

## Capitalism, Work, and Sexuality from the Lavender Scare to Now

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**M**argot Canaday's *Queer Career*, a landmark contribution to queer labor history, begins at precisely the moment in time when her brilliant first book, *The Straight State*, left off. *The Straight State* reconstructed how the liberal regulatory state defined "homosexuals" and excluded them from citizenship between the Progressive Era and the Second World War. *Queer Career* begins with the Cold War and extends to the present, chronicling the workplace experiences of lesbian, gay, and transgender employees in the United States. Ambitious in scope, meticulously researched, and lucidly written, *Queer Career* is governed by the central thesis that queer workers at midcentury, as a result of their vulnerability, were "harbingers" of neoliberal capitalism's characteristic employment condition: precarity.

Because *Queer Career* combines the history of sexuality with the history of capitalism, it will be said to be the heir to John D'Emilio's foundational 1983 essay "Capitalism and Gay Identity."<sup>1</sup> But the two studies abound in contrasts. D'Emilio provided a full-fledged analysis of capitalism's characteristic features as a mode of production and charted its historical ramifications for sexuality. Canaday positions her work within the "new history of capitalism" and shares that more recent historiography's tendency to neither define nor theorize capitalism as a distinctive system of production.<sup>2</sup> D'Emilio attributed the nineteenth-century emergence of gay identity to wage labor's enablement of independence from the patriarchal family and household economy. Canaday does not seek to explain capitalism's role in the remarkable transformations of sexual identity and sexual politics across the late twentieth century. Instead, *Queer Career* limits itself to the workplace—a sphere, in turn, barely mentioned by D'Emilio.

1. D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity."

2. Excellent appraisals of the new history of capitalism's tendency to neither define capitalism nor engage with prior theorists of it include Nelson, "Who Put Their Capitalism in My Slavery?"; and Huston, "Slavery, Capitalism, and the Interpretations of the Antebellum United States."

*Queer Career* does correct for two major weaknesses in the new history of capitalism: neglect of sexuality and neglect of labor. Its workplace focus contrasts with the financial and business history that comprises so many recent histories of capitalism, despite Sven Beckert's promising early characterization of the field as inclusive of labor history.<sup>3</sup> Its comprehension that sexuality and gender are integral to the history of capitalism is rarer still.<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, numerous scholars have shown that working-class history and the history of sexuality are entwined: George Chauncey on class and identity, Peter Boag and Nayan Shah on migrant labor, Allan Bérubé on "queer work," and Phil Tiemeyer, Miriam Frank, and Anne Balay, among others, in a recent spate of praiseworthy books.<sup>5</sup> Canaday builds on this established body of work, but rather than consolidate a field, she had to improvise. *Queer Career* could not provide a synthesis of the scholarship on labor and homosexuality because to date it mostly concerns earlier time periods, is confined to specific sectors like airlines or steel, or explores working-class community and identity in the bars and streets, leaving the workplace "a seriously understudied area of inquiry," as Canaday notes (3).

Where *Queer Career* succeeds most admirably is in its superb middle band of chapters, a series of deftly rendered portraits. Frank Kameny's irrepressible homophile campaign against the federal denial of employment to sexual deviants between the 1950s and 1970s is told with rich new detail about his campaigning against security clearance denials. Lesbians' creativity in launching printshops, publishers, and restaurants during the 1970s gay liberation era, along with the undercapitalization and fractiousness that shattered their hopes, is vividly presented. Queer nurses' creation of the nation's first AIDS ward at San Francisco General Hospital in the 1980s is movingly conveyed, their courage, compassion, and humor shining through. These chapters have many strengths, not least an equal attentiveness to lesbian history that makes the book a model for a field still too often centered on gay male history.<sup>6</sup>

Canaday's method of taking sequential soundings of specific subjects, however, makes for a patchy coverage. *Queer Career* has little to say about labor unions, anti-gay violence and harassment on the job, the inequities in employment benefits that fueled the drive to legalize same-sex marriage, or the opening of the US military to LGBTQ employees—an especially perplexing omission, since *The Straight State* proved that the military was a central institution in the erection of a homophobic social order.

3. Beckert, "History of American Capitalism." On the new history of capitalism's neglect of labor and class, see Sklansky, "Labor, Money, and the Financial Turn in the History of Capitalism."

