Queer Career

SEXUALITY AND WORK IN MODERN AMERICA

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CHAPTER ONE

“The Homosexual Does Cope Fairly Successfully with the Straight World”

DEFINING GAY LABOR
AT MIDCENTURY

Historians and sociologists rely on a few, commonly used shorthand phrases to describe conditions for workers in the 1950s and 1960s United States. Sometimes this period is referred to as the “glory years” or a “golden age,” alternatively, as an “age of security.” These phrases all gesture toward the same rosy constellation of factors: a booming postwar economy in which workers offered loyalty to their employers, receiving high wages and benefits as well as job security in return. Sustained growth across this period meant that jobs were easy to get. While white-collar workers benefited the most from postwar prosperity, the working class also experienced a significant rise in living standards in exchange for rejecting shop-floor militancy as a tactic. Both white- and blue-collar working men expected a breadwinner’s wage with which they could support a family, as well as the formation of long-term attachments between employers and

employees and opportunities for advancement plentiful enough “to enable workers to construct orderly and satisfying career narratives.”

From the perspective of gay history, these tropes (whether the “glory years” or an “age of security”) seem seriously off kilter. This is especially true when one considers the shorthand that historians of sexuality have most commonly used to describe these years: namely, “the Lavender Scare.” That term, which has become nearly hegemonic for thinking about gay life in the 1950s and 1960s, refers to the purge of gays and lesbians from the federal government that began in the late 1940s. Modeled after the military’s own witch hunt, it culminated with President Eisenhower’s 1953 executive order that named “sex perversion” as a ground for termination not only from government service but also from private industry for companies that held government contracts. The idea that gay people were so vulnerable to blackmail that their employment might compromise national security was offered as justification for the firing of more than five thousand federal civil servants for homosexuality, as well as the refusal to hire many, many more. Historians now estimate that far more people were fired from the government for homosexuality as “security risks” during this period than for alleged Communist ties.

3. From the perspective of women’s history, the period was also not exactly a glorious “golden age.” The family wage that guaranteed male breadwinners high wages to support families simultaneously cemented women’s position as low-wage workers in secondary labor markets. On the history of the family wage, see especially 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); 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-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 235–59. Nor were these glory years for people of color: “The male-headed household formed the elementary institution of the public-private welfare state,” according to Gabe Winant. “The subjects of this order, the persons it recognized most fully, were the heterosexual white men who held most factory jobs and headed most working-class households. African American men held a real foothold within this world, but it was small, confined, and eroding,” 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), 13.
The methods employed during the witch hunt were extreme—the slightest trace of gender inversion, a roommate’s phone calls at the office, or even a specious tip from a disgruntled coworker could subject federal workers to intrusive scrutiny. Investigators checked credit and police records, interviewed friends and acquaintances extensively, and engaged in direct surveillance, hoping to follow a suspect’s footprints right to a gay bar, bathhouse, or cruising area.\(^6\) In some cases, the post office might even monitor a civil servant’s mail for physique magazines, gay “pen-pal” clubs, or other telltale signs.\(^7\) The FBI reported morals arrests to the Civil Service Commission, which also maintained a database of those fired for homosexuality so they would not be reemployed by other federal agencies.\(^8\) The results were devastating for those who lost jobs—especially for women and African Americans of both sexes. Opportunities for government employment far surpassed anything else available to them, making the likelihood of starting over in the private sector more remote than it was for white men. One woman economist “with New York-type ambition” was, for example, devastated by her removal from the Treasury Department.\(^9\) Another man remembered the lengths that African American gays and lesbians would go to in order to protect their government jobs, even attending parties in male-female pairs and then separating once inside the door. He recalled this strategy as a marked feature of Black gay life in Washington during the years when federal anti-homosexualism was at its height.\(^10\)

Even more generally, the social ecology of the capital city was deeply affected by the gay purges. One woman’s clearest memory of life in Washington during the 1950s was how quiet people were on city buses, afraid to speak to one another.\(^11\) The Lavender Scare also spread beyond Washington as state and local governments began going after state employees, those with professional licenses, and especially university and secondary teachers who were suspected of being homosexual. Large purges were conducted in Florida, Idaho, Iowa, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Texas, Michigan, Oklahoma, New York, and California, among other places.\(^12\)

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Because they were so targeted, teachers and civil servants exhibited the most extreme passing behaviors during these years. People in these types of jobs tended to be more likely to date or even marry another gay person of the opposite sex, to “de-gay” an apartment, or to keep gay life and gay community at a drastic distance.

The brutality of the Lavender Scare is undeniable, but like the “age of security” or the “glory years,” it also misses the mark as a shorthand for this period. One-fifth of the entire American workforce was employed either by the federal government or by private employers who contracted with the government. All those people, most of whom were neither gay nor suspected of being so, had to take loyalty or security oaths. But that leaves four-fifths who were less directly affected. Moreover, these purges were in many ways local events. Only in Washington, DC, was the Lavender Scare all pervasive, and perhaps in the handful of state governments that were similarly overtaken by anti-homosexualism. The work of the Johns Committee in Florida, which led to the removal of untold numbers of secondary teachers and university professors, was for example horrific but also somewhat singular in its duration and scope at the state level.

Precisely because the particular impact of the Lavender Scare (in Washington, DC, and in some states) was so intense, however, the civil service purge has been understandably distorting for historians. Many accounts characterize the relationship between homosexuality and employment at midcentury as one of sharp repression, as a witch hunt or crackdown that sent gay people into deep hiding. This image is not wholly inaccurate, but it is a partial view, applicable primarily to government employees (and some government contractors). Elsewhere, the midcentury employment regime for sex and gender nonconformists is not best understood in terms of episodic crackdowns or dramatic flashpoints, even while those crackdowns did foster an intensifying sense of danger that shaped employment relations everywhere. Away from the heart of the Lavender Scare, however, the manifestations were distinct enough that we might reconceptualize the gay work experience not as something repressed and hidden but rather as a form of labor in the same way one might talk about the
history of women’s work or immigrant labor, for example. This kind of lens is possible: despite constituting “one of the largest, but least studied, minority groups in the work force,” gay labor is not actually an absence or an invisibility.\(^{15}\) It is not something cloaked and veiled that we can never see. Rather it is a kind of presence, perhaps unspeakable but still somewhat knowable, not just to us but also to midcentury Americans, gay and straight, employers, employees, coworkers and colleagues.

That visibility and knowability was especially true in the occupations that make up what I call the “queer work world,” which is considered in the next chapter. These were the stereotypically gay occupations as well as other casual, temporary, low-paid, low-status work, often in the service sector, where gay people clustered in part because they could generally be fairly open. As one man said about these years, “I was always looking for low-paying jobs where I could be myself.”\(^{16}\) Some did not choose to be in this world but were forced into these kinds of jobs after encountering employment difficulties in mainstream occupations. But many other gay people, possibly the majority, actually worked in those mainstream occupations that I designate here as the “straight work world.” For these workers, who are the focus of this chapter, the civil services purges and the related increase in policing of gay life that commenced in the 1950s certainly loomed as a threat.\(^{17}\) At the most extreme, an encounter with the vice squad in a bar or a cruising area could result in a gay man or lesbian losing their position, and an arrest record might make reemployment in a straight job difficult.\(^{18}\)

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18. Police practices varied, but in some locales the morals squad routinely informed the employers of those arrested. John Logan, “You’re Fired! Thousands of Homosexuals in America Face Inward Terror of Hearing Their Employer Say These Two Words,”
The queer and straight worlds of work at midcentury were thus interdependent, not only because gay people moved back and forth between them, but because knowledge of the way they could be banished conditioned behavior on the job for those who maintained a perch in the straight work world. They were not hidden and safe but somewhat exposed and deportable. Their vulnerability made them exploitable in particular ways, and some midcentury employers appreciated and took advantage of their precarity in an age of security. It is at least partly for this reason, I argue, that some employers welcomed the presence of sex and gender nonconformists in mainstream occupations, and why the relationship between employee and employer in these jobs was not usually defined by elaborate hiding by the employee and cluelessness on the part of the employer, but rather by a shared commitment to downplay what the sociologist Erving Goffman called the “evidentness” of stigma.19

Gay workers during these years thus may have been as much desired as they were disavowed. Capital, abetted by law, “produces subjects accommodated to its own needs.”20 This was a vulnerable and intimidated work force for whom job loss stood as the greatest fear. And yet, as sociologists Martin Weinberg and Colin Williams concluded of this period, “the homosexual does cope fairly successfully with the straight world.”21 The phrase “coping fairly well” of course sets low expectations; it says surviving rather than thriving. Not incidentally, it also offers a useful guiding precept for exploring gay life inside mainstream occupations during the American economy’s glory years. This then may finally be a useful shorthand for the period.

