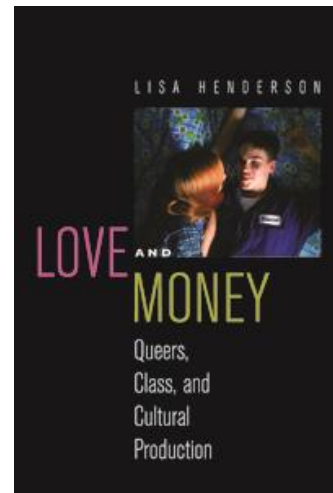


Lisa Henderson, **Love and Money: Queers, Class, and Cultural Production (Critical Cultural Communication)**. New York and London: New York University Press, 2013, 224 pp., \$70.00 (hardcover), \$23.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Cynthia Chris
College of Staten Island, CUNY, USA

Just over two decades ago, in 1992, Colorado citizens voted to approve a constitutional amendment to prevent the state, and any municipality within it, from recognizing gay men and lesbians as members of a protected class. The Supreme Court struck down the provision in a 6–3 decision. Justice Antonin Scalia wrote the dissenting opinion, arguing that “those who engage in homosexual conduct tend to reside in disproportionate numbers in certain communities . . . have high disposable income . . . [and] possess political power much greater than their numbers, both locally and statewide” (*Romer v. Evans*, 517 U.S. 620 [1996] [Scalia, dissenting]). Why would such a privileged community need protection? And where did Scalia get such an idea?



Impulses to blame TV, however habitual, might not pan out. *Will & Grace* (1998–2005), the popular series featuring a gay male protagonist who just happened to be an Ivy-League educated lawyer, wasn’t yet on the air when Scalia fretted about the wealthy queer cabal running Colorado. In fact, America had not yet even confronted news that Ellen DeGeneres was a lesbian (the “coming out” episode of her sitcom aired April 30, 1997). Previously, with few fleeting exceptions, sympathetic portrayals of homosexuals were notoriously few and far between on the small screen.

So how did Scalia decide that gay communities are economic and political powerhouses, compared to their straight neighbors? As it turns out, a study that informed this portion of his dissent used data from upscale market research involving gay consumers to suggest that *all* gays are upscale consumers; it was refuted by the report *Income Inflation: The Myth of Affluence Among Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Americans* (Badgett, 1998) and subsequent studies. But the idea that queer activists were strategically wielding undue influence in media, education, and politics was already all the rage among anti-gay rights Christian conservatives. (Remember the Family Research Council’s 1992 salacious, paranoia-mongering video *The Gay Agenda*?)

Given recent strides toward marriage equality, these hoary myths and accompanying homophobic vitriol may seem like ancient history (even if Scalia is still singing the same old tune). But meanwhile, even in relatively liberal New York City, antigay violence has risen steadily since 2010. A paradigm shift may be taking place, but it is an incomplete project. In response, in **Love and Money: Queers, Class, and Cultural Production**, Lisa Henderson offers a thoughtful exploration of the conflated fear and loathing that meet working-class queers, as well as tactics—or what Herman Gray might call “cultural

moves" (2005)—that enable survival and promote affinity in a deeply hostile environment. The time frame considered above, roughly, is the raucous, paradigm-shifting backdrop for the cultural artifacts that Henderson deploys as landmarks throughout the intensely personal, wide-ranging volume: Dorothy Allison's early publications *Trash: Short Stories* (1988) and *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), and films such as Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *By Hook or By Crook* (2001) by Silas Howard and Harry Dodge, Miranda July's *You and Me and Everyone We Know* (2005), and Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). Methodologically freewheeling, and traversing experimental and independent media, commercial television, Hollywood film, and literature, her subject is really a broad cultural milieu and set of practices, rather than a medium or a moment. And it is a milieu—from late Reagan-era union busting to the acute millennial vilification of teachers and other public employees—in which the circumstances of the American working class, queer or otherwise, have declined precipitously in terms of material resources and representational heft.

