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INTO THE STACKS: BOOK LAUNCH: *QUEER CAREER: SEXUALITY AND WORK IN MODERN AMERICA*

Queer Affect at Work

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Early on in her often moving new book, *Queer Career*, Margot Canaday quotes from an oral history interview she conducted in New York in 2012, at the very beginning of her research. The participant, an African American gay man, recalled his entry into the working world: "I was a typist, and I wanted to type." The sentence provides early evidence for one of the major findings of the book, that before gay liberation, many queer and trans people chose lower-paying jobs in office and service work because it allowed for greater flexibility to pursue a sexual and social life outside of their job, and because there was less to lose if you were arrested. But Canaday also slows down to parse not just the speaker's words but also his intonation. As Canaday recalls, "[H]e didn't just state this; he joyfully exclaimed it: '*I was a typist*,' his voice rose, '*and I wanted to type!*'" (19).

Canaday's attention to voice and feeling operates here as a method of interpretation but also signals one of the book's underlying interventions: its attention to the workplace as a site and source of emotion. *Queer Career* bridges many subfields that will be familiar to readers of Canaday's first book, *The Straight State*—queer history, political history, legal history—but it is, at its core, as Canaday puts it, "an *affective* labor history" (19). In this short response, I want to reflect on the work of affect in *Queer Career*, to think through how attention not just to queer workers but to queer feelings rewrites the history of LGBTQ engagements with capitalism, especially amidst the rise of neoliberalism.

Affect and emotion—both embodied and psychological feelings—have been central themes in queer and trans studies for the last twenty years, building out of works of cultural and literary theory by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Elizabeth Freeman, Heather Love, José Esteban Muñoz, and Ann Cvetkovich especially, as well as a larger body of affect and trauma studies.[1] Many of these works principally focused on feelings of loss, shame, and grief, although Freeman warns readers not to turn away from the "politics of pleasure" too soon.[2] Queer historians have been slower to embrace affect and emotion as areas of inquiry. Sociologist Deborah Gould's history of ACT UP, *Moving Politics*, remains a key exception, tracing what she terms the shifting "emotional habitus" of AIDS activism—how ACT UP mobilized grief and anger as sources of activism.[3] Still, the roles of affect and emotion have often been only implicit in histories of LGBTQ

[1]Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC, 2003); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC, 2010); Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA, 2007); José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, ed. Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong'o (Durham, NC, 2020); Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC, 2003). See also Kadji Amin, "Haunted by the 1990s: Queer Theory's Affective Histories," in *Imagining Queer Methods*, ed. Amin Ghaziani and Matt Brim (New York, 2019), 277–93.

[2]Elizabeth Freeman, "Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography," *Social Text* 23, nos. 3–4 (2005): 59.

[3]Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago, 2009).

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identity, community, and politics. Canaday, for her part, looks to British histories of labor for examples of studies that have highlighted everyday feelings as crucial facets in the history of work.[4] This approach resonates especially with Dipesh Chakrabaty's framing of affective histories, calling for "a loving grasp of detail" that might point us toward modernity's complexity and contradictions.[5]

Canaday's major sources in tracking the affective labor history of LGBTQ workers are over 150 oral history interviews she conducted across the United States. Oral histories have long been crucial sources for public and academic LGBTQ history, but the oral histories in *Queer Career* also reveal in retrospect the surprising ways work has been overlooked in LGBTQ histories.[6] Even *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis's groundbreaking history of a working-class lesbian community in Buffalo, contains little extended discussion about life in the factories where many women worked.[7] One reason for this elision may be that LGBTQ histories have traditionally focused on spaces of queer community building and activism—the places LGBTQ people have built or worked to claim for themselves. Still the workplace has been a unique site of ongoing negotiation—a place where queer and trans people have had to continually navigate their relationships with straight (as well as queer) colleagues and supervisors.