Mattachine Review 2 (June 1956): 27–29. One reader of the Mattachine Review elaborated that “they [the police] even go to the places where they [the arrested] are employed and call them off the job... They then are held as long as the police desire to hold them and generally cost the respective employee his job (which the police clearly envision because of their actions),” “Readers Write,” Mattachine Review 7 (July 1961): 27. Sometimes police did not directly report arrests but newspapers reported on the arrest, which might also result in job loss. In another instance, a man was recognized by the court attendant who then “had me fired from a good job.” Letter from “Mr. B., Philadelphia,” one 2 (June 1963): 30.

19. Some employers “welcomed” while others only tolerated queer employees. The point here is less about the degree of toleration or hostility among midcentury employers than that they benefitted from the subordinate position of queer workers irrespective of their own attitudes. On “evidentness,” see Erving Goffman, Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 48.


21. Martin S. Weinberg and Colin J. Williams, Male Homosexuals: Their Problems and Adaptations (New York: Penguin, 1975), 126 (emphasis mine). While the publication date of this study is 1975, the data for the US portion of the book (which also covers the Netherlands and Denmark) is from the mid-to-late 1960s (see pp. 47 and 65).
What was the landscape of gay labor? One of the challenges of attempting something of a bird’s-eye view of gay people’s work experiences across the 1950s and 1960s, rather than focusing in on a single occupation or industry, is that individuals’ experiences on the job—their points of entry into a position, their coping strategies once there, ambitions thwarted or realized—all varied somewhat. That’s true even within the crude division between a straight work world and a queer one made in this chapter and the next. Still, in the aggregate certain patterns are clear, and it’s possible to sketch a composite portrait drawn from archival records and published sources, as well as numerous interviews I conducted with the cohort born in the 1930s and early 1940s. Some members of that group, who entered the labor market during the 1950s and early 1960s, interestingly set themselves apart from the generation that preceded them. More than one informant noted, for example, that they struggled especially with men born in the 1910s and 1920s “who were so gay” that “it got in the way of their work.” One man born in the 1930s remembered thinking of this older generation: “why can’t they be more serious?” This man’s “seriousness” was undoubtedly conditioned by his own experience of being entrapped by the vice squad in a public restroom in New Orleans and consequently kicked out of the military as a very young man, and then enduring a long stint in temporary jobs in San Francisco, before working his way back toward a straight job. Being removed from the military for homosexuality usually brought substantial vocational derailment, perhaps even more so for women with their very limited opportunities for employment during these years. One young woman, for example, was kicked out of the Marine Corps for homosexual tendencies in the mid-1950s. Before she was discharged, she learned she had placed third out of three hundred women for entry into air traffic school. She later reflected that it had taken her years to understand “what was taken from me.” Being sent home from college for homosexuality could be as significant a setback. One college student, called in by the dean of women on suspicion of lesbianism, remembered feeling terrified. “I was counting on a college degree,” she recalled. “I was a lesbian. I wasn’t going to get married. No one was going to support me.”

23. Interview subject 70, Santa Rosa, CA, 2011.
24. Interview subject 101, Houston, TX, 2011.
For those who made it through college or a tour of duty without being investigated, the career trajectory was still marked from the beginning for those who understood themselves as either sex or gender variants during these years. Coming to terms with their homosexuality, some reported, could be an emotional barrier to focusing on a career. One Florida man described the experience of “going crazy” and not being able to finish their education as rather common among gay men of his generation. The homophile activist Barbara Gittings ascribed her flunking out of Northwestern University after her first year to a similar dynamic. A contemporary of Gittings reported that she left her graduate program after a year because “she was too anxious about who she was to focus on studying.” Several others reported believing that “a homosexual must not excel”: “shame kept them from focusing on a career,” and they had “no clear direction.”

For some women in particular, the barriers might be less psychological than purely economic. Sexist hiring practices and low wages literally kept lesbians trapped in marriages to men. Sources of advice were

26. One midcentury study showed that the greatest number of students seeking personal adjustment counseling were those who had occupational interests “opposed to those most culturally acceptable for their sex”: young men who were drawn to nursing, for example, or young women whose ambition made them feel restless inside traditional women’s occupations. Samuel Osipow and James Gold, “Personal Adjustment and Career Development,” Journal of Counseling Psychology 8 (1968): 442–43. The term “sex variant” was popularized by the sexologist George Henry in Sex Variants: A Study of Homosexual Patterns (New York: Hoeber, 1941). The term continued to be used into midcentury and encompassed not only those with same-sex erotic desires but sometimes gender nonconformists as well. It was also a term queer people used to describe themselves. “Because the term variance offered an interpretive fluidity and openness,” the historian Jennifer Terry has explained, “it was appealing to so-called sex variants themselves, especially when compared to the more rigid belief that sexual inverted or homosexuals were of an entirely different and inferior order.” Jennifer Terry, An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 221. On midcentury uses of the term variant, see, for example, an editorial that described the homophile publication one as aiding “in the social integration of the sexual variant.” Lyn Pedersen, ONE 6 (May 1, 1958): 4.

27. Interview subject 46, Atlanta, GA, 2012.


29. Faderman, Gay Revolution, 140.


also extremely limited. One woman who grew up in the 1930s and 1940s remembered being given a copy of *The Well of Loneliness*, the 1928 lesbian novel, by her PE teacher, who told her she should also be a gym teacher.³² For women, few other tracks were even available. “I just couldn’t see past teaching,” said one woman.³³ Often the advice offered—to both sexes—was about what *not* to be. “I wanted to be a nurse,” one man admitted, “but I was told that was for gays, so I did something else.”³⁴ Another man who was interviewing for a teaching position was correctly “read” by the school superintendent, who told him that he couldn’t be in such close proximity to students and should be a librarian instead. At that point, the aspiring teacher had never even touched another man. “Being gay put up roadblocks,” he said: “Don’t be this, and don’t be that.”³⁵

Some of those roadblocks came from the growth of personnel and human resource offices at midcentury and the more elaborate screening methods they utilized. To be clear, personnel officers were not doing the deep detective work of their counterparts in the military and the civil service; they were predominantly interested in screening out only the “obvious types” who might embarrass the company.³⁶ An unconventional gender presentation, for example, might lead one’s resume to be flagged with the letters “HCF,” short for “high class fairy.”³⁷ An address in a Bohemian part of town or too much time already logged in unconventional work settings also raised flags. “Bill, just one more question before you leave,” one would-be salesman was asked in 1965. “Because you have been in summer theatre work, I think I should ask it. Are you inclined to be a homosexual?”³⁸ Besides blocking

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³². Interview subject 71, Sebastopol, CA, 2011.
³⁴. Comment from an audience member during a talk at Services and Advocacy to Gay Elders (SAGE), New York, NY, 2012.
³⁵. Interview subject 34, New York, NY, 2012. Another man who had a homosexual incident in his background was steered by a vocational counselor in 1960 away from teaching toward barbering. “Homosexual Denied Employment,” 1964, folder 16, box 1063, Records of the American Civil Liberties Union, Seeley Mudd Library, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ.
employment altogether, the personnel office could prevent advancement to “straight” work within a single firm. “I was employed by a company with a retail and a wholesale operation,” one man explained. The retail side of the business was gay and poorly paid. The wholesale side was straight and better remunerated. “I had been assigned to retail work and had done very well, more than doubling the record of any other retail person. I wanted to change to the wholesale section because it offered greater opportunity for money and advancement. [But] when I asked about a transfer I was told that . . . I was better suited to retail.”

