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

Response to My Readers

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It is truly a pleasure and an honor to have my work read by five such esteemed colleagues, and I want to begin by thanking all of them for the thoughtfulness and care of their essays, and also to express my gratitude to Darren Dochuk for organizing this exchange. After working in (pandemic-exacerbated) isolation for so long, it is fascinating for me to see the book through others' eyes, to appreciate what has resonated, and to grapple with questions and qualms as well.

Before I respond directly to my five readers, let me first say a bit about what I think the book is about and why I wrote it. *Queer Career* offers a history of LGBT people on the job over the second half of the twentieth century. This sounds like an obvious topic, but it is one that to-date has been somewhat understudied by historians of sexuality. To some extent, the field's limited attention to work has perhaps been conditioned by an underlying notion that workplaces were straight spaces in which people passed, and a related belief that, as a result, the workplace would not be the most revelatory site for queer historians. So, in situating their research questions, historians of sexuality have more often looked to the street and the bar rather than the job site. This tendency has been compounded by what the critic Biddy Martin many years ago called queer theory's "fear" of the "ordinary" homosexual—a transdisciplinary disinterest in/disavowal of "ordinariness"/the everyday.[1] For historians of sexuality, this disinterest has manifested then in an attraction to the nighttime, not to the daytime—to spaces of leisure rather than work. That emphasis has of course produced stunning and important scholarship in my field. But workplaces remain a critical lacuna in our understanding, critical both because of the way work is "situated in human experience" at a general level and also because of the particular ways in which work has shaped queer lives in particular.[2] I could elaborate on the latter at some length, but for now: anxiety over job loss was one of the most salient and profound features of living a queer life for most of the period that I am writing about. That fear utterly shaped how queer people moved through the world.

Historians have done terrific work in articulating one especially dramatic determinant of that fear: namely, the mid-twentieth-century purge of civil servants from the federal government, also known as the "Lavender Scare."[3] The brutality of this episode has colored how historians think about the relationship between queer people and employment—that is, when they have thought about the relationship. It certainly guided my own thinking as I was embarking

[1]Martin's critique of the radical antinormativity that resulted in "far too little attention to the dilemmas of the average people that we are," was directed more at queer scholars' antifamilialism, but I think the tendencies she described had consequences for the study of the workplace as well. Biddy Martin, "Extraordinary Homosexuals and the Fear of Being Ordinary," *Differences* 6 (1994): 123.

[2]Andrew Abbott, "Sociology of Work and Occupations," in *The Handbook of Economic Sociology*, 2nd ed., ed. Neil J. Smelser and Richard Swedberg (Princeton, NJ, 2005), 325.

[3]To the extent that historians of sexuality have focused on work, the Lavender Scare tends to be the dominant paradigm. The classic work is David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (New York, 1990).

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on this project; years ago, I wondered if the book I hoped to write did not yet exist because the research I wanted to conduct was simply impossible insofar as queer people had worked so hard to disappear on the job. Would the archival trail be too faint to actually follow? That turned out not to be the case, but my initial worry about the prospect of archival gaps and silences was a primary reason why I started my research by conducting oral history interviews. Specifically, I began by seeking out conversations with the generation born in the 1930s and 1940s, many of whom commenced their working lives during the period of the Lavender Scare. I am glad I started that way because what I initially learned from my informants guided the project throughout the dozen or so years I worked on this book. While I had expected these informants to tell me about deep hiding on the job, and about immediate job loss in the event of discovery, so often I instead heard from many in this cohort that they believed that their bosses knew about them, and yet they continued on in their positions. I soon saw similar sentiments reflected in archival materials as well. In the words of two midcentury sociologists, for example: "The homosexual copes fairly well with the straight world."[4] Or as an early liberationist tract simply proclaimed, "Our bosses know we are gay."[5]

