

Offsetting queer literary labor

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OFFSETTING QUEER LITERARY LABOR
Samuel Solomon

“You’re an electronic technician,
not a typesetter. You’re lucky
to be shut out of the union.”

I know that typesetters
grow more capillaries
in our fingertips
from all that use.

here’s a test: cut my fingers
and see if I bleed more.

–Karen Brodine, *Woman Sitting at the Machine, Thinking*

This article works through the poems of Marxist-feminist writer Karen Brodine in order to explain how LGBTQ+ people and other feminists in the US navigated late twentieth-century changes in print technology between 1965-1990, and to explore how this navigation shaped literary production in this period. During these years typesetting was computerized and then all but abandoned as part of the pre-print process. Karen Brodine was one of many working-class LGBTQ+ people, especially, but not only, lesbians and transmasculine workers, who found employment as typesetters in the 1970s and 1980s. While she is not the only writer whose work navigates the feminized and racialized class politics of new forms of printing labor, Brodine is singular in the extent to which the labor relations of typesetting are in full view at the surface of her writing. An excerpt from her 1981 poem, “Woman Sitting at the Machine, Thinking,” provides my epigraph. Even from this short excerpt, it is easy to see how this poem takes contested labor relations as sites for

the development and elaboration of bodily capacities and skills, and not only of those that are a part of “work.” Brodine’s reference to the capillarization of fingers is not only clinically descriptive, it also evokes other possible uses of digital strength and dexterity and of blood letting, including those that might be more properly considered the domain of a pulp novel. Brodine accounts for the intertwining of intimacy and labor; her writing brings together the material production of literature with late twentieth-century working-class lesbian and queer life in the US.

In the 1960s and 1970s, typesetting for large-run print jobs in the US underwent an unevenly distributed but rapid shift from “linotype” (a popular brand name for “line casting,” heavy machinery that casts hot metal “slugs”) to phototypesetting (basically two dimensional). This shift in pre-press technologies complemented the slightly earlier transition in large-scale printing from letterpress to photo-offset lithography. In each case, the technology shifted from three-dimensional impressions to two-dimensional, photographic processes for creating printing plates and for getting ink onto the final printing surface.¹ Phototypesetting technologies were constantly innovating during this period, and they involved the computerized storage of layout and copy data, whether in punched tape or microchips, to create film negatives that could be developed onto metal plates for printing.

By the 1990s, typesetting as a distinct phase in the printing process was superseded by desktop and online publishing, while offset lithography remains to this day the go-to method for large-scale print runs of newspapers and books. The

expansion of phototypesetting in the 1960s and 1970s had required that the mostly white and male linotype operators be retrained, or else that new workers be drafted in to take their place. These new workers were frequently women who could be paid less. Both the materials for and the relations of origination (pre-press) work were dramatically changed by this process, which involved the painful busting of old white-male-dominated trade unions and the opportunistic employment by industrial bosses of non-union workers previously excluded from these jobs. In other words: the politics of these new labor relations were deeply ambivalent.

It was also in the wake of this transition that “lesbian and gay” literature came into prominence as a category among publishers, booksellers, printers, educators, and activists. This was the period in which the particular complex of text, labor, collectivity, and printed matter that we might call “LGBT literature” was quite literally composed. In this essay, I consider how gender and sexual categories, as well as queer forms of intimacy, were forged through the material relations of print-related wage work. Rather than claiming to “queer” these texts or this history, I would suggest that the category of “LGBT literature” came about in part through the feminized and racialized labor that still attends literary technologies.² I weave together three strands of argument: 1) a broad claim in the history of sexuality, that the growth of feminized labor in a previously masculine printing industry was part of the development of lesbian and proto-queer identities, collectivities, and structures of feeling; 2) a more tentative and implicit literary historical argument, that the shifting labor relations brought on by phototypesetting technologies

contributed to the development of queer print cultures and of LGBT literature as a category; and 3) a more specific and definite argument about the work of Karen Brodine, which not only illustrates these developments but also provides a queer and Marxist-feminist politics that is responsive to the history of literary production.³

Karen Brodine's writing has not received much critical attention, even as it has been important to a range of poets and activists and received substantive literary recognition during her lifetime.⁴ One of my aims is to correct for the critical neglect of Brodine's work by looking at some of her published poems and also by making reference to archival materials: personal journals, published political writings, and memos that she circulated in more limited fashion to her comrades as part of their organizing work. The most relevant critical treatment of Brodine for my purposes comes from Karen Kovacic, in an article titled "The Poetry of Pink Collar Resistance" that features nuanced readings of Karen Brodine's work. Kovacic notes that in "Pink Collar" poetry, "secretaries and waitresses emphatically call attention to their presence as individuals and as members of a collective" (Kovacic 2001: 23). Her article proceeds to read Brodine's work as counterpoising "the worker's alienated and instrumental performance of her body on the job with her emotional and physical engagement during lovemaking" (ibid.: 23). Kovacic emphasizes the alienating aspects of Brodine's work, although she also notes the fact that Brodine imagines a potentially revolutionary offshoot of pink-collar work. That is to say, Brodine works to show how women and other feminized workers

might take control of the production and reproduction of the textual processes that are meant merely to pass through them. Kovacic's is a precise and skillful reading of Brodine's work, and it also bears extending. Indeed, Brodine's descriptions of lesbian intimacy are not simply *opposed to* the "instrumental performance of her body on the job"; they are not *only* there as evidence of the alienating nature of word-processing labor. Rather, the labor relations that surround the typesetting computer are part and parcel of the revolutionary working-class and queer socialist-feminist politics that Brodine elaborates across her writing and that she worked for tirelessly in her life.

Karen Brodine (1947-1987) was born in Seattle into a radical secular Jewish family (her maternal grandmother Harriet Pierce, who features in many of Brodine's writings, was a member of the US Communist Party) and was raised in Woodinville, Washington. She moved to the San Francisco Bay Area in the mid-1960s to study dance at UC Berkeley, where she suffered a knee injury, at which point her creative efforts switched to poetry. In the mid-1970s, having studied for a Masters of Fine Arts in Writing at San Francisco State University, Brodine (along with her then girlfriend and fellow student Sukey Durham as well as writers Roz Spafford, Frances Phillips and others) co-founded the SFSU Women's Caucus. The Caucus, which would later come to be known as the Women Writers Union (WWU) was originally formed in an effort change the structure of the English Masters oral exams so that they might include women and non-white writers ("Creative Writers Seek New Degree Policy"). Through her work with the WWU,

Brodine, along with Nellie Wong, Merle Woo, and others, came to join Durham as members of Radical Women and the Freedom Socialist Party, two affiliated socialist-feminist organizations in the Trotskyist tradition; these women launched the Bay area branches of these organizations.

