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Introduction

IN THE BLUNTEST OF TERMS, we think of jobs as “good” or “bad,” but that contrast hardly begins to describe our working lives.¹ The modern workplace is a realm of myriad contradictions: Some workplaces are zones of “uniforms and conformity” where compulsion reigns, norms are enforced, and identity is stripped away. At the same time, our jobs are a critical site for the formation of selfhood, so that asking someone what they “do” is tantamount to asking them who they are.² Some see work as our fullest realization of human creativity and cooperation; others regard it as an obstacle to our growth and happiness and wonder why we don’t fight harder to escape it.³ Occupational segregation is as much a factor as residential segregation in driving social stratification, yet workplaces also force people to come together across religious, ethnic, and racial divides.⁴ Finally, while we think of work as a place apart from our intimate life,

1. Arne L. Kallenberg, *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment Systems in the United States, 1970s to 2000* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011).

2. Michael Selmi, “The Many Faces of Darlene Jespersen,” *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy* 14 (2007): 468; Vicki Schultz, “Life’s Work,” *Columbia Law Review* 100 (2000): 1881–964. On workplaces as spaces where authentic selves can be expressed, see also Kenji Yoshino, *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights* (New York: Random House, 2006).

3. On the oppressive nature of work, see especially the political theorist Kathi Weeks’s provocative call for a “politics of refusal” to work and a “postwork imaginary” in her book *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). On the creative and fulfilling aspects of work, see Schultz, “Life’s Work.”

4. Douglas S. Massey, *Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007), 217; Cynthia Estlund, *Working Together: How Workplace Bonds Strengthen a Diverse Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

it surely rivals the family in its capacity to determine multiple facets of our existence. Work is “the experience through which,” according to legal scholar Vicki Schultz, “we construct coherent life stories.”⁵

That work fundamentally shapes our lives is true for all of us, but it is not true for everyone in the same way. That’s an obvious proposition for historians—who follow these questions over time—but we know more about certain histories than others. Labor historians, for example, formerly focused on industrial workers, but as manufacturing jobs have declined, they have shifted their attention to jobs in the expanding service sector.⁶ Work has been a central concern of women’s historians, who have given us rich portraits of colonial midwives, nineteenth-century seamstresses and laundresses, and early twentieth-century office workers.⁷ Immigrant labor accounts for a large (and expanding) historiography.⁸ Yet

5. Schultz, “Life’s Work,” 1927.

6. The history of labor is too voluminous to cite comprehensively, but classic works include Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977); Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976); David Montgomery, *Workers’ Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall et al., *Like a Family: The Making of the Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); Mary H. Blewett, *Men, Women, and Work: Class, Gender, and Protest in the New England Shoe Industry 1780–1930* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). Studies of service work in particular include: Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Tera Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Jennifer Klein and Eileen Boris, *Caring for America: Home Health Workers in the Shadow of the Welfare State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Two recent works that deal with both manufacturing and service are Lane Windham, *Knocking on Labor’s Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Gabriel Winant, *The Next Shift: The Fall of Industry and the Rise of Health Care in Rust Belt America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).

7. This is also a huge literature, but three foundational texts are Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York: Vintage, 1991); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

8. See, for example, John E. Bodnar, *Immigration and Industrialization: Ethnicity in an American Mill Town, 1870–1940* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977); Zaragosa Vargas, *Proletarians of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Cindy Hahamovitch, *No Man’s Land: Jamaican Guest Workers in America and the Global History*

productive labor's "categoric occlusions"—those worlds of work "marginal to wage labor"—remain a challenge for historians, as do other omissions.⁹ When several years ago I heard a leading historian of capitalism call for a "fuller accounting of diverse forms of labor," I, as a historian of sexuality, perked up my ears.¹⁰ He was specifically referring to the need to integrate histories of slavery into histories of political economy, but he could have been describing the paucity of our knowledge about gay workers as well.

Simply put, there are few other work experiences about which we know less.¹¹ Indeed, four decades into the project of LGBT history, this is still a seriously understudied area of inquiry.¹² The reasons are multiple, but some of the explanation is simply bad timing. The field of labor history was, for example, entering a quiet period at the precise moment when

of Deportable Labor (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Moon Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Lori A. Flores, *Grounds for Dreaming: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the California Farmworker Movement* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016); Ana Raquel Minian, *Undocumented Lives: The Untold Story of Mexican Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Natalia Molina, *A Place at the Nayarit: How a Mexican Restaurant Nourished a Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022).

9. Zachary Schwartz-Weinstein, "The Limits of Work and the Subject of Labor History," in *Rethinking U.S. Labor History: Essays on the Working-Class Experience*, ed. Donna T. Haverty-Stacke and Daniel Walkowitz (New York: Continuum, 2010), 290.

10. The historian was Sven Beckert, speaking at a state-of-the-field session called "The Return of Political Economy," at the 2012 annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians in Milwaukee, WI.

11. This holds true not just for historians but across the social sciences more generally. In 2004, Belle Rose Ragins described gay and lesbian workers as "one of the largest, but least studied minority groups in the workforce." Belle Rose Ragins, "Sexual Orientation in the Workplace: The Unique Work and Career Experiences of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Workers," in *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management*, ed. Joseph Martocchio (Bingley, UK: Emerald Books, 2004), 35.

12. To the best of my knowledge, books in the field of LGBT history that are centrally about the workplace include Allan Bérubé, *My Desire for History: Essays in Gay, Community, and Labor History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Phil Tie Meyer, *Plane Queer: Labor, Sexuality and AIDS in the History of Male Flight Attendants* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Miriam Frank, *Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014); Ryan Patrick Murphy, *Deregulating Desire: Flight Attendant Activism, Family Politics, and Workplace Justice* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016); Elspeth H. Brown, *Work! A Queer History of Modeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). Studies that treat early twentieth-century queer working-class cultures include George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). David Johnson's study of the Lavender Scare is more of a

LGBT history gained traction and legitimacy in the academy.¹³ That the history of capitalism *was* exploding at the same time that the history of sexuality simultaneously peaked could have led to productive collaborations. But historians of capitalism often defined their approach as a flight from the social and cultural history that had previously been dominant in the historiography, a fervent drive toward the “top” and away from the “bottom.”¹⁴ Trenchant critiques of these tendencies aside, historians of sexuality have themselves been somewhat dismissive of the workplace as a site of inquiry.¹⁵ That is especially remarkable when one considers that the historian John D’Emilio, in an early well-known article in the field, hypothesized that gay identity was itself shaped by the development of capitalism. He showed how industrialization untethered queer men and women economically from family units. Some of these individuals then migrated to cities; they took on wage labor in the expanding urban economy; and, by the late nineteenth century, they began to form gay subcultures.¹⁶ Many scholars,

political and cultural history of the federal purge than a book about work per se. David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). The same is true of Stacy Braukman’s study of McCarthyism at the state level in *Communists and Perverts under the Palms: The Johns Committee in Florida, 1956–1965* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012). Allan Bérubé’s history of gays and lesbians in the World War II-era military deals with work but is not explicitly a labor history. Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

13. Labor history has revitalized more recently, and I wonder here about renewed possibilities. One promising work in the pipeline is Joshua Hollands’s 2020 dissertation, “Work and Sexuality in the Sunbelt: Homophobic Workplace Discrimination in the US South and Southwest, 1970 to the Present” (PhD diss., University College London, 2020). Hollands’s dissertation won the 2021 Herbert Gutman Prize for outstanding dissertation from the Labor and Working-Class History Association.

14. Sven Beckert, “History of American Capitalism,” in *American History Now*, ed. Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 314–35.

15. Such critiques include Nan Enstad, “The ‘Sonorous Summons’ of the New History of Capitalism, or, What Are We Talking about When We Talk about the Economy,” *Modern American History* 2 (January 2019): 83–95; Amy Dru Stanley, “Histories of Capitalism and Sex Difference,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 36 (Summer 2016): 335–41; Ellen Hartigan-O’Connor, “The Personal Is Political Economy,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 36 (Summer 2016): 335–41. I appreciate as well Geoff Eley’s notion that setting social histories at “the bottom” against histories of capitalism at “the top” is a “false antinomy,” and his recognition that the “largest of analytical questions” can be “brought down to the ground.” Eley, “No Need to Choose: History from Above, History from Below,” *Viewpoints Magazine*, June 27, 2014, <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2014/06/27/no-need-to-choose-history-from-above-history-from-below/>.

