

A Short Review of *Homosexuality
in Cold War America*

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***Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity.* By Robert J. Corber. Durham, N.C: Duke Univ. Press. 1997. x, 240 pp. Cloth, \$49.95; paper, \$16.95.**

History, Nietzsche tells us, is about forgetting, and by such a measure gay male scholarship certainly seems of late to be profoundly historical. Robert J. Corber's splendid book, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity*, offers a corrective to the amnesiac processes of history by reminding us of a profoundly simple matter, namely, that the 1950s did have same-sex political movements, in the form of the Mattachine society and the daughters of Bilitis, and that current theoretical and critical work would do well to remember them as we attempt to understand the relations among politics, desire, the state, and capital. Even if such early movements now strike us as conciliatory and apologetic, they were crucial for the emergence of same-sex political voices of all varieties.

I say this not because Corber's book is entirely devoted to the Mattachine society or the daughters of Bilitis (it's about some of the films and novels of the period) but because the book is so strongly historical in its workings. By situating his critical enterprise in the context of these early same-sex political movements, Corber's book allows for a more nuanced and historically rigorous critique of some of the popular and literary texts of the period. While his move to read film noir in its homosocial and homoerotic dimensions might seem to cover terrain that has already been traversed, one of the virtues of his reading of cinema is its grounding in the theoretical debates regarding spectatorship and the pleasures of viewing; rather than producing the more customary thematic readings and narrative analyses of film, Corber reads *Laura* and *Crossfire* with an understanding, borne out in far too little gay male scholarship of cinema, that feminism has already visited many of the arguments—about pleasure and ambivalence, about viewing from the most untenable of positions—and has had much to say about these matters.

It is in his treatments of Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, and James Baldwin, however, that the book is most provocative and delightful. Insisting that the work of these writers be read in tension with a host of competing discourses of the 1950s about male homosexuality (the focus by the more orthodox left upon homosexuality as a distraction from “real” politics, the narratives of pathology that emerge from medicine), Corber demonstrates that same-sex desire was not solely a secondary (or, worse, negligible) feature of the intellectual lives of Williams, Vidal, and Baldwin; rather, such desire fueled their impulses to challenge and radicalize other spheres of thought, such as race, nationalism, regionalism, and class, as well as genre and literary forms. We need to remember these lessons, and Robert Corber's vitally important book helps us to do so—helps us to think about our own moment in the context of the past which gave rise to us and to our words.

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