



# **The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America**

*Margot Canaday*

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*The Straight State* is the most expansive study of the federal regulation of homosexuality yet written. Unearthing startling new evidence from the National Archives, Margot Canaday shows how the state systematically came to penalize homosexuality, giving rise to a regime of second-class citizenship that sexual minorities still live under today.

Canaday looks at three key arenas of government control--immigration, the military, and welfare--and demonstrates how federal enforcement of sexual norms emerged with the rise of the modern bureaucratic state. She begins at the turn of the twentieth century when the state first stumbled upon evidence of sex and gender nonconformity, revealing how homosexuality was policed indirectly through the exclusion of sexually "degenerate" immigrants and other regulatory measures aimed at combating poverty, violence, and vice. Canaday argues that the state's gradual awareness of homosexuality intensified during the later New Deal and through the postwar period as policies were enacted that explicitly used homosexuality to define who could enter the country, serve in the military, and collect state benefits. Midcentury repression was not a sudden response to newly visible gay subcultures, Canaday demonstrates, but the culmination of a much longer and slower process of state-building during which the state came to know and to care about homosexuality across many decades.

Social, political, and legal history at their most compelling, *The Straight State* explores how regulation transformed the regulated: in drawing boundaries around national citizenship, the state helped to define the very meaning of homosexuality in America.

## The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America Details

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# From Reader Review *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* for online ebook

## Kristi says

Canaday argues that changing definitions of homosexuality emerged with the systematic bureaucracy of the federal government. According to Canaday, late nineteenth century understanding of homosexuality as the possession of opposite gender qualities shifted toward the 20th century identification with sexual acts. The author looks closely at federal enforcement of sexual "normalcy" in the realms of welfare, the military, and immigration, with particular attention to how men and women were penalized for their sexuality, and relegated through federal policy to a status as second class citizens. Canaday's noteworthy study would have been strengthened had she immersed it within a greater cultural context, and interwoven her conclusions throughout the text to clarify and direct her argument.

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## Marlee Stark says

This book!!!

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## Hanna says

Don't pick this up unless you have a highlighter in hand and a lot of time. Be warned.

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## Cynthia says

I get that it's part of the argument, but there are hardly any human beings with agency in this book. Bleh.

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## Ashley says

In *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* Margot Canaday elegantly demonstrates the ways in which an expanding federal bureaucracy both shaped and reacted to the emergence of a homosexual-heterosexual binary. The emergence of this binary came to function as an important method of inclusion and exclusion from the benefits of citizenship. By creating the category of the homosexual, government policies also created the closet. Canaday examines both what the government laid out as official policy and how bureaucrats at all levels enacted or enforced those policies. She is more concerned with what the state actually did than with what it purported to do. At the core of the state's evolving understanding of homosexuality is the shift toward homosexual as a status rather than homosexual acts. The military and other agencies initially punished acts but, over the course of the 20th century, shifted to policing the homosexual person regardless of their behavior. The book focuses specifically on the Bureau of Immigration, military, and the various federal agencies that administered welfare benefits between roughly the turn of the last century through the Cold War. At the end of the book, she turns to a discussion of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"

and contemporary debates about same-sex marriage.

This book strikes me as more of an American Studies text than, for example, Mae Ngai's book. Although *The Straight State* is only barely more interdisciplinary on the level of methods than *Impossible Subjects*, Canaday engages with gender issues in a deeper way than many historians. The book's introduction highlights how little attention historians have given to issues of gender, sexuality, and the emerging bureaucratic state. She also does more with her source material, primarily archival documents and court proceedings, than the average historian. By combining the quantitative and qualitative readings of court cases, Canaday explores ambiguity and ambivalence on the part of the state. Her presentation of these cases and memos reveals not just what happened, but ventures into the symbolic and the level of meaning. This is especially the case with her reading of women's confessions to homosexual acts (see p. 203-205). A brief discussion of popular culture's response to the emerging homosexual identity or government policies could have added a bit of nuance to her work. Similarly, the illustrations that she does include could have been dealt with in greater detail. That said, the book is not weaker for these choices.

I appreciated that Canaday presents an academically written, thoroughly researched argument, in a manner similar to Mae Ngai, while nevertheless maintaining a clear, passionate political stance. Canaday herself speaks directly to the reader in the conclusion, offering her thoughts on contemporary gay-rights strategies on the local, state, and federal level. Throughout the book her enthusiasm and belief in the subject is clear. By ending the book with a statement of her politics, rather than including them in the introduction as a kind of "disclaimer" in the name of transparency, Canaday manages to leave the reader with a way forward based on the history that she presented. Although this conclusion certainly is not a rallying cry in the same way as Schmidt-Camacho's afterward in *Migrant Imaginaries*, Canaday ties the past to the present, states clearly the injustice of contemporary policy, and advocates for action.