16. John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 100–116.

most notably George Chauncey in *Gay New York*, then documented the emergence and growth of these urban subcultures.¹⁷ Yet D’Emilio’s original insight, while strikingly brilliant, did not lead to broader inquiry into the relationship between work and gay life more generally. A more far-reaching examination of the place of employment in the queer past seems instead to have been continuously circumscribed by a widely shared assumption that the workplace was part of the “straight world” in which people passed, and that the “homosexual world,” as the psychologist Evelyn Hooker wrote in the mid-1960s, was “largely one of leisure time and recreational activities.”¹⁸ Historians of sexuality have followed Hooker’s lead, tending to check in after five p.m., directing their attention to the street and the bar. As a result, we know a considerable amount about working-class cultures, but very little about the workplace itself.¹⁹

Because of the way that work is, in the words of one sociologist, “situated in human experience,” this is a gap in our historical understanding that is particularly vital to address.²⁰ When, more than a decade ago, I began studying the working lives of queer people in the postwar United States, I certainly started with the firm conviction that this was valuable research to attempt; but I had also fully bought in to the notion that work was an arena in which gays historically had tried to vanish and that digging up the evidence might be very tough going. Determined to try, I started where anyone who was working on the postwar period with little confidence in what the archives might yield would begin—with oral histories. Because I thought the period before gay liberation would be especially difficult to recover, I began to look specifically for gays and lesbians born in the 1930s and 1940s who were willing to speak with me about their experiences on the job. Those working lives, which spanned the 1950s into the 1990s, map temporally onto the rise and fall of standard employment

17. Chauncey, *Gay New York*.

18. Evelyn Hooker, “Male Homosexuals and Their Worlds,” in *Sexual Inversion*, ed. Judd Marmor (New York: Basic Books, 1965), 94.

19. George Chauncey’s assertion that on New York streets “queers constructed public identities quite different from those they maintained at work and elsewhere in the *straight world*,” is illustrative of trends in the broader field for its separation of the gay world (on the streets) from the world of work. George Chauncey, “Gay Men’s Strategies of Everyday Resistance,” in *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality*, ed. Kathy Peiss (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 359 (emphasis mine).

20. Andrew Abbott, “Sociology of Work and Occupations,” in *The Handbook of Economic Sociology*, 2nd ed., ed. Neil J. Smelser and Richard Swedberg (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 325.

that I also assumed would be central to my story.²¹ I conducted my first interviews in 2011 and ended up doing more than 150 of them. What jumped out at me during those initial conversations was something I had not expected to hear. More often than I heard stories about elaborate ruses to conceal sexual identity at work, I heard from informants that they assumed their bosses and coworkers suspected, or even knew, about them. This degree of visibility and knowability surprised me, and it made me wonder if the archives would be more promising than I had initially anticipated.

That turned out to be true. Once I knew to look for it, the paper trail left by and about gay people in their employment, going back to the mid-twentieth century, was voluminous. I drew upon substantial social scientific research that purported to explain why gays seemed to gravitate toward certain occupations, but not others. I read legal documents in which gay workers sued over government jobs, security clearances, and licenses that had been denied or revoked because of homosexuality. Organizational records revealed the concerted efforts to secure better working conditions made first by the homophiles, then by gay liberationists, and finally by the modern gay rights movement, from the Gay Activists Alliance in the 1970s to the National Gay Task Force and Lambda Legal. I also relied on the homophile, liberationist, and mainstream press, memoirs, and personal papers, as well as union and corporate records. I was well into the project before I let go of my fear of impending scarcity, my worry that it was just a matter of time before the archival trail would go cold. My first discovery was just how much evidence there was. This really wasn't a "hidden history" after all.²²



The contours of that history, as its shape became ever more clear, have required a reconsideration of the primary lens through which historians have considered gay employment, when they have considered it at all: that of the Lavender Scare. As I elaborate further in chapter 1, this brutal episode in the 1950s, when thousands of gay and lesbian civil servants were

21. On the standard employment relationship as a feature of the postwar era and its relationship to a gendered division of labor, see Marcel van der Linden, "San Precario: A New Inspiration for Labor Relations," *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas* 11 (Spring 2014): 15.

22. This phrase alludes to the title of an early and important collection: Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr., eds., *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: New American Library, 1989).

purged from the federal bureaucracy, has conditioned historians' thinking about gay people in employment more generally. The prevalent notion is that gay people at midcentury were in deep hiding on their jobs, and if an employer caught wind of an employee's homosexuality, they were immediately fired. That routinely happened in the government during these years, and sometimes outside the government as well. But this is a partial view, based on a particularly dramatic flash point in a particular sector, that doesn't fully capture the experience of work for many gay people at midcentury. While fear of job loss was a pervasive anxiety during these years, the workers portrayed in this history handled that fear in a variety of ways. My research has found that not all gay people, especially those employed in the private sector, were engaged in deep hiding in their jobs at midcentury. First of all, there was a "queer work world" that overlapped with the secondary labor market populated by women and people of color in low-paid, low-status work where gay people could be open and where nonnormative gender expression was sometimes affirmed on the job. Journalists, social scientists, and other midcentury observers of those who were openly employed noted "clustering" in certain kinds of "queer" occupations and in service jobs more generally. Many gay people, however, were employed in the "straight work world," in relatively better jobs, but in positions that did not affirm queerness and often repressed it. Yet even there the spectrum ranged from secrecy to discretion, with a good number of gay employees adopting something akin to what the sociologist Erving Goffman termed "covering." Goffman described covering as the effort "to keep [one's] stigma from looming large," in order to "ease matters for those in the know."²³ Covering was the opposite of "flaunting"—a term used to describe gay indiscretion, usually with a twist of gender transgression—but it rarely required an elaborate performance. As it turns out, many employers were happy to "look the other way." Employment relations during these years were, in fact, regularly characterized by an unspoken "bargain" between employers and employees—a mutual pact neither to reveal nor to pry.

The Lavender Scare then only partly illuminates this era. We need an alternative explanation that does not overgeneralize based on the public sector but rather relates the public- and private-sector experiences to one another and captures the range of ways gay people appeared at work during this period. In order to make sense of the many workplaces where

23. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 102–4. The legal scholar Kenji Yoshino has made it his mission to "pull Goffman's term 'covering' out of academic obscurity and press it into the popular lexicon, so that it has the same currency as terms like 'passing' or 'the closet.'" See Yoshino, *Covering*, 194.

queerness was less covert, less concealed than the Lavender Scare framework would lead us to expect, it may be helpful to begin to think about gay work as a *form of labor*. The sociologist C. Wright Mills admonished us long ago to stop talking about “this job” or “that job” and to start thinking about work systemically.²⁴ Women’s historians and labor historians—among others—have given us an account of women’s labor, for example, that *is* systemic. From them, we know that at midcentury employment relations were structured around the family, and that the heterosexual family form was valuable to capital in two ways. First, women’s unwaged work in the home was necessary to the task of social reproduction. Second, the heterosexual family was itself used as a form of labor control.²⁵ After all, working men increasingly surrendered labor militancy in exchange for a generous “family wage” that would support their wives and children. In making that bargain, employers shored up the power of male workers over wives in exchange for their submission on the shop floor.²⁶ The expansion of the family wage system, which was one of the hallmarks of the “Fordist regime” that characterized work from the end of the World War II into the 1970s, was expensive and cumbersome for employers, but, in a booming postwar economy, the stability it bought was worth the price.²⁷

Once we recognize gay people as more of a presence than an absence in the workplace—and if we are thinking systemically about work—we

24. C. Wright Mills, *White Collar*, quoted in Weeks, *Problem with Work*, 1, 3.

25. The “heteropatriarchal nuclear family,” Gabriel Winant has recently elaborated, “was mass production capitalism’s instrument for obtaining and reproducing a stable workforce.” Winant, *Next Shift*, 14. (Stable and compliant, I might emphasize.)