Brodine also helped to found the Berkeley Poets Cooperative and Kelsey St. Press, which respectively published her first two books of poetry, *Slow Juggling* (1975) and *Work Week* (1977). Her third book, *Illegal Assembly* (1980) was published by the New York-based Hanging Loose press, and her final book, *Woman Sitting at the Machine, Thinking* (1990), was published posthumously by the Freedom Socialist Party's (FSP) affiliate, Red Letter Press, after a number of feminist presses had rejected the manuscript (Brodine 1986: 4). It is perhaps no surprise that Red Letter Press embraced the book, in light not only of the politics of the work itself but also of the extent to which Brodine had focused her energies on organizing with FSP and Radical Women. She took on many leadership roles, including as organizer of the San Francisco branch of Radical Women and of FSP. She also did extensive work on a variety of defensive campaigns as the organizations' communist radicalism came under legal attacks.⁵ Brodine also did the publishing, book design, typesetting, and wrote the introduction for Gloria Martin's *Socialist Feminism: The First Decade 1966-1976*, the first book to be published by Red Letter Press.

The rejection of her more militant Marxist arguments by some cultural feminists fed into a wider theme throughout Brodine's work: the multiple sources of silencing and censorship that she faced. She was acutely aware of the ways in

which her writing was prevented from reaching potential readers, and she experienced her terminal illness as continuous with these forces of silencing and repression. Brodine died in 1987 from advanced breast cancer that had gone undiagnosed as a result of medical negligence (her journals and her poetry testify to feelings of serious illness years prior to her diagnosis).⁶ Her personal papers, and some of her published works, indicate an awareness of the limited audiences for which she wrote. She resented the ways in which her writing was deemed irrelevant or uninteresting by some other feminists because it was writing by a working class Marxist lesbian. Censorship in these many modes is a central problem for Brodine's poetry. At the same time, her poetry teases out ways in which capitalist literary technologies, in the moment of their feminization, might be expropriated, shared, and liberated against censorship. This complex intertwining of literary labor, technology, and lesbian existence is as thoroughly imagined in Brodine's work as it is anywhere else.

In what follows, I begin by providing a more detailed account of the feminization of typesetting in the period after 1965; I read Brodine's work to see how, in her account, this feminization conditioned some late twentieth-century forms of queer life. I then take a detour through other queer and feminist responses to technological shifts in printing labor, in order to outline some of alternative practices of LGBTQ+ literary production in this period. Finally, I synthesize these various strands in an extended reading of the "thinking" that

Brodine's work takes as its subject. Her dialectical approach to poetics can model how we engage the history and politics of queer literary production.

The Feminization of Typesetting and Queer Literary Labor

The introduction of phototypesetting (a metonymic name for the larger process of photocomposition) brought with it major changes in the demographic composition of printing and pre-press labor. Management could either allow for the retraining of mostly white male linotype workers in new photocomposition jobs or else spring for new workers to be hired, often women who could be paid less and who, in many cases, already had facility with the QWERTY layout used for photographic composition (linotype keyboards had been laid out differently, did not afford touch-typing, and were understood to require sustained physical strength and the risk of burn injuries).⁷ The QWERTY layout—that of a typewriter—was not an inevitable feature of phototypesetting design. As Cynthia Cockburn argues in her 1983 study of London male newspaper compositors, *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change*: “the continued use of QWERTY has been to enable the integration of office and printing technologies and to enable the use of relatively cheap female typists on both” (Cockburn 1983: 99-100). In *Brothers*, a socialist-feminist study of masculinity at work, Cockburn focuses on the experiences of men who were “deskilled” by the transition to photocomposition.⁸ The attitude that these men had toward typing labor was, Cockburn explains, deeply infused with

feelings about feminized labor more generally and with what might be called the psychological wages of white masculinity.

Cockburn explains that the transition to photocomposition was not only about increasing productivity; it was also about control and the breaking of workers' political power (ibid: 91). The introduction of phototypesetting took place within a larger horizon of industrial transformation, and the direct input of copy (by writers and editors—bypassing typesetting as a profession altogether) was the writing on the wall. Few workers—and perhaps fewer managers—seem to have believed that photocomposition would be a permanent fixture of origination work. Computerized typesetting was a stopgap, and digitization was understood to be around the corner (Marshall 1983: 69-70). The feminization of typesetting, then, was part of a longer trajectory in its elimination as a form of steady wage work.

Due to union protections and negotiations, some linotype operators were retrained in computerized typesetting rather than laid off. In the United States, the International Typographical Union (ITU) also tended to approach the rise of phototypesetting and the threat it posed to workers' power with a rearguard craft unionist strategy: the ITU leadership would be loyal to its “men” as “skilled” workers. National policy focused on negotiating contracts that guaranteed lifetime employment or early retirement for composition workers in exchange for allowing their existing jobs to be phased out by automation. This approach won out, on the whole, over efforts to unionize the women, queers, and people of color (including women and queers of color) who were increasingly finding employment at

nonunion shops. Such people were soon to be employed as typesetters in new, open-shop typesetting businesses, and many pieced together work as freelancers. Perusal of ITU publications and mainstream media coverage from the period show this clearly, as do Brodine's writings (think, for example, of my opening epigraph) as well as other literary texts more widely recognized to be central to the canon of LGBT literature. Leslie Feinberg's path-breaking *Stone Butch Blues*, for example, includes in its closing pages a common historical narrative about Bertram Powers' industrial strategy as president of ITU Local 6 in New York City:

I told him I'd stopped taking hormones and moved to New York City and now I was a typesetter.

