

Book Review: The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America

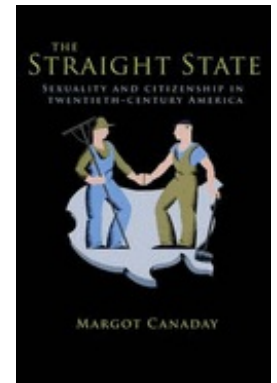
Blog Admin

Ashley Mog reviews **Margot Candaday's** new release on gay politics, sexual citizenship and the future of the closet.

The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America. By Margot Canaday. [Princeton University Press.](#)

Gay rights continue to be debated at many levels and in various contexts around the world. In the UK, the Church of England last week came under the spotlight over how far it will comply with the Equality Act when it comes [allowing gay men to become bishops](#). Earlier this month, human rights organisations waded into the case of Ugandan Betty Tibikawa, who stands to be deported from the UK despite being branded with a hot iron in her home country as a [punishment for her lesbian sexuality](#).

Looking to America, where the focus of this book lies, the prohibitive “[don't ask, don't tell](#)” policy has recently been repealed, meaning that the Department of Justice will no longer defend legal cases to enforce the Defence of Marriage Act ([DOMA](#)), which says that gay marriage is decided by state, effectively prohibiting federal gay marriage rights. [Margot Canaday's](#) book *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth Century America* takes the reader through the complicated and interconnected web of homosexuality and citizenship.



Canaday, assistant Professor of History at Princeton University, clearly undertook a lot of archive work for the book; sifting through various government papers, reading accounts of expulsion from the military, denial of welfare, and deportation from the country. Canaday actually brought a lawsuit against Citizenship and Immigration services because they refused to release documents to her that are supposed to be available under the Freedom of Information Act. So not only does this book explore issues related to government inclusion and exclusion, but its author actually fought to get information out in the open that the government wanted to stay hidden.

Made up of six chapters covering the military, welfare, and immigration, Canaday considers these processes to be key parts of the state building process. Canaday's main argument is that sexual citizenship was built into the federal bureaucracy as it was being created, and this needs to be more attended to by historians. For Canaday, the foundations of sexual citizenship are the reason the United States has such an issue with securing universal gay rights. The emphasis on the federal government's role is very important, because they are in charge of all things citizenship related, and it is here that the harshest enforcement of anti-gay ideals are enacted. For example, federal rights such as immigration for bi-national same-sex couples, wherein one is not American, are non-existent. Same-sex couples who want to claim tax benefits cannot yet do this at the federal level, which overrides city and state level in most issues. So Canaday argues that homosexuality, as a category, was in part created at the federal level because in creating the category it was easier to regulate and control. Homosexuality is not just a medical or psychiatric category, it is also a *legal* one.

For many readers, myself included, Canaday's writing will be fairly revolutionary. Canaday states that we must attempt to see the closet as a “deliberate state strategy”. The closet, as a tool of oppression against queer people, has throughout the history of homosexuality as a category, been encouraged by the state, not just society, in order to uphold and legitimise heterosexuality.

Overall, this book is a very interesting and enlightening read. Because of the historical and archival approach, when reading this I felt like I was exploring an historical period of time through people's lives and the government attitudes. Canaday strikes a good balance with academic and historical evidence, and anecdotes about the real experiences of people who were effected by a federal bureaucracy's policing of sexuality. These findings are very relevant to the treatment of queer people in our present moment. *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth Century America* probably mostly appeals to academics and historians of queerness, however, it is written in such an accessible way that anyone who is interested in

sexual citizenship history would find this a great read.

Ashley Mog studied MSc Gender at the LSE Gender Institute and now works as a research analyst.