4. For a withering critique of the new history of capitalism for ignoring such factors, see Enstad, "'Sons of Summons' of the New History of Capitalism."

5. Chauncey, *Gay New York*; Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs*; Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*; Bérubé, *My Desire for History*; Tiemeyer, *Plane Queer*; Frank, *Out in the Union*; Balay, *Semi Queer*; Balay, *Steel Closets*.

6. Canaday, *Straight State*; Canaday, *Queer Career*. Canaday herself called out the field for insufficient inclusion of lesbians in Canaday, "LGBT History."

Canaday makes her boldest, most innovative claims in the book's opening chapters. She passes with surprising rapidity over the Lavender Scare of the 1950s, which saw the discharge of hundreds of civil servants on grounds that homosexuals represented a security threat since susceptible to blackmail. To some extent, her cursoriness is explained by the fact that the Lavender Scare is already the subject of a worthy monograph by David K. Johnson.<sup>7</sup> The chief reason Canaday deemphasizes the Lavender Scare, however, is that she denies that the federal purges fostered pervasive concealment of sexual orientation at work. That was true in the federal civil service, she allows, but in the "primary sector" many sexual and gender variants were not in "deep hiding"; rather, they were visible and knowable to employers (7).

According to Canaday, queers' need to "conceal and reveal" (59)—exert caution yet make themselves known to other gays and lesbians—left them perceptible. That, in turn, made them vulnerable. Striking a tacit bargain with employers, queer workers practiced discretion more than secrecy, worked doubly hard, were open to inconvenient jobs such as those requiring frequent travel, and submitted even when passed over for promotions. Canaday argues that because queerness is "transversal" on the class spectrum (found across all social strata), queer employees were the first to experience across the board the "precarity in an age of security" that African Americans, immigrants, and women experienced on the lower rungs of the employment ladder (40). Queers' disposability and self-exploitation, their settling for less, made them the harbingers of neoliberal casualization.

This is a novel interpretation, one that scholars will sift and weigh for years to come, but without question Canaday's concept of queer employment precarity is highly useful. In the 1950s, for example, "swishes" had difficulty holding a job through economic downturns, a sodomy arrest usually attracted press coverage and dismissal, and "bachelor" status beyond a certain age raised suspicions.<sup>8</sup> Still, identity transparency was often possible in what Canaday calls the "queer work world" of stereotypical occupations—hairdressing or department sales for queens, factory work or taxi driving for butches.

In the counterposed "straight work world," however, were visibility and knowability typical? Were gay workers, as Canaday claims, "as visible as they were hidden" (68)? Considerable evidence exists to the contrary. In 1955, Chicago Mattachine members discussed employment and reported that "all agreed that it was wise to keep one's sex interest as deeply submerged as possible on the job."<sup>9</sup> Martin Duberman vows in his celebrated memoir *Cures* that when he was at Princeton in the early 1960s—teaching in the very history department in which Canaday does now—"the vast majority of gay people were locked away in painful isolation and fear, doing everything possible *not* to declare themselves."<sup>10</sup>

7. Johnson, *Lavender Scare*.

8. See, for example, Pedersen, "Editorial."

9. "Invert and His Job," 15.

10. Duberman, *Cures*, 3. Italics in original.

The contrary perspective of Canaday originates from the interviews she carried out with 156 people born in the 1930s and 1940s whose work life lasted from the 1950s to the 1990s. Canaday doubtless listened closely to these subjects and seeks to represent the nuances of their experiences faithfully. To weigh the claim that even in the 1950s these subjects were perceptible rather than concealed at work, though, it would be useful to know when precisely they began working. Given constricted Great Depression birthrates, the 1940s baby boom, and the natural toll exerted by life expectancy, it seems highly probable that most were born in 1940 or later. If we assume a typical starting age for work at twenty, this would mean most of them entered the workforce from 1960 onward.