26. Women’s relegation to the secondary labor market helped to construct “women’s ‘primary’ commitment as devotion to home and family,” such that the circumscribed roles of women in the labor market and women in the family were mutually reinforcing. Ruth Milkman, “‘Redefining Women’s Work’: The Sexual Division of Labor in the Auto Industry during World War II,” *Feminist Studies* 8 (Summer 1982): 338–40. On the “family wage” more generally, see Nancy MacLean, “Postwar Women’s History: The ‘Second Wave’ or the End of the Family Wage,” in *A Companion to Post-1945 America*, ed. Jean-Christopher Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 235–59; Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Marissa Chappell, *The War on Welfare: Family, Poverty, and Politics in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 5–15. The systemic thinking by feminist historians on women’s work is indebted to earlier theorizing by socialist feminists, especially those associated with the “dual systems” approach. See, for example, Heidi Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Toward a More Progressive Union,” *Capital and Class* 8 (1979): 1–34.

27. David Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 125–40; Jacob S. Hacker, *The Great Risk*

also have to ask about the *other* bargain at midcentury. How do we understand the bargain between many employers and gay workers to neither see nor be seen? It's obvious why this arrangement made sense for understandably apprehensive gay employees, but for employers? Why look the other way? The appeal of gay workers at midcentury, I argue, was that of a vulnerable labor force—one whose consciousness was shaped by the specter of the government purges, and who commonly knew of other queer people who had lost jobs. These workers could be underpaid relative to the level of skill and responsibility their jobs demanded, easily pushed out with downturns in the business cycle, and expected to quietly walk away when fired.²⁸ They would also stay in jobs where they felt safe, even when they were mistreated. These dynamics played out in many different kinds of employment, but especially in white-collar jobs and corporate offices. Across the straight work world, gay people also brought assets to their jobs that employers recognized and valued: They were contingent, easy to move, and both perceived and treated as unattached from family units. As a result, they potentially alleviated some of the pressure of the Fordist breadwinner model at a time when many labor arrangements were still expensive, cumbersome, and inflexible. In sum, they were harbingers of the “post-Fordist” transformation of work that was still several decades in the future. As long as gay employees were discreet and did not attract negative attention, then, there were many reasons for employers to avoid seeing what they didn't want to see.

Because queerness (in contrast to race) is “transversal to class”—meaning that queer people do not occupy a single class position but are distributed “throughout the class structure”—it is sometimes assumed that they have experienced cultural animus but not economic exploitation.²⁹ This study takes aim at this assumption, arguing, as one social theorist recently put it, that the “liabilities of homosexuals are hardwired into

Shift: The New Economic Insecurity and the Decline of the American Dream (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Linda McDowell, “Life without Father and Ford: The New Gender Order of Post-Fordism,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 16 (1991): 400–419. The idea of the family wage had its origins in the nineteenth century in the American context. See MacLean, “Postwar Women's History,” 238.

28. “Hiding on the Job,” *Gay Liberator*, October 1, 1971, 4.

29. According to Melinda Cooper, “Queerness is rather transversal to class, cutting across the stratification of race and gender.” Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York: Zone Books, 2017), 159; see also Judith Butler, “Merely Cultural,” in *Adding Insult to Injury: Nancy Fraser Debates Her Critics*, ed. Kevin Olson (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2008), 49.

relations of production.”³⁰ Those dynamics were explicitly called out by gay liberationists beginning in the early 1970s. “Our bosses know we’re gay” but pretend not to notice, one liberationist tract explained. For that, “we are profoundly grateful, as we are *expected to be*.” As a result, this writer lamented, gays performed work that others would not tolerate.³¹ Other liberationists took aim specifically at the way the criminalization of sexual behavior and gender transgression outside of the workplace licensed queer vulnerability within it. Yet rules against homosexuality, another liberationist noted, did not prevent homosexuals from being hired, “nor were they intended to.” What such prohibitions achieved was “to force the homosexual to be not only discreet about homosexuality but also relatively docile on the job.”³² We might of course critique the liberationists for their shared tendency to caricature the sinister boss; even at midcentury homophobia was not universal, and some employers likely did not care one way or another. Yet it is notable that even tolerant and understanding employers benefited from *the system* of gay labor the liberationist writers described. One employer, for example, noted that he had “interviewed many homosexuals,” and hired some of them, “always on the basis of their abilities and my employment needs.” While he expressed no conscious desire to benefit from their insecurity, he also observed that the gays he hired had worked “harder than most,” which he surmised they did in order to overcome stigma and “prove their worth as individuals.”³³

Whatever the attitude of various employers toward their employees, the bargain that defined employment relations more broadly did begin to break down in the 1970s and 1980s, as some gay people heeded the liberationists’ call to reject its terms. This development was enabled first by a terrible economy in which there was simply less to lose and then by a deadly epidemic that had the same effect. More and more, gay people yearned to be not only seen but also acknowledged. Outside the workplace, this occurred with alacrity as gay culture exploded across these decades. Inside the workplace, the pace of change was slower. This had something

30. This is actually Nancy Fraser’s skeptical formulation of Judith Butler’s position in their contentious (and wonderful) exchange. See Fraser, “Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism: A Response to Judith Butler,” in Olson, *Adding Insult to Injury*, 62.

31. 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: New York University Press, 1992), 166.

32. “Hiding on the Job,” 4.

33. Peter J. Myette, “Employing the Homosexual,” 1972, “Sexual Minorities and Employment” folder, box 1, William J. Canfield Papers, University Archives and Special Collections, Northeastern University, Boston, MA.

to do, I argue, with the way that gay people were mostly left out of the civil rights achievements of these years. In contrast to other groups that suffered from discrimination on the job, queer workers gained no underlying blanket protection; in fact, no other minority group has had so little claim on formal legal protection.³⁴ Not only was there no equivalent to the 1964 Civil Rights Act for sexual minorities, but the local and state laws that did exist were often passed so quietly that people didn't always know about them, and even when they did, many gay employees were unwilling to invoke the law's protection in one place only to then find themselves exposed later in another locale.³⁵

Yet, outside the regular mechanisms of civil rights laws, workplaces partially opened to gay workers, and clearer expressions of identity gradually became possible by the end of the twentieth century. How did that happen? One explanation has to do with the distinction between civil rights law and civil rights culture: the civil rights imaginary increasingly included gay people, in other words, even if civil rights laws did not. Both the African American freedom struggle and the women's liberation movement affected the rights consciousness of many gay people, changing their sense of what they were entitled to in the workplace. While this growing rights consciousness did not emerge alongside robust legal tools, and safeguarding by the state remained elusive, this study documents the responsiveness of business to demands that queer employees increasingly made for protection and recognition. While some might interpret this shift as a response to the discovery of gay consumers, that played only a minor role. Rather, I argue that business was out ahead of both the government and labor unions in protecting and otherwise demonstrating a receptivity

34. Gay experience, I argue, cannot simply be assimilated to other civil rights trajectories. The sociologist John Skrentny has usefully made this point as well. "The words 'homosexual' or 'gay' in the context of American politics connote both a minority-like status and yet a separation from other minorities," Skrentny wrote in 2002. "Gays therefore did not find strong advocates in the government, as did other groups, and the logic of client politics or anticipatory politics never extended to them." John D. Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 315. Coalition with other civil rights groups was also not easily achieved. As late as 1994, the Leadership Council on Civil Rights would endorse the omnibus gay civil rights bill (the Employment Non-discrimination Act, ENDA) only tepidly, making clear that not all member organizations supported the legislation. See Chai R. Feldblum, "The Federal Gay Rights Bill: From Bella to ENDA," in *Creating Change: Sexuality, Public Policy, and Civil Rights*, ed. John D'Emilio, William B. Turner, and Urvashi Vaid (New York: St. Martin's, 2000), 179.

35. Norma M. Riccucci and Charles W. Gossett, "Employment Discrimination in State and Local Government: The Lesbian and Gay Male Experience," *American Review of Public Administration* 26 (1996): 175, 185.

to gay workers by the early to mid-1990s in part because of the apparent way that these employees were in sync with and even had prefigured the employment regime of late capitalism.