Chapter 1 demonstrates the contradictions produced by a representation of working-class culture that is predicated on a *pas de deux* of empathy and shame. Henderson is wary that the based-on-a-true-story *Boys Don't Cry* needlessly reiterates the worst clichés of working-class pathology, that is, the numbing conditions of under-, un-, and menial employment in which numbed individuals drink, drug, and self-mutilate. In addition, she laments that the script (cowritten by Peirce and Andy Bienen) excised the story of Phillip DeVine, "the young African American man who had been dating Lisa Lambert (renamed Candace in the film), who was killed alongside Lisa and Brandon" (p. 28). The murder of Brandon Teena may have been transphobic, but the related deaths of an interracial couple suggest that the violence had multiple motivations, rather than a singular cinematic impetus. But perhaps the most interesting observation Henderson makes about the film is that girls find Brandon appealing (in the film, anyway), not only because he is cute and attentive, but also because he has aspirations. Dreams, more than plans, perhaps, but he imagines ways out of a world in which escape comes only in death.

Having found the articulated entanglement of class and queerness a death trap in Chapter 1, Henderson looks for more promising markers of class in mass-market media. On the whole, she finds well-to-do gays conforming to neat narratives. For example, the gay couple Cam and Mitchell on *Modern Family* are firmly partnered and comfortably domestic ("good queers"), neither sexual nor class disruptors ("bad queers") of broadcasting's consumerist, familial ethos. Premium cable offers more adventure, in both sexual terms and in an interesting willingness to demonstrate class tension and privilege via talk therapy culture, where queer characters from *The L Word* and *Six Feet Under* spent a great deal of their time. Yet, the working class suffers its greatest invisibility in that upmarket setting, suggesting that mass media can exploit queerness more readily than it can bear any interrogation of socioeconomic stratification.

Mass media seems to present, then, fallow ground for thinking about class and queerness, stilted by its obsessive reliance on uncomplicated storylines and stock characters. So Henderson casts her net wide for the next chapter, which explores reparative affinities in *You and Me and Everyone We Know*. To conclude her discussion of the film, she quotes *New York Times* critic A. O. Scott: "There's not a cruel moment in this film" (p. 66). (What could be queerer—in the word's original sense of odd, strange—than the remarkable absence of cruelty, in a media culture hinged largely on violence, humiliation, and

sarcasm?) But before moving on, Henderson amends a brief consideration of July's next project, a book of short stories called *No One Belongs Here* (2007), which appears to be rife in cruelty: stalking, incestuous confessions, death wishes. Rather than seeing these twists as an unstoppable cycle of violence (à la the pathologized working class), Henderson insists that a girl's wish for her abusive sister's death is a way out, a triumph of the imagination that defies presumptions of perpetual victimhood. Where does such a way out lead? It is key to recall that this instance of violent ideation is a self-defining desire, not an other-directed action; it is, perhaps, a refusal of compliant subjectivity, of pressure to forgive and forget, of blaming the self: less, as the next chapter will show, a resolving recognition than a liberating rebuff to abuse, misuse, and misrecognition.

In that next chapter, Henderson turns to the work of Beverley Skeggs, holding that the grail of recognition obtained via identity politics has done little to coalesce working-class consciousness. Following from this argument, Henderson privileges refusal of misrecognition over tidy, idealized projects of community formation. The working class is, here, not so much the solid fiber of revolutionary potential, or even a potential movement (the surprising surge of class consciousness that became Occupy Wall Street was nascent when *Love and Money* went to press, and appears only in a final end note), but rather a fraught internalization, haunting the subjugated individual from within, mediating between the subject and her circumstances, to limiting ends. Here, Henderson takes on the work of writer Dorothy Allison, less as fodder for textual analysis than as a trail on which she finds audiences of queer readers willing to be interviewed regarding conceptions of class identity. Those readers, found at Allison's public lectures and book signings, unleash profound ambivalence: nostalgia and disavowal, desire and shame, sighs of resignation, and fantasies of rescue. The interviews show that the cost of class recognition can be palpably self-effacing—and that for successful class "escapees," mobility bifurcates the subject. Allison's work may not resolve overarching crises regarding the distribution of material resources; it may not even provide psychic balm for the disenfranchised. But to her readers, Henderson shows, Allison's writing enunciates angers and hungers that are elsewhere silenced: ways forward, if not ways out.

