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

Re-centering Race and Class in the "Queer Career"

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Margot Canaday offers this new book as a kind of continuation of her classic 2009 study on the bureaucratic persecution of gays, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in the Twentieth Century*. Rather than government documents, *Queer Career* draws on more than 150 oral histories of subjects recalling employment memories and complaints, as well as her signature exhaustion of the secondary sources.

But this new project is a tall order for a historian so wedded to official records and analytical prose, rather than more personal insights and tones. The continuities in practice outweigh her claim for historiographical departure. The interviews have been spliced and categorized and classified with great rigor, and then deployed in a dizzying series of anecdotes per paragraph. Perhaps persuasive, and yet now the voices feel muted or, at the very least, drowned out in the aggregate. There are few names that appear in the text (only of the famous), and with that very little sense of how this or that experience of secrecy or impersonation in the workplace reconfigured individual lives outside in the long run. In a modern society, even in the Fordist era, workers experienced a divide between their work and domestic or leisure practices. Already by the late-nineteenth century, many laborers most wanted "eight hours for what we will," for the pleasures of a role not defined by their artisanal status. I question Canaday's continual assertion that queers proved to be harbingers of the new post-Fordist economy, or that queers were the original precarious class. We need a closer look at the impact of African American precarious service work, rigidly segregated, compared to middle class queer labor.

Not to open a Pandora's box, but Canaday seems to take as self-evident what labor is and what it is not. As we know, a generation of labor historians have fruitfully engaged numerous methods, from oral history to postmodernism, to understand the experience of work and the conditions for resistance. These sorts of explicitly conceptual questions are left out of *Queer Career*—again a casualty of focusing more on work than class—and so the scope narrows LGBTQ working-class history. Perhaps this is the point of the "career," to signal the middle-class and professional focus for both men and women, that Canaday tracks. One wonders about the work of the incarcerated and their queer allocation of labor and service, and how struggles over wages and workplace safety play an outsize, yet little understood, role in the contemporary crisis of mass incarceration. There are plenty of other dangerous and oppressive workplaces in U.S. society, but perhaps these are not queer. What are the shared commonalities of queer work in terms of safety and skills within the prison and without?

Canaday's story begins in the period of the Lavender Scare, when the demonization of homosexuals led to the dismissal of thousands of civil service workers, and many others. There was little to no recourse. A highly original point: that even when their sexual orientation became public, many employers hired and exploited queer precariousness by expecting greater flexibility and more effort, due to the fact that they were presumed to be single and also constantly compelled to prove their value. Settling for less in employment or opting for less lucrative occupations that came to be seen as gay jobs were also ways to shelter from

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discrimination in the straight world. Canaday suggests that some preferred the gay segregation, but I was looking for more on this.

Canaday brings up several examples in each chapter of workers who lost their jobs, but we do not always understand how they cope. Loss of a career trajectory strikes me as powerfully injurious, a horrific gay bashing, but Canaday moves us swiftly through to broad generalizations and overall themes. It is fascinating to trace her argument that midcentury employers might identify a potential employee as queer, but then recruit them because they were perceived as more flexible and hardworking. But at times I wanted to see the blood, sweat, and tears of gay working- and middle-class experience—perhaps a cameo here and there. At this time, current professional practice has dismissed the biographical as uninteresting and unrepresentative, and yet I finished Canaday's deeply researched volume without conjuring up even one image of a precarious queer worker. She mentions here and there that flamboyant attire and presentation were measured, and unevenly tolerated, and yet I would like to know which gestures and presentations proved most likely to result in retribution or even termination. Which subjects seemed to pass? This specificity of the biographical could illuminate not only the contours of the workplace, and its treatment of gay workforce, but also differentiate classes and types of gays.

To still talk about gays or queers as a monolith—most obviously in terms of class—but also of race and gender presentation has become problematic. There are a couple of smash hit books in LGBTQ history out now, but they settle for studying only white subjects. I am thinking of Stephen Vider's *The Queerness of Home* and Anna Lvovsky's *Vice Patrol*.[1] Who would have imagined that such acclaimed new scholars could study postwar domesticity and ignore the Black family, or study the policing of perverts at midcentury, and not think about the origins of the New Jim Crow. Canaday's own analytical scope has gotten herself invited to the same party; dare I say, the "white party."