Those insights led me to what I think of as one of the book's major interventions—which is not so much to reject as to offer a serious recalibration in how we consider the Lavender Scare frame. To elaborate, I found in the mid-twentieth century a world in which the consciousness of gay workers was undoubtedly shaped by the government purges and by the related intensification of antigay policing that accompanied them. This was a moment when queer workers in both public- and private-sector jobs moved through employment settings with a great deal of vulnerability. Some employers, however, rather than pushing gay people away, were actually keen to take advantage of this heightened vulnerability, and so I define employment relations during these years as a "bargain" in which employers agreed to try to not see the queerness of their employees and those employees, in turn, agreed to try not to be seen by their employers. As long as they were discreet and did not embarrass their bosses, in other words, queer employees were often seen as advantageous hires. In all kinds of jobs, they could be paid less; they would tolerate less desirable work; they would stay in jobs they felt safe in, even when mistreated; and if employers needed to shed workers, they could be counted on to quietly walk away. Whatever the reality of their attachments, moreover, queer workers were viewed and treated as unattached, as workers without dependents. So they could work split shifts or put in extra hours; they could also travel or even be moved for the company on short notice.

Queer workers thus brought to their jobs a lot of the attributes that more recently have been associated with "flexible" work. They also could be had, as one lesbian observed during the 1960s, "for less."[6] This was especially distinctive during the Fordist period when employers were paying quite a lot to otherwise maintain breadwinners with families. So, these queer workers were truly a bargain in every sense of the word, and this explains why so many employers were happy to "look the other way." Still, if this employment dynamic was quite different from the way we usually think about the Lavender Scare—and if it not only outlasted but spread beyond its presumed boundaries—it is important to underscore nonetheless that this was a labor system that was built upon state policing. It was only possible because of the government purges and could only exist in a world where it was commonplace for gays to know of others who had lost their jobs.

[4]Martin S. Weinberg and Colin J. Williams, *Male Homosexuals: Their Problems and Adaptations* (New York, 1975), 126. While the publication date of this study is 1975, the data for the U.S. portion of the book (which also covers the Netherlands and Denmark) is from the mid-1960s (see 47 and 65).

[5]Mike Silverstein, "The Gay Bureaucrat: What They Are Doing to You?" (1971), in *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, ed. Karla Jay and Allen Young (New York, 1992), 166.

[6]Interview with Betty Deran, conducted by Len Evans, 1983, box 1, Len Evans Papers, GLBT Historical Society of Northern California, San Francisco, CA. This sentiment was also reflected in many of the interviews I conducted.

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It is also not the world we inhabit anymore. Another objective of my book is to try to understand how workplaces eventually opened to LGBT people by the end of the twentieth century. As with so much that happened in the twentieth century, the 1970s and 1980s are a critical hinge. Specifically, the bargain—that mutual pact neither to reveal nor to pry—started to come undone during the liberation and AIDS eras. First, as the ethos of liberation began to take hold, some gay people were less and less willing to abide by the terms of the bargain: to practice discretion. They yearned to be seen, they yearned to be acknowledged. For their part, employers initially responded to the changing posture of queer workers with alarm. An era that we associate with liberation and freedom thus actually saw a dramatic uptick in precarity on the job, as employers began to more aggressively weed out the gay people on their payrolls. The AIDS epidemic, when it arrived in the 1980s, only exacerbated this tendency that employers had to remove (or block) queer workers from their workforce—indeed, I suspect that the 1980s surpassed the 1950s as the all-time nadir of gay employment in this country. But the extreme vulnerability of the AIDS era, compounded by the limited protection coming from government, led gay people (who increasingly had nothing left to lose) to go directly to their employers for rights and recognition. And while businesses did have to be pushed, business was eventually quite receptive to these demands—more receptive certainly than either government or unions.

Given the terrible losses of the AIDS era, as well as the almost total abandonment by the state, I do not find it surprising that some queer people went directly to employers in search of protection. Among other relevant facts, employment is of course the channel through which Americans access their healthcare. What is perhaps more puzzling is why business responded in the way that it did. And here I argue that employers were so persuadable at this moment (the 1990s were really the tipping point) not only because of their long and productive relationship with a queer workforce, but also because of the way that queer workers actually fit the template of late capitalism so well. This is something of a bittersweet moment for gay rights in general: the workplace opened for queer people as working conditions in general were deteriorating. And if we look at the whole arc of the story, we see that those early characteristics of gay labor under Fordism (during the period I see characterized by "the bargain") anticipated and were even a harbinger of the post-Fordist economy we all live under now. In all kinds of jobs, in other words, work has come to be defined by precarious arrangements that have enabled employers to shed responsibility for family units. So as much as we can say that over these years the world of work has opened to LGBT people, we can also say working conditions have morphed to be more like the ones that queer people experienced in the 1950s and 1960s.