In the next chapter, Henderson looks to the labor of cultural production as the site of affective ties. To research queer production in situ, Henderson attended shoots for Liza Johnson's short film *Desert Motel* (2005) as a participant-observer, acting as script supervisor. On set, she found a carefully assembled web of cast and crew, queer and straight, dynamically collaborative in their devotion both to craft and to Johnson's authorial vision for the 12-minute film, involving an uncomfortable encounter between a white butch lesbian and a group of FTM queers of color. For film and media studies students whose primary interest is media production, queer or otherwise, the chapter is an illuminating dissection of the complexity of completing a short film with high production values, from financing to casting, on-set divisions of labor, and the postproduction festival life of the film. (At which point, distributors, however impressed by the film, sadly opt to buy only the "fun and happy" films; but Johnson has gone on to complete two features, the impressive *Return*, 2011, and *Hateship Loveship*, 2013). For those with a primary interest in queer-class studies, this chapter is where Henderson develops her notion of "queer relay" as a cultural practice of sociability, mobility, and material relations between people afforded through creative labor and exchange. The term seems to refer to quotidian creativity through which members of subordinated classes make their way through unnourishing circumstances: getting along, maybe even getting out. That is, relay is "our routine navigation of cultural and institutional faultlines" (p. 117)—our

construction of queerness itself, in identity formation projects, lived social relations, and, almost incidentally, works of art and media.

In the final chapter (prior to the conclusion), Henderson compares no-budget *By Hook or By Crook* with the blue-chip *Brokeback Mountain*, finding in both reason for “plausible optimism,” a phrase that serves as the chapter’s title, and offered as antidote to Lauren Berlant’s “cruel optimism,” a psychic formation in which attachments cannot overcome conditions. Henderson refuses dead ends, seeing “good attachments” (and “queer-class friendship, sexual love, and self-made family,” p. 154) in these films. But exit strategies sometimes fail, and cruelty triumphs: Henderson’s use of *Brokeback Mountain* loops back to the same end game where this book began, with Jack Twist’s death recalling Brandon Teena’s. Still, in the conclusion, Henderson favors evidence of class struggle she has identified in these films and other cultural moves over signs of faith in the myth of classless America; she takes solace in the vigor of romantic, sexual, and friendly affinities that defy social norms.

Love and Money is a fine read, a book you can have a conversation with, even if you don’t agree at all times with the converser on the page, or if you are not always certain where the overarching thread is leading. The chapters on *Boys Don’t Cry* and *You and Me . . .* are peculiarly short (6 and 10 pages, respectively). It may be that the former has been discussed, and taught, extensively in queer studies and that the author opted to set the stage for the rest of the book with her critique of the film and its traumatic origins and dramatic cultural life, while eliding the already-covered ground of a more thorough analysis (Judith/Jack Halberstam is cited, but the literature on this film is abundant). And the latter, July’s film, appears in this volume primarily as a not-ostensibly-queer bridge to forms of representation that are alternatives to Hollywood and indie (with Hollywood connections) film tropes. But ending with the bombshell of an anecdote from *No One Belongs Here*, the chapter seems to pull up short, ambiguous, and abrupt.

It may be that the book is, at its core, an unusually intimate excavation of media-cultural experience. This much is evident in the carefully crafted prose and the frequent self-reflexive passages in which the author’s various roles—as researcher, critic, fan, and consumer, but also as queer and classed subject—are laid more bare than is customary. Henderson reveals herself as voracious observer, situating her half-dozen primary objects in a jam-packed mediascape, where no one-off episode or festival favorite is too far off the mainstream radar. This is commendable, and invigorating, while the field tends to compartmentalize mainstream and experimental film and media as nonconversant tracks. *Love and Money* is also, irrefutably, hopeful. This may also be a suit that many of us are unaccustomed to wearing, especially as regards class politics at the current historical juncture. But in these pages, it might pay to try. It is, at least, as Henderson herself concludes, “a place to start.”

References

Badgett, M. V. L. (1998). *Income inflation: The myth of affluence among gay, lesbian and bisexual Americans*. New York, NY: The Policy Institute—National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and Amherst, MA: Institute for Gay and Lesbian Strategic Studies.

Gray, H. S. (2005). *Cultural moves: African Americans and the politics of Imagination*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Henderson, L. (2013). *Love and money: Queers, class, and cultural production*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Romer v. Evans, 517 U.S. 620. (1996). (Antonin Scalia, dissenting).