Despite these sentries along the border that separated the queer and straight worlds of work, many pursued a straight job during these years. As with the retail salesman trying to move to wholesale, some wanted to be there because of the pay and respectability and sometimes to protect the “investments” they had already made in “education, training, and vocational development.” But it was also a decision to navigate lifelong risk. They hedged their bets in part by sharing information about where to work. Acquaintances directed one man toward “friendly” companies in the financial district in San Francisco where you certainly “would not say you were gay, you would not do anything overt, but you probably would not be fired if anyone found out.” Sexuality there was merely “background noise.” The more general precepts, applicable in almost any locale, were also well known, partly because they were shared widely through the homophile press. For starters, job applicants should not be too forthcoming about problems in one’s background. As the employment service of the Mattachine Society, one of the earliest gay rights organizations, cautioned: “Arrive at answers that will fit the need and still not provide more information than is required.” Beyond that, most understood that

41. Interview subject 131, interview conducted via telephone, 2015.
acquiring and retaining jobs in the private sector was far easier than for jobs in the public sector.\textsuperscript{43} And positions in large corporations, with a culture of anonymity, could be easier to negotiate than those in the midsize, more family-oriented ones.\textsuperscript{44} Most also knew that teaching was one of the riskiest occupations—but one that many lesbians pursued anyway because it, along with other public-sector employment, offered the highest pay to women. “Wouldn’t they be [safer] in private industry?” the lesbian activists and pioneers Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin queried of lesbians in public employment, before answering their own question: “Not all women are satisfied with mediocre jobs at mediocre pay.”\textsuperscript{45}

If government jobs entailed the greatest risk—and any occupation that required licensing by the government or bonding could also be dangerous—self-employment was by far the safest.\textsuperscript{46} It’s no accident that so many of the early homophiles (and later liberationists) worked for themselves.\textsuperscript{47} But if self-employment was impossible, then the next best option was to find a job where one spent a lot of time alone. One woman said that the solitary nature of the job was what drew her to a position delivering mail.\textsuperscript{48} Another saw the same advantage in accepting employment as a bookkeeper.\textsuperscript{49} Jobs that involved a lot of travel could have nearly the same effect, in that those who were out on the road would be less closely observed by coworkers.\textsuperscript{50} Travel had the added benefit of providing opportunities to explore a city’s gay scene after hours in a way that would be more difficult closer to home. The historian Nick Syrett has

\textsuperscript{43} Weinberg and Williams, \textit{Male Homosexuals}, 323.
\textsuperscript{44} Interview subject 69, San Francisco, CA, 2011. Some had a different take on the impact of business size, however. Dorr Legg of the homophile organization one warned a job seeker to avoid the “big outfits. These customarily are staffed by devising all manner of probing application forms. A smaller firm, especially one that is rather new, quite often will be less fussy and may not even ask the sort of questions which bring on troubles.” Letter to Dear Friend, January 5, 1970, folder 16, box 90, Social Service Division and Satellite Offices Records, one, Inc. Records, One National Gay and Lesbian Archives.
\textsuperscript{45} Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, \textit{Lesbian/Woman} (San Francisco: Glide, 1972), 196.
\textsuperscript{46} JK to the President, June 1, 1966, Correspondence Files, folder 11, box 42, one, Inc. Records; case intake form, October 29, 1962, Social Sciences Division, folder 10, box 90, one, Inc. Records.
\textsuperscript{47} Faderman, \textit{Gay Revolution}, 86, 141, 213, 218. Also noteworthy, one scholar “interviewed 55 gays and lesbians who were leaders in the gay and lesbian movement. All, it turned out, were self-employed or owned their own businesses.” Marny Hall (citing earlier research by Russo), “The Lesbian Corporate Experience,” \textit{Journal of Homosexuality} 12, nos. 3–4 (1986): 62.
\textsuperscript{48} Interview subject 103, Houston TX, 2013.
\textsuperscript{49} Interview subject 23, New York, NY, 2012.
documented, for example, the lives of married midwestern businessmen who created an erotic queer world for themselves while traveling on business. Business travel held a similar allure for those who were beginning to explore transgender identity. One executive, who later transitioned to female but was living as a man at the time, remembered traveling during these years with lingerie in her suitcase wrapped like a present for her wife. She could experiment with female dress in the privacy of her hotel room in a way that was at that moment still impossible at home.

Those who did not have the luxury of working by themselves, or using travel to create a buffer, followed strict codes of behavior on the job. Gays occasionally constructed elaborate fronts; one individual actually wrote to a homophile organization to ask if they had a referral service for gay men who needed female dates for office parties. Yet, far less emphasis was placed on appearing straight than on not being overtly homosexual. Those who didn’t seem clearly one or the other circled around one another carefully, quietly gathering evidence. If “you suspected someone was gay,” one man elaborated, “you might approach.” One might then have lunch, begin to “develop a quiet friendship,” and send out subtle feelers, like mentioning a gay bar to see if there was a response. “These were pretty safe things to do, because straights didn’t know about these bars,” he recalled. But “there was also an unspoken agreement about how to behave.” “It was very business-like. You used a low voice.”

Once past the exploratory stages, workplace friendships that did develop often required cover. A group of lesbian teachers at a newly established school started a cheerleading squad and a drama club. If anyone from the school saw them together at work, or in town, their colleagues would assume they were meeting about the squad or the club. “It gave us a reason to be together.” Protective codes of behavior extended from the workplace to other public spaces. The writer Marijane Meaker was at a Greenwich Village bar with four other lesbians one night when the television producer David Susskind came in with his female assistant. “We all


52. Interview subject 106, interview conducted via telephone, 2015. I use female pronouns here to affirm this woman’s authentic gender identity even though it conflicts with her actual presentation when this episode occurred.

53. JF to one, Inc., December 11, 1968, Social Service Division, folder 14, box 90, one, Inc. Records.


55. Interview subject 90, Provincetown, MA, 2011.
knew Jackie,” Meaker recalled. One of the women at Meaker’s table had “had an affair with her, and I’d joined her table at gay bars many times.” Nevertheless, “none of us looked their way. Mum was the word in situations like that, always.”

Wherever a person found themselves along that spectrum of occupational risk, getting by in the straight work world also meant using gay networks when they were available and when it was safe. Early homophile organizations created employment bureaus, and business owners occasionally wrote in with offers to hire those who’d lost jobs. The Mattachine’s employment service reported being hampered because some gay employers were reluctant to take the risk, but employment services made the transaction safer for both parties by agreeing to never mention “homosexuality” when the contact was made and to practice discretion. Even as they sometimes tiptoed, these services were merely formalizing a more general instinct. Gays often “tend to hire other gays as employees, either through friendship connections or due to sympathy for gays generally,” one study reported. “An obvious consequence of this process is that gays may tend to be clustered, not only in certain lines of work but within certain firms.”

That finding seemed to hold not only in the white-collar office but in blue-collar settings as well. “Believe it or not,” a Mr. T. wrote to a homophile magazine in 1964, “We have a gay construction crew. The operator is an Italian fellow who . . . employs about 20 men . . . The guys are old and young, black and white.” As Mr. T.’s comment suggests,

56. Marijane Meaker, Highsmith: A Romance of the 1950s (San Francisco: Cleis, 2003), 106.
58. See “SIR’s Gay Jobs Bureau,” Vector 8 (October 1972): 21. Early gay activist Dick Leitsch reported that “the Mattachine Society ran into that sort of reverse discrimination a few years ago when we tried to set up an employment service. Many gay men in hiring positions said, ‘I’m the only homosexual in my company. If I bring in another one, he might start camping or otherwise give me away. I can’t take chances.’” Leitsch quoted in “Playboy Panel Discussion: Homosexuality,” Playboy, April 1971, 180. More ominously, “when a homosexual employee runs up against an employer who is a latent or repressed homosexual, a vicious situation can ensue about which nothing much can be done.” “Job Hunting Doesn’t Need to Be a Problem,” Ladder 1 (March 1957): 6.
60. Mr. T. to Letters, one 12 (December 1964): 28.
gay networks could be interracial. Indeed, because of the access to white social capital that these connections provided, African Americans sometimes identified homosexuality as a *positive* factor in furthering a career during these years. Along with jobs, informal training, advice, and mentoring were provided across not only race but class lines, so the movement between queer and straight work worlds entailed not only downward but occasionally upward mobility. “Thus,” one sexologist observed in 1966, “a slum urchin may through a series of partners or patrons be taught a trade or even graduate to a white-collar job.” Gay employment networks, it should be said, were rarely cross-gender, and women in general were less likely to be in positions to help one another. But that happened too, for example, in the case of teachers being able to place friends or partners in their school.