Just as Sven Beckert recently argued that the emergence of *industrial* capitalism was “built upon older social hierarchies” (in his case, patriarchal relations in the household), a similar claim might be made about the ways in which *postindustrialism* (or post-Fordism) was built in part on the economic position of queer people at midcentury.³⁶ Many attributes that later came to be associated with post-Fordism—short-term, precarious work arrangements that enabled employers to shed responsibility for family units—were the same ones that, going back as far as the 1950s, could also be identified with gay labor. One could of course make a similar argument about women and workers of color, but queer workers were even more predictive because of the way they represented precarity in primary—as well as secondary-sector jobs (the corporate office as well as the retail shop) and because of their perceived lack of dependents. To be clear, I do not claim that queer people were *more* precarious than women and people of color, and many were positioned at the intersection of these identities. The point is rather to highlight the ways that gay workers offered capital a midcentury lesson in structuring employment relations without regard to family attachment—even in primary-sector jobs for which the breadwinner/caregiver model was paradigmatic—and, relatedly, to note that queer people were among the first precarious workers *across* the class spectrum, for example, in middle-class jobs dominated by white men.³⁷ In secondary-sector employment long associated with contingent and fragile jobs for women, people of color, and immigrant workers, we should only notice that queer people were also present there among the precarious.³⁸



36. Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York, Vintage, 2014), 188.

37. Queer workers then preview the precarity that did not really hit many white-collar workers until the 1980s and 1990s. The sociologist Erin Hatton has made a distinctive though parallel argument that by the 1970s temporary agencies had begun to introduce ideas of contingency into primary-sector employment, including in “breadwinner jobs.” I don’t disagree with Hatton but see gay employment as a precursor even to the development she was describing (and also note how many queers at midcentury were working as temps). See Erin Hatton, *The Temp Economy: From Kelly Girls to Permatemps in Postwar America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).

38. Earlier examples of structuring employment relations without regard to family attachment involved immigrant labor, although not in primary-sector employment. I further explore the analogy between immigrant and queer labor in chapter 2.

My aim here is to integrate sexuality into the history of capitalism, as well as into labor history, picking up the conversation that John D’Emilio began in 1983 when he published “Capitalism and Gay Identity.”³⁹ Capitalism seemed to produce, following D’Emilio, gay identity and, in a fascinating double move, the eventual means to exploit that identity. I also hope to help nudge the prevailing narrative of postwar US history from its focus on consumption and affluence toward production (i.e., the workplace) and precarity. But, more than anything else, this book is a continuation of my earlier work *The Straight State*, which told the story of the government’s policing of homosexuality over the first half of the twentieth century.⁴⁰ That I see these two projects as linked is itself an evolution in my thinking; for quite a while, I saw them as totally distinct. If my first book was “bringing the state back in,” I initially thought that this project was “pushing the state back out.” It was to be a shift, in other words, from the state to the market. Some years later, I realized I was wrong about this, and how conceptually intertwined these two books are. I now see the relationship between *The Straight State* and *Queer Career* as a diptych or even as a series. From a temporal standpoint, *The Straight State* mostly covers the first half of the twentieth century, and *Queer Career* addresses the second. The two works complement each other as well, in that the first book is about the state discovering queer people and writing anti-homosexuality into the architecture of the law, while this book is about capital taking advantage of that aggressive state policing.⁴¹ *It is about the systematic exploitation of state-created legal vulnerabilities.* And, to the extent the market is shot through by the state, this book is actually *still* a history of the straight state, but in a new period of state formation that is more characterized by the hallmarks of neoliberalism.⁴²

39. A recent book that integrates the history of sexuality and the history of capitalism, but focuses on consumption rather than work, is David K. Johnson, *Buying Gay: How Physique Entrepreneurs Sparked a Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

40. Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

41. Because my first book was focused on national citizenship, I was also focused on federal policy (and policing). As I elaborate in the chapters that follow, in the employment context, state and local policing also matters.

42. Relevant here is the sociologist Erin Hatton’s identification of “status coercion,” “found anywhere an employer has power over the workers’ social position,” as a “new mechanism by which the state has expanded its punitive power in the context of neoliberalism.” Erin Hatton, *Coerced: Work under the Threat of Punishment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 16, 20. On the history of neoliberalism more generally, see Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

Yet, there are ways that *Queer Career* is not just a sequel but also a revision of my earlier work, as the topic of the workplace enables me to probe some aspects of the history of sexuality that my first book did not. One of the issues with writing about state regulation that I did not realize when I began that project is that when the state policed queerness, it was almost always targeting men. So, despite my own deep commitments as a feminist historian, *The Straight State* was predominantly focused on male experience. This problem plagues the history of sexuality more generally, because it relies so heavily on the archival traces left by state policing, even when historians look at leisure and nightlife.⁴³ When I began to conceptualize this book, I thought much more deliberately about sites from which to write a queer history that would *not* marginalize women. It soon became obvious to me that the workplace was such a site. After all, lesbian breadwinners needed better, higher-paying jobs than married women to survive economically, and they sometimes “violated gender norms” to obtain them.⁴⁴ By

43. Margot Canaday, “LGBT History,” *Frontiers* 35 (2014): 11–19. This essay is part of a forum on the twenty-fifth anniversary of John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman’s foundational text *Intimate Matters: The History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988). Two recent exceptions to the dearth of work on lesbians are Lauren Gutterman, *Her Neighbor’s Wife: A History of Lesbian Desire within Marriage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); and Susan S. Lanser, *The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic 1565–1830* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). Older, classic works on lesbian history include Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs* 1 (Autumn 1975): 1–29; Blanche Weisen Cook, “The Historical Denial of Lesbianism,” *Radical History Review* 20 (Spring 1979): 60–65; Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993); Estelle Freedman, *Maternal Justice: Miriam van Waters and the Female Reform Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). See also Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778–1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2006).

44. M. V. Lee Badgett and Mary C. King, “Lesbian and Gay Occupational Strategies,” in *Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life*, ed. Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed (New York: Routledge, 1997), 78. “Lesbians had a higher stake than heterosexual married women in accessing well-paid jobs, since lesbians did not have access to ‘family wages’ through husbands,” the economist Julie Matthaei elaborated. “Furthermore, lesbians had already crossed gender lines in other ways . . . and were less fearful of losing their ‘womanhood’ and attractiveness to men if they took on ‘men’s jobs’ than were heterosexual women.” Matthaei, “The Sexual Division of Labor, Sexuality, and Lesbian/Gay Liberation: Toward a Marxist-Feminist Analysis of Sexuality in U.S. Capitalism,” in Gluckman and Reed, *Homo Economics*, 155.

necessity, as one team of sociologists concluded in the 1960s, lesbians were “seriously committed to work.”⁴⁵

At the same time that I have set out here to write a history of gays and lesbians in the postwar workplace that does not subordinate female to male experience, I also have aspired to write about *people* in a different register than I did in my first book. Yes, there are people in *The Straight State*, but I was interested in them only insofar as they were caught in the apparatus of state policing. When my colleague Dirk Hartog read a draft of that manuscript, he said I talked about the people in the book and told their stories in a very cold way. I recognized the truth of this charge but ultimately decided there was little I could do about it. After all, the book was fundamentally about bureaucracy, which is impersonal by its nature. But I have not been similarly hampered in *Queer Career*; so I have engaged with a more human side of the practice of history, determined to produce scholarship that “feels” as much as it “thinks.”

More than anything else, conducting oral histories has enabled me to better elucidate the human side of this story, to explore work as a “sort of life,” rather than what Studs Terkel so memorably called a “Monday through Friday sort of dying.”⁴⁶ I’m aware, however, that historians sometimes greet oral histories with a degree of skepticism, even when that skepticism comes with the disclaimer that written sources are also biased and need to be read critically.⁴⁷ So I should explain how I did my oral histories and identify what they add to this study: The 156 interviews I conducted as part of this research fall into two subgroups. Roughly one-third of them were carried out with individuals who emerged as actors in the story as I did archival research, who were interviewed specifically about their roles in one of the episodes the book takes up. For example, I interviewed many nurses who helped staff the first designated AIDS ward in the country, as well as the individuals who pushed AT&T to recognize the country’s first gay and lesbian employee resource group. When I cite interviews with those individuals, they are identified by name. A larger group of interviews—just over one hundred—was conducted as part of what I think of as a “cohort study” of individuals born mostly during the 1930s

45. William Simon and John H. Gagnon, “The Lesbians: A Preliminary Overview,” in *Sexual Deviance*, ed. Simon and Gagnon (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 270.