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### **Dave says**

In "The Straight State," historian Margot Canaday examines efforts by the U.S. government to control homosexuality in the areas: immigration, the military, and welfare, from approximately WWI era to the 1960s. You can see the connection between past efforts and what some of today's politicians would like to enforce. It was so difficult to read of lives ruined over this obsession by "the moral right."

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### **Peter says**

Another useful entry in the category of books that show distinctions people take for granted as "natural" -- in this case, sexuality -- are in fact social/political/legal constructions.

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### **Sophia says**

This is a cleverly written book about the history of sexuality in America. I really enjoyed the author's tone and the way she handled many of the difficult issues that are still present today.

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## **Katie says**

Canaday's main argument here is that the development of the massive bureaucracy that we now know as the U.S. nation-state developed at the same time the idea of "the homosexual" developed and that these entities were mutually reinforcing. In other words, as the idea of homosexuality came to be seen as a fixed identity, the state developed more and more explicit ways of policing it. In turn, this bureaucratic/legal regulation of sexuality cemented the idea of the homo/hetero binary, an idea we're still contending with today. Canaday provides evidence for this argument by closely examining the exclusion of gay people (and those assumed to be gay) within three institutions of the state: immigration, the military, and welfare.

What I liked most about her book was that it wasn't about gay marriage. She focuses on how queer people were made into second class citizens through other types of exclusion that I think we often forget about in the discussion of queer civil rights. While her focus is on the pre- and post-WWII era (she is a historian after all), I would have liked to see a little more of a thread to today. How are queer people (or queerness) treated/policed/excluded in these bureaucracies today?

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## **Gaetano Venezia says**

An expert study of the federal regulation of homosexuality through immigration, military, and welfare policy. Charting the various strategies the state used to regulate citizenship from the turn of the century to midcentury, Canaday convincingly argues that the state "did not merely implicate but also \*constituted\* homosexuality in the construction of a stratified citizenry" (4). Thus, this study is not "a history of federal interest in what homosexuality is at any given moment, but rather a history of federal interest [and influence] in \*what becomes\* homosexuality by midcentury" (11). Through critical perspectives and extensive sources—including new evidence from the National Archives—we come to see homosexuality as a simplification of complex social facts into a legible category (214; see also Scott's 1998 book, *Seeing Like a State*).

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## **Andrew Shaffer says**

Hands down one of the most compelling and moving queer history books I've ever read. The premise may sound rather dull (the ways federal bureaucracies shaped homosexuality and citizenship in opposition to each other throughout the 20th century) but Canaday's treatment really brings these subjects to life.

Resist the temptation to skip to the conclusion. It works so much better when it's read in the proper order, and you can fully appreciate the gravity of Canaday's closing words.

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## **Natasha says**

The Straight State is an immediately readable and interesting attempt to define the federal state throughout

the twentieth century by looking at the intersection between citizenship and sexuality. Canaday lucidly and engagingly explores the ways in which the federal government attempted to define, shape, and restrict American citizenship on the basis of sexuality by examining three facets of citizenship--immigration, the military, and welfare--in a clever structure. The state, argues Canaday, was instrumental in developing the homosexual-heterosexual binary and the concept of a closet, at the same time that queer Americans were trying to define themselves on their own terms. The book is illustrated by real cases and narratives of deportation, military discharge, arrest fought by people accused of falling on the "undesirable" side of that binary and the ways that those fights (eventually, slowly) brought about change.

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### **Jennifer says**

Interesting book about the ways that the development of the American state and the defining of citizenship and homosexuality are linked in the twentieth-century. Canaday uses immigration policy, the military, and welfare to illustrate her point. Interesting conclusion that some states have been much more inclusive with homosexuals than the federal government, unlike during the Civil Rights Movement (race).

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### **Hunter says**

Quite good, and her point is well taken on the need to attend to the welfare and other nonmilitary state in histories, especially histories of social groups. I appreciated that she gave snapshot pictures of the personalities of the (mostly men) who she wrote about. Meticulously cited. A bit dry for a popular book but very well-written for an academic one.

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### **Emily says**

Uniquely organized around two time periods (1900-1940 and 1940-1960) and three areas (immigration, the military, and welfare), Courtenay's first and award winning book draws from court-martials, records from the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and congressional and court records to demonstrate how the state defined and attempted to control homosexuality in twentieth century America. While it is commonly argued that homosexuality became more "visible" during and following WWII and targeted by McCarthyism, Canaday reveals a much longer history of state involvement in sexual identity politics that runs in parallel to the rise of the modern bureaucratic state in the US.

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