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

Emotion's Place in Labor History

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Queer Career opens with a reflection on work's contradictions. While jobs impose discipline and mandate conformity, workers also hope to find fulfillment and express their individuality while on the clock. Labor force segmentation mirrors social disparities, but workplaces are also sites where diverse people converge and collaborate. The tensions in this abstracted meditation —between exploitation and authenticity, between domination and subjectivity—ground the book's historical analysis and shape the tools Margot Canaday brings to the job. There is much to say about *Queer Career*'s interventions as a history of gender, sexuality, law, and social movements. Still, its most revelatory innovations are as a model of what Canaday terms "an *affective* labor history" (19).

Since labor history's origins, scholars have charted the field through binaries. These dichotomies include labor versus management, immigrants versus U.S. citizens, and the racialized and gendered divisions of labor. Works of queer labor history such as Stacey Braukman's *Communists and Perverts under the Palms*, Lillian Faderman's *Gay Revolution*, and David Johnson's *Lavender Scare* reasoned from the mid-twentieth-century Lavender Scare to assert a different type of divide: concealment on the job and freer expression during leisure time. But Canaday found extensive evidence of queer workers across the labor force through her 156 oral history interviews and deep legal and archival research. Thus, she redefines the queer work experience away from the pressure to be invisible and toward "a kind of presence" (39). *Queer Career* reconstitutes this presence by considering gay and lesbian workers as whole individuals. Of course, they were cogs in workplaces whose purposes ranged from producing profit to public service, but they were also people with their own experiences, priorities, and perspectives.

Like other labor historians—Susan Porter Benson, Maurice Isserman, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Joe Trotter, to name a few—Canaday finds the binary to be a useful analytical frame. She asserts a new one: the division between straight and queer spheres. The queer work world mapped on to the contingent fields where women and people of color had long earned low wages in dead-end jobs with diminished status. But those marginal roles offered queer workers personal freedoms such as the opportunity to "dress in a way that felt authentic and enjoy the company of others like them" (74). Many queer people also worked in the straight work world, which included the "good jobs" that were typically the domain of salaried white men. But seizing upon that elevated status and ample pay meant entering a space that "did not affirm queerness and often repressed it" (7). Absent legal protections or cultural affirmation, queer workers were especially vulnerable because they were at least partially visible. In a "bargain of discretion and obliviousness," bosses tended to tolerate queer workers' semi-open presence in exchange for their docility (27). In both worlds of work, employers exploited queer identity to boost profits and shore up workers' contingency.

Both worlds of work could be extractive and affirming for the queer people who maneuvered them with care. Canaday's oral history evidence unearths the layered harms created by permanent precariousness: the "cultural" destruction of "misrecognition," the "fundamentally economic" damage, and the "psychic fear that many people took with them to their jobs

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every day" (266–7). Workers' subjectivity drives the analysis in *Queer Career*, and not in simple terms of resistance or acquiescence or for the purpose of adding color to the narrative. While labor historians have long focused on rights consciousness, Canaday's affective lens uncovers personable and variable dynamics that were only partially tethered to the legal, political, and activist regimes of their day. Queer workers' calculated choices, circumscribed as they were, formed the contours of their world of work, and ours.

With this analytical apparatus in place, Canaday presents a new trajectory of American labor since the 1950s. Scholars have generally defined the mid-twentieth century as an age of employment security. The economy saw sustained growth and stability, and while white collar workers fared best, blue-collar workers benefitted from a higher standard of living. Men earned breadwinner wages in exchange for loyalty to employers. But queer workers' perspective upends this narrative. The Lavender Scare ruined some lives and terrorized many others, but most queer workers kept their jobs. Still, they were vulnerable, as even the most elite among them were "not hidden and safe but somewhat exposed and deportable" down to the queer work world (40). Uniquely at risk, queer workers in the straight work world tried to manage the fear and hold onto their jobs.

Gay liberation unsettled this arrangement in unexpected ways, as Canaday reveals by analyzing workers' emotions in tandem with deep economic shifts. That movement brought about an "expanded consciousness" that was "facilitated by a broader skepticism during these years about jobs and career" (149). As gay liberation reworked American culture, queer workers refused to, or could no longer, keep their side of "the mutual pact *to try not to see* and *to try not to be seen*" (150). Canaday recovers queer workers' varied relationships to liberation. Although the professions opened slightly, blue-collar work became less hospitable. Queer workers who had once worked with relative openness could no longer count on being left alone in exchange for their personal discretion. Blue-collar gay men enraged straight counterparts who "felt their own economic prospects growing more circumscribed" (158). Lesbians endured interlocking forms of oppression in their detachment from male breadwinners, and some experimented with alternative living and economic arrangements that brought distinct obstacles. "No one was able to completely isolate themselves from gay liberation," and that included some queer workers who lost control of how the movement's currents shifted their lives and others who did not want to participate at all (183).

