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## *Book Review*

### **Defying Homophobic Culture in Cold War America**

**Adelaide Vergnolle**

Cold War America was an era defined by the immense pressure to conform, but Robert Corber reveals opposition to this culture. He identifies homosexuality as a type of resistance within the Cold War period. At the same time, he argues that the male gay identity was influenced by left-wing political opposition. Homosexuality, according to Corber, represented a response to fears of the Fordist regime and subjectivity to consumer capitalism. In other words, it represented the omnipresent threat of a world where the concept of the American Dream was in danger. To prove his thesis, Corber examines novels, plays, and films alongside studies of consumer culture, national security, and suburbs.

Since 1998 Robert J. Corber has been a professor at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut where he is the Director of the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Program. His research focuses on the intersection of American national identity, homophobia, and Hollywood cinema during the Cold War era. He has been published by well-accredited publishing institutions.

This book investigates the Cold War Era, a period marked by the oppression of gay and lesbian individuals because homosexuality was seen as undermining the American Dream and democracy itself. Campaigns like “Beware the Homosexual” ran rampant and many discriminatory laws were used to oppress the gay and lesbian community.

This author challenges the notion of gay complacency during the period and instead argues that forms of gay resistance were exercised despite cultural pressures. He states that although Hollywood reinforced homophobic stereotypes, it also validated the existence of gay men in direct opposition to the national goal of making the gay identity invisible. The reinforcement of

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homophobic stereotypes is exemplified in Corber's analysis of the film noir *Laura*. The main character, Lydecker, is a gay man utilized in the film to represent the feminization of male subjectivity, the homosexualization of visual pleasure, and other oppositional positions. The feminization of male subjectivity that Corber refers to is the concept that male subjectivity was shamed through making that subjectivity be described as feminine and weak.

Lydecker is also seen as an object of potential desire for the character Mark; Corber notes that in the film Mark is seen having to resist Lydecker's face, or "he might succumb to its lure" (69). While the representation and exposure of a gay individual may represent and reinforce negative stereotypes on the surface, it also represents opposition to the norm. Not only does Lydecker represent an oppositional ideological position, but he is also a visible gay character during a time that pushed for the invisibility of homosexuality. This action could also be considered oppositional to the dominant culture.

The author references films, books, plays, and interviews as well as other well-accredited analyses. The footnotes are robust with reliable resources, demonstrating the detailed approach the book takes. Corber uses the sources for analysis and to create a more in-depth take on his own opinion.

This book is extremely detailed, reflecting the meticulous work of the research but also making it less approachable for readers. Corber tends to repeat the similar statements multiple times, to the point where a paragraph would have been better than a page. However, the author was convincing because of the depth of his analysis. Corber falls short in inclusivity; his exclusive focus on men excludes important queer groups. This is especially notable because Corber makes the claim that these artists helped build the

foundation of the gay liberation movement, a movement that is made up of more than just gay men<sup>1</sup>.

Overall, I would recommend a “sparks-noted” version of this book. The information is valuable, well-researched, and unique; but the book is repetitive and narrowly focused. The existence of gay visibility in a time of social conventionality discussed by Corber is key to the development and understanding of modern-day movements, social standards, and stereotypes of homosexuality.

**Author Bio:**

I’m a third-year history and political science major here at Santa Clara. Naturally, as a History and Political Science Major, I love reading, writing, research, museums, and stalking the CIA World Factbook. In light of pursuing these passions, I am a member of Santa Clara's Phi Alpha Theta History Honors Society and participated in Model UN last year. Outside of these seemingly mundane activities, I love to run and am a part of the D1 Cross Country and Track teams at Santa Clara. I am also a diversity and inclusion Embrace Facilitator and a passionate yogi, having obtained my 200-hour teacher training certification. I’m most happy when I am outside doing activities or inside learning.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity*, Duke University Press, 1997, 240 pp.