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FORUM

The Costume of My Trade

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Despite a number of excellent queer labor histories, the historiography of lesbian, gay, and trans people and the historiography of work and workers have remained relatively uninfluenced by each other.[1] This is puzzling in some obvious ways: the Mattachine Society was founded by a communist, and class questions were right there at the origin of the field of queer history with John D'Emilio, Leslie Feinberg, Joanne Meyerowitz, and George Chauncey.[2] D'Emilio and Feinberg were Marxists and Meyerowitz began as a labor historian, while Chauncey had the legendary historian of work David Montgomery for one of his advisors. Enumerating his graduate cohort in the acknowledgments of *Gay New York*, Chauncey names a string of Montgomery's advisees, now eminent labor historians, followed on the next page by Edward and Dorothy Thompson, with whom Chauncey spent a postdoctoral year at Rutgers.[3] More substantively, a central analytic move of *Gay New York*, itself building on and developing D'Emilio's classic intervention, is to understand the urban gay world in much the same way that, say, Herbert Gutman understood the worlds of working-class immigrants (with which gay social worlds overlapped to a great degree): as a "counterpublic," although Gutman would not have used the term.[4]

The fields thus shared a sociology in both their personnel and in the kinds of people they studied—young people newly absorbed into urban labor markets, fashioning community and solidarity with each other, and resisting repression. The two have also shared something more profound, in that both are fundamentally concerned with the iterative and contested practices of the body: its creative capacities; the forms of power and discipline overlaid upon it and permeating through it, stimulating, regulating, and directing those capacities; and the resistances and solidarities that arise from the encounters between these phenomena. No wonder Margot Canaday is able to generate so much insight by bringing the two fields more completely into contact in her wonderful new book, *Queer Career: Sexuality and Work in Modern America*.[5]

[1]Key entries in this too-scarce literature include Allan Bérubé, *My Desire for History: Essays in Gay, Community, and Labor History* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011); Phil Tiemeyer, *Plane Queer: Labor, Sexuality, and AIDS in the History of Male Flight Attendants* (Berkeley, CA, 2013); Anne Balay, *Steel Closets: Voices of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Steelworkers* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2014); Miriam Frank, *Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America* (Philadelphia, 2014); and Anne Balay, *Semi Queer: Inside the World of Gay, Trans, and Black Truck Drivers* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2018).

[2]John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York, 1983), 100–13; Joanne Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880–1930* (Chicago, 1988); Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come* (New York, 1992).

[3]George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York, 1994), iv–v.

[4]Herbert Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815–1919," *American Historical Review* 78, no. 3 (June 1973): 531–88; Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Brooklyn, NY, 2002).

[5]Margot Canaday, *Queer Career: Sexuality and Work in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ, 2023).

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Although the book's agenda is quite solidly empirical and richly researched, for this labor historian it prompts some theoretical reflection. All the way back to Marx, scholars of labor have pointed out that what an employer pays for on the labor market is never identical to what the worker does on the job, a non-identity that goes two ways. On one side, famously, is Marx's theory of exploitation: the worker produces more value than is paid in the wage. On the other side, a bit more obscurely, is the split within the labor process itself, between the "abstract labor" paid for and the concrete labor performed: you pay for eight hours, I do an infinity of movements of muscle and brain.

Between monotonous abstract time and variegated concrete time, there is always a moment of slippage, out of which subjectivity arises. The worker somewhat improvises the work, albeit not freely—and this is class conflict in molecular form. Similarly, since Judith Butler, queer theorists have observed that coerced yet improvisatory repetition over time is central to the construction of gender and sexuality, and the inevitable moments of slippage in the protocol of repetition makes experimentation and contestation possible—an insight that, as Elizabeth Freeman notes, takes queer theory right into the realm of class theory. "In its dominant forms, class enables its bearers what looks like 'natural' control over their body and its effects, or the diachronic means of sexual and social reproduction," writes Freeman.[6] Here E. P. Thompson and Michel Foucault blur with each other, at the boundary between the libidinal and the productive. Indeed, Thompson reflected at some length in *The Making of the English Working Class* on sexuality and work-discipline, albeit from within a version of Foucault's hated "repressive hypothesis." Writing about Methodist observance, Thompson observed its strange quality as a passionate religion that paradoxically encouraged discipline and inhibited spontaneity:

> It is difficult not to see in Methodism in these years a ritualised form of psychic masturbation. Energies and emotions which were dangerous to social order, or which were merely unproductive … were released in the harmless form of sporadic love-feasts…. These Sabbath orgasms of feeling made more possible the single-minded weekday direction of these energies to the consummation of productive labour.[7]

For his part, Foucault—far from the caricatured anti-Marxist—was obsessed with the time-discipline of labor, which he saw as the core of the larger disciplinary society, and which he linked directly to matters of sexuality through the question of population.[8]

From the perspective of labor history, then, queer theory and the history of sexuality can be very good to think with. Yet few labor historians who are not specifically writing about queer workers have looked in this direction. Here *Queer Career* provides an occasion for some deeper reflection. Canaday argues that gay workers in midcentury America were vulnerable to their employers in a way that presaged neoliberalism, serving as "harbingers" of the insecure post-Fordist order to come.[9] This insecure quality of the queer worker—in but not of the Fordist political economy, unstably positioned and therefore destabilizing in the world of the regularized family wage—is what generates some tacit discomfort within labor history, so much of whose horizon consisted of triumph over just that insecurity. The queer worker figures—as queer people so often have done in U.S. social and cultural history—not just as a suppressed or excluded other, but as a symptomatic and constitutive one.

[6]Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC, 2010), 19.

[7]E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1963), 368–69.

[8]Michel Foucault, *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1972–1973*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Bernard E. Harcourt (New York, 2013), 201–47.

[9]Canaday, *Queer Career*, 9.

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By complicating the relationship between work and the closet, *Queer Career* allows us to see how all jobs have closet-like qualities. In his poem "Fear and Fame," the legendary working-class poet Philip Levine narrates the motions of a worker's routine on the night shift at a plumbing and plating workshop, where he must don a protective suit and descend "into the dim world" of the pickling tanks where he mixes the acids. Finished with the task, he climbs back up, strips off the suit, and becomes someone else again. "Then to disrobe down to my work pants and shirt, my black street shoes and white cotton socks, to reassume my nickname, strap on my Bulova, screw back my wedding ring, and with tap water gargle away the bitterness as best I could." He takes a break, smokes a few cigarettes, eats two sandwiches made by his Aunt Tsipie. "Then," the poem ends, "to arise and dress again in the costume of my trade for the second time that night, stiffened by the knowledge that to descend and rise up from the other world merely once in eight hours is half what it takes to be known among women and men."[10]

Here once again, the central question of both labor history and queer history: what does it take "to be known among women and men"? The sexuality of queer workers at midcentury, Canaday argues, was often not truly hidden from their employers, but rather suspended in a limbo in which their employers tacitly tolerated them in return for their hyper-exploitability. (This is one of the many amazing insights with which Canaday recasts cliched images of the twentieth-century closet.) To examine the meaning of this bargain too closely would say something uncomfortable also about the wider Fordist order, prompting us also to ask, what of themselves did *straight* workers give up in order to remain in compliance with the norm? Accounts of Fordist families between 1950 and 1980 are full of such accepted miseries, the price of inclusion in that era's promises. "The 'good-girl-bad-girl' split remains alive for many of these women," observes Lillian Rubin in her classic ethnography *Worlds of Pain*. "Their fears of being tagged with the 'bad girl' label are rooted in social reality and reinforced in interactions with their men who 'throw it back in their wives' faces.'"[11] This is not to say, of course, that postwar America was a society universally in the closet: rather, it is to say that the capitalist political economy produced gender and sexual normativity as part of its automatic operation, raising the costs of defiance.

Much of Canaday's narrative is concerned with the heroic ways that gay people confronted those costs. Some defied directly, forming the rising social movement resistance of the last third of the twentieth century. Others exited if they could, working in queer-coded jobs known to be safer, if often more economically vulnerable. Many carefully negotiated in one form or another. Most paid some price, psychic or economic. The book's second half presents a new archive of rights struggles, as lesbian and gay workers fought for and gradually won a new set of protections against discrimination, lifting this burden gradually and painstakingly.