Gay networks could, of course, backfire, placing people in jeopardy. One man was asked by his boss to hire a project manager, and he tried to do it through a gay contact at a mainstream employment agency. When the prospective hire came to the interview wearing a white puffy pirate shirt with a pink scarf (this was the mid-1960s), this man decided he was taking a risk he should not be taking. Another man tried to get his effeminate roommate a job in his financial services company; his roommate was not hired, and then he was fired himself. One also had to be careful with existing coworkers, to avoid the borderline cases who themselves had only a tenuous perch in the straight work world. To protect their employment, gays could, in fact, be very cool to one another. One man recalled running into a colleague at a gay bar who had steadfastly refused to pick up on his signals in the office, ignoring the many hints he dropped. “Don’t you ever tell anyone that you saw me here,” the coworker implored.

Fear of job loss could alienate gay people from others like them in the workplace, but it also shaped behavior out in the world. Some only participated in

61. Alan P. Bell and Martin S. Weinberg, *Homosexualities: A Study of Diversity among Men and Women* (New York: Touchstone, 1978), 148. (Research for this work was conducted in the 1960s; see p. 9.)
63. Interview subject 71 and interview subject 72, Sebastopol, CA, 2011.
64. Interview subject 83, Boston, MA, 2011.
the gay world guardedly. Men were more likely than women to risk venturing into a gay bar or restaurant, but they often didn’t talk very openly when they were there. “You got a first name . . . never asked anybody what they did,” remembered one pharmacist of these years. Successful men with a lot to lose were, in fact, far more likely to go to a public restroom for a sexual encounter than to the bar; if questioned, their presence could always be excused by saying they had just wandered in to use the facilities. Notably, one San Francisco resident observed that for men looking for “hanky panky,” the most likely destinations were restrooms in the financial district that presumably filled a need for businessmen who might not venture out to gayer areas of town like North Beach, the Tenderloin, or South of Market.

Evidence suggests that lesbians often felt they had to be even more careful. Some crossed state lines to patronize gay bars, and “even so you left as much ID as you could at home. Maybe you hid your driver’s license in your bra.” The lesbian clientele at the bars comprised “a higher preponderance of secretaries” than teachers or other professionals. The latter groups tended to socialize in private, often with women who had as much to lose as they did. One woman described her rules for hosting parties during these years: Only those who were in jobs they would have lost immediately “would get into this house. . . . So school teachers and military officers” came. More strikingly, there were even some lesbians who would not acknowledge they were homosexual even to the other lesbian couples in their social circles. “We could have lost our jobs,” one said, explaining her reticence to say the word “lesbian” or “homosexual” out loud. “We needed to make money.” The one silver lining for lesbians was that


70. Interview subject 90, Provincetown, MA, 2011.

71. Interview with Bill Plath, conducted by Paul Gabriel, 1997, Oral History Project 97–24, GLBT Historical Society of Northern California. Internal Revenue Service auditor Charlotte Coleman was one exception. Her friends had warned her that she had a good job and shouldn’t go to the bars. But “she needed to go.” She was spotted in the bars, and “that’s how the IRS got me.” She was, she remembered, “crushed when I lost my job.” She later became a bar owner in San Francisco. Interview with Charlotte Coleman, conducted by Paul Gabriel, 1997, Oral History Project, 97–023, GLBT Historical Society of Northern California.

72. D. Johnson, Lavender Scare, 152.

73. Interview subject 103, Houston, TX, 2013; interview subject 104, Edison, NJ, 2014. See also J. Sears, Lonely Hunters, 106.
their overall economic oppression as women gave them cover for living together. One informant remembered how, when he was growing up in Washington state, the two women librarians in his town lived together without attracting suspicion. The town’s gay male teacher was, by contrast, “alone and forlorn.” Similarly, women editors in New York could easily share an apartment; male editors might each take an apartment in the same building, but they would not live together.

Yet, in general, for men and women alike, vocational achievement often carried with it a profound loneliness. One woman with her own advertising business carefully avoided patronizing gay establishments or “having anything to do with the gay scene” because it might hurt her business. Only years later did she finally allow herself to appear in a publicly gay space for the memorial service of a prominent New York City public official, which was held at NYU in Greenwich Village. As she took her seat, “it hit me that for the first time in my life, I was in a room full of gay people,” she recalled. “I was absolutely overwhelmed with longing.”

Alienation also characterized relationships with straight coworkers. Most gays kept socializing with coworkers to a minimum during the 1950s and 1960s. “You can’t get too close to people at work,” one woman said. “It gets too complicated. You start going out and they want to know too much about you.” “We all knew where the boundaries were,” said another woman who began teaching in a small town in rural Maryland in the mid-1960s but lived and socialized with a circle of lesbian teachers in northern Virginia. She remembered cording off her job from the rest of her life; she rarely ventured out into the community she worked in, or made an effort to know the local families.

The need to create a buffer between one’s work and one’s gay life not only was isolating but could hurt one’s prospects on the job. As one sociologist observed, “When career advancement depends on informal contacts, it may be negatively affected because these informal links are severed.” The lesbian magazine the Ladder declared it “sad but true” that “promotions go

74. Interview subject 87, Cambridge, MA, 2011.
75. Interview subject 138, interview conducted via telephone, 2016.
78. Interview subject 90, Provincetown, MA, 2011.
more readily to the ‘good mixers’ and we are therefore at a disadvantage.”^{80}

Indeed, while gays operating within the straight world were anxious about being fired, many were also resigned to being held back.\^{81}

The straight world of work was a world of severely curbed ambition—this was one of its most pronounced characteristics. “Once you were in a job where you felt accepted and safe,” one man recounted, “you would not push up the ladder. Why risk it? People who were not gay took chances I didn’t feel I could.”^{82} In those years, sheltering in place was a common survival strategy. Another man whose homosexuality became known to the airline he worked for realized then that he would never become a sales representative, a promotion he had hoped for. “I just adjusted my expectations,” he said, settling into his job in customer service, grateful not to have been fired. The president of the University of Florida, who was a family friend, at one point asked this man if he didn’t want a better job. The customer service representative responded that he was not a “big achiever” like his brother, but later he remembered that “it made me feel bad to say that because I [did want] more.” He admitted that, as a gay man, “I didn’t feel like I could have more.”^{83}

That clear sense of limits even shaped the aspirations of those who were, apart from their sexuality, quite privileged. Dr. Howard Brown, who later became one of the founders of the first nationwide gay rights organization (the National Gay Task Force), remembered thinking for a long time that homosexuals could not be doctors.\^{84} Another man said that he could imagine himself a doctor, “but never chief of surgery.” For one thing, he would not have a wife to go to cocktail parties with.\^{85} Many gay men did of course marry during these years. Relatively few of these decisions were exclusively about work, but for a subset of professionals they occasionally were. One New York City advertising executive, for example, was poised to become a named partner of a thriving agency in the mid-1960s. He was

82. Interview subject 69, San Francisco, CA, 2011.
83. Interview subject 46, Atlanta, GA, 2011. Another man, who had been fired from his job, also adjusted his expectations. “You find out you shouldn’t have been there,” he said, explaining his mental state in the aftermath. “The place you were fired from wasn’t the right place for you.” Interview subject 38, New York, NY, 2011.
85. Interview subject 70, Santa Rosa, CA, 2011.
living a gay life in Greenwich Village at the time. The existing partners said there was just one condition: he had to get married. He agreed; and his future partners used a headhunter to find him a wife, who was herself a VP at a rival advertising agency.\textsuperscript{86} Marriage was also explicitly part of the career calculus of a publisher who explained his decision to marry during these years as inseparable from his career ambition. Heterosexual marriage, he elaborated, like putting on a tie every day and getting the early train to the office, was “part of a package.”\textsuperscript{87} Those ideas, moreover, were broadly enough imprinted that many gays during these years internalized an opposition between “being queer” and “being something.”\textsuperscript{88}

