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**Attempted Book Bans:  
The Censorship of Queer Themes in the 1950s**

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## INTRODUCTION

The early Cold War in the United States, specifically during the 1950s, is an often under-credited period in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ+) history. People started to become more open with their identities, defying traditional expectations. The government saw this defiance as a moral weakness, which led people to believe that queer people were susceptible to communist infiltration. In “The Lavender Scare and Empire: Rethinking Cold War Antigay Politics,” historian of U.S. political culture, Naoko Shibusawa, explains that after World War II, the American consensus was that any deviation from the heterosexual nuclear family was seen as abnormal.<sup>1</sup> During the Cold War, government officials and their initiatives aimed to fight communism through the promotion of Christian values, embracing the American family as a national weapon.<sup>2</sup> The image of the heterosexual nuclear family highlighted the strict boundaries of what women and men could and could not do. In order to further protect American morality, the federal government led a national book ban that pulled texts that discussed ‘unsuitable’ themes — including queer texts — leading to a formative period in queer literature.

For most people, the start of queer history and queer resistance traces back to the 1969 Stonewall Riots, a series of violent interactions between the police and gay rights activists at the Stonewall Inn, located in Greenwich Village in New York City.<sup>3</sup> Published in *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, Toby Marotta, author of multiple early gay ethnographies, wrote that Stonewall led to “an unprecedented surge of activism and organizing for gay and lesbian rights.”<sup>4</sup> In conjunction with what Marotta stated, Stonewall is often referred to as the catalyst for the queer rights movement in the United States and abroad.<sup>5</sup> Though the 1950s was a fundamental period for the formation of the queer identity and queer resistance in the United States, it is often overlooked in favor of more “critical” events, such as the Stonewall Riots. The decade witnessed the formation of the first public LGBTQ+ rights organizations in the United States, as well as a rise in

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<sup>1</sup> Naoko Shibusawa, “The Lavender Scare and Empire: Rethinking Cold War Antigay Politics: The Lavender Scare and Empire,” *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 4 (2012): 723–52, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2012.01052.x>, pp 747.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Stoop, “‘A Christian Solution to International Tension’: Nikolai Berdyaev, the American YMCA, and Russian Orthodox Influence on Western Christian Anti-Communism, c.1905–60,” *Journal of Global History* 13, no. 2 (July 2018): 188–208, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022818000049>, pp 190.

<sup>3</sup> Toby Marotta, “What Made Stonewall Different?,” *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 13, no. 2 (March 1, 2006): 33.

<sup>4</sup> “Marotta, “What Made Stonewall Different?,” pp 35.

<sup>5</sup> “Marotta, “What Made Stonewall Different?,” pp 35.

queer literature and publications such as *ONE Magazine* and *The Ladder*.<sup>6</sup> This advertisement of queerness and queer subtext was seen as a rejection of traditional societal norms and threatened the Cold War-imposed gender ideology.<sup>7</sup>

The fear of communist expansion led to the conflation of homosexuality and communism; subsequently, the government categorized queerness and queer-related themes as unacceptable interferences in the United States' fight for democracy. During his 1950 speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-Wis.) characterized the Cold War as “a war between two diametrically opposed ideologies.”<sup>8</sup> These two ideologies were not, however, capitalism versus communism. Rather, in McCarthy's eyes, the war was a moral conflict between “communistic atheism and Christianity.”<sup>9</sup> The United States was the face of traditional Christian values, with the nuclear family at the forefront of those moral grounds. McCarthy and the government saw the nuclear family as a fundamental building block of strong societies with the idea that families could only exist between a man and a woman. In the midst of the Cold War, queer people, and queerness in general, threatened the traditional Christian values that the United States was desperately attempting to uphold.

Prominent scholarship on the subject discusses how the Cold War ideology was deeply rooted in the notions of religion. In his analysis of Western Christian anti-communism, titled “A Christian Solution to International Tension,” professor Christian Stroop, who specializes in modern Russia, further elaborates that religious anti-communism in late imperial Russia influenced the United State's use of Christianity during the Cold War.<sup>10</sup> In the United State's fight against communism, “many Americans were influenced by ideas rooted in the religious traditions of the United States.”<sup>11</sup> Americans believed they were responsible for enlightening and helping foreigners, such as the Russians, and could do so by spreading American values. This is why, when researching the early Cold War, it is often found that there were ties between government

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<sup>6</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* (Basic Books, c2006), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb07713.0001.001>, pp 116.