Still, the book strikes a somewhat ambivalent note about these triumphs, since they coincide with the generalization of gay economic vulnerability across the labor market. Canaday demurs that employers presumably did not see the exploitable gay workers of the midcentury as a model in any explicit way for the universalized insecurity of neoliberalism. But her argument here resonates in some unexpected ways with more socially conservative critiques of the affinity between market logics and gay rights. As Canaday writes, "That these citizens—long denied fundamental rights—did not refuse 'the opportunities afforded within neoliberalism's limits' in no way diminishes their courage but rather illuminates the ways that civil rights have sometimes moved through market logics, for better or worse."[12]

In particular, Canaday here echoes—with a different valence—an argument made on the more traditionalist side of the social democratic left. In some quarters, it has been often argued

[10]Philip Levine, "Fear and Fame," in *What Work Is* (New York, 1992), 3–4.

[11]Lillian B. Rubin, *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working-Class Family* (New York, 1976), 63.

[12]Canaday, *Queer Career*, 263.

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that the winning of individual rights against discrimination in the post-1960s era in some way embodied or even enacted neoliberalism's ruinous arrival. As Walter Benn Michaels puts it, mocking an organizational form whose significance Canaday demonstrates at length, "We would much rather celebrate cultural diversity than seek to establish economic equality … almost every company has the standard racial and sexual 'employee relations groups.'" Or, as sociologist Wolfgang Streeck observes, "To many, escaping from the Fordist family was more important than defending the standard employment relationship, and their interests coincided in nontrivial ways with those of others who were keen on abolishing the latter for very different economic purposes."[13] The appearance at several points in *Queer Career* of Dr. Howard Brown would seem to bear out this point to a contemporary eye: Brown, a pioneering gay professional and prominent figure in the gay rights movement, lends his name today to a Chicago nonprofit LGBTQ health clinic chain that has bitterly resisted its workers' ongoing unionization effort.[14]

But here is the rub, the problem with accounts like those of Michaels and Streeck, which Canaday's book allows us to see in our present—although it is not her own main theme. The workers at Howard Brown Health are also largely queer, as are so many workers in the renascent and youthful labor movement stirring across sectors of the new economy. As has happened innumerable times in the development of capitalist society, the expansion of new forms of market liberty also then opens new possibilities of social solidarity, as it brings people into connection in new ways, both exploitative and interdependent.

The opening of the workplace to queer people, although a concession granted in a worsening economic environment, also made possible a new layer of social connection among workers. Just as racialized labor regimes often cause class solidarity to appear in racial forms, so does the queered workplace—connected materially to different strategies for labor's social reproduction—generate a different medium of class conflict. In *Queer Career*, this possibility comes through most clearly in Canaday's account of the AIDS unit at San Francisco General Hospital in the 1980s. Canaday describes this environment as "communalis[t]." "On the AIDS ward," she writes,

> … work and "your outside life," in the words of one nurse, "were all one thing." The culture on the ward was not merely tolerant of gay culture; it celebrated it. One bisexual nurse noted that it was the "straight" part of her identity that was closeted at the time because the norm "was so clearly gay." In the early days especially, nurses were incredibly bonded with each other, with an "us against the world" feeling. Imagine a group of young, mostly gay nurses being left alone by their hospital administration to create something totally unique in the country.

Physical touch was central to the common culture of unit, "and included nurses crawling into bed to hold distressed patients." Nurses became totally involved in their patients' lives, particularly as so many were separated from families. One nurse brought visiting family on a tour around the city so they would get to see more of San Francisco than the hospital room. Others stood between their patients and employers, family members, even doctors. "Nurses were more powerful in these contests than otherwise would have been the case because AIDS was a nurse's disease."[15]

[13]Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (New York, 2007), 12; 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), 78.

[14]Kim Kelly, "How an LGBTQ+ Community Health Clinic Ended Up in a Bruising Labor Battle with Its Workers," *Fast Company*, Feb. 2, 2023, https://www.fastcompany.com/90843346/howard-brown-health-workers-strike.

[15]Canaday, *Queer Career*, 199–202.

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What better example could one ask for of the proletarian ethic documented in the work of Thompson, Gutman, and Montgomery? *Queer Career* sets out to reveal an experience of exploitation and a history of rights struggles—ambiguous as all such struggles are. What it shows beyond this is the possibility, in these origins, of a new language of labor.

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