Marriage and ambition of course were inversely coded for women, but even for single women, career options were still very limited. Most did not imagine themselves as doctors, much less as chiefs of surgery. As late as the 1970s, even after occupations had begun to open somewhat under the pressure of the women’s liberation movement, 70 percent of all women still worked in just four fields: teaching, nursing, social work, and as secretaries.\textsuperscript{89} Nonetheless, many lesbians were, as a pair of sociologists concluded in the 1960s, “seriously committed to work.”\textsuperscript{90} That commitment was spoken in different registers by working-class and middle-class women, but it was palpable for both. So, for example, the writer Joan Nestle remembered of these years that “it was always working-class clear to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{86} Interview subject 86, Cambridge, MA, 2011.
\item \textsuperscript{87} Interview subject 42, New York, NY, 2011. See also letter to \textit{one} from Mr. T., a married lawyer in Cleveland who was the lover of another married man: “We do not hate our wives, on the contrary, we are fond of them. But we are not about to fight the world and jeopardize our jobs.” Letter to the Editors, \textit{one} 10 (October 1962): 30. Lesbians also married during these years, sometimes owing to the lack of good economic options, and sometimes as a more deliberately protective move. One lesbian lawyer, for example, married a male friend when she found herself being investigated by the state bar association for homosexuality, “to throw investigators off track.” Case intake form, August 11, 1960, Social Service Division, folder 7, box 90, \textit{one}, Inc. Records. On the history of lesbians in heterosexual marriages, see Lauren Gutterman, \textit{Her Neighbor’s Wife: A History of Lesbian Desire within Marriage} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).
\item \textsuperscript{88} This theme runs through the annual reports of the George Henry Foundation. They can be found in folders 147–48, box 13, Foster Gunnison Papers. This notion that if you were gay, you couldn’t “become anything” was also a theme in many of the interviews I conducted with those who grew up during these years.
\item \textsuperscript{90} Simon and Gagnon, “Lesbians,” 270.
\end{itemize}
me that I had to earn my living in a very concrete way to make my erotic survival possible.” About her entry into working world, the historian Lillian Faderman similarly observed that “the more satisfying women were to me, the more important it was for me to prepare for a career since I was forever closing the option—apparently so prized by other women—of being supported by a husband.”

Yet this association between lesbians and workplace ambition was, as one 1968 study noted, a problem for “all women who took work seriously.” The career woman “was defined by many of the stereotypical characteristics that are found in the stereotype of the lesbian.” One remarkable midcentury study even rated career women low on a scale for heterosexuality, opining that they worked in order to avoid sexual relationships with men. The way that ambitious professional women and lesbians were considered overlapping types, however, sometimes assisted younger women looking for mentors in both career and personal matters. One student at the University of Miami, for example, got involved with the dean of women’s office in the mid-1960s. She and a friend were fascinated by a national gathering of women deans held at their university. In observing the way the deans interacted, “it seemed . . . that there was an attraction between them—but, of course, they were trying not to make it obvious to [us,]” this student remembered. “Georgia and I, who were starved for role models of professional women, picked up on it.” Was it the deans’ professional achievement or the erotic energy between them that was so exciting to these two college students? It seems likely it was the way they were intertwined, giving them hopes for an independent and erotically charged future at great variance with the feminine mystique on offer to so many of their peers.

For this set of professional women, managing one’s appearance was as important as concealing emotional ties to other women. One woman

94. John H. Gagnon and William Simon, Sexual Conduct (Chicago: Aldine, 1973), 203. This volume was a lightly revised version of their 1967 study “The Lesbians: A Preliminary Overview.”
96. J. Sears, Lonely Hunters, 104.
remembered that even women who “were drill sergeants would come striding down the hallway wearing heels and little button earrings.”\(^9\) The navy-blue suits and pumps were “as much a requisite uniform as butch and femme dress in the gay bars. It was crucial in the middle-class lesbian subculture to behave with sufficient, though never excessive, femininity.”\(^9\)

It was also advisable for single career women to have a script ready to narrate the chance circumstances that left them “married” to the company. “I expected to be raising a family,” one female executive said to a journalist in 1960. “Things didn’t work out that way. I took to the bank, and the bank took to me.”\(^10\)

If deftly handled, being “read” as a career woman during these years—as long as one was not seen as overly “masculine” or “driving”—could have benefits.\(^11\) After all, many employers dreaded training young women only to see them abandon their jobs for marriage and family. This assumption sometimes gave women who were perceived as permanently single an advantage over women whose marital prospects were not yet regarded as exhausted.\(^12\) For this reason, one woman who was frustrated at being passed over for promotion by men at her firm in the mid-1960s considered telling her boss she was a lesbian. She worried about the firm’s reaction, though, and eventually decided against it.\(^13\)

So lesbians worked hard for the company but simultaneously kept their own aspirations in check. Outside of the family wage economy, lesbians’ economic position was in some ways different from that of other women, but they were also ordinary, facing the same constraints and obstacles as other women workers. Many informants reported, for example, being hemmed in by the same kind of harassment, limited job opportunities, and low pay that also hampered their heterosexual coworkers. That lesbians were simultaneously uniquely vulnerable and also exploited in ways that would be familiar to all women is illustrated by the story of one woman who was purged from the Department of Commerce in the late 1950s. Years later, she remembered how that event conditioned her response to unwanted

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advances from “executives bored with their wives.” So, she remembered, she “played that game,” thinking “I don’t want to be fired again. I don’t want to lose what I have.” Other lesbians contended that the struggles of women were fundamentally their struggles. As one woman wrote in 1968 to the homophile activist Foster Gunnison, “What has held me back all my life is being a woman.” It’s hardly surprising, then, that the lesbian deans of women at the University of Miami schooled their young charges not on how to handle their erotic interest in other women, but on how to deal with the pervasive sexism ahead: “One dean was very quick to point out that she had the same responsibility as the dean of men, and yet her salary and influence were less,” one remembered. “Their advice to us was to strive to be the most polished, poised, and highly educated professional you can possibly be, because the higher your level of education, the more likely you are to overcome some of these disparities.”

The Ladder, the publication of the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), the early lesbian rights organization founded a few years after the Mattachine, read a lot like any other liberal feminist periodical from the mid-to-late 1960s. The magazine’s editor emphasized the “economic side,” noting that the concern of the Daughters was “no longer with homosexuality exclusively as it was with the problems of women in a male dominated society.” The DOB president also stressed their differing economic positions in distinguishing the interests of lesbians and gay men by the late 1960s. What mattered most to gay men was police harassment and “the legal proscription of sexual practices, and for a relatively few the problem of disproportionate penalties for acts of questionable taste such as evolve from solicitations, wash room sex acts, and transsexual attire.” What mattered most to lesbians, by contrast, was “job security and career advancement.”

104. Interview with Madeleine Tress, conducted by Len Evans, 1983, box 1, Len Evans Papers, GLBT Historical Society of Northern California.
105. Rita LaPorte to Foster Gunnison, November 13, 1968, in Daughters of Bilitis Correspondence, folder 97, box 10, Foster Gunnison Papers.
106. J. Sears, Lonely Hunters, 104.
The fact that lesbian issues on the job overlapped so much with issues faced by all women has led to a common refrain, then and now, that gay men had it “worse” on the job than lesbians did. The treatment of gay men after all appears to have been more distinct from that of heterosexual men than the treatment of lesbians was from that of heterosexual women. But closer scrutiny suggests that gay men may not have had a harder time in their workplaces than lesbians. It is telling that lesbians clearly had a “greater instinct for self-preservation” than gay men, that their practice of discretion was far more pronounced.\footnote{A problem we lesbians have that the guys don’t is our inordinate fear of discovery,” the activist Rita LaPorte wrote in 1968. “I have met lesbians who didn’t dare breathe a word even to me that they were such [and] I attribute [that] to the fact that it is still a man’s world . . . and a tough uphill struggle . . . to get somewhere.”} The need for discretion was likely exacerbated by the fact that the best employment options for women were in the public sector, which was far more dangerous during these years than the private sector. Even as white-collar jobs in the private sector where beginning to open up for women during these years, men’s employment options were still far greater.\footnote{“Gay men sure did move up quick as nurses,” one woman recalled. And if a gay man was fired, he had better options to find another job than a lesbian would. He also was more likely to have money in the bank to cover his setback, and if he was dependent on a lover during a long period of unemployment, then he was dependent on another male wage earner. Even though men were certainly careful at