46. Studs Terkel, *Working: People Talk about What They Do All Day and How They Feel about What They Do* (New York: New Press, 1972), xi.

47. There is a huge literature on the promise and also the pitfalls of working with oral history. I find especially illuminating many of the essays in Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

and 1940s, whom I spoke to about their working lives. I made anonymity a default condition of the second group; some informants preferred that, and some didn't care, but I treat this cluster of interviews uniformly.⁴⁸ Because of the age of many informants, I conducted the vast majority of these interviews in person in urban centers around the country—I did clusters of interviews in Washington, DC; New York; Atlanta; Lansing; Detroit; Houston; Ft. Lauderdale; Boston; Cambridge, Massachusetts; Buffalo; and the Bay Area. I also did telephone, and eventually Skype or Zoom, interviews with many individuals in smaller towns and cities as well.

I found interview subjects in a variety of ways and took care that they represented a wide range of socioeconomic positions. At one end of the spectrum, I took advantage of a year in residence at the Radcliffe Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to use Harvard's large gay alumni network to find potential informants. At the other end of the spectrum, the social service agency Services and Advocacy for LGBT Elders (SAGE) allowed me to attend their \$2 drop-in dinners in midtown Manhattan as well as their events in Harlem to talk about my research and find interview subjects.⁴⁹ SAGE DC and SAGE Atlanta also helped me find informants. I placed an ad in the lesbian feminist periodical *Lesbian Connection*—still, as in the 1970s, arriving in a plain brown wrapper and “free to all lesbians”—to find women who had used that publication to go “back to the land” in the 1970s and ended up in Oregon, Arkansas, and elsewhere. Once I had identified an interview subject, I relied on snowball sampling to find a larger network, whether of blue-collar lesbians in Houston, gay autoworkers in Detroit, or lesbian deans of social work who vacationed on Cape Cod. I was cognizant too that it was important to record the experiences of those who might be reluctant to speak to me, as I surmised they might have had a different trajectory through the workplace than, for example, a liberationist would have had. At SAGE dinners, I paid as much attention to those who did not approach me as those who did. One elderly woman, for example, told me she would consent to an interview only if I could introduce her to MSNBC host Rachel Maddow! I never produced Maddow, but after several entreaties, she finally allowed me to interview her. Throughout the project, I struggled to identify LGBT people of color in the right age range who were willing to be interviewed.

48. I have sorted anonymous interviews by location and then assigned a numeric code to each; I identify the interviewee by number, with year, and with city unless the interview was conducted via telephone, Skype, or Zoom, in which case that is noted.

49. SAGE was founded in 1978. Originally, the acronym stood for Senior Action in a Gay Environment.

Roughly 10 percent of my interviews are with informants of color, mostly African Americans. I have supplemented my own interviews with research in other oral history collections and archival sources to draw some meaningful conclusions about how race matters in the working lives I recount here.⁵⁰ Interviews with transgender subjects in this age range were more difficult to arrange; I interviewed five trans women and two trans men in this age cohort. These conversations were fascinating, but the picture that emerges from them is hardly definitive. The greatest lacunae in my collection of oral histories, however, are the voices of the generation that succumbed to AIDS. So many times in the course of my research, I went in search of contact information only to find an obituary.

For the interviews that I was able to arrange, conversations typically lasted around two hours each. I began by simply asking people to narrate their work histories, first situating themselves by telling me the year they were born, where they grew up, and the work their parents did. Then I asked them to tell me about their educational and work backgrounds, most often beginning with graduation from high school. In addition, I usually asked several more pointed follow-up questions: How had they handled sexuality at work? How had they connected to a gay world, and did their employment have any bearing on how they did so? If an individual experienced harms in the workplace as a result of being gay, what were they? What positive consequences, if any, had they experienced? I asked what occupations informants would have identified as substantially closed to them as gay people, and what occupations seemed especially open. I inquired what they remembered observing about other gay people in their workplaces. For men who married, I asked if they viewed their marriages as connected in any way to career ambition. For women who married, I asked about the material difficulties of leaving the marriage. I asked about involvement with labor unions and professional associations. Among many other questions, I asked about memories of the AIDS epidemic as it first appeared on the work site.

As the historian Michael Frisch has pointed out, oral histories tend to produce such an overwhelmingly intuitive response that the specific value of oral histories can be obscured.⁵¹ The value of this methodology for this study is multifaceted but easy enough to articulate. In analyzing the interviews, I am especially interested in aggregate patterns across

50. For example, the Rochella Thorpe Oral History Project Files, 1992–95, Collection 7607, Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.

51. Michael Frisch, “Oral History and *Hard Times*: A Review Essay,” in Perks and Thompson, *Oral History Reader*, 32.

many working lives, as well as “a cross section of the subjectivity of the group.”⁵² And, in contrast to historians who use oral histories primarily to fill a vacuum in archival evidence, I often read these oral histories against or in tandem with archival evidence.⁵³ That not only validates people’s memories about events that happened a long time ago, but it also corrects either the archival record, or more likely, my own faulty reading of it. The triangulation of archival and oral history sources, in other words, can enhance the interpretation of both types of material.

Of course, these interviews are valuable for many other reasons as well. They helped me to construct a national history, even if the fact that so many gay people were migratory during this period nonetheless leads to a kind of hazy sense of place. Interviews support the notion that the very sharp divide we now imagine between socially conservative “red states” and socially liberal “blue states” is, in some ways, a fairly recent development. Into the 1970s and 1980s, queer people faced a surprising amount of discrimination in big cities like San Francisco and New York, which are often perceived as safe havens. Indeed, I even heard some informants opine that southern cities could be safer for gay people in the 1950s and 1960s because there wasn’t enough of a critical mass there and police weren’t really very interested in them, in sharp contrast to places like New York.⁵⁴

The very life course of this cohort is also important in that it maps onto the narrative arc of the book itself. My informants entered the labor market during the years of the Lavender Scare (or “the bargain,” as I define the same era); they worked through the liberation and AIDS eras and retired just as diversity was becoming a stated value in industry. Their working lives tell us a lot about the labor regimes they experienced over time. Members of this cohort entered the labor force during the years when

52. Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” in Perks and Thompson, *Oral History Reader*, 67. I also like Portelli’s formulation that subjectivity is, in his words, “the business of history.”

53. Ana Raquel Minian’s inspiring interviews with undocumented immigrants come much closer to filling a significant void in archival sources. “Migrants’ experiences made it hard for them to preserve documents,” she has observed. “When crossing the border illegally, they carried as little as possible; once in the United States, they relocated often and left many of their documents behind.” Minian, *Undocumented Lives*, 239. Natalia Molina turned to oral histories for a similar reason in crafting her portrait of the Mexican immigrants who worked in her grandmother’s restaurant in Echo Park in Los Angeles. “This is a book about a place and a people that have no archives—what I call the ‘underdocumented.’” Molina, *Place at the Nayarit*, xiii.

54. Interview subject 74, interview conducted via telephone, 2013. See also John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

high productivity was coupled to the relatively high wages that fueled mass consumption, when unions were powerful, and when many workers experienced fairly stable employment. This cohort was for the most part still employed *after* 1975, when deindustrialization decimated manufacturing, the service sector burgeoned, and unions were undermined, while real wages fell and standard terms of employment declined. “Individuals last longer than do the social structures of the work world,” the sociologist Andrew Abbott has observed, “so it is to individuals, by themselves and as a cohort . . . that we must look for the deep historicity of the world of work.”⁵⁵

Above all, the distinctive value of oral history sources may lie in their orality. The fullness of this—to my ear, the wonderful way many queer people *sound*—tends to be lost when it moves to the written page, but not all of it is.⁵⁶ The intonation imparts subtleties of meaning that become part of the interpretation. So, for example, one of my informants, an African American man, was remembering his early working years and remarked: “I was a typist, and I wanted to type.” Except he didn’t just state this; he joyfully exclaimed it: “*I was a typist*,” his voice rose, “*and I wanted to type!*”⁵⁷ And the exuberant, almost breathless, proclamation that I heard in this man’s voice—“*I was a typist, and I wanted to type!*”—helps me to formulate an argument about the complexity of “queer jobs” that were low in pay and status but also sometimes affirmed a queer identity in a way that made them simultaneously exploitative and rewarding. So what we hear in a speaker’s voice can guide us toward more nuanced readings of the past, leading us, for example, toward an understanding of the workplace as a site where queer people experienced not only great vulnerability but also the deepest kind of meaning.



