamline their operations. Replacing men with considerable seniority with young women slashed labor costs. With the straight, white, male customer in mind, airlines began to emphasize flight attendants’ emotional labor and physical beauty as symbols of their brand. Further, American ideals of masculinity came to privilege “the ruggedness and adventuring of a soldier,” a model that undermined the male flight attendant’s legitimacy (p. 9). Thus, by the 1950s, most airlines exclusively hired women for the job.

The remaining chapters detail men’s efforts to manipulate law and corporate policy in order to secure and hold onto flight attendant positions. Chapter 4 restores gays to their rightful place in 1960s movements for workers’ rights, expertly analyzing how sex equality laws opened new possibilities for men who sought feminized jobs. Tiemeyer shows how conservative policymakers invoked the specter of the male flight attendant to counter the notion that the sexual division of labor should be eroded. Yet men fighting to be flight attendants were among the first plaintiffs—male or female—to test Title VII’s reach. Their victory chipped away

at some of the most degrading elements of the job and opened the door for women's legal efforts to enter male-dominated jobs. Tiemeyer thus shatters scholars' widely held assumption that civil rights at work trickled down from African Americans to women to homosexuals. The fifth chapter details how the 1970s culture of liberation at times forged alliances between, and at other times divided male and female flight attendants. In particular, much of female flight attendants' activism was directed at de-sexualizing the job, while male flight attendants did not share that priority. Chapters 6 and 7 explore how the male flight attendant's struggles were reshaped by the AIDS crisis. Here, Tiemeyer's maps juxtaposing the simultaneous spread of AIDS and emergence of new flight patterns that pulled airline employees to hub cities are particularly compelling. Fears about contagion and the myth of "patient zero" stoked homophobic reactions from airlines and customers that threatened to ground male flight attendants once more. In the final chapter, Tiemeyer considers the mixed outcomes of male flight attendants' struggles. Men's access to flight attendant jobs seems secure, as corporations have extended parity to gay workers as part of efforts to court gay customers. Yet relying on voluntary corporate actions privileges relatively wealthy gay flyers over the working-class gays who serve them on board, as the flight attendant job has been stripped of the benefits that made it desirable in the first place.

Among *Plane Queer's* many strong points, I found two to be most prominent. First, Tiemeyer demonstrates that sites of labor are also places where workers' sexual identities are produced, consumed, and policed. Scholars often reference the fact that race, gender, and class identities are social constructs, and by situating male flight attendants as "people with fluid legal standing and evolving economic value," Tiemeyer excavates the forces responsible for that construction (p. 13). Male flight attendants sought the right to stay on the job, and often, to express a gay identity at work. In so doing, they came into frequent conflict with brand-conscious employers attempting to keep tight control over which identities workers could embody. By unearthing how these struggles between workers and employers shaped the development of homophobia and gay identity, Tiemeyer also shows how assumptions about the essential differences between the sexes and appropriate gender expression are

infused into workplace relationships and into jobs themselves. Second, *Plane Queer* demonstrates the uneven legacy of the civil rights revolution for service workers. Tiemeyer unearths the androcentric assumptions that made it easier to understand women who sought entry into male-dominated jobs than men who pursued the opposite. Yet he also reveals that men's access to feminized jobs proved a pyrrhic victory as those jobs were gutted of their middle-class elements. Female-dominated service work has remained effectively gendered because it retained the worst elements of feminization—little flexibility, low pay, and few benefits—even as such jobs become integrated. Men have more access to feminized service jobs than ever before, but the disfavored status of those jobs has only intensified.

In light of Tiemeyer's effective argument that homophobia, sexism, and racism are mutually reinforcing pressures that structure labor relationships and disempower workers, he might have probed the potential differences between these forces and the struggles against them a bit more. As I was reading this study, I wondered whether, in the heyday of male flight attendants' activism, their push for "queer equality" encompassed a more radical threat to patriarchal workplace relations than movements for sex or race equality—which, by the 1970s, law and jurisprudence increasingly framed as integration and non-distinction between identity groups. Did queer equality proponents' demands for freer and worker-controlled gender expression hold the potential to both de-gender jobs and make them less dehumanizing in ways that would give all workers more control over their working conditions? If that potential once existed, does it still? Further, Tiemeyer also might have compared men's struggles as flight attendants with their similar campaigns in other jobs. In particular, I wondered whether gay men's fight to be "out" met more success in feminized jobs than in male-typed jobs. Might it have been easier for homophones to accept a gay male flight attendant than to accept a gay man in a more traditionally masculine role, such as professional football player, astronaut, or doctor? Such analysis would only strengthen Tiemeyer's claim that a deeply gendered logic still structures the labor force. But these questions are small in light of *Plane Queer's* tremendous contributions to the histories of American law, labor, gender, and sexuality.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-law>

Citation: Katherine Turk. Review of Tiemeyer, Phil, *Plane Queer: Labor, Sexuality, and AIDS in the History of Male Flight Attendants*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. July, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39051>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.