\footnote{Rita LaPorte to Barbara Gittings, August 1, 1968, folder 1, box 4, Frank Kameny Papers, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.}
\footnote{Interview subject 29, New York, NY, 2013. Another remembered that in her job with the airlines, “the gay guy made twice what I did.” Interview subject 94, interview conducted via telephone, 2013.}
work, there was no lesbian equivalent to gay men “dropping a hairpin” (to subtly announce themselves to other gay men); this was a mode of expression that was not available to most women.\textsuperscript{116} The clear exception was the butch lesbian in blue-collar work, but she still did a man’s job for a woman’s wage. The gay men standing next to her on the assembly line made more money. None of this is to deny that gay men faced difficult circumstances, but the notion that they had it “worse” than lesbians is a racialized and gendered assertion that these workers couldn’t access their regular privilege as (presumably white) men. It’s also certain, as the economist Julie Matthaei has noted, that occupational segregation by sex did not just benefit married men, whose wives were held in low-wage jobs and therefore limited in their ability to leave a marriage. Unmarried men, including gay men, were also indirect beneficiaries of occupational segregation as well as direct beneficiaries of “women’s low wage provision of services to business.”\textsuperscript{117}

Matthaei’s shrewd analysis prompts a shift of attention from this (thus far) mostly experiential account of the way gay men and lesbians navigated on their jobs—how they began their working lives, intuited or shared tacit knowledge, managed risks, connected to or kept their distance from a gay world—toward more structural questions about gay labor and the way it fit into the schema of midcentury employment relations. Most obviously, in between the poles of intensified policing of the gay leisure world and the ravages of the Lavender Scare, an extremely vulnerable workforce made its way every day to the office, the hospital, the factory, and the school. Gay people were vulnerable because, despite the assumed salience of the idea of the “closet,” many were at least somewhat visible to employers and bosses.\textsuperscript{118}

\textsuperscript{116} This was true even as women were more dependent on the workplace to meet other women because of the way that lesbian institutions were often harder to locate in the outside world. On the terminology of “dropping a hairpin” to indicate gay men dropping clues about themselves for other gay (but not straight) people to observe, see George Chauncey, \textit{Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940} (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 6–7.


\textsuperscript{118} Fascinatingly, the diarist Donald Vining in 1968 referred to “the closet” as “new jargon” that was not used in “my day.” Donald Vining, \textit{A Gay Diary}, vol. 4, 1967–1975 (New York: Pepys, 1983), 35.
Gayness may not have been very “speakable” during these years, but it was at least partially seeable and knowable. Most obviously, those with either bad military discharges or arrest records were often exposed to their employers. And arrests in particular were a relatively common attribute of gay life during these years; nearly all gay people knew someone who had been arrested in connection with a bar raid or entrapment, and quite a few had been arrested themselves. One midcentury study estimated that 30 percent of gay men and 12 percent of lesbians had arrest records.119

It was not the uptick in arrests alone that made people more knowable, moreover, but rather the way that new methods of policing created an ethnography of queer life that eventually made its way into general knowledge. As the morals squad increasingly focused on entrapment, police were required to scrutinize and master the ways midcentury homosexuals performed queerness through appearance and conversation. As the historian Anna Lavovsky described in her brilliant analysis of the visible, invisible homosexual of the 1950s and 1960s, vice officers became “leading students of the gay world that had sprung up in American cities following World War II.”120 The popular press relied on these police experts as their sources in crafting the many exposes of homosexual life that exploded in print culture during these years: “New York’s Middle Class Homosexuals” in Harper’s, “Homosexuality in America” in Life, “Growth of Overt Homosexuality in City Provokes Wide Concern” in the New York Times, and “Homosexual in America” in Time were some of the genre’s classic statements. With many other in-depth stories in the Washington Post, the Chicago Daily News, the Atlanta Constitution, and Greater Philadelphia Magazine, the cumulative media coverage helped to make the gay world more legible to straight Americans.121


120. Lavovsky, Vice Patrol, 143, 149, 225–56. Social science was another source of knowledge about gay life during these years. See, for example, many of the essays in Simon and Gagnon, Sexual Deviance. A useful analysis is provided in Gayle Rubin, “Studying Sexual Subcultures: Excavating the Ethnography of Gay Communities in Urban North America,” in Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 310–46.

Even for those who weren’t following the newspapers, other factors made homosexuality more visible during these years. Remaining single past a certain age, for example, was itself considered a telltale sign in an era with historically high marriage rates.\textsuperscript{122} A gay man described his coworker’s chilly response to his offering a job to a single man: “Bob asked me if [the new hire] was married. When I said he was single, Bob said, ‘I thought so’ with something of a leer which I coldly ignored. Thinking back,” the narrator conceded, “I guess he probably is queer.”\textsuperscript{123} What is significant here is the equivalence, revealed in Bob’s leering look, between being unmarried and being “queer.” Thirty seems to have been the magic age when an adventurous bachelor might begin to be seen as “a little off,” or when the office girl was suddenly reinterpreted as a “career woman.” Beyond that, there was also what the sociologist Donald Webster Cory described as the gay person’s own conflicted need to simultaneously conceal and reveal at midcentury, that is, to remain as covert as possible while also dropping the clues that enabled gay people to be recognized “in order to find companionship, friendship, affection, understanding, and physical partners.” And finding others only enhanced the assumption “even . . . at work” of “mannerisms, method of speech, and other traits from each other, in much the same manner as members of a ghetto community of an ethnic character might do.” Cory elaborated on the “very definite type of haircut,” the “tonal modulation,” the “handshake,” and the walk, “far from effeminate, [but] almost militaristic, consisting as it does of a bringing of the heels down in a sharp, clacking, almost Prussianistic manner. It is possible,” Cory concluded, “in a few extreme cases, to close one’s eyes and hear a gay person walking down the street.”\textsuperscript{124}

While Cory was focused on men, others also noticed the “obviousness” of lesbians.\textsuperscript{125} The need to both conceal and reveal might explain the way the historian Alix Genter has described the lesbian’s professional attire at midcentury: “crisp, tailored women’s suits with slim skirts” that could

\begin{itemize}
\item Donald Vining, \textit{A Gay Diary}, vol. 2, 1946–1954 (New York: Pepys, 1980), 348. Vining reported as well a related conversation from 1953: “[They] were discussing Garbo and Cynthia’s husband said, ‘All this time she’s never married? Well, I say people who never marry are queer’” (465).
\item Donald Webster Cory, “Can Homosexuals Be Recognized?,” \textit{One} 1 (September 1953): 10–11 (emphasis mine).
\item Stearn, \textit{Grapevine}, 6.
\end{itemize}
simultaneously signal professional decorum and slight gender variance from the other women in the office.\textsuperscript{126} The original draft of Helen Gurley Brown’s 1964 \textit{Sex and the Office} (the follow-up to \textit{Sex and the Single Girl}) included details on lesbian sexuality, which, according to her biographer Jennifer Scanlon, Brown saw as “integral to office politics.” She was quite peeved that her publisher eventually made her cut the material, remarking that the “the lesbian thing just seems part of the office to me.”\textsuperscript{127} Brown’s observation suggests the visibility and knowability of even professional lesbians, with their exacting practices of discretion.

Whether male or female, public officials worked harder than anyone else to stay under the radar as homosexuality seemed to become more discernible. Dr. Howard Brown, New York City’s Health Services administrator under Mayor Lindsay, had his partner, Thomas, move out of their apartment once he was appointed to his post. Brown’s caution did not prevent a \textit{New York Times} reporter from including him on an “accurate” list of every gay person prominent in the Lindsay administration. As Brown’s contact recited the names on the list, Brown “listened, stunned. Our supposedly private lives were, if not yet public knowledge, no longer secret.” Brown resigned his position with the city before his secret came to light.\textsuperscript{128} Particularly in government jobs, the visibility and knowability of homosexuality meant a lot of ruined or damaged careers. But there was also no perfect correspondence between an employer’s awareness or suspicion about an employee and job loss—sometimes one followed the other, sometimes not.

Away from the public sector, what seemed to govern the employment relation was what one midcentury observer referred to as a kind of collusion, or a bargain.\textsuperscript{129} Generally speaking, many employers agreed to try not to “see,” while many employees agreed to try not to be “seen.” This bargain meant that the most “obvious types” would not make it past an initial interview, and anything that caused serious embarrassment to the company could be grounds for termination. But for nearly everyone else, “so long as the employee’s sexual proclivities . . . do not result in the molestation of other employees, customers, or clients,” observed the homophiles’


\textsuperscript{128} Brown, \textit{Familiar Faces, Hidden Lives}, 15.