My greatest aspiration in writing this book, however, was not merely to offer a structural account of changing work regimes across the second half of the twentieth century, but to write an affective labor history that could reveal the workplace not only as a site where queer people experienced insecurity and harm, but also friendship, connection, and meaning. I am so pleased that multiple respondents picked up on that theme (and two focused their comments on it). Stephen Vider's essay portrays the affective history of the workplace "at [the] center of neoliberalism." And Vider is correct in asserting that I do not "map a change in queer feelings over time but rather uncover a peculiar intractability," which is the long history of queer vulnerability at work. To me, that is the dominant story of queer people on the job in the second half of the twentieth century, and one that has been somewhat obscured and distorted by the myth of gay affluence that I see as part of the project of the book to take on. Katie Turk also finds the affective dimension of this study to be its most innovative and revelatory aspect. It clearly does not work for all readers, however: Kevin Mumford disagrees, finding my work with oral histories somewhat cold and analytical.

I confess I do sort of see what he means. I do not agree that the book is actually cold or impersonal, but I conducted as many interviews as I did because I *was* looking for larger

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patterns, for what the oral historian Alessandro Portelli called a "cross-section of the subjectivity of the group."[7] And Mumford is correct to call out the way I "splice" and "categorize" and "classify" my interviews. As much as I wanted to take a hard turn toward the humanistic side of our discipline with this book (in part in response to criticism I received about my first book, *The Straight State*), perhaps he is right that my own social-scientific tendencies are still the dominant ones on display here. Turk has a more positive spin on these traits when she notes that I "embed individuals in the structures that shape their lives," but both she and Mumford note how the biographical falls away in my approach. Still, I struggle a bit with Mumford's assertion that he could not, upon setting my book down, conjure up an image of a single precarious worker. Working backward, how about Aimee Stephens, the transwoman plaintiff in the Supreme Court's recent *Bostock* decision, whose desire to return to work as a woman was layered on top of a life-long struggle to keep body and soul together? How about the working-class women of Diana Press, whose bold venture into printing and publishing required them to continually and severely exploit their own labor power to remain afloat? How about Frank Kameny, the government astronomer (and eventual civil rights champion) purged from the civil service in the 1950s, who never made his way back to any measure of financial health or stability?

Kameny comes as close to anyone as getting a biographical treatment in my book. This was a result of both his singular importance in pushing reforms in civil service/security clearance policy for the period under consideration, and that he was an obsessive person who documented and saved everything, revealing quite a lot about his wonderfully idiosyncratic way of doing politics and life. I frankly love that the individual who arguably was responsible for the most significant legal advances in gay employment rights during the postwar period described himself as a "lawyer without portfolio," who regularly crossed boundaries of lawyerly decorum, and who exalted in the freedom that came from not being able to be disbarred! I spent so much time on Kameny, at least in part, because he aligns well with my own instinct to want to find the law in unexpected places. For this reason, I also devote considerable attention not to high-profile appellate cases, as Serena Mayeri points out, but to the low-to-the-ground gay and lesbian legal offices of the 1970s and 1980s, who among other things triaged an epidemic of employment discrimination during the AIDS crisis. That same instinct—looking for law in unexpected places—led me to devote the entire last chapter of the book to advances made in gay rights in the corporate sector (and then to speculate, alongside political scientist Stephen Engel, about how those private sector advances came back to reshape the public sector and eventually made their way into court decisions as well).[8]

Kevin Mumford points out what may be some of the costs of those choices, however, asserting that in focusing as much as I do on the civil service or the corporate sector, my book is not sufficiently concerned with race or class. Only Serena Mayeri notes my book's attention to women, which, in a subfield that has continually emphasized male experience, is an aspect of my book about which I am proud. But to return to Mumford's important critique, I appreciate his insight but I think my book, first, has somewhat more to say about class than he suggests. I would start with Turk's really interesting observation in this forum, that like so many other women's and labor historians, my frame of analysis is "binaristic." But because queerness is, in contrast to race, "transversal to class" (meaning gay people do not occupy a single class position but are positioned across the class structure), the binary that occupies my thinking is not working class versus professional jobs; it is straight versus queer ones.[9] I divide the world of

[7]Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson (New York, 1998), 67.