What I hope this book offers then is threefold: a persuasive historical account of gay workers across changing employment regimes in the post-war United States; embedded within that account, a “thick description” of the long history of queer precariousness at work; and finally, an *affective* labor history. Regarding the last of these, as British historians especially

55. Abbott, “Sociology of Work and Occupations,” 311–12.

56. Don Kulick, “Gay and Lesbian Language,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 29 (2000): 243–85; Michael Schulman, “Is There a Gay Voice?,” *New Yorker*, July 10, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/is-there-a-gay-voice>.

57. Interview subject 16, New York, NY, 2012 (emphasis mine).

have emphasized, work was “a deeply emotional experience.”⁵⁸ Of course, some of the feelings I have needed to sort out in writing this book belong not to my informants but to me, and the many career narratives I’ve recorded over the past ten years have led me to reflect much more deeply on my own work history, and to consider both its dissonances and its resonances with the working lives of the historical subjects of this book.⁵⁹ I do not remember thinking, as many of my informants several decades older did, that being gay meant that I could not *become anything*. What I do remember was the belief that what was most consequential to me even as a college student—understanding queer lives past and present—was not academically serious. I ended up choosing American studies as my major at the University of Iowa simply because it enabled me to supplement a “rigorous” track of conventional political science and history courses with more personally meaningful ones in feminist and queer studies. Although these courses were technically all part of a single major, in my mind the two tracks represented a completely bifurcated course of study. Because I didn’t view the subjects that resonated with me most deeply as leading toward an academic career, I certainly didn’t see myself as headed for graduate school, nor did I take the necessary steps to prepare myself for that possibility. Still, I was as academically focused as you could be without any real sense of direction, and a conversation I had during my senior year with one of my professors about the inroads feminist scholars had made in the discipline of history stayed with me.⁶⁰

58. Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives: Work in Britain since 1945* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 75. As the historian Clare Langhamer has observed: “Thinking more broadly about feelings at work allows us to explore the ways in which social relations underpin relations of production, to take a category of cultural history and engage with it in social and economic terms.” Langhamer, “Feeling, Women, and Work in the Long 1950s,” *Women’s History Review* 26 (2017): 79. On the “deeply human character of economic life,” see also Emma Griffin, *Bread Winner: An Intimate History of the Victorian Economy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 23.

59. On autobiography and history, see the introduction to Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 5–7; David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), 3–5; Susan Porter Benson, *Household Accounts: Working-Class Family Economies in the Interwar United States* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 2–6. More recently and more expansively, see Susan Lee Johnson, *Writing Kit Carson: Fallen Heroes in a Changing West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

60. That professor was the political scientist Sally J. Kenney. I was fortunate too that both Sally Kenney and the historian of Mexico Charles Hale thought to pull me aside and tell me I should think about graduate school. In large state schools especially, those

As significant was what happened on the path I took every day from my apartment to the main campus, and the shortcut I discovered that took me through the law school. In the stairwell of the law school one day I met my partner, Rachel, who was trying to create a group for gay law students, but no one (in the early 1990s) would join. She berated me for not signing up for her group, I explained that I was not a law student, and somehow we ended up shooting pool in a bar. When she graduated from law school, she returned home to San Francisco to sit for the California bar and begin working, and I followed her there after I completed my degree. Because the economy was in a deep recession, I could not find a job, even in a coffee shop. I ended up doing an unpaid internship with the San Francisco Commission on the Status of Women, mostly tracking legislation in Sacramento. But we couldn't afford to live there on Rachel's meager salary in a plaintiffs' civil rights firm, and our credit card debt was mounting with each passing month. I was also reading feminist history in my free time, and after about a year, I saw a path to graduate school that made sense to me.

I did enough investigation to decide that the University of Wisconsin was the perfect program given my interests, but not enough investigation to realize that establishing residency is not something graduate students generally need to do. I asked Rachel to leave her job and move to Madison with me so that I would be a Wisconsin resident in anticipation of eventually attending graduate school. She reluctantly agreed, and I assured her she would love Madison. It was not helpful that almost the first thing that happened when we arrived was being denied an apartment we really wanted to rent because, as the landlord said to us, "our lifestyle grieved God's heart." We recovered; Rachel began to study for the Wisconsin bar exam, and I looked for work. I hoped to get a job with the State of Wisconsin and began to take civil service exams, but recognizing that getting a state job would take some time, I immediately signed up with a temp agency as a "Kelly Girl."

My first assignment was doing reception and clerical work at a small insurance company in a suburb a few minutes outside of Madison. After about a week, the office manager asked me if I would like to be considered for a permanent job. A permanent job meant not sharing my paycheck with Kelly Services while I waited for a civil service position to come through, so I agreed to bring in a current resume the next day. I don't

conversations are so important, and I am still grateful to both of them for their generosity and kindness.

know why it didn't occur to me to "de-gay" that resume, but I didn't erase my year in San Francisco, omit my internship with the Commission on the Status of Women, or change the names of the gay organizations I had been active with during college. I just handed the unedited version over to my prospective employers the next morning. From my perch at the front desk, I thought I saw the office manager show my resume to the head of the company, and I worried that their conversation seemed to last much too long. When I got home that night, I received a call from my contact at Kelly Services, who told me the insurance company had abruptly terminated my contract with them. I was instructed not to report to work the following morning.

One might think that with temporary work, it's easy come and easy go, but I slumped down on the couch as soon as I got off the phone and began to cry. "What if I am actually unemployable?" I remember saying out loud. Rachel, who is twelve years my senior, assured me that I *was* employable, adding that one day I would laugh about this experience. I soon had another assignment from Kelly Services—but this time I was driving an hour from Madison to work in a cramped, windowless office providing support for a mean and incompetent man who was working on a development campaign for a small-town hospital. Even in the world of temporary work, this was a *bad* assignment. But I stuck it out until I got a call to interview for a position with the state. The job was working in the Personnel Division of the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, investigating discrimination and harassment complaints made by correctional and probation and parole officers. I immediately called the person at the San Francisco Commission on the Status of Women who handled complaint investigations for the city. She carefully explained their procedures to me, and at the interview I sounded like I knew what I was doing. I was offered a position.

I learned a lot in that job; it was challenging and occasionally even rewarding. But it was also truly depressing to spend so much time inside Wisconsin prisons, and while the Personnel Division was predictably full of gay people, no one said it out loud, so days spent in the central office were somewhat depressing too. Perhaps because by this point I imagined myself eventually going to graduate school, I was "out" in the sense that I talked about Rachel freely. I also wore Doc Martens shoes to work on Fridays, which I think my straight coworkers had even more trouble getting used to, but it was my compensation for feeling like I had to wear a skirt whenever I went into a prison to conduct an investigation. This was what "dressed up" and "professional" meant in Wisconsin in the early 1990s, and it was probably the most alienating aspect of the job for me.

In a huge state agency of around five thousand people, I did not imagine that important people in the central office would have noticed me in my Friday Doc Martens, offering chipper reports from my ground-floor cubicle on weekend outings with Rachel.⁶¹ That was naive—a fact I realized only after Rachel and I registered as domestic partners with the City of Madison. This was a relatively recent innovation, and a Milwaukee newspaper called to ask if they could feature us in a story about Madison's domestic partner ordinance. We were thrilled and happily complied. After the story ran, with several large photographs of us, then state (and now US) senator Tammy Baldwin called Rachel at her office to thank her for being visible. I didn't expect that anyone at my job would even see the story, and initially that seemed to be the case. Some days later—maybe a week?—I was finishing a report on an investigation concerning a probation and parole officer. My boss reviewed it and asked if I would run it up to the director of probation and parole. I had never met this high-ranking official, nor ventured anywhere near his office on one of the top floors of the building. He was away, and so was his secretary, so I walked into his office, intending to place the document on his chair. It was then that I saw that the *only* thing on the director's desk was the clipping of the story from the Milwaukee newspaper featuring Rachel and me.