What comes through in Canaday's oral histories is the sense of meaning and self-worth many LGBTQ people have derived from work, as well as their struggles and joys in trying to build community in workspaces where their sexuality and gender place them at risk. Several interview participants, for example, recalled the need for discretion and what Erving Goffman called "covering" in making friendships with other queer people at work. One participant described the need to make a slow approach and send subtle cues to someone else you suspected was gay, like mentioning a gay bar. He explained, "There was also an unspoken agreement about how to behave…. It was very business-like. You used a low voice" (46). Another interview participant described how she and a group of lesbian teachers started both a cheerleading squad and a drama club as a cover for spending time together outside of school. In chapter five, Canaday turns to the gay and lesbian nurses who worked for the first hospital ward in San Francisco for people with AIDS. The interviews here capture both the pride in caring for members of their own community and, in the words of one nurse, the "electricity of beginning something brand new" (199).

Canaday's attention to feeling in the oral histories carries over into her reading of written sources as well, from social science studies to personal and professional papers. Chapter three traces homophile leader Frank Kameny's long effort to challenge discrimination against gay men and lesbians for jobs that required security clearances. For years, Kameny supported clients in administrative hearings against the Civil Service Commission (CSC) and the Department of Defense. But Kameny, who popularized the slogan "Gay Is Good," understood the uses of emotion, including harnessing what Canaday calls "a politics of annoyance" (114). When the CSC barred Kameny from one early hearing, relegating him to a neighboring building, he insisted his client come to consult him after every question, until the CSC finally relented. Even in success, Kameny could be cantankerous. After a major legal victory,

[4]For example, see Claire Langhamer, "Feelings, Women and Work in the Long 1950s," *Women's History Review* 26, no. 1 (2017): 77–92.

[5]Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ, 2000), 18. See also discussion in Freeman, *Time Binds,* xix–xxi; and Tyler Bradway, *Queer Experimental Literature: The Affective Politics of Bad Reading* (New York, 2017), 53–4.

[6]On queer oral history, see especially Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, eds., *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* (New York, 2012); Kevin P. Murphy, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Jason Ruiz, "What Makes Queer Oral History Different," *The Oral History Review* 43, no. 1 (2019): 1–24.

[7]Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York, 1993).

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Kameny bristled when the client expressed worry that media coverage would out him to his family. When Canaday quotes Kameny, "You have fought the very government of the United States and won…. And you're still running from your family???!!!" (117), you can hear his outrage in every question mark and exclamation point.

Canaday's ear for individual emotional experience simultaneously opens up to a broader social history. *Queer Career* does not so much map a change in queer feelings over time but uncovers a peculiar intractability: despite the broader cultural and legal shifts the book tracks, whatever meaning and connection queer and trans people have found in the workplace seems persistently shadowed by feelings of fear, shame, and alienation, whether in the 1950s, the 1990s, or today. The word Canaday returns to again and again is vulnerability.

That feeling of vulnerability is central to another of the book's core revisions. Queer studies scholars over the last twenty years have tended to look critically at LGBTQ people's warming relationship with corporations and the rise of what has been termed rainbow capitalism—the embrace of LGBTQ people by big business both as consumers and workers. Yet Canaday finds that the working lives of most queer and trans people have been characterized far more by a sense of precarity than privilege. Even in the 1950s, some employers accepted gay men and lesbians in the workplace, precisely because their vulnerability made them desirable employees: they were often grateful for the work and unlikely to complain if they were fired. Canaday reads this as a "bargain": employers accepted the open secret of queerness, while workers accepted a demand for discretion, in ways that ultimately enabled their exploitation. Whatever wins that LGBTQ people have achieved in the workplace look less, as Canaday puts it, like "privileged people sidling up to business or legitimating neoliberalism, but rather a matter of vulnerable people (and a fledgling but growing movement) exhausting every possible avenue open to them" (272). As Aaron Lecklider shows, in the decades before World War II, some queer people undoubtedly rejected such a compromise, linking their sexual dissidence with anticapitalist and leftist organizing. Such alliances were increasingly sidelined, however, with the rise of the homophile movement in the context of the Red Scare of the 1950s.[8]

