Queering the History of Sex Discrimination

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Phil Tiemeyer, **Plane Queer: Labor, Sexuality, and AIDS in the History of Male Flight Attendants** (2013).

In my employment discrimination course, I use *Diaz v. Pan American Airlines* (5th Cir. 1971), overturning Pan Am's ban on male flight attendants, to illustrate how airlines and other employers tried and failed to exploit Title VII's bona fide occupational qualification (BFOQ) exception in the years after the Civil Rights Act's enactment. Pan Am defended its female-only policy as necessary to satisfy the "psychological needs" of its mostly male passengers, who "overwhelmingly" preferred to be served by "young girls." In *Diaz*, the court ruled that the "essence" of an airline's business was not to titillate male travelers, nor to offer maternal comfort to anxious fliers, but rather to keep passengers safe from harm. Excluding men, therefore, could not be "reasonably necessary to the normal operation" of an airline.

Phil Tiemeyer's *Plane Queer* reveals that Pan Am's defense of the male steward ban was even more insidious than previously understood. The airline argued that male flight attendants performing traditionally female ministrations, such as tucking blankets around dozing passengers, would repulse their (assumedly) male, heterosexual, and homophobic customers. Tiemeyer argues persuasively that *Diaz* and the other early challenges to airlines' sex BFOQs are properly seen as queer equality cases, belying conventional assumptions that gay employment rights advocacy merely piggybacked on, or at least postdated, movements for racial justice and women's rights.

Tiemeyer's engaging, often riveting social and legal history of male flight attendants is valuable for the light it sheds on *Diaz* and other early Title VII cases. But *Plane Queer* does more than that. Revealing the intertwined impact of technological change, political and economic imperatives, legal advocacy, sexism, racism, and homophobia, Tiemeyer offers an account of workplace transformation with deeper resonance for historians of twentieth-century social movements and the law.

Throughout *Plane Queer*, Tiemeyer underscores the complex interplay of ideological and material motives in airlines' evolving treatment of their airborne workforce. He begins in the 1930s, a forgotten heyday for male stewards, and chronicles their decline and resurgence in subsequent decades. Tiemeyer attributes the occupational feminization of the 1950s and 1960s to a diverse array of economic and attitudinal factors. The rise of the military-industrial complex produced larger, more comfortable aircraft, allowing airlines to appeal to a broader customer base. Airlines' desire to soften and domesticate the commercial flight experience to attract women and children as passengers created a demand for female stewardesses, as did discomfort with white men performing "servile" roles that supposedly undermined their masculinity.Importantly, stewardesses—fired by many airlines when they married or reached the ripe old age of thirty-two—accrued little seniority and were more easily exploited as cheap labor.

Cases such as *Diaz* opened the door not only for male stewards, but also for many women seeking jobs in exclusively male domains. Forcing airlines to hire male flight attendants—and to remove sex-specific marriage, age, and later pregnancy bars—also undercut airlines' undercompensation of cabin crew generally. As Tiemeyer underscores, this reform allowed "significant numbers of gay men" to "secure[] their first unionized, middle-class job," an unusual and precious opportunity during this period. (P. 83.)

The removal of these formal barriers did not, of course, transform the airline industry into a gender egalitarian queer-friendly paradise, and indeed, the “culture wars” were just beginning.Further, as Tiemeyer notes in an intriguing passage, the interests of feminists who promoted the desexualization of traditionally female careers existed in some tension with gay liberation activists’ celebration of sexual freedom of expression in public. Tiemeyer also suggests that “the middle-class men who were the most well-heeled gay rights advocates” were “often more concerned with liberating their libidos from homophobia than rectifying economic injustices.” (P. 116.) And some gay rights activists preferred to champion access to traditionally male occupations where gay men could exhibit their masculinity and virility. Indeed, “male stewardesses may have been too queer for much of the gay community as well.” (P. 117.)