[8]Stephen M. Engel, *Fragmented Citizens: The Changing Landscape of Gay and Lesbian Lives* (New York, 2016), 6.

[9]Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York, 2017), 159.

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work, in other words, between occupational worlds that affirm queerness and those that negate it. And while those worlds did track along class lines to some extent, they did so imperfectly. The queer work world was generally one where workers endured exploitation on the job in exchange for the freedom to be themselves, and these were regularly service jobs (think waiters, clerks, taxi drivers) and at midcentury, blue-collar/factory work as well. But if we are defining the queer work world as comprising those jobs in which a lot of gay or trans people clustered and queerness was sometimes affirmed, we also need to account for a handful of professional occupations as well (librarians and decorators, for example, as well as the arts). It is also notable that individual queer people not only vacillated between queer and straight work (an arrest, for example, might result in downward economic mobility from a straight to a queer job); the queer and straight worlds of work in fact shifted over time. By the end of the twentieth century, many professional occupations had become more affirming, more open to queer people, but blue-collar jobs moved along an opposite trajectory. Where many gay people would have been visible in factory settings at mid-century, for example, by the late 1970s increasing hostility meant they began to disappear. By the end of the twentieth century, this striking reversal meant that, as the activist Urvashi Vaid observed then, "middle class and wealthy gay people" were far more likely "to be visible" in their employment "than working class and poor queers."[10] It is precisely by following queer people across class lines over time, as my book does, that such patterns are clear.

Mumford's assertion that my book joins the "white party" that is LGBT history is harder to answer. I completely agree with him that more attention to race would have made my book a better one. I perhaps think it is more interesting than he does that gay activists were so shaped by prior advocacy by other minority groups, both in terms of the forms their activism took, and even more broadly in terms of their rights consciousness. While perhaps not definitive, there are other ways I think race matters in the story I am telling. Most strikingly, at least some African Americans viewed their homosexuality as a *positive* factor in advancing a career at mid-century and beyond. Gay networks that were interracial provided queer workers of color access to white social capital that would not have been as available to, say, straight Black men or women at this time. Not all white gays, however, were in the kinds of straight jobs that provided a base from which to engage in such cross-class and/or interracial forms of uplift. Indeed, the queer work world was itself a racially mixed one that overlapped entirely with the secondary labor market of contingent jobs that had long been populated by women, immigrants, and workers of color. This leads me to also want to point out a part of the argument where I think Mumford might misread me. I am not saying that queer people were *more* precarious than workers of color or women or immigrants, only that they also belonged to and were visible denizens of the secondary labor market, on the economic periphery. Where I am claiming queer people were, in Mumford's terms, the "original precarious class" was *only in primary sector jobs*—those "good" jobs usually held by white middle class men. It was the fragile but persistent presence of gay people there (again, gays could be transversal to class but still vulnerable to exploitation as queer people) that leads me to designate them as the first precariat *across the class spectrum*, and a "harbinger" of the labor regime we currently identify with post-Fordism in which precarity has also spread to the kinds of primary jobs we used to think of as "good jobs."

Now I seem to have cycled back to structural arguments, to thinking, again, about gay labor as a form of labor rather than an absence or an invisibility. This leads me to Gabe Winant's essay, which contains multitudes (queer theory! poetry!), but also seems to be inviting me to clarify my own politics regarding the place the book ends up. Winant is correct that I do in the end suggest that emancipatory things, including LGBT rights, have sometimes come through the market. I am, of course, completely ambivalent about that. I do not actually

[10]Urvashi Vaid, *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation* (New York, 1995), 256.

