

University at Buffalo School of Law

Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law

Book Reviews

Faculty Scholarship

2010

Book Review, Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*

Michael Boucai

University at Buffalo School of Law, mboucai@buffalo.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/book_reviews



Part of the [Civil Rights and Discrimination Commons](#), and the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Michael Boucai, *Book Review, Margot Canaday, The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*, 22 *Gender & History* 509 (2010).

Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/book_reviews/12

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Michael Boucai, Book Review, Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*, 22 *Gender & Hist.* 509 (2010) which has been published in final form at https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.2010.01602_32.x. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Use of Self-Archived Versions.



This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Book Reviews by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. For more information, please contact lawscholar@buffalo.edu.

Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. xiv + 277. ISBN 978-0-691-13598-4.

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.