"Nonunion?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yeah. When the computers came on the scene, the owners could see first how it was going to transform the old heat-lead industry. So they hired all the people the old craft union didn't realize were important to organize. That's how they broke the back of Local 6. (Feinberg 1993: 298)⁹

While Cockburn focuses on the experiences of men who were losing craft control of labor relations, Brodine's poetry sets out from the position of already feminized and "deskilled" workers. This feminization of typesetting labor took place in an era when the waged workplace tacitly facilitated some expressions of same-sex desire following a brief retrenchment of employment opportunities for many women immediately after the Second World War.¹⁰ The fact that phototypesetting could form an important basis for the development of queer print

cultures was not a reflection of the technology itself; rather, this was in part because of the flexibility of the labor relations and management styles that the technology facilitated in a period of deindustrialization. There were more and less busy times of year, for example, enabling artists and activists to work intensely for a few months and then to take longer chunks of time off for artistic and political projects. Phototypesetting was somewhere between blue, white and pink-collar work—it was sometimes, although not always, done in an office environment, but was shift-work all the same, and it did not always require the consistent affective labor (or white femininity) of, for example, much corporate secretarial work.

The “visibility” that some versions of lesbianism would achieve in the 1980s and 1990s, largely through the growth of the “professional managerial class” and of feminist and lesbian women’s inclusion in it, then, does not explain the working-class lesbian lives that are elaborated in the work of Brodine. Nor does phototypesetting work quite line up with what various theorists and historians have called the “gay economy,” or the “queer work,” or “camp labor,” insofar as phototypesetting did not necessarily mark one as queer.¹¹ Phototypesetting and related jobs were, rather, attainable skillsets for people with good enough vision, typing know-how, and the capacity to learn new skills and adjust to technological changes.¹² This was appealing for many artists and writers who needed to make a living but who wanted to have flexible wage-work schedules. Of course, such flexibility was also often part and parcel of feminized jobs. As Brodine writes at the end of her long essay-poem “Money and Land”:

My mother always said, “A woman has to have some independent means of income, independent of marriage, I mean, Karen...”

In the back of my mind, a practical little hand taps out, ‘she can type, she can type, and fast too.’ I count the jobs I’ve been somewhat paid for—berry-picker, baby-sitter, dance-teacher, writer, secretary, bread-baker, art model, waitress, house-cleaner, old woman’s companion, slide-mounter, writing teacher, dish-washer, paste-up person, typesetter, house-painter, inventory-taker, label-maker.... And I have plans for a big garage sale. (Brodine 1980: 37-38)

Most of the jobs enumerated here were marked as feminized (many also involve heavy manual labor, including those that might be called ‘care’ work). Most of these jobs required that a worker, either by choice or else by economic compulsion, would pick up work as and where possible without strong (or any) union protections. For Brodine, the fact that “she can type” provides an alternative to marriage (she herself had been married to a man in her early twenties), and it might allow her to scrape by. In this sense, flexible, feminized jobs could be linked to the prospect of combatting compulsory heterosexuality.

Indeed, in her journals from November 1975, Brodine wrote, having secured a job in a typesetting shop:

I think the job for me is an instant element of centeredness, sureness. Just to know I will have enough money for once in my life... I fantasize coming home that I come home to a woman, strong + a working person I come

home + we are warm in a warm house + perhaps she has just walked in the door.... Yet the truth is, I watch the moon leaning backwards in the sky right above my own little place. I live alone + cook for myself + after sleep alone. + now that is good.... I don't know how to live. But oh I want to be the strongest and happiest [and] perhaps finally I am learning this. (Brodine 1970-1987)

It should not come as a surprise that the reality of a new job is linked, here, to Brodine's capacity to thrive as a working-class lesbian. The fact that the job was in a non-union typesetting shop does not diminish this fact, even as Brodine cannot yet find a clear path to everything she desires. Still, with this job—and, implicitly, with her newfound involvement in political organizing—she feels she may be learning how happiness and strength are made.

Skills for Assembly

Brodine wrote the above words in the same journal in which she composed many of the poems that would appear in her second book, *Work Week* (1977). Indeed, Brodine's work as a typesetter, and the kinds of organizing she did in relation to her job, coincided with her development as a gay woman, a communist, and a poet. Brodine was employed at the time by the magazine Communication Arts, Inc., where she was part of an ultimately successful effort to unionize those who worked in typesetting and related pre-press work. But this effort doesn't really show up

until the later *Illegal Assembly* (1980); *Work Week*, for its part, foregrounds in a primarily descriptive mode the relations between feminized labor and the critique of political economy. The book is framed by a cover featuring the calculation of clients and jobs (fig. 1), including a range of different origination tasks from typesetting to paste-up to offset plate preparation (“opaquing and dyeing”). The book is named for one of the mechanisms by which the capital-labor relation subsumes the worker’s life. The title suggests that all aspects of life are structured by the calculation of labor time, including the writing of “poetry” and the sharing of private intimacy.

Alongside this reduction of duration to the calculation of labor time, *Work Week* investigates the relations among women in feminized workplaces that require or encourage feminine self-presentation. The book’s third poem, for example, is titled “The receptionist is by definition” and closes as follows:

2. the receptionist is by definition underpaid to lie

remember the receptionist with the lovely
smile, with the green eyes, the cropped
hair, big feet, small knees, with the
wrinkled hands, the large breasts, with
the husky voice, the strong chin?

She takes her breaks

In the washroom, grimacing, waving her fists
At the blurred reflection of her dress.

(Brodine 1977: 11)

This receptionist is marked by stereotypical feminine descriptors (“the lovely/smile”) but the poem pushes past this, presenting a much more detailed physical description, followed by the acknowledgement of her time *off* the clock:

time that is stolen away from capital's demands for feminized self-presentation. The description points to the tacit forms of attention that women pay each other, and the book as a whole features tentative relationships between women that might be described as part of what Adrienne Rich called the "lesbian continuum" (Rich 1980). The first section of *Work Week*, "On the Job," opens with an untitled poem that reads in its entirety:

new to this office, we watch
the faces of the other women
for clues, to discover which tribe,
we watch their soft faces
for the quick glance, the laugh
of recognition, what we call
the understanding

(ibid.: 9)

In this office, women work together for low wages and communicate through coded looks and silences. *Work Week* presents itself, as well as the dreams that it narrates, as an alternative or escape. The possibility of relationships between women at work is presented as a puzzle or challenge, as in the following excerpt from the opening of "Jigsaw Riddle":

who's that woman avalanching down the street?

setting the margins
doesn't justify, but
I can frame her face the word
with my hands, what
we both dreamt, a jig- floats down through
saw puzzle of planes,
welded cold steel the memory
in a sky that would
not rain

(ibid.: 22)

Women's faces are sources of fascination here, and they are framed by the timeline of the workweek (as in the case of the receptionist) and by the restrictions of the typeset page. But "setting the margins" and justifying the lines can't frame this relationship in the same way that *hands* would. Indeed, the column on the left-hand side of the page is typographically disrupted by the skillfully set (by Brodine) "floating" words to the right. In *Work Week*, wage labor is a barrier, and women try to breach it with imagined and furtive connections—glances, words, and touches—but it remains a sort of limiting partition. Not all of the poems confine themselves to silence and non-communication—there are moments of overt conversation between women, but many of these seem to be reported dreams.