For that reason, my reading led me to search for a sense of class stories within the queer community, and not only from the perspective of a white applicant to a gay bar, for example, but a clearer sense of gay civil servants conceived of gay waiters. Again, race is sidelined: for example, is it not interesting that at midcentury, as deindustrialization imperceptibly accelerated, Black workers were relegated to service work at the same time that queers too were barbers and barmaids? With so much scholarship on Black labor, one wonders why the prodigious Canaday overlooked it. Versed in social theory, Canaday also skipped over the whole body of scholarship on intersectionality; likewise, the fate of Black queer women remains almost entirely invisible in this study purporting to survey queer work. What about Black beauty salons and boutiques, not to mention lesbian sporting leagues and dive bars? As Anne Enke established in a brilliant historical ethnography, spheres of domesticity, formal and informal leisure, and sexual community continually interacted to produce a complicated network of casual and formal labor.[2]

How many gay barbers or restaurant hosts and waiters were or are Black in the United States, then or now? A careful perusal of the census would help to solidify Canaday's illustrations throughout the text. It is quite possible that Black queers toiling in any number of contexts within and outside the Black community eluded detection without too much trouble. Despite rapidly increasing gay visibility in this period, Black queer identities were still indecipherable as such. Even effeminate Black men might be considered and considered themselves to be eccentric rather than gay or homosexual. This is a small wrinkle in the narrative, and yet Canaday's method of illustrating big trends again obscures subtle variations and intersections

[1]Anna Lvovsky, *Vice Patrol: Cops, Courts, and the Struggle over Urban Gay Life before Stonewall* (Chicago, 2021); Stephen Vider, *The Queerness of Home: Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of Domesticity after World War II* (Chicago, 2021).

[2]Anne Finn Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham, NC, 2007).

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on the margins. There is the impression of definitiveness, which Canaday seeks to convey, that actually shines a light on a very specific demographic within a demographic, and casts shadows on queers of color again and again.

To reiterate: *Queer Career* unearths new terrain, and Canaday has secured her reputation as the leading LGBT historian, a brilliant successor to George Chauncey and Joanne Meyerowitz. But it was precisely their overlooking or erasing of racial difference that this new generation of queer scholars needs to be prodded to correct. Everyone has heard of the internecine debates in Third Wave Feminism, when women of color mercilessly pointed out the racial biases of white women's writings. This is a natural progression—a kind of racial paradigm shift. But queer studies remains as pristine white as *Gay New York* and *Gay L.A.* and *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves* from decades ago.[3]

There are books now that truly innovate: think of Hector Carillo's comprehensive, multiple award-winning volume, *Pathways of Desire: The Sexual Migration of Mexican Gay Men*.[4] The university has committed to spotlighting race and racism, but queer studies needs to catch up. Again, Black and white gays are divided by differential treatment and departments, even if they also share a common LGBT barrier to advancement. Early on, Canaday mentions the impact of the larger, ongoing civil rights movement gay men and lesbians—what she terms their "rights consciousness." What about the inverse—Black men who were influenced by the new trend of coming out? Did they lose protections of antiracism at work, or did they sacrifice a worker community stratified by race, with the result that their coerced silence in the office was as much a product of gay racism and general homophobia?

Again, I wonder about the significance of class, not just work—the huge difference between working as a civil servant, even as a typist, and as a beauty operator, retail clerk, or waiter. These were often a step above the working poor, whereas the others do have what we refer to as a "career." Canaday has recovered a far more varied set of career aspirations: the civil servant or executive wants to succeed financially, but others quickly opted for the queer world of downward mobility, bypassing years of harassment and blocked opportunity. What is striking, I think, is to imagine the toll such a negotiation takes on the queer subject, whether in or out of the closet, given that the key life project for so many queers had to do with work, rather than the nuclear, suburban family. To complete one's training fully, only to find that one had to modify their aspirations in accord with discrimination against homosexuals is painful to contemplate.

Canaday concludes with a discussion of corporate gays, and the legal coalition arguing for the application of Title VII protections of sex discrimination to sexual orientation. In the previous quarter century, gay activists pressed for antidiscrimination measures in progressive cities and a few states. Canaday makes the crucial point at several key moments in the book that capitalism leveraged and exploited queers while promising a kind of protection against extreme harm that still defined manufacturing and small businesses. The rise of the gay consumer promised a new liberty, and now gay executives proved their capacity to fully assimilate into corporate America. This is why *Queer Career* is not a triumphalist narrative, but rather a cautious, even ambivalent, evaluation of how work came to provide a space of queer expression, not merely wages, despite considerable exploitation. Straights had an infinite number of options elsewhere, from churches to family life to governments, to pursue their dreams, not to mention a wide-open workplace. If I were searching for a new career, I would not choose traditionally masculine, straight work. I would go where the queers are, and enjoy the compensation in community therein provided.

[3]George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York, 1995); Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* (Berkeley, CA, 2009); *Marc Stein, City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945–1972* (Philadelphia, 2000).

[4]Hector Carillo, *Pathways of Desire: The Sexual Migration of Mexican Men* (Chicago, 2017).

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