This discovery was chilling. Because it was days after the story had run, it didn't seem like the clipping had just casually landed on this man's desk. But what did it mean? Had the article been passed around among the agency's leadership? Sent to the head of probation and parole by the Milwaukee office? I never found out, but in retrospect I don't think I was ever in danger of losing my job. Wisconsin was one of the only states in the nation at that time that had a gay rights law, although it's relevant to the story that unfolds in the coming chapters that I don't think I knew about that law at the time.⁶² If I had stayed, though, I believe my career options would have been circumscribed and advancement would have been more difficult. My openness as a lesbian was, of course, only part of the difficulty. Around the same time, I started walking home from work with a friendly young man who had been hired at the same time as I had with a very similar background. His job was less demanding than mine, but as he casually let slip one night on our way home, he was making a lot more money than I was.

61. The total number of Wisconsin Department of Corrections employees in 1995–96 was 5,413. Lawrence S. Barish, ed., *State of Wisconsin 1995–1996 Blue Book* (Madison, WI: State Legislative Reference Bureau, 1995–96), 401.

62. State and local civil rights laws tend to underprotect in general. Nan D. Hunter, "Sexuality and Civil Rights: Re-imagining Anti-discrimination Laws," *New York Law School Journal of Human Rights* 17 (2000): 572–73.

Lesbians are never just gay people in their jobs; we are also always women as well. That was it for me at the Department of Corrections.

So I applied to graduate school in history at the University of Wisconsin, and to six or seven other schools just in case. My lack of clear direction as an undergraduate dogged my application process, and only the University of Minnesota admitted me. As a graduate student, the main quandary of my undergraduate years—whether my academic work could fit with an interest in queer life—was one I bracketed. I didn't even consider studying the history of sexuality during the first several years I was in graduate school. By then I had plenty of models of brilliant scholarship in that field: for example, I read George Chauncey's book *Gay New York* in my second quarter at Minnesota. So the question was no longer whether queer history could be serious intellectual work. It obviously could! But my antenna was already up about professional issues, and I ascertained that doing a dissertation in the history of sexuality might be a risky move in terms of my future employment.

I was trained at Minnesota in the history of women and gender—training that is foundational for me, but in a subfield that had already established its legitimacy in the academy. As I began to look about for a dissertation topic, I found myself intrigued by the histories of gender and citizenship that were being produced in the late 1990s and early 2000s by some of the top scholars in the field. Their work was inspiring, but also intimidating. What was left for me to say? I floundered for a distressingly long time without finding my own project. Then I read Linda Kerber's magisterial study of gender and citizenship *No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies*. The last chapter of that book is about the gendered obligation of military service, and in that context Kerber wrote just a couple of sentences about the paradoxes of gay and lesbian citizenship.⁶³ As I read that passage, I immediately sensed that I had found a dissertation topic, and I felt the personal pull of a project that gathered in one place the overriding intellectual concerns about both sexuality and politics that had been with me since college but had until then seemed unassimilable. But I still had to get over my fear of doing a project like this, and that fear kept me even longer from committing. I ultimately decided that a risky dissertation was better than no dissertation, which seemed to be where I was otherwise headed, and I finally got started.

There were a few other bumps along the way. When faculty at Minnesota nominated me for a fellowship from the graduate school, for

63. Linda K. Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 300.

example, the History Department's director of graduate studies wrote in his letter of nomination that projects "as political" as mine "*were not good history*."⁶⁴ After the first campus interview I had, the chair of the search committee called one of my advisers to tell her that I had done well but that no job offer would be forthcoming. The department interviewing me, she explained, thought that I was "a Martian." A Martian? The call was well intentioned, but I remember wondering then if I had made a huge mistake, and if I was, again, simply unemployable. I'm certain the fact that my project engaged the history of the state helped me feel a bit safer; in some sense, it was my own form of covering. I leaned into that even harder when I went back out on the job market the following year, and that probably helped condition the positive response I eventually got. So did changing times. I was incredibly lucky to finish my dissertation just after the Supreme Court struck down sodomy laws in the *Lawrence v. Texas* decision and as states began to legalize gay marriage. It was crystal clear at that moment that LGBT issues were matters of national concern, not trivial or strange. Hiring committees broadened their outlook. There were only a few years between that shift and the financial crisis of 2008, which precipitated the collapse of the academic hiring market, especially in humanities disciplines like history.⁶⁵ But I was fortunate to be on the market during that short, hopeful window, and I was lucky to get a very good job with colleagues who have always recognized me as a person and valued my scholarship. In my academic life, in fact, I ultimately got what I couldn't seem to figure out how to have as a younger person. I was able to be integrated, a whole person, and to "follow the principle," as the European intellectual historian Paul Robinson opined, "that you should write about things that really matter to you."⁶⁶ I could go to work without, as gay liberationists had once lamented, *always having "a piece missing."*⁶⁷

64. I learned of this letter only when the subsequent director of graduate studies called me in to show it to me because she felt I should know it was in my file (emphasis mine).

65. Benjamin Schmidt, "The Humanities Are in Crisis," *Atlantic*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/the-humanities-face-a-crisis-of-confidence/567565/>.

66. Paul Robinson, "Becoming a Gay Historian," in *Becoming Historians*, ed. James M. Banner Jr. and John R. Gillis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 250. On career narratives of lesbian and gay academics more generally, see Toni McNaron, "Poisoned Ivy: Lesbian and Gay Academics from the 1960s through the 1990s," in *Feminist Generations: Life Stories from the Academy*, ed. Hokulani K. Aikau, Karla A. Erickson, and Jennifer L. Pierce (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 67–86.

67. Transcript, folder 14, box 83, Barbara Gittings Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, New York, NY (emphasis mine).

This is not a particularly dramatic career narrative, especially in contrast to some of the stories I heard from my informants about their experiences in prior decades. I think I am probably fairly typical of my age cohort, and also fairly typical of LGBT academics more generally, for whom, as the pioneering anthropologist Esther Newton put it, “scholarly and personal coherence” has been and sometimes still can be a particular hurdle.⁶⁸ But I write this here partly because it’s been on my mind all the years I’ve been working on this project, and perhaps also to make myself vulnerable after so many informants have made themselves vulnerable in front of me. Above all, in the context of professional norms that still evidence some discomfort about or distrust of the “private reasons” we are drawn to an area of study, I want to be clear that *Queer Career* is, for me, a deeply personal book.⁶⁹ I don’t think that fact compromises my ability to ask good historical questions or to interpret evidence carefully, but ultimately readers will decide for themselves.

There are a few other aspects of this study that the reader needs to know about in order to proceed. The first is some explanation of language and scope. Anyone who works in this subfield knows that in some way, the words we employ will always fail us. I mostly use “gay,” “lesbian,” or sometimes “queer” to describe the subjects of this book. These words were used throughout the period I am writing about, although I am aware that “queer” is for some of my subjects a painful word that calls up memories of childhood taunts. The fact that the word was reclaimed by a younger generation and even deemed “subversive” has not fully removed its sting. I use it because it is the one historically accurate referent that applies equally to men and women and captures both the same-sex eroticism and the gender nonconformity that are entwined in many (but not all) of the working lives I try to capture here.⁷⁰

I do not use “LGBT” until the discussion of the very late twentieth century, when that acronym came into general usage. I should be clear as well that transgender experience is only lightly treated in this book. That was not my intention when I began, but I struggled to find enough

68. Esther Newton, *My Butch Career: A Memoir* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 17.

69. *Ibid.*, 114.

70. Siobhan B. Somerville, “Queer,” in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, 2nd ed., ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 203–7.

material to adequately depict this historical experience in relation to the workplace. Yet, while trans men and women populate this study somewhat sparsely, my thinking about gender normativity is deeply indebted to academic trans studies. Moreover, I emphasize transgender work experiences in the epilogue with the hope that future historians may be able to treat this subject more comprehensively than I have here.⁷¹

Next, a “roadmap” for the reader: The book is divided into three parts, each with two chapters. Part 1 is entitled “Gay Labor” and offers an ethnography of gay and lesbian employment in both the “straight” (chapter 1) and the “queer” (chapter 2) work worlds during the early 1950s and 1960s. The bargain of discretion and obliviousness that I have already described as hegemonic for straight jobs did not apply in the low-wage, low-status jobs that often affirmed gay people’s identity in the queer work world, but the boundary between those two realms was quite porous. That permeability mattered: fear of being relegated to the queer work world secured the vulnerability of gay workers in the straight world, making them desirable employees for those employers willing to close their eyes to what may have been in front of them.