Faderman, *Ebook of Gay L.A.*, pp 126.

<sup>7</sup> Angela E. Galik, “Queer Texts and the Cold War: How Nationalism Shaped U.S. Lesbian and Gay Writing, 1945-1960.” (Thesis or Dissertation, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota, 2009), <http://conservancy.umn.edu/handle/11299/54427>.

<sup>8</sup> “Document – Joseph McCarthy, Speech in Wheeling, West Virginia (1950) - Patterns of World History 3e Dashboard Resources - Learning Link,” accessed November 19, 2022, <https://learninglink.oup.com/access/content/von-sivers-3e-dashboard-resources/document-joseph-mccarthy-speech-in-wheeling-west-virginia-1950>.

<sup>9</sup> “Document – Joseph McCarthy, Speech in Wheeling, West Virginia (1950) - Patterns of World History 3e Dashboard Resources - Learning Link.”

<sup>10</sup> Stroop, “A Christian Solution to International Tension,” pp 188.

<sup>11</sup> Stroop, “A Christian Solution to International Tension,” pp 197.

officials, projects, and Christian organizations.<sup>12</sup> The spread of American religious ideology can be seen in the discussion of book bans during the Cold War, as queer books were seen as the spread of a godless evil enemy that the American public had the responsibility to repress.

American historian Elaine Tyler May corroborates some of Stoop's research in her book *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. Her discussion of family life during the Cold War draws parallels between how the American policies protected the Christian values of the nuclear family and how, in turn, these familial norms reinforced domesticity and gender roles in the private sector.<sup>13</sup> She notes that the American nuclear family was used in accordance with national goals and served as a less explicit way of fighting communism. By having as many kids as possible, it would allow for parents to raise and educate their children "correctly," benefiting American society in the long run.<sup>14</sup> Per this view, then, the family was not only a reflection of American values but also a reflection of American superiority and status.<sup>15</sup> Without the nuclear family, the mold of American society would crumble, leading to fears of communist infiltration.

The government's defense tactic in trying to combat the unparalleled rise in public forms of homosexuality was to emphasize the importance of the nuclear family further and demonize any deviation from traditional gender and familial roles. Political figures like McCarthy reinforced this ideology through their political campaigns, and so did public education systems through the implementation of Life-Adjustment education. The government left no room for misinterpretation. In this paper, I explore book banning as a national defense tactic, with a focus on how it led to the villainization of queerness and the censoring of queer themes in books. I also aim to understand the process of book banning by using two different queer texts, *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin and *Women's Barracks* by Tereska Torrès, and their public and private receptions as proxies for understanding the larger effect of Cold War queer book banning campaigns. To this end, I engage with primary sources, such as the congressional investigations brought forth upon these books, to further understand how and why these texts were seen as threats to democracy. I engage with the texts themselves to further analyze the claims brought forth in the aforementioned hearings. The guiding questions of this paper are: How did the representation of queerness in texts published in the 1950s, such as *Giovanni's Room* and *Women's Barracks*, lead to their attempted banning in the U.S.? How did McCarthy and the House

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<sup>12</sup> Stoop, "A Christian Solution to International Tension," pp 190.

<sup>13</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (Basic Books, c1988), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb01654.0001.001>.

<sup>14</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, pp 136.

<sup>15</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, pp 16.

Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials use book banning as a defense mechanism when it came to protecting the American identity as defined by the U.S. government during the Cold War era? How did the public engage with book banning campaigns? How did these book bans impact queer literature and history?

I argue that book bans during the Cold War were a form of internal regulation intended to protect the public from exposure to queerness and to protect the nuclear family. Therefore, the Cold War book banning campaigns' intent to target queer literature and texts should be given the same importance as more well-known events in queer history. Accordingly, this paper sheds light on the importance of Cold War queer book banning attempts by using *Women's Barracks* and *Giovanni's Room* as proxies for understanding the era's impact on queer literature and culture.