By the time of *Illegal Assembly* (Hanging Loose Press, 1980) and especially *Woman Sitting at the Machine, Thinking* (Red Letter Press, 1990) Brodine had developed new ways of thinking about feminist political agency in the workplace—through, on the one hand, acts of sabotage, and on the other hand, the collective development of political skill and power. If *Work Week* primarily engaged with typesetting labor in terms of the silences imposed by technology and management, it was in *Illegal Assembly* that Brodine moved toward actively building collective power in the context of the feminized workplace. The book is less obviously about work than it is about forms of collectivity and the changes that both legal and illegal assemblies can bring about. "Making the Difference," for example, discusses the process of organizing a union (presumably at Communication Arts, Inc.): "in two weeks we will have a union election. we will vote yes and no. we will win or

lose. it will make a difference” (Brodine 1980: 50). Brodine has developed confidence in her political and her technical skills, and she explores the pleasures that come from acquiring and playing with new skills: “when I learn something new at work, even when it is very minor, and could in time become drudgery, the hours shrink./ I like the clean slice of the exacto blade against the drawing board.” (ibid.: 56). Here, skill is presented as a source of pleasure and as an aspiration—it is a generative part of being with others. This entails a rejection of the rhetoric of “deskilling” that accompanies the encroachment of feminized labor and that amounts to a *political* assault on feminized versions of skill: “I have skills and they attach to what I need or love/ there are skills I don’t have and I mean to learn them” (ibid.: 61).¹³ These lines appear in *Illegal Assembly*, and they were taken directly from Brodine’s June 29, 1977 journal entry. In the journal, they are preceded by an indication of the political nature of Brodine’s thinking about skill as a typesetter, a writer, and an organizer: “Skill is a hand-up toward power when it is applied toward our (+ I mean the group’s) own ends.” (Brodine 1970-1987: np)

Simultaneously, *Illegal Assembly* begins to reflect in detail the extent to which these skills can turn the worker into a sort of word-processing machine:

at work I have to let the brutality of language turned against us flow thru my hands - typing, “a relatively senseless robot will be marketed under the name, ‘the Helen Keller robot.’” (Brodine 1980: 55)¹⁴

Similar sharp reportage of management discourse shows up in the tongue-in-cheek lunch-break discussions that run throughout “Opposites That Bleed One Into the Other or Collide”:

at lunch I sit with other office workers sunning on a small scrap

of sidewalk
it's so nice to work in the arts
it's so laid-back we don't have to dress up
& they don't even mind gays working here
her supervisor said she was only half a woman

(ibid: 53-54)

As its title implies, this poem is typographically rendered as a picture of dialectics. Right and left aligned portions of text are “opposed” on the page but also show themselves to be the flip sides of each other through their alternations down the page. The typographically opposed portions of this text are no longer quite divided up into reality and dream, as they were in *Work Week*; they are instead processes of change and movement through antagonism and opposition. The final section of the poem documents the materials for revolutionary assembly that have been built by the concentration of feminized office work in the deindustrialized core of San Francisco, and it moves from left-to-right-to-center aligned text:

and leaning out the window, I watch the small fist of a three-month strike
up the street flowering into bright turning signs and shouting people, circling, circling

and staring up the street I see hundreds of green streetcars stopped now backed
up stockstill unbudging for blocks. a disruption in service. a stoppage.

and people rushing and tumbling out of the cars like water —
we could shut this city down.

The last line is centered, as is, in a sense, the book as a whole. This growth of Brodine’s confidence and transformative vision is not only a result of the passage of time, or of simply having written or worked more. It is clear from her journals that coming out as a lesbian, and doing so in the context of organizing with the Women Writers Union, Radical Women, and the Freedom Socialist Party, changed her day-to-day understanding of her life. Each of these organizations prioritized the training

of women, queer people, and people of color for revolutionary political leadership. This experience of leadership—and of using and developing her skills, including those that she learned at work, for political purposes—may explain Brodine’s facility in writing about alternative, humane ways of organizing the activity of making and distributing printed texts and other forms of information.

Collectivity, Autonomy, and Uncertainty

Brodine’s poetry, of course, was not the only development in LGBTQ+ literary production that was enabled by the era of photocomposition. I will shortly turn to Brodine’s landmark poem, “Woman Sitting at the Machine, Thinking,” but first I take a detour through some of the other queer consequences of new printing technologies, specifically the development of new typesetting, printing, and publishing collectives. I do so to locate the specificity of Brodine’s queer and Marxist-feminist poetic project in a broader context of queer and feminist literary production: Brodine’s first two books had, after all, been published respectively by the Berkeley Poets Cooperative and Kelsey St. Press (she had helped to found and did voluntary origination and publishing work for each).¹⁵ Kelsey St. had their early titles printed at the West Coast Print Center, a community endeavor that donated typesetting and printing equipment to small presses, especially within avant-garde poetry circles. Collectives of this sort, including a range of alternative and underground presses and other feminist and gay liberation publishing ventures,

were widespread, if often short-lived, during this period.

A rich body of work on feminist and LGBT print culture (scholarly and otherwise) has shown that for LGBTQ+ publishers—including those committed to feminist and gay liberation politics—there was a pervasive tension between ambitions for political autonomy, on the one hand, and the instability of the printing and publishing industries that undergirded them on the other.¹⁶ For publishers, access to affordable computerized typesetting and small offset litho did indeed allow for large-run prints of materials that might otherwise have been censored or else produced by necessity using more limited duplicating machines. This advantage is noted repeatedly in reflections by gay and lesbian publishers, such as Gay Sunshine Press's Winston Leyland, who reports that the printer for John Wiener's pioneering *Hotel Wentley Poems* "was so uptight that he deliberately left out the word 'cock' in 'Cocksuckers,' and a second printing with the unexpurgated title had to be done almost immediately" (Leyland 1975: 8).