One magazine in 1963, “many employers are happy to pretend they know nothing at all about the matter.” Another author spoke of a “tacit understanding” on “both sides” that, even when homosexuality is suspected, “the subject is best ignored.” Those contemporaneous assessments line up well with the recollections from innumerable informants that during these years bosses and coworkers either knew or strongly suspected that they were homosexual, and yet they often continued to hold their position.

We know why employees accepted this bargain, but what did employers gain by doing so? The answer may lie in the sociologist Andrew Abbott’s caution that we not treat workers as an undifferentiated mass. Economic sociologists and labor historians have disaggregated the experiences of women workers or racial and ethnic minorities, Abbott has observed, but have done too little to appreciate the full diversity of forms of labor. Yet gay people also brought distinct attributes to their places of employment. The lesbian activists and authors Lyon and Martin saw that clearly:

[Lesbians] have a single-minded attitude toward their careers since they know . . . there is no husband in the background on whom they can depend. Often, as the “single” woman in an office, they are available for overtime or weekend work where those with families can’t spare the time. They can be more flexible with relation to vacation schedules since they don’t have to go while the children are out of school. Lesbians usually don’t spend long periods on the telephone talking to their lovers, nor do they spend time flirting with the girls in the office. . . . And, finally . . . most Lesbians, rather than waiting for a man to come around to do the heavy work, would move their typewriters or files themselves.

132. On the general knowability of homosexuality during these years, see also Cory and LeRoy’s chapter on the “better-adjusted homosexual.” They wrote, “From factory workers to business executives, these people are not unlike their coworkers. . . . Their lives are quiet and unnoticed usually, with but a small amount of not-too-malicious gossip: ‘I wonder about him.’ They are friendly with wide circles of people, including many heterosexuals, most of whom ‘know the score’ but leave the gap between their lives unarticulated.” Donald Webster Cory and John P. LeRoy, The Homosexual and His Society: A View from Within (New York: Citadel, 1963), 213.
Lyon and Martin knew what employers knew as well; that gay employees could be advantageous hires.\footnote{Martin and Lyon, \textit{Lesbian/Woman}, 193; see also Rita Bass-Hass, “The Lesbian Dyad: Basic Issues and Value Systems,” \textit{Journal of Sex Research} 4 (May 1968): 116.} Despite the image of the homosexual as an unstable, unreliable employee, this was true of men as well as women. “It is likely that gays have more to give their jobs due to freedom from familial obligations,” one study found.\footnote{Harry and DeVall, \textit{Social Organization of Gay Males}, 163.} Many noted that gays were likely to stay in jobs that felt safe to them.\footnote{This was a common refrain in interviews I conducted.} But they were simultaneously available to work split shifts, to put in extra hours, to be transferred to a different part of the country, or to travel for the company on a moment’s notice.\footnote{See Bass-Hass, “Lesbian Dyad,” 116; Harry and DeVall, \textit{Social Organization of Gay Males}, 163. Traveling jobs, as the \textit{Mattachine Review} noted in 1955, also helped gays remain hidden. “Invert and His Job,” 15.} They could also be underpaid relative to their level of responsibility and skill—with women because they weren’t men, and with men because they weren’t breadwinners supporting a wife and children.\footnote{Certain mainstream occupations, like publishing, in which a lot of gay men worked, were low-paying relative to skill and educational level. See also Escoffier, “Stigmas, Work Environment, and Economic Discrimination against Homosexuality,” 10.}

Under the terms of the bargain, then, gay employees were literally a bargain. The employers’ “reluctance to know” makes even more sense when considering the attributes of the gay workforce in relation to the broader contours of employment relations during these years.\footnote{Harry J. Cannon, “Gay Students,” \textit{Vocational Guidance Quarterly} 21 (March 1973): 184.} In the Fordist era, employers sought an accord with labor, offering stable and secure employment, as well as high wages and benefits, in exchange for limiting strikes, stoppages, and other forms of labor militancy.\footnote{Daniel Bell, “The Treaty of Detroit,” \textit{Fortune}, July 1950, 53–55; David Brody, \textit{Workers in Industrial America: Essays on 20th Century Struggle}, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).} At the heart of what workers were offered was the so-called family wage—a wage that was “indexed . . . to the costs of maintaining a wife and children at home.”\footnote{Melinda Cooper, \textit{Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism} (New York: Zone Books, 2017), 10.} This arrangement, which also relegated women to a lower-paid, secondary labor market, subtly made family relations a key element of labor control: it put a male worker’s gendered interest in controlling the labor power of his economically dependent wife at odds
with his class interest in joining together with women workers against the boss.\textsuperscript{143}

Familial relations thus underlay employment relations. This not only was true among blue-collar workers but made its way up the class structure. Corporations also rewarded their managers with steady, secure jobs with excellent benefits to support their families during these years. White-collar workers especially began to be regarded as fixed costs by corporations, and relatively invulnerable to swings in the business cycle.\textsuperscript{144} This labor regime was generally sustainable because of the unprecedented productivity of the economy during the 1950s and 1960s. But the system was also cumbersome and expensive. By the 1970s, when productivity began to slump, employers began to alter the terms of their social contract with labor, gradually withdrawing their commitment to high benefits and steady employment, and demanding more flexibility from employees.\textsuperscript{145}

Even before that happened, employers looked for ways that they could make Fordism less costly and more nimble. If heterosexuality was valuable to employers in helping to maintain labor control though the family wage, homosexuality was valuable in suggesting ways to ease the strains and expense of that arrangement. There was always a secondary labor market, of course, populated by women, immigrants, and racial minorities, which absorbed some of the costs and inflexibility.\textsuperscript{146} But in order to buffer the jobs of permanent employees in the primary labor market, employers also valued a peripheral workforce \textit{within} that sector.\textsuperscript{147} Gays were one obvious source, a Fordist pressure-release valve: trapped and exploitable, like married men,

\textsuperscript{143} Although she was writing specifically about occupational segregation by sex during the World War II period, my thinking here is indebted to the sociologist Ruth Milkman’s classic essay “Redefining Women’s Work: The Sexual Division of Labor in the Auto Industry during World War II,” \textit{Feminist Studies} 8 (Summer 1981): 337–72.

\textsuperscript{144} Kallenberg, \textit{Good Jobs, Bad Jobs}, 24.


\textsuperscript{146} “The primary labor market segment was made up of good jobs (that is, well-paying, relatively secure jobs that were associated with job ladders in large firms),” the sociologist Arne Kallenberg has explained; the secondary segment “consisted of bad jobs (that is, relatively insecure jobs associated with low-wage employment and the absence of job ladders and opportunities for advancement to better jobs).” Kallenberg, \textit{Good Jobs, Bad Jobs}, 11.

\textsuperscript{147} On this point, see, for example, Erin Hatton, \textit{The Temp Economy: From Kelly Girls to Permatemps in Postwar America} (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011). Hatton associated this development particularly with temporary workers in the 1970s, but I would
but without the costs incurred by families. Contemporaries referred to them “in various states of economic precariousness,” as the “last hired and the first fired.” Another described gays as a “relatively well-educated, cheap labor force.” They were the guest workers of the corporate office: inexpensive, moveable, and easily eliminated.

Their vulnerability and their low expectations were key. Gay people knew they could be had “for less,” as one lesbian remarked. Another man explained that because “our bosses know we’re gay,” but pretended not to notice, gays worked hard, “without a thought of reward.” If their services were no longer needed, those who were pushed out of their jobs seldom protested their removal. One man, asked for his resignation, was assured that “it has nothing to do with the conduct or quality of my work on the job . . . So it must have been some aspect of my sex life.” Without further information, “I figured upon it for a half an hour . . . and decided not to fight it.” Resignation, he concluded, “was the very best way out—no branding, no publicity, no fuss and feathers (my feathers).” Many seemed to share this inclination. “Lawyers who have represented homosexuals have told us,” the Council on Religion and the Homosexual reported in 1965, “that most homosexuals . . . will not fight their cases through the courts.” Even a short blurb in the homophiles’ magazine that wondered about the possibility that those who experienced discrimination

argue that gays were employed as contingent workers in primary-sector jobs even earlier than that.


