

BOOK REVIEW

Margot Canaday, *Queer Career: Sexuality and Work in Modern America*

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023. Pp. 312.
\$35.00 hardcover (ISBN 9780691205953). doi:10.1353/
book.109980

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Margot Canaday has done it again. In *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), Canaday reshaped historical understandings of when, how, and why the federal government began regulating same-sex sexuality. In her second monograph, *Queer Career: Sexuality and Work in Modern America*, Canaday turns her keen eye to employment, once more upending conventional narratives. This time, she addresses how queer individuals navigated the workplace.

Until *Queer Career*, historical scholarship on the intersection of sexuality and employment at mid-century had largely been focused on the Lavender Scare, an episode in the 1950s when thousands of gay and lesbian civil servants lost their federal jobs. Because of those events, historians have typically assumed that gays and lesbians hid their sexual orientation at work. However, Canaday persuasively demonstrates that these constraints only applied to a subset of the queer community. Many gays and lesbians labored in what Canaday describes as the “queer work world,” a market distinct from its straight counterpart (70). The queer work world typically offered temporary, low-pay, and low-status employment, but it gave gays and lesbians a distinct benefit: the freedom to be out while on the job. Moreover, even within the straight work world, few employers actively sought to uncover their employees’ sexual orientation. Instead, most entered into an unspoken bargain with their queer workers, “a mutual pact neither to reveal nor to pry” (7). Employers benefited from this arrangement as much as gays and lesbians, as companies could pay their vulnerable queer employees less for their work.

The implicit contract between employers and the queer labor force began to break down in the 1970s, when gay liberation inspired gays and lesbians to challenge workplace norms. During this period, Frank Kameny led the charge

to eliminate the federal government's anti-queer employment policies, a battle that took decades to win. As Kameny fought the federal government, other liberationists urged queer community members to be out at work. Canaday shows that gays and lesbians increasingly rejected the bargain in which they traded exploitation for safety, organizing on the job to advocate for their rights. Some left their workplaces entirely, founding businesses that catered to the queer community.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic reshaped the employment landscape in the 1980s. As anti-queer discrimination surged, many gays and lesbians found themselves entering back into the closet to hold onto their jobs. Of course, that was not universally true. For queer nurses who tended to AIDS patients, the epidemic was often the first time they were completely out at work. Gay and lesbian lawyers likewise found themselves in ever-greater demand, leading some to establish practices focused on AIDS discrimination. In the 1990s, as the crisis receded, the labor market once again began welcoming queer employees. Canaday emphasizes that, at many large businesses, queer employees convinced management to institute antidiscrimination policies and offer domestic partner benefits to same-sex couples by making "the business case" for queer rights (256). They argued that support for gays and lesbians improved a corporation's bottom line by emphasizing that discrimination deprived the company of qualified workers and impaired their employees' productivity.

By the mid-1990s, the employment landscape had shifted yet again. Fortune 500 companies offered more protections for gay and lesbian employees than many governments. Canaday emphasizes that the driving force for equality in the workplace was therefore not the state, but rather private actors who used market logics to advocate for their interests. Yet gay and lesbian employees were operating in the shadow of the law, as workers demanded rights from their employers precisely because it was legal to fire someone because of their sexual orientation. One consequence of the market-driven approach to rights was that safeguards from discrimination were uneven, with only the more privileged members of the LGBTQ community benefiting from the changes.

Canaday was able to create this multilayered, complex, and rich history of how gays and lesbians negotiated their work lives by supplementing archival materials with oral histories. The interviews that Canaday conducted allowed her to both identify patterns across workplaces and tell a national history spanning several decades. The individuals' inflection also imparted subtleties of meaning that ultimately shaped *Queer Career's* central argument. One man, she recounts, did not simply say "I was a typist, and I wanted to type." Instead, he joyfully exclaimed: "*I was a typist, and I wanted to type!*" (19). His exuberance showcased how it was the jobs could be simultaneously exploitative and rewarding.

Canaday's carefully crafted narrative constitutes a notable work of historical scholarship, one that will undoubtedly reframe future studies of legal history, the history of sexuality, and the history of capitalism. It is also poised to have a significant effect on how scholars approach their research. *Queer Career* provides a model for how scholars can uncover the stories of marginalized individuals, whose experiences often leave no written trace. *I was a typist, and I wanted to type!*