But if access to phototypesetting and offset printing allowed for greater control over content, it also brought up the more complicated but equally critical question of control over the means of production of printing. While phototypesetting equipment was within reach for some LGBTQ+ and feminist presses and typesetting collectives, large-scale offset printing machinery was usually out of reach. Autonomous publishing collectives still needed to manage print production. This presented distinct challenges for feminist, lesbian, and gay publishing and printing ventures that sought to maintain nonhierarchical and

collective decision making and production processes, as it did for the “underground press” more broadly.¹⁷

For some print collectives, and particularly for lesbian-feminist groups, the key challenge was in maintaining both autonomy *and* non-hierarchical relationships, and this involved skill-sharing and job rotation. In some cases, autonomy and equality were understood to be mutually reinforcing.¹⁸ Barbara Smith, a trailblazing black feminist and supporter of Brodine, Merle Woo, and Nellie Wong, located her impetus for co-founding Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press in autonomy and control, referring to “our need for autonomy, our need to determine independently both the content and conditions of our work” (Smith, 2014 [1989]: 155). But Smith also reflected on the political difficulties of managing such a project *as a business*.¹⁹ Running presses autonomously and collectively did not guarantee their survival, if survival was dependent on profitability, which it was for many presses and publishers such as Kitchen Table that did not have wealthy patrons or people able or willing to live without steady wages.²⁰ While, on the one hand, the expansion of photo-offset printing and of queer and feminist typesetting collectives helped more people to produce and distribute on a large scale, these technological developments also accelerated the organizational and political problems of functioning as businesses. When asked by Matt Richardson if Kitchen Table was a collective, Smith remarked, “That was what was said on the piece of paper....We had a commitment to people having non-hierarchical roles and relationships, but it can be very difficult, particularly if you are running what is

essentially a business, to operate in that way” (Smith, 2014: 157).

Charley Shively, a central member of the staff of the Boston-based anarchist periodical *Fag Rag*, recalled how changes in typesetting technology affected the labor relations of the collective. This was the case, for example, when they started having to pay for typesetting:

Seeing the need for typesetting in the gay community, [David Stryker] started a part-time business. Ken Sanchez, who worked for Stryker, was able to type out *Fag Rag* text (with some volunteer help) after hours; we paid a dollar an hour for using the machine.... Stryker charged basically at cost per issue; still our typesetting costs quadrupled. He saw it as a sacrifice for the movement; others saw it as an inroad of capitalism. (Wachsberger, 2012: np)

Shively’s account, while detailed, is hardly exceptional. Cheap print and typesetting machinery was not always readily available through community print centers and personal contacts, and most radical and underground collectives had little starting capital with which to pay for origination and printing. While new typesetting technologies could allow for more efficient and sophisticated control over typesetting, Shively notes that constant shifts in technology also made ideals of autonomy and collectivity more difficult to attain than they otherwise might have been. The expertise required for operating the machinery as it continually developed posed challenges to the collective’s anti-capitalist and nonhierarchical aspirations. Moreover, as Shively notes, by the end of the 1980s, “Desktop

publishing almost instantly wiped away all the skills learned on the Compugraphic.”

In other words, the use of new typesetting technologies (including piecemeal methods of origination, e.g. laying-out and photographing typewriter copy) in radical egalitarian collectives can only be understood as an uneasy development in the face of the feminization and racial-ethnic diversification of the typographical labor force. That is, such collective efforts, and particularly LGBTQ+ and feminist businesses that depended on making ends meet (if not on making profits), were the flipside of the feminization and casualization of much printing labor in the de-industrializing global North, and they stood on shaky ground.

Brodine’s work pushes past this tension between the ideal of autonomy and the need for profit. Unlike some separatist and cultural feminists, Brodine never wanted to abandon the feminized waged workplace as a site for feminist struggle, even as she certainly did not idealize such wage work or see it as liberating in itself. Brodine’s poetry centers feminized labor—including waged literary labor—as a site of *struggle and elaboration* rather than something to be abandoned in favor of separatist or nonhierarchical ideals. Through her writing, Brodine showed that all work, but particularly undervalued and feminized work, was as suitable a topic for feminist poetry as was anything else; she raged at the economic and racial privileges of those feminist writers who argued that the workplace was a masculine domain from which women should remove themselves. She refused feminist dismissals of wage labor, that is, and wanted instead to think about feminized work in the context of

an ever-changing social totality.

Thinking at the Machine

Following on this exploration of some alternative forms of queer literary labor, I close with an extended reading of Brodine's "Woman Sitting at the Machine, Thinking," the title poem from the 1990 book of the same name. The poem was originally written in 1981, and it is the most sustained of Brodine's poems that engage with phototypesetting labor. If *Work Week* indicated the ways in which feminized wage labor might facilitate tacit expressions of lesbian desire, and *Illegal Assembly* began to theorize the revolutionary potential of feminized workers, "Woman Sitting" returns to these problems, mediated this time by a dialectical approach to the material conditions of its own writing. In my reading, I track "thinking" as an abstraction that Brodine's materialist poetics renders concrete: this thinking is conditioned by and responsive to the social conditions of feminized, queer literary labor. Thinking is not a collective escape from but is rather a *communist elaboration of feminized labor*.

Brodine wrote this poem while she was working for Howard Quinn Co., a unionized, family run all-service print shop, as a typesetter. Brodine herself was initially kept out of the union on the basis that she was an "electronic technician" rather than a writer; she contested this and eventually won membership in GAIU Local 280, only to be placed into a partitioned room, separated from the other non-

union phototypesetters (Brodine c. 1981: 2). The poem moves through the everyday work experiences of a typesetter in a small shop, and it weaves into the description of these routines bits of dreams, memories, and fantasies: about animals, about other women, about spontaneous insurrection, and about organized revolutions.