150. Interview with Betty Deran, conducted by Len Evans, 1983, box 1, Len Evans Papers. This sentiment was also reflected in many of the interviews I conducted.


152. Thomas Painter Notebooks, series 2, C.1, February 16, 1956, Kinsey Institute, Indiana University, Bloomington.

might contact the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was pessimistically captioned: “Us too? (But don’t kid yourself.)”

The ease with which they could be pulled in or pushed out, their lower cost, their flexibility, and their tendency to stay where they were safe all help to explain what otherwise seems inexplicable: midcentury employers’ at least occasional expression of a positive desire for gay workers. With lesbians, the preference was sometimes stated almost directly. One bank president demanded, “Where can I find a career woman?” For both men and women, moreover, there were consistent counterexamples to the expected narratives of serious career setbacks resulting from the discovery of homosexuality, even under what seemed like the most damaging circumstances. “The undesirable discharge is not the hazard it is supposed,” two women from the personnel field told members of the Mattachine Society at a 1957 meeting. “I have met quite a number of men who have gay discharge records from the service,” one man wrote to ONE magazine in 1961. “Most have stopped worrying about it and have done something for themselves.” An advice columnist wrote to a veteran that she knew of “a number of young men with a problem similar to yours who did get jobs—not entirely to their liking—but jobs with salaries, once they made up their minds that they would find work in spite of an undesirable discharge.” That some employers appeared willing to employ those with unfavorable service records was one sort of marker of these employees’ appeal. Another was the fact that the homophiles’ various employment bureaus seemed to regularly work through and with mainstream agencies.

One employment agency that initially placed an ad in a gay paper only inadvertently was surprised at how “placeable” these gay workers were (but also

155. Frances M. Fuller and Mary B. Batchelder, “Opportunities for Women at the Administrative Level,” Harvard Business Review 31 (January–February 1953): 112. I would argue that the single career woman and the lesbian were functionally almost indistinguishable, and that ambitious career women were coded as deviant during these years.
159. “Since we learn of few jobs to which we can refer persons directly,” the Mattachine Society wrote, “we therefore must rely . . . on services which established employment agencies can perform for job seekers.” “Mattachine Society, Inc.—Employment Referral Information,” circa 1960, Mattachine Society Project Collection, folder 12, box 2, ONE, Inc. Records. The DOB’s forum on “employment and the homosexual” included a manager of an employment agency. “Job Hunting Doesn’t Have to Be a Problem,” Ladder 1 (March 1957): 5. See also Brown, Familiar Faces, Hidden Lives, 163–64.
how underemployed). And Hartford’s “H. Project,” a quasi-religious group organized to help homosexuals “adjust to their condition” through employment and “friendship,” held a dinner for the personnel officers of several area businesses, mostly in insurance, to frankly discuss “the whole matter of homosexuality.” The personnel officers responded to the invitation “with enthusiasm.”

One company told the Mattachine Society that while it was “always in the public eye,” it would not automatically terminate an employee for homosexuality. “His actual job and time on the job play a very important factor [as to] how much the company can tolerate.” Many of the other businesses the Mattachine surveyed in 1965 were not as relaxed, but the homophile Barbara Gittings reported that the Philadelphia architecture firm she worked for knew of her activism in a lesbian rights organization. Two years after she had left her job, dissatisfied with the man who replaced her, they asked her to come back. Yet another man reported that his employer had been “particularly helpful” after he got into legal trouble for homosexuality. “I have one of those employers who shrugs off the idea that he has a homosexual employee,” he said, “with ‘I hire for work.’”

Even more telling is one man’s account of being hired at IBM in 1963 despite having just lost his job as a schoolteacher because he had been arrested in a public restroom. The man listed the arrest on his application for the job at IBM. He was offered and accepted employment anyway. Soon after he started his job, “IBM removed the arrest question from the standard application form.” When he pointed this out to his manager, the man later recalled, “he snipped it off my application form, kept in my personnel jacket. Presumably,” he concluded, “within the company no other record exists.”

160. Testimony by Dr. Ralph Blair before City Council’s General Welfare Committee on Bill 475, City Hall, Friday, December 17, 1971, Homosexual Community Counseling Center folder, box 83, Barbara Gittings Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library.

161. Minutes, “Project H. Meeting,” October 20, 1966, folder 3, box 1, Canon Jones Papers, Special Collections, Central Connecticut State University, New Britain, CT.


164. JH to one, Inc., November 12, 1957, Social Services Division, folder 5, box 90, one, Inc. Records.

165. Project Open Employment, “Employment Discrimination Survey,” folder 29, box 97, Records of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. IBM was certainly not singular. “My employer, a major national corporation, knows that I am gay,” one man reported in the
This mounting body of evidence suggests something of a liminal space in between untarnished possibility and a totally ruined life. This was the space where many gay people, in fact, lived out much of their working lives. To be clear, *this was not freedom from discrimination but rather a distinct form of it*. With no legal protection against an aggressively hostile state, gay people were ripe for employer exploitation. The law licensed their exploitation; sometimes it was accompanied by employer animus, at other times by a genuine feeling of toleration. Either way the price was right, and the logic is quite different from the Lavender Scare and the tropes that commonly explain these years as characterized by extreme secrecy and hiding. Yet such a system could also exist only because of the Cold War purges, could exist only in a world where it was commonplace “among homosexuals” to learn “that someone of the group has lost a job.”\(^{166}\) This helps to make sense of the seeming paradox that gay people concurrently reported that job loss was their single greatest fear and also that they did “cope fairly successfully” with the straight world.\(^{167}\) Both things were true simultaneously; really, there was no contradiction between them.

The dynamic is encapsulated especially well in one lesbian economist’s experience of learning that her security clearance investigation had revealed her homosexuality and she was on the brink of being fired from the Treasury Department. Her immediate boss, who was sympathetic to her plight, helped set up an interview for her with some private-sector economists from New York. She was fortunate that he was willing to help, and also that the New York firm was not looking for someone to do government work. But she still had a strategy to ensure the needed outcome: she asked her boss to be sure that the prospective employer knew about the clearance problem. This was shrewd on her part. For the New York company, “the clearance problem” was not an impediment, but rather an opportunity to get a highly skilled economist at a significantly reduced price. “They knew the only reason they could hire me was because of that clearance,” she recalled. For the economist, the job offer came much more

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\(^{166}\) Logan, “You’re Fired!,” 27–28.

quickly than she had expected, and was an “end to my desperation.” But it was also “a lesser job than I would have taken” otherwise.168

In sketching out the key elements of gay employment as a form of labor during these years then, the following attributes are foremost: Gay workers were as visible as they were hidden; they were valuable because they vulnerable, but also because they were cheap, unattached, and highly moveable; they brought, in other words, a useful element of precarity and flexibility to sectors of the economy that were generally structured by security and rigidity. If an employee brought unfavorable attention to an employer, or even if production slowed, they were also highly deportable—often to jobs far more peripheral than the one that the lesbian economist purged from the Treasury Department was extremely lucky to obtain. The knowledge that gay workers carried with them and shared with one another pertained not only to how to navigate safely across the straight work world, but how to survive in the queer one as well. “It seems to me that there ought to be any number of $35-a-week jobs in Miami that you could get and they wouldn’t care who you were or what you were connected with at that price,” one friend wrote another in the wake of his termination. “Dishwashing, janitoring, god knows what else. . . . Think about it.”169

168. Interview with Betty Deran, conducted by Len Evans, 1983, box 1, Len Evans Papers. (The timing of this incident seems to be late 1950s or early 1960s.) The economist Madeleine Tress, also interviewed by Evans in the 1980s, agreed that those purged from the government often ended up in occupations below their skill level (and presumably at lower wages). Tress ended up “in a field I would not have gone into.” Interview with Madeleine Tress, conducted by Len Evans, 1983, box 1, Len Evans Papers. After the astronomer Frank Kameny was purged from the government, the “progressive minded” president of a thermal electronics laboratory, “fully aware of [Kameny’s] predicament,” was pleased to hire him. Notably, however, the job paid him on a week-to-week basis and offered him only “a fraction of other, similarly qualified physicists’ salaries.” Eric Cervini, The Deviant’s War: The Homosexual vs. the United States of America (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 106.

169. Foster Gunnison to Dick Inman, October 1, 1966, folder 24, box 3, Foster Gunnison Papers.