That suggests a very different hypothesis, one more consistent with an enormity of documentary evidence that the straight state imposed a disguised work life, particularly in the straight work world. Instead of taking the 1950s and 1960s as a unitary whole, Canaday might have allowed for phases. The Lavender Scare, combined with antecedent cultural ostracisms of “perversion” as sin, psychopathy, and immorality, initially tipped the scale heavily toward workplace covertness. The chill was particularly intense in the mid-1950s but lingered on until sometime around 1963, when the press began to note a new assertiveness in gay life, at least in major metropolitan areas.<sup>11</sup> The ambiguous mix of detectability and vulnerability Canaday describes is therefore far more characteristic of the 1960s and 1970s than the 1950s. The toll of a double life lingered among those who still clung to it, explaining why the gay liberation movement made “Come Out” its main slogan. This is why the documents that Canaday cites to prove queer workers were visible and exploitable date overwhelmingly from the mid-1960s onward, not the 1950s.<sup>12</sup>

Attentiveness to such phases might also help illuminate earlier workplace dynamics, because the 1920s bear comparison to the 1960s as a decade of sexual revolution. Both manifested a confusion about and antipathy toward homosexuality combined with increased public visibility and tolerance, the ideal conditions for straight employers to intuit queerness and exploit it. A perfect Jazz Age example is found in the diary of Jeb Alexander, a Government Printing Office editor in Washington, DC, whose close friend and gay lover (briefly) was C. C. Dasham. One day in 1929, Jeb’s supervisor, Mrs. Utott, said to him out of the blue, “Outside of the State Department where your friend works, this Department is the most liberal to be in. The Government is too soft, too liberal. They ought to be more strict.”<sup>13</sup> Jeb was stunned: he had never mentioned “his friend” to her, let alone that Dash worked in the State Department—and yet *she knew*. The supervisor’s indirection exemplified the “mutual pact neither to reveal nor to pry” (7) that Canaday pinpoints, while Jeb’s disconcertment arose from his vulnerability.

11. “Growth of Overt Homosexuality”; “Homosexuality in America.”

12. For example, one citation in the first chapter on the 1950s and 1960s is from a study stating that gays give more to their jobs because of their “freedom from familial obligations” (62). The study’s date is 1978.

13. Russell, *Jeb and Dash*, 157.

The chapter structure of *Queer Career* is determined by the history of sexuality, from the Lavender Scare through gay liberation to the AIDS years. Only the last chapter is defined by a phase of capitalism: neoliberalism. As the Fordist regime of stable, high-wage employment gave way, “flexible” and contingent labor relations took hold. Here Canaday delivers a surprise twist. Her portrayal of the neoliberal era—despite its negative foreshadowing in precarity throughout the book—arrives in a glow of rainbow optimism. In a mirror image of the “woke capitalism” deplored by the right, Canaday judges the corporate sector a liberatory force in recent decades. Owing in part to LGBTQ employee organizing within companies, such as an early campaign at Bell Labs, Canaday implies that the needs of capital itself have somehow made corporate America a more reliable ally than the state, given that the civil rights revolution failed to make sexual orientation a protected category like race and gender.<sup>14</sup>

That legal omission is now corrected, Canaday believes, by the Supreme Court decision in *Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia* (2020), which recognizes LGBTQ employment rights under Title VII’s “because of sex” clause. Canaday’s concentration on the juridical textualism that justified this decision is too narrow; contextualization was in order. The 2022 *Dobbs* decision overturning *Roe* and reverting abortion to the states better reveals the sexual politics of the Roberts Court. After *Dobbs*, Clarence Thomas mused publicly that same-sex marriage should be next to go, and in 2023 the Court ruled in *303 Creative LLC* that a web designer’s refusal of service to same-sex couples on religious grounds was permissible—with untold adverse implications for LGBTQ workers in a multitude of sectors, including, for example, health care.<sup>15</sup>

Canaday might have considered, furthermore, that queer workers need protection not only as queers but as *workers*. The same Roberts Court that issued *Bostock* has delivered countless rulings undermining labor rights, from *Janus* (2018) to *Cedar Point* (2021), making it the most cravenly pro-corporate Supreme Court since the Gilded Age.<sup>16</sup> At a time when trans and gay rights seem everywhere under attack, when neoliberalism is playing footsie with neofascism, and when the labor movement is finally on the march again despite the evisceration of labor law, the quest for workers’ equality—economic *and* sexual—is far from complete.

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14. Here *Queer Career* echoes Ball, *Queering of Corporate America*.

15. Sepper, “Supreme Court’s 303 *Creative* Decision.”

16. Glover, “All Balls and No Strikes”; Budow, “How the Roberts Court Has Changed Labor and Employment Law.”

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