As scholars begin to tell histories of the 1980s and 1990s, Canaday's attention to vulnerability is particularly powerful in rethinking how marginalized communities have worked to sustain themselves against the larger structural shifts, and restricted horizons, of neoliberalism and privatization. For me, one of the striking takeaways from *Queer Career* is how much cultural change in the workplace has depended not on legal or policy changes or the decisions of government and business leaders but on the grassroots efforts of activists, often without formal training. Kameny, for one example, referred to himself as a "lawyer without portfolio" (112). A decade later, the lesbian and gay lawyers who fought for employment protections for people with HIV/AIDS did so without having the benefit of any coursework in gay and lesbian law. The earliest employee resource groups for LGBTQ workers also emerged from employees experimenting with new forms of email, at a time when few people had access to computers outside the office. Those dynamics of creative resistance and organizing also resonate with scholarship on LGBTQ health and mental healthcare: the founders of early gay health clinics, queer and trans counseling centers, and HIV/AIDS social services all had little or no specific training in LGBTQ healthcare to draw on. Rather, as David S. Byers, Emil Smith, and I have argued, they improvised new modes of affirmative care based on their own experiences, enabling them both to recognize and counter the feelings of alienation that were often ignored or exacerbated by straight and cisgender clinicians.[9] LGBTQ people ultimately built a more

[8]Aaron S. Lecklider, *Love's Next Meeting: The Forgotten History of Homosexuality and the Left in American Culture* (Oakland, CA, 2021).

[9]David S. Byers, Stephen Vider, and Emil K. Smith, "Clinical Activism in Community-Based Practice: The Case of LGBT Affirmative Care at the Eromin Center, Philadelphia, 1973–1984," *American Psychologist* 74, no. 8 (2019):

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secure place for themselves in various professions not because of the good will of the government or their employers, but because queer and trans people saw each other's vulnerability and banded together to support one another in novel ways.

Against the broader history of LGBTQ culture and capitalism, Canaday's focus on workers is a marked and intentional departure: previous scholarship has focused principally on queer consumption.[10] I was left wondering, though, how corporations, their employees, and their customers have understood the relationship between LGBTQ consumers and workers: to what degree has queer and trans inclusion in the workplace translated into marketing and consumption, and vice versa? In October 2021, for example, trans and allied workers at Netflix protested, resigned, and lodged formal complaints against the company for streaming Dave Chappelle's transphobic comedy special, *The Closer*. As journalist Kate Sosin reported, the company's trans employee resource group, founded in 2015 and formally recognized by Netflix in 2017, felt betrayed after years of working to build an accepting culture.[11] Many viewers objected as well, calling on Netflix to take down the special. They did not and released another Chappelle special less than a year later. Netflix ultimately wanted it both ways—to attract LGBTQ workers and viewers, without steadfastly supporting them. If Netflix is any indication, it seems many big businesses have learned to approach queer and trans customers in the same ways as they have long approached queer and trans workers—as a bargain: a loyal but vulnerable customer base that the company, in turn, feels no loyalty to. This hypocritical, if not outwardly hostile, stance toward LGBTQ consumers and workers parallels the similarly opportunist stance taken by many corporations toward racial justice and reproductive freedom.[12]

It has become a common American trope that the workplace provides an alternative form of family—evidenced everywhere from TV shows like *The Office* and *Severance* to corporate onboarding programs. But the rhetoric of family in the workplace also betrays how companies have learned to manipulate the emotional needs of employees in ways that serve the employer most.[13] As Canaday reveals, the affective history of the workplace is in no way a side story of neoliberalism but at its center.

868–81. See also Katie Batza, *Before AIDS: Gay Health Politics in the 1970s* (Philadelphia, 2018); and my discussion of GMHC's buddy program in Stephen Vider, *The Queerness of Home: Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of Domesticity after World War II* (Chicago, 2021), 185–201.

[10]For a historiography of queer consumption, see Stephen Vider, "Consumerism," in *The Routledge History of Queer America*, ed. Don Romesburg (New York, 2018), 344–58.

[11]Kate Sosin, "Netflix Employee Walkout: Here's What Happened at the Trans Solidarity Protest," *them*, Oct. 21, 2021, https://www.them.us/story/as-netflix-stands-by-anti-trans-chapelle-special-employees-prepare-to-walk-out.

[12]Mary Ziegler, "If You Want to Know What Republicans Think About How Americans Feel, Ask Walgreens," *New York Times,* Mar. 17, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/17/opinion/walgreens-abortion-pill-attorneys-general-states.html.

[13]On the rhetoric of "family" in corporate culture, see Joshua A. Luna, "The Toxic Effects of Branding Your Workplace a 'Family,'" *Harvard Business Review*, Oct. 27, 2021, https://hbr.org/2021/10/the-toxic-effects-of-branding-your-workplace-a-family.

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