The poem's composition tracks “thinking” across the processes that comprise the daily routines and expropriations of photocomposition. This includes the selection and placement of characters, the justification of lines, and the manipulation of codes to call up and store different jobs:

Call format o five. Reports, Disc 2, quad left
return. name of town, address, zip. quad left
return. rollalong and there you are.
done with this one. start the next.

call format o five. my day so silent yet taken up with words.
floating through the currents and cords of my wrists
into the screen and drifting to land, beached pollywogs.
all this language handled yet the room is so silent.
everyone absorbed in feeding words through the machines

(Brodine 1990: 5)

Kathleen Fraser writes of this passage that “as Brodine keeps a mental tally of her mechanical tasks, she simultaneously notes the deep silence soaking up her fellow workers and pulling her into mental drift” (Fraser 1991: 24).²¹ I would add to Fraser’s account that, in spite or because of so much silence, the poem presents its own activities, including the thinking that it weaves through the computer, as sites of struggle: the thinking is not simply a product of the machine, but it is conditioned by it all the same. Thinking emerges alongside the peculiar collective

social experience of phototypesetting, and it describes an unvoiced choreography, a kind of silent communication around the machines.

In the lines that follow, a different kind of thinking—and of communication—is slotted in among the codes:

Call file Oceana. name of town, Pacific. name of street, Arbor.
thinking about lovemaking last night, how it's another land,
another set of sounds, the surface of the water, submerged,
then floating free, the delicate fabric of motion and touch
knit with listening and humming and soaring.
never a clear separation of power because it is both our power
at once. hers to speak deep in her body and voice to her own
rhythms. mine to ride those rhythms out and my own,
and call them out even more. a speaking together from body
to mouth to voice.

Thoughts “sneak through,” here—the silent room is filled with the memories of a different arrangement of bodies and modes of speaking and thinking together. As in *Work Week* and *Illegal Assembly*, however, the poem demonstrates that “women’s work” and “lesbian love” are not simply opposed bodily experiences. Indeed, there is a sort of “speaking together from body” in the typesetters’ subaltern modes of communication with regard to their racist and sexist bosses:

because they must think we are stupid in order
to push us around, *they* become stupid.
knowing “something’s going on,” peering like moles.
how can they know the quirk of an eyebrow behind their back?
they suspect we hate them because they know
what they are doing to us—but we are only
stupid Blacks or crazy Puerto Ricans, or dumb blonds.

we are their allergy, their bad dream.
they need us too much, with their talk of
“carrying us” on the payroll.
we carry them, loads of heavy, dull metal,
outmoded and dusty.

they try to control us, building partitions,
and taking the faces off the phones.
they talk to us slow and loud,
HOW ARE YOU TODAY? HERE'S A CHECK FOR YOU.
As if it were a gift.

we say—even if they stretched tape
across our mouths
we could still speak to one another
with our eyebrows

(Brodine 1990: 7-8)

While the regular exchange of raised eyebrows is not identical to “lovemaking last night,” both involve the building of coordinated skills and perhaps of political power in the face of a generalized disregard for the embodied lives of working-class women. The speaking through eyebrows is, of course, not any kind of guarantee of solidarity among the feminized workers—and, certain versions of female solidarity at work are premised on the expulsion of gender nonconforming people.²² All the same, the knowledge conveyed in these exchanges, that “we carry them, loads of heavy, dull metal, / outmoded and dusty” is a small advantage that the typesetters have over management. Management is figured here as the heavy metal linotype machines whose white male operators were prioritized by labor leadership over the women and queer people increasingly finding work in the industry. Management is also figured as having a disadvantage in terms of both technical and political skill. Brodine has learnt that there is some power on the flipside of her downgraded status. The conditions of her work allow for the generation of skills, and these are skills that must be taken into the hands of those who have been silently collectivized.

Again, this dialectic between technical deskilling and political power is rendered through the movement of “thinking” across the poem. The woman who is “thinking” is not simply shaped by lovemaking and wage labor: she is shaped by the Marxist-feminist praxis that Brodine developed with comrades in the Women Writers Union, Freedom Socialist Party, and Radical Women. Brodine described the genesis of the project in a 1984 letter to her good friend, gay Filipino writer, Edgar Poma: “Do you know what inspired that poem? (I mean besides the job I was working at then). A talk on Marxist economics by [an FSP comrade]. It was that talk that spoke of human labor hours stored up in machines, and so on, and really got me thinking” (Brodine 1984: np). This explanation of machinery by way of Marx’s labor theory of value also inflects the significance of the word “thinking”: it appears not quite to belong to the woman in the title: “Woman Sitting at the Machine, Thinking.” “Thinking” posits a dimension of freedom from work, but it is a freedom conditioned by the choreographic constraints of typesetting labor: code, rhythm, gesture, posture, manipulation of text as seen on the monitor or video display terminal, and transfer of data to the mainframe. The placement of “thinking” after the comma affords some ambiguity about the agent of the thinking: woman, machine, or woman-machine. That is, “thinking” is *conditioned by* rather than simply *outside of or beyond* the relations of feminized wage labor.

Take the opening lines of “Woman Sitting at the Machine, Thinking”:

she thinks about everything at once without making a mistake.
no one has figured out how to keep her from doing this thinking
while her hands and nerves also perform every delicate complex
function of the work. this is not automatic or deadening.

try it sometime. make your hands move quickly on the keys
fast as you can, while you are thinking about:

the layers, fossils. the idea that this machine she controls
is simply layers of human workhours frozen in steel, tangled
in tiny circuits, blinking out through lights like hot, red eyes...

(Brodine 1990: 3)

“Thinking” is something that emerges through the material discipline of work, alongside the silences and solidarities that accompany it. Brodine grasps at the hierarchical and networked relations and forces that determine her life, and she delineates the contradictions that underpin and threaten this ordering of relations. Thinking happens in spite of apparent attempts to prevent it from taking place (“no one has figured out how to keep her from doing this thinking”) and especially to *prevent it from being shared.*

At the same time, at least some of this thinking also enters *into* the machine and is thereby destined for expropriation by the bosses; it does not simply escape the relations of production. The mainframe computer and the information that it stores are the private property of the bosses and of their clients. This is the literal transfer of feminized human labor power (quantified “thinking”) to an expropriating machine. In this sense, the poem literalizes the fact that capitalism recuperates and appropriates feminized interventions in technique:

we sell ourselves in fractions. they don't want us all
at once, but hour by hour, piece by piece. our hands mainly
and our backs. and chunks of our brains. and veiled expressions
on our faces, they buy. though they can't know what actual
thoughts stand behind our eyes.

These “actual / thoughts... behind our eyes” are cold comfort if the means for their communication and preservation are not “ours.” And writing and reading poetry – sharing these thoughts – cannot resolve this problem.