Notwithstanding these tensions and obstacles, gay men flooded airlines’ flight attendant corps in the 1970s. Under the cover of media depictions that relentlessly “heterosexualized” male stewards, defusing the threat they posed to airlines’ image, gay stewards built a discreet but vibrant national social network that encompassed gay passengers as well as crew members. What made airplane cabins a haven for gay men? Tiemeyer’s interviews with former flight attendants suggest several factors. A decent middle-class job with good benefits that did not require gay men to remain closeted remained rare and prized in the 1970s. Some recalled reveling in the sartorial flair and prestige associated with top-flight airlines like Pan Am. Moreover, Tiemeyer and his subjects speculate, gay men may have been more willing than their straight counterparts to work with and be supervised by women. For their part, female flight attendants generally seemed happy to work and socialize with gay men, preferring their society to that of pilots, who tended to be older, married, and more prone to unwanted sexual advances and other abuses of power.

Indeed, any tensions that surfaced in advocacy for workplace rights seemed to have little effect on the camaraderie between female and male flight attendants.The influx of men also produced welcome improvements in female flight attendants’ uniforms, as more professional, comfortable, androgynous outfits replaced sexualized costumes featuring revealing mini-skirts and constrictive girdles. In short, in the 1970s male and female flight attendants enjoyed a level of workplace parity rare in an American workforce stratified and segregated along gender lines. Through collective bargaining and other exertions of pressure on the airlines, flight attendants successfully challenged the vestiges of overt sex discrimination, such as weight limits, and eventually won concessions including “buddy passes” for unmarried employees, which enabled gay and straight partners to enjoy travel benefits formerly available only to spouses and other legally recognized relatives.

For gay stewards, however, the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s overshadowed the previous decade’s advances. Tiemeyer records the heartbreaking reply of a steward asked how many he knew who perished from the disease:“I stopped counting at 162.” (P. 136.) Not only did male flight attendants disproportionately lose friends and loved ones, and suffer and die from AIDS themselves, but they also became targets of a new wave of fear and scapegoating. This backlash was exacerbated by hyperbolic and downright false accounts purporting to identify flight attendant Gäetan Dugas, as the “Patient Zero” responsible for spreading HIV across North America; by scientifically discredited but persistent fears that AIDS could be spread through casual contact; and by anti-gay propaganda. Airlines’ initial response to the AIDS crisis varied. Some grounded flight attendants suspected of having the virus, while others allowed employees to continue working until they became too ill to perform their jobs. Grounded flight attendants such as Gär Traynor enlisted their unions to fight back in arbitration and court proceedings, with Traynor winning an important early victory. Then, for approximately two years in the mid-1980s, United essentially paid HIV-positive flight attendants to stay off the job.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, airlines became corporate leaders in an emerging ethos friendlier to gay employees. Activism and lawsuits by people with AIDS contributed to this about-face, but so did

airlines' bottom line: harboring AIDS phobia became costlier as high-profile incidents of homophobic hysteria tarnished airlines' reputation, and misinformation about how the disease spread compromised relationships among employees and threatened to alienate passengers. Guided by public relations firms, airlines began to require HIV/AIDS training for employees, to allow accommodations for employees who had AIDS or were HIV-positive, and to launch marketing campaigns designed to appeal to gay customers. "Doing the right thing," concluded one gay PR consultant and industry observer, "is truly good for business." (P. 191.) By the turn of the twenty-first century, airline employees "possessed greater economic advantages in their workplace than they did as U.S. citizens and residents of most states," enjoying domestic partner benefits and the protection of non-discrimination clauses unavailable to most gay and lesbian Americans.

Tiemeyer's narrative is far from whiggish, however. His final chapter explores how neoliberal economic policies produced a limited version of "queer equality," one that privileged civil liberties and consumerism over economic justice, and ultimately granted equality in benefits just as many of the most valuable employment benefits—job security, affordable health insurance, unionized jobs—were slipping away. Significantly, courts, local governments, and unions no longer drove reforms, or codified them. Instead, gay flight attendants depended upon the goodwill of corporations driven by profits rather than principle or legal imperative, rendering their gains more tenuous, less valuable, and unavailable to those not fortunate enough to find airline employment. As Tiemeyer sums it up: "[G]one is the most overt sexism and homophobia of previous decades, but gone as well are the prospects for flight attendants—whether male or female, straight or gay—to attain a middle-class standard of living." (P. 226.) In that respect, the story of male flight attendants, for all of its fascinating particularity, is the story of the larger political and economic shifts that engulfed American workers at the turn of the twenty-first century. Deftly synthesizing the histories of sexuality, labor, and law, *Plane Queer* offers insights that resonate far beyond the flight deck.

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