Part 2, “Law and Liberation,” examines the 1970s as a fulcrum of change when the bargain of midcentury began to break down. The most significant legal reform for gay employment rights in the twentieth century was the lifting of the ban on gay civil servants in 1975, which in many ways ended the vestiges of the Lavender Scare. That reform, explored in chapter 3, was largely the result of a sustained fight by a government astronomer who was fired from his job in the mid-1950s, refused to go quietly, and then devoted his life to this legal battle. The policy change Frank Kameny eventually won, as he himself recognized, was not as monumental as it is sometimes represented to be, partly because of the continuing use of security clearances against gay people, and even more so because the vast majority of Americans worked in the private sector during these years.

71. Contemporary accounts do exist, such as sociologist Kristen Schilt’s study *Just One of the Guys? Transgender Men and the Persistence of Gender Inequality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Anne Balay, *Semi Queer: Inside the World of Gay, Trans, and Black Truckers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); Michelle Esther O’Brien, “Trans Work: Employment Trajectories, Labour Discipline and Gender Freedom,” in *Transgender Marxism*, ed. Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O’Rourke (London: Pluto, 2021). There is also a rich historical literature on nineteenth-century cross-dressing and its relationship to wage work. Exemplary is Claire Sears, *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015). See also Emily Skidmore, *True Sex: The Lives of Trans Men at the Turn of the 20th Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

Still, Kameny's sustained activism created ripples that helped set the stage for the politics of liberation. Chapter 4 considers the liberationist period outside of government employment, when the emancipatory impulse went beyond individual declarations on the job, however risky, to collective projects to remake the workplace as well. Across the decade, employers responded to gay people's sudden yearning to be seen with bewilderment, and the smattering of municipal ordinances that were passed by liberationists and their allies by the late 1970s did little in practice to guard against growing employer animus. Historians have focused more on the freeing aspect of these years rather than their overall precariousness, but these elements were inextricably intertwined.

Part 3, "Civil Rights in a Neoliberal Age," concerns the 1980s and 1990s. The AIDS era ushered in not just a medical epidemic but a legal one, as gays and lesbians faced an upsurge in employment discrimination as a result of the fear of HIV/AIDS and its strong association with gay people. The epidemic, and the legal needs it created, spurred the rise of gay lawyering, both for solo practitioners and for nonprofit gay legal organizations. Ironically, though, gay rights lawyers probably had the least success in the arena of employment. Eventually growing rights consciousness in the face of continuing state hostility caused gay people to turn from the state to business for protection, and the final chapter examines the quest for gay employment rights inside the corporate sector, as well as that sector's surprising responsiveness to those demands. By century's end, the bargain that had been shattered by liberation and AIDS was not exactly reconstituted, but employers and their gay employees found a new equilibrium during these years that once again positioned the latter as potentially desirable subjects of capitalism.⁷²

The sharp divide between the straight and queer work world that structures part 1 of the manuscript is also present but somewhat less pronounced in parts 2 and 3, as more open expressions of sexuality gradually became somewhat acceptable in the straight world from the 1970s onward. Yet parts 2 and 3 still each maintain a separation between mainstream work cultures (chapters 3 and 6) that were slowly changing, and more alternative "queer" work worlds (taken up in portions of chapters 4 and 5), where work was openly queer, underpaid, and often quite labor intensive. As part of the scope of chapters 4 and 5, I slow down to provide detailed "worksapes" of a few alternative work cultures to highlight the

72. On "the historical specificity of capitalism's investment in formations of sexuality," see Meg Wesling, "Queer Value," *GLQ* 18 (January 2012): 107.

ways that queer people created workplaces for themselves, found profound meaning, and sometimes even formed surrogate families on the job (at a moment when many gay people were alienated from families of origin).⁷³ In chapter 4, for example, my broader exploration of the relationship between gay liberation and work is recounted in my discussion of lesbian feminist attempts to create an alternative economy during these years as represented by lesbian businesses such as Olivia Records and Diana Press. In chapter 5, I devote considerable attention to the work of nurses on the AIDS ward at San Francisco General Hospital as a way of keeping affect and feeling centered in the project, as well as knitting the legal and medical epidemics together (nurses remained especially vulnerable to employment discrimination many years into the AIDS crises). In both chapters, it may seem odd to devote so many pages to these workplaces that each employed a relatively small number of people. Yet Olivia Records and Diana Press illustrate a much broader movement to create a separate lesbian work culture, whose significance has been largely missed in the historiography because it was undercapitalized, operated in the shadows of the mainstream economy, and was dispersed across the landscape in ways that has made it seem less important than it actually was.⁷⁴ For all three “workscapes,” moreover, it’s not the scale of the organization but the scale of the experiment (*the scale of their thinking*) that is important. Moreover, each of these chapters (4 and 5) centrally involves women and helps to rebalance chapters (3 and 6) that focus on national security and corporate sectors and, as a result, tilt more toward men’s employment. It so happens that in subfields that tend to marginalize women’s experience, as LGBT history does, concentrating on women can sometimes create narrative challenges. I hope the reader will nonetheless agree with me that these are worthwhile trade-offs to make.

As concerns the broader temporal movement of the book, decades are generally sloppy containers, and so the six chapters themselves are chronologically staggered, with a slightly overlapping historicity across them. And while most historical narratives foreground change over time, I hope readers will note how much stasis and continuity there is in this story.

73. The concept of the “workspace” is from Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal: Labor’s Deadliest War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

74. But see Alexandra Ketchum, *Ingredients for Revolution: American Feminist Restaurants, Cafés and Coffeehouses, 1972–2022* (Montreal: Concordia University Press, forthcoming); Finn Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Joshua Clark Davis, *From Head Shops to Whole Foods: The Rise and Fall of Activist Entrepreneurs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

The balance of continuity and change has been one of the hardest things to sort out about this project. I have listened to informants talk about the 1950s and 1960s with the feeling that I was hearing about a completely lost world, and simultaneously a sense that the scene was oddly familiar. I recognized, for example, quite a bit of what these informants ascribed to mid-century in my coworkers from the early 1990s. How could both things be true? I hypothesize that it has to do with the fact that enormous cultural change for queer people happened without much in the way of accompanying legal protection.⁷⁵ This fact sets the gay experience sharply apart from the experiences of women or African Americans, for whom these things happened in tandem.⁷⁶ This of course makes the gay experience a particularly useful case for thinking through the question of whether and how civil rights laws matter, an issue that I return to in the epilogue.

One last note: Some readers may question my use of the word “career” in the title of a book that purports to be about working-class as well as professional jobs. I appreciate that potential objection, but to my ear the word contains multitudes. I think, for example, of C. Vann Woodward’s *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* to denote the South’s racialized system of stratification, violence, and oppression.⁷⁷ Writing just a few years after Woodward, the sociologist Howard Becker used “deviant careers” to describe the lifeways of society’s “outsiders.”⁷⁸ Neither usage maps tightly onto what I am up to here, but there are some resonances. Because the

75. In 1979, legal scholar Rhonda Rivera drafted what came to be seen as a truly canonical study of the legal status of gay people at the time. Twenty years later, in 1999, she was asked to update that essay to reflect “progress” in the law. She assessed the forward gains over that span of time as extremely limited. My own view of legal developments over these years accords with Rivera’s. See Rhonda R. Rivera, “Our Straight-Laced Judges: The Legal Position of Homosexuals in the United States,” *Hastings Law Journal* 30 (March 1979): 799–955; Rhonda R. Rivera, “Our Straight-Laced Judges: Twenty Years Later,” *Hastings Law Journal* 50 (1999): 1187–88.

76. I am referring here to the temporal proximity of the African American freedom struggle and women’s liberation to the legal protection achieved by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was initially more responsive to complaints based on race, but by 1969 the agency began to treat complaints based on sex like complaints based on race. Hugh Graham Davis, *The Civil Rights Era: Origins and Development of National Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 211–32; Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity*, 246. On the longer arc of civil rights struggle, see especially Kate Masur, *Until Justice Be Done: America’s First Civil Rights Movement, from the Revolution to Reconstruction* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2021).

77. C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955).

78. Howard Becker, *The Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Free Press, 1963).

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