That is, while the poem comprehends at once the machine, the feminized work, and the thinking that stream into it as social material, it also expresses a wish that the computer *could* hold and convey all of the thinking that takes place in front of it. Brodine writes a demand for the machine and a wish to store meaning and labor in the machine in a way that is *not* an expropriation:

what if you could send anything in and call it out again?
I file jobs under words I like–red, buzz, fury
search for tiger, execute
the words stream up the screen till tiger trips the halt
search for seal search for strike
search for the names of women

we could circle our words around the world
like dolphins streaking through water their radar
if the screens were really in the hands of experts: us.
think of it–our ideas whipping through the air
everything stored in an eyeflash
our whole history, ready and waiting.

(Brodine 1990: 17)

Here, the machine becomes an enabling condition of joy and desire precisely because of all it has absorbed of collective feminized labor, of unspoken conversations, of women rolling their eyes at management and glaring into the machine, and of women looking longingly at one another over the machines. The contradictory labor relations of computerized typesetting, and the social antagonisms that these relations entail, make up Brodine’s vision of feminized

labor (and of thinking) as concrete activity. The poem calls for efforts to make it so—to appropriate the machine so that “our whole history, ready and waiting” can be readily available to “experts: us.”

For this to be possible, the woman at the machine has to engage in various forms of resistance, including, but not limited to, collective industrial action. Brodine did just this, as I have already noted. But the context of Brodine’s work—the relatively brief historical window during which typesetting was simultaneously feminized and computerized—potentiated other, complementary but distinct forms of organizing and resistance. Stealing time or just using machines after hours to typeset poems about feminized labor certainly falls into this category of resistance. A single typewritten sheet of paper archived among Brodine's teaching materials is titled “Sabotage.” The page seems to be Brodine’s notes for a public reading or performance. She has typed:

writing about work is a form of sabotage.

stealing, another: running off my poems on the company
xerox machine, or copying material about the union

saying the way things really are

.....

sneaking words into the memory of the machine...

(Brodine c. 1980.: np)

Brodine, unlike some of the “Language” poets who were her San Francisco contemporaries, did not expect formal linguistic experimentation on its own to resolve or even intervene directly in the contradictions of capitalist society.²³

Rather, she saw poetry learning from and being shaped by collective struggles against capitalism as a total system, struggles coordinated and led by those whose labor has most often been undervalued because it is racialized and feminized. As she wrote in a controversial essay on “The Politics of Women Writing”:

The poem I write, *by itself*, will not organize for affirmative action, or abortion. Action, organizing with other people, has to do that. New different poems come out of that organizing experience. I can give a new poem, copied secretly on the office machine, to my fellow workers. Because the images in it come from us, our anger, our resistance, my co-workers care for the poem, and it become[s] a part of the gathering force of our solidarity. For that poem can collect on one page a record of the contradictions we experience every day. I have yet to know the use of a poem the way I know the use of a hammer. Yet I feel a poem is surely a tool. (Brodine 1979: 9)²⁴

The arguments that Brodine makes here for the “use” of poetry are not about the creation of revolutionary forms of subjectivity in an abstract reader. Rather, poems are materially situated in the production and distribution of literary language, and Brodine sees “the poem” as a technology that affords particular uses. The poem, “Woman Sitting at the Machine, Thinking” has a range of such possible uses, one of which is to share it with her coworkers as part of the collective development of political skill.

Brodine’s “sabotage” is not (or is at least not only) intended to ironize the labor relations that condition it, to make irreverent fun out of her work for sharing with professional writers who are not her comrades. This is not to say that the poems are not fun and funny (they are), and that others wouldn’t want to read them (many do), but rather that they are geared toward the collective transformation of queer literary labor. This is not simply a matter of Brodine’s

moral decision making or of some special individual attitude that she held toward poetry—rather, it has everything to do with the objective, feminized labor relations of typesetting work in this period. And it also has to do with Brodine’s political orientation, as a leading member in socialist-feminist organizations, toward a revolutionary strategy that takes as its basic condition of possibility the feminization and racialization of the US working class. Thinking and writing can be individually engaged activities, but when they are also part of the conditions of labor, they can line up with ways of feeding collective disruption into the management machine, and of enlisting technologies (screens, memory, and even deadly chemical processes) to aid in this resistance.

Such resistance, it must be added, was framed by the fact that pre-press and printing labor would be further outsourced in the years to follow through the explosion of logistics and the outsourcing of much microchip fabrication and computer manufacturing, a story that might profitably be explored in relation to the global feminization of literary and printing labor all the way down the supply chain. By contrast, in Brodine’s work, the machine comprises both the terminal and the mainframe—the machine and the information that it stored were on site, and the point of production was relatively centralized. That this particular combination of access to the means of print production and Marxist-feminist praxis under discussion in this article was localized and relatively brief does not, however, limit its purchase for thinking about and engaging in the concrete activities that are abstractly called “LGBT literature” today. In a journal entry from October 7, 1983,

Brodine wrote out a plan to perform “the working poem” at a reading and to introduce it according to these indications:

Explain: from one shop - wouldn't let in union - call by another name.
found poem - word stretches out. Thinking in and out of the gaps of the
work itself.... The poem in the form that material goes into the machine.
//files//... resistance the prime ingredient. (Brodine 1970-1987: np)

Brodine's work shows us that this kind of queer poetic resistance—getting it into the machine—was made distinctly possible, for a relatively brief time, by the feminization of typesetting labor in the United States.

Notes

This article benefits from the work of too many people to name, including some who have worked in typesetting and print and many who knew Karen Brodine. Helen Gilbert, Toni Mendocino, Mark Solomon, Nellie Wong, and Merle Woo all generously provided crucial information and guidance at various stages; special thanks are due to Helen and Toni for sharing materials from their personal archives. I am grateful to Tim Wilson and Andrea Grimes at the San Francisco Public Library for help during my visit to the Karen Brodine papers. I am indebted to Ramzi Fawaz, Shanté Paradigm Smalls, and two anonymous reviewers for suggestions about the shape and scope of the essay.

¹ In offset lithography, positive images on a photographically developed metal plate are inked (as in lithographic processes more broadly, the adhesion of the ink on some parts of the plate but not others is based on the repulsion of oil and water).

Ink is transferred from the plate as a negative image onto a “blanket” and then transferred again from the blanket onto a printing surface.