Canaday most directly applies this affective labor history lens in Chapter 5: a sweeping analysis of how AIDS changed work for queer people. That crisis brought a new regime of cruelty and fear. As the "stigma of homosexuality" was compounded by association "with contagion and fatal disease," employers began to view all queer workers as saddled with "multiplying liabilities" (188). Workplace discrimination became its own epidemic, and gay and lesbian workers became even more discreet through a process of "recloseting" (192). Some employers fired workers known or thought to be sick with AIDS, depriving them of a paycheck, health insurance, and a sense of purpose when they intensely needed all three. Yet the epidemic also gave rise to a new kind of "AIDS workplace," exemplified by the San Francisco General Hospital's special care unit for AIDS patients (196–7). The unit shielded patients and gay nurses alike from the hospital's homophobic climate. The nurses reveled in the opportunity to support their own community in their jobs, and because AIDS had no cure, the nurses gave priority to providing palliative care and protecting their patients' dignity. For the nurses, the work brought physical risks, but witnessing "the suffering and loss of patients" took the heaviest toll (203).

Canaday locates these dynamics in our own time, pointing out, in a figure that will surprise many readers, that nearly one-half of all LGBT workers have chosen not to come out in their jobs. *Queer Career* concludes with the story of one worker whose recent quest for rights was "layered on top of a longer struggle" for employment that would shore up her own self-respect and authentic life (285). Aimee Australia Stephens was a funeral director at Harris Funeral

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Homes in Garden City, Michigan. Excelling in the position, Stephens handled the bodies in her care and the bereaved relatives she met with decency and respect. While employed at the funeral home, Stephens "had come to understand herself as transgender," and when she informed her boss that she would soon transition fully, including in their workplace, she was fired (282). Stephens launched a seven-year fight to win legal protection from discrimination for herself and other queer workers. As her case ground on, her mental health suffered. Being fired was "like … going from being somebody to nobody," Stephens explained, asking, "Do I not matter anymore?" (284). Stephens died in 2020, five weeks before the Supreme Court handed down its opinion in her case. That opinion, *Bostock v. Clayton County*, extended Title VII protections to LGBT workers.

Queer Career interweaves a wide range of fields, illuminating several avenues for future research. Canaday has crafted a model of history that embeds individuals in the structures that shape their lives, giving equal explanatory power to each. Approximately 100 of her oral history interviews ground Canaday's "cohort study" (15). These individuals were born in the 1930s and 1940s, joined the labor force during the Lavender Scare of the 1950s, worked through the liberation and AIDS years, and retired in the 1990s, when diversity became a buzz word for employers. Their lives offer a through-line across a striking range of eras, and a similar cohort study focused on another group could be just as revelatory. Historians adopting this model but lacking Canaday's access to oral histories could consult letters, diaries, and other forms of personal expression. A cohort study of trans workers would complement and perhaps complicate *Queer Career*'s narrative, as would a pre-history of Canaday's cohort. Is a prequel in her plans?

Queer Career also points the way to new labor histories that foreground workers' subjectivity while situating them in their overlapping contexts. Such an approach is indebted to women's and gender history, which has long found meaning in bridging public and private, home and work. *Queer Career* draws from this tradition, showcasing the power of scholarship that uncovers subjectivity and community. As a result, *Queer Career* intervenes in broader historical narratives, speaks to other subfields, and admonishes those U.S. historians who continue to treat gender and sexuality as marginal when they engage those categories at all. Applying Canaday's approach to this problem, a new crop of labor biographies could analyze workers' experiences on and off the job, their activism, and their rights consciousness in concert with the larger systems that bounded their lives.

Finally, Canaday offers a more nuanced method of studying capitalism that is equal parts bottom-up and top-down. Historians of capitalism have tended to analyze U.S. history by foregrounding powerful individuals and abstract market forces. Canaday demonstrates that everyday people—their efforts, their struggles, and their options—shaped capitalism just as much. A new turn in the history of capitalism could take up Canaday's charge to study ordinary people without downplaying the economic currents that push them along or the elites who constrain or overlook them. As Canaday points out on *Queer Career*'s first page, this history should matter to all of us, whether we study the modern United States or perform some other kind of labor, either paid or unpaid. All of it entails navigating the balance between exploitation and authentic expression that we cannot escape—even when we are choosing to set aside less-stimulating labors in order to respond to exquisite books like *Queer Career*: the rare task that is purely a pleasure.

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