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In 1958, a soldier accused of lesbianism told the military board considering her case, ‘I don’t feel that I am being treated like an American citizen. I would like to know why’ (264).

Margot Canaday’s *The Straight State* does not attempt to satisfy this soldier’s demand – perhaps ‘why’ is unanswerable – but it treats with unprecedented thoroughness an equally important question: *how?* How did the U.S. government come to disqualify from first-class citizenship, and sometimes from citizenship *tout court*, individuals branded homosexual? Canaday’s investigation of this problem examines three contexts – immigration, the military, and social welfare policy – in which the capacious notion of national citizenship was constructed most tangibly.

Correcting a historiographical tendency to locate the origins of state homophobia in Cold War paranoia, Canaday shows that homosexual exclusion developed cumulatively, and in tandem with the growth of American bureaucracy, throughout the twentieth century. Examining immigration policy between 1900 and 1924, military enlistment and retention standards between 1917 and 1933, and New Deal welfare programs for ‘unattached persons,’ her book demonstrates that federal homophobia was initially expressed through regulatory devices aimed at broader problems – poverty, disorder, violence, crime – and that such regulation by proxy reflected a bureaucratic ‘lag’ (57, 213). Government officials were intensely concerned about homosexual behaviour and status long before policies were tailored with these concerns in mind: the 1944 GI Bill, willfully interpreted by the Veterans Administration to exclude approximately 9000
servicemembers discharged for homosexuality; the military’s widespread suppression of
lesbianism in the years following World War II; and the Immigration Act’s intentional exclusion,
from 1953 to 1983, of homosexual aliens by means of the ‘psychopathic personality’ clause.
These policies, Canaday convincingly asserts, incorporated a homosexual-heterosexual binary
that was central to federal regulation in the postwar period.

Aspiring ‘to put the history of sexuality into closer dialogue with political and legal
history’ (2), Canaday vividly narrates the encroachment of government officials – legislators and
judges, but also military personnel, immigration inspectors, and social workers – onto the
traditionally psycho-medical turf of sexual typology. She clearly traces how homosexuality in
the last century became ‘a legal category as much as a medical or psychiatric one’ (4). Yet if her
book is perceptive and painstaking in its analysis of a conceptual shift from homosexual acts to
homosexual personhood, it tends to conflate two notions that are worth keeping distinct: the
ascription of a status and the assumption of an identity. At times Canaday overstates the extent to
which federal regulation was ‘a catalyst in the formation’ of the latter (4). The ‘lag’ she discerns
in state policy’s apprehension of the homosexual testifies to that identity’s production in domains
of culture other than federal policy. Likewise, her sources on lesbian witch hunts at midcentury
suggest that, even as postwar repression could occasion quasi-public confessions of
homosexuality, subjective uptake of homosexual identity arose and was affirmed quite apart
from state intervention, often in homosexual subcultures that were well-developed and startlingly
self-conscious.
One of the most important aspects of this book is its correlation of a regulatory regime that directly affected a relatively small number of people to the ‘degraded’ citizenship imposed upon millions of others (142). Although most homosexually inclined or practising individuals ‘were never vetted at all by the state,’ Canaday emphasises that federal policies penalising homosexuality contributed to the construction of ‘the closet,’ a mechanism that ‘invit[ed] people to pass’ while ‘suggesting that they suffered no harm because they could hide’ (10, 256). In a powerfully argued conclusion, she insists that ‘the incitement to pass was part of the harm, and so much more effectively did the state shape the citizenry by letting people in under certain conditions than by keeping them out absolutely’ (256). Canaday’s point here is characteristically sophisticated, evocative, and prescient.