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sign on, though, to either Walter Benn Michaels's or Wolfgang Streeck's account that each seems to blame those who pursued either freedom from the family form or cultural recognition as ushering in neoliberalism.[11] Rather, I want to simply recognize three things: (1) people use the tools that are available to them in their historic moment; (2) the negotiation that LGBT employees made with their employers took place in the wake of the AIDS crisis, a moment of extreme vulnerability and near total abandonment by the state. Their politics, in otherwords, were neither trivial nor self-indulgent.[12] And finally, (3) the either/or dichotomy between pursuing recognition (diversity) *or* redistribution (economic equality) is, I think, a false one for gay people, for whom these were historically linked.[13] Across much of the period I am writing about, seeking recognition or acknowledgment (as a queer person) was an invitation to genuine economic exploitation. ("I was always looking for low-paying jobs where I could be myself," in the words of one informant.[14]) And it was precisely this relationship that activists (beginning with Frank Kameny, then the liberationists, and eventually those at the corporate grassroots) aimed to sever. But they were in no way choosing "diversity" over the struggle for economic equality. They wanted both: to be their whole selves without suffering economic harm.[15] And while I love Winant's provocative suggestion in his essay that we should also think about the dynamics of misrecognition or even covering on the job for straight workers, and his beautiful invocation of Phillip Levine's poem about a (presumably straight) worker's loss of self on the job, I do not think that economic exploitation is tied to recognition on the job for straight people as it is for gays. But Winant is more generally correct that the phenomenon of status coercion I am writing about does *not only* belong to gay people. In the book, for example, I specifically draw an analogy between the nexus of visibility and exploitation faced by gays at midcentury to that of some (especially undocumented) immigrants.[16]

Last, I have recently thought a lot about this episode in LGBT history when employees went directly to their employers for rights and recognition because channels through the state seemed impossible to access. And it has been especially on my mind since the *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision last summer, which, if it had come a few months earlier, might have been something else to grapple with in the book's epilogue. We have entered a moment when the state not only fails to protect our bodily autonomy but is even a direct threat to it. This is of course also true of the state-level bans on transgender healthcare that have been spreading across the country these past several months. Both developments have led me to think a lot about the ways that gay people in the 1980s and early 1990s—particularly in the context of AIDS and related campaigns for employment rights—offer an interesting case on

[11]Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (New York, 2007); Wolfgang Streeck, "Flexible Employment, Flexible Families, and the Socialization of Reproduction," in *Imploding Populations in Japan and Germany: A Comparison*, eds. Florian Coulmas and Ralph Lützeler (Leiden, Netherlands, 2011), both cited by Winant.

[12]This is from Judith Butler's critique of a leftist objection that "the cultural focus of left politics substitutes a self-centered and trivial form of politics that focuses on transient events, practices, and objects rather than offering a more robust, serious, and comprehensive vision of the systematic interrelatedness of social and economic conditions." Judith Butler, "Merely Cultural," in *Adding Insult to Injury: Nancy Fraser Debates Her Critics*, ed. Kevin Olson (Brooklyn, NY, 2008), 42–3.

[13]This is part of Butler's point in her really provocative exchange with Nancy Fraser (cited above). I would only note about this exchange that in mapping out the ways in which queerness is not merely cultural but also connected to economic questions of redistribution in fundamental ways, Butler seems not to imagine queer people as workers. Ibid., 42–69.

[14]Interview Subject 49, Atlanta, GA, 2012, quoted in Margot Canaday, *Queer Career: Sexuality and Work in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ, 2023), 39.

[15]I think it is also because gay people are transversal to class that their economic exploitation (which also happens across the class spectrum) has been harder to see or comprehend.

[16]On the concept of status coercion, see especially Erin Hatton, *Coerced: Work Under the Threat of Punishment* (Berkeley, CA, 2020), 16, 20.

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how to navigate and survive during such moments. This is one of the reasons I am extremely compelled by Serena Mayeri's call in her essay for work that looks comparatively across various rights movements. I agree with Mayeri that we still have so much to learn from one another on these and other questions, and the terrific essays in this forum really plot a path forward. I thank Serena Mayeri, Kevin Mumford, Stephen Vider, Katie Turk, and Gabe Winant again for their deep and thoughtful engagement with my work.

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