² I use the terms “feminized” and “racialized” labor in the sense of work that is marked by the politically distorted sense of the value of the labor power of the workers who do it. Conversely, “feminized” work tends to further feminize those who do it. In this, I follow Rosemary Hennessy’s account of feminized “second skins” (Hennessy 2013: 171).

³ I understand these claims to be in conversation with recent work in queer Marxism, particularly the work of Rosemary Hennessy and Holly Lewis on feminization, labor, and non-normative sexual practices. See Hennessy 2013, Lewis 2016, and also Floyd 2009, Liu 2015, Tinkcom 2002, and the yet-unpublished work of Nat Raha on queer labor and trans social reproduction. For recent accounts of the gay left and of gays and lesbians in the labor movement, respectively, see Hobson 2016 and Frank 2014.

⁴ Brodine’s work has received renewed critical appreciation from poets and editors, see especially Buuck 2014 and Boyer 2015.

⁵ Cf. “Merle Woo vs. UCB: the history” for an outline of one legal and political campaign that Brodine organized in the early 1980s.

⁶ It is possible that some of the chemical processing involved in photocomposition may have contributed to Brodine’s cancer. Many of her journal entries contain retrospectively upsetting notes along the lines of one typed entry dated “July 30” and likely from 1979 or 1980: “I’m afraid of how my chest hurts. It must be the

fumes. Nothing else could make it feel this way.” (Brodine 1970-1987: np) See Boyer 2015 also for an extended consideration of sickness and labor in relation to Brodine’s poem.

⁷ The paradigmatic literary representation of this attitude and situation can be found in Updike 1971.

⁸ For a recent study of masculinity in the transition from letterpress to offset lithography (for which masculinity remained a marker of privilege and skill), see Stein 2016.

⁹ Feinberg herself was not only a revolutionary communist and a transgender icon: ze also made a living as a typesetter and was intimately acquainted with this history; *Stone Butch Blues* can, in fact, be read as a novel that narrates the processes that allow for butch and transmasculine experiences to be *asserted in print*. See “The ‘Revolution’ on Park Avenue” 1973 and Montgomery 1974 for earlier management and journalistic accounts of Powers’ industrial strategy.

¹⁰ This history is, of course, of consequence in most of the workplaces in which Jess Goldberg finds herself in *Stone Butch Blues* (particularly in the binderies, where Feinberg narrates the open secret of butch and femme women workers flirting and developing relationships – binderies, of course, have long been the most feminized workplaces in the print and publishing industries).

¹¹ On “camp labor,” see Tinkcom 2002; on “queer work,” see Bérubé 2011; on the “gay economy,” see Rubin [1984] 1994.

¹² The eye-strain that often came from spending long shifts in front of Video Display Terminals is the subject of printer and writer Susan Meurer's poem "Have You Ever Considered...": "My VDT tortured eyes, twitching again/ begged for a break from green letters/ and glare eyed hours a day." (Wayman 1991: 98).

¹³ Alan Marshall argues that computerized typesetting was not, in and of itself, any less "skilled" than linotyping had been: "The inherent capabilities of computer-typesetting do not, however, necessarily imply deskilling.... But in general they are being used by management to break up the work sequence into simplified and more easily quantifiable sections." (Marshall 1983: 105).

¹⁴ For the material and metaphorical history of "word-processing" in late twentieth-century American literature, see Kirschenbaum 2016. For a brilliant exploration of typing and copy-editing as exemplary feminized modes of "not reading," see Cecire 2016.

¹⁵ Kelsey St. was formed out of a split in the Berkeley Poets Cooperative: "Patricia Dienstfrey recalls her impetus for breaking away from the Berkeley Poets Cooperative and forming KSP: She remembers the critique of a particular poem by Karen Brodine and the sense that the vocal, male members of the Berkeley Poets Cooperative had reduced the poem to its domestic subject matter, to its apparent femininity, and nothing more" (Kelsey Street Press Blog).

¹⁶ See Streitmatter 1995 on gay and lesbian publishing, Baim 2012 for scholarly and oral histories from LGBTQ+ print ventures, and Hogan on the crucial role

that “feminist bookwomen” played in the economy of gay and feminist publishing in the late twentieth century.

¹⁷ For accounts of the “underground press” that take on the problem of management, see Lewis 1972, Marshall 1983, and McMillan 2011.

¹⁸ “The structure of job sharing allowed a variety of women to learn different skills in the phases of printing, and it also expressed an important philosophical commitment of feminism in the early 1970s: the refusal of hierarchical structures, associated with patriarchy, and the egalitarian belief that all women could learn all types of skills.” (Beins and Enszer, 2013: 205).

¹⁹ Many of Barbara Smith’s reflections on running Kitchen Table are collected in Jones et al 2014. To support Smith’s ongoing work, visit <https://fundly.com/barbara-2>

²⁰ The same was true of for-profit feminist typesetting businesses. WGC Typesetting and Design was founded in the early 1980s to fund the operations of the Women’s Graphic Centre at the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles. The business ran almost entirely in the red, however, and by March 1988 had declared bankruptcy and suspended operations (Wolverton 2002: 168-232).

²¹ Fraser, who taught at SFSU when the WWU was formed, dedicated the 1988 issue of the avant-garde feminist poetry journal *How(ever)* to Brodine.

²² Indeed, in Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues*, Jess is subjected at a typesetting shop to painful transphobic suspicions by cisgendered women coworkers, who, while conferring with each other in a manner reminiscent of the raised eyebrows in

Brodine's poem, identify Jess as "a psycho," "effeminate," "gay," and "the kind you gotta watch out for" (Feinberg 1993: 265). Jess leaves work and never returns to that particular shop.

²³ See "Response to L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E," in *Illegal Assembly*. Brodine writes: "I say blow the house down / the whole house, not just the words" and later "it's true I want things to mean / it's true I mean things/ to change..." (Brodine 1980: 51-52).

²⁴ This article caused significant controversy among the radical feminist readership of the feminist journal *Second Wave*, not least for Brodine's blunt criticisms of Adrienne Rich and of radical feminism more broadly. Brodine's comrades wrote letters-to-the-editor in defense of Brodine in subsequent issues, as did science fiction writer Joanna Russ. Rich, for her part, wrote movingly about Brodine's work on numerous occasions (e.g., Rich 1991).

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