### **PROTECTING DEMOCRACY AND THE NUCLEAR FAMILY: BOOK BANNING IN THE UNITED STATES**

Scholarship on book banning has emerged in waves, often responding to the ever-changing political contexts that shape it. The history of book banning, particularly in the United States, is heavily influenced by the era's political climate considering that its overarching goal is to censor content, ideas, and themes that are considered inappropriate or too sensitive for the general public's consumption.<sup>16</sup> Most institutions or figures that attempt to censor book materials often use the argument that the public should be afraid of what the content is attempting to do. Many fear that such 'inappropriate' content is attempting to influence their reader, which can be perceived as potentially dangerous and harmful. The themes that have become targets of book banning have shifted over time to reflect the current political climate and contemporary ideas of what is anti-American.

Associate professor in the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Emily J. M. Knox, focuses on information access and intellectual freedom. Her monograph, *Book Banning in 21st-Century America*, explores why people challenge, restrict and remove books. Although her research focuses on book banning in contemporary America, it discusses information that is relevant and applicable to book banning practices in the 20th century. Knox discusses how a decline in society is one of the most common themes in a book's challenger's discourse. Books challenged through this defense are often seen as out to "destroy our great nation" and as "actively

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<sup>16</sup> Emily J. M. Knox, *Book Banning in 21st-Century America* (Blue Ridge Summit, United States: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/reed/detail.action?docID=1921960>, pp 11.

working to put an end to American society.”<sup>17</sup> Book challengers believe that books should improve the character and morality of a person.<sup>18</sup> However, banning books limits literature’s ability to be indexical signs, essentially erasing texts as indicators of what was going on during a time period.<sup>19</sup> Books are a gateway into a world of ideas, and if books get banned, a whole audience may never get to uncover a world of knowledge.

Although the federal government of the United States is not allowed to restrict or regulate expression based on the content — with a few notable exceptions, including obscenity — under the First Amendment, this freedom of expression has been challenged throughout history.<sup>20</sup> In 1821, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that the distribution of a book entitled *Fanny Hill* by John Cleland was illegal due to the obscene topics of prostitution found in the book. According to a second Supreme Court case regarding the book, it was “the first recorded suppression of literary work in [the] country of grounds of obscenity.”<sup>21</sup> This decision to rule the piece of literature as obscene gave way for others to stop or ban the distribution of books that went against the ‘traditional’ ways of life. On March 3, 1873, Anthony Comstock, the founder of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, an institution dedicated to supervising the morality of the public, successfully petitioned for the U.S. Congress to pass an act regarding obscenity in literature.<sup>22</sup> The “Act for the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use” prohibited the possession and circulation of any obscene or subject of “immoral influence” in literature, image, or of any other material and manifestation.<sup>23</sup>

If the government finds an issue with certain types of material, such as literature containing obscene material, they can pass acts or amend laws to fulfill their duties of ensuring domestic tranquility and promoting the general welfare. The government believes that the protection of the public’s sense of morality is of utmost importance, and anything that may contaminate their morality must be taken care of immediately. Any piece of literature that can be considered “sexually explicit,” “offensive language,” or “unsuited to any age group” can be

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<sup>17</sup> Knox, *Book Banning in 21st-Century America*, pp 70.

<sup>18</sup> Knox, *Book Banning in 21st-Century America*, pp 96.

<sup>19</sup> Knox, *Book Banning in 21st-Century America*, pp 97.

<sup>20</sup> “U.S. Constitution - First Amendment | Resources | Constitution Annotated | Congress.Gov | Library of Congress,” accessed November 6, 2022, <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-1/>.

<sup>21</sup> Nicolas Valazza, “Obscenity Laws in the United States, 19th-21st Centuries,” in *Banned Books and Prints in Europe and the United States, 17th–20th Centuries. Works from the Lilly Library and the Kinsey Institute Collections* (Indiana University Bloomington, 2019), <https://bannedbooks.indiana.edu/items/show/42>.

<sup>22</sup> Valazza, “Obscenity Laws in the United States, 19th-21st Centuries.”

<sup>23</sup> Valazza, “Obscenity Laws in the United States, 19th-21st Centuries.”

challenged at the discretion of the government, private organization, or individual.<sup>24</sup> While those are three major reasons for challenging speech, there are still other reasons why books are challenged. More often than not, however, they fall underneath one of those categories.

During the Cold War era, specifically the late 1940s and 50s, the government conducted book banning campaigns that were part of a larger coordinated effort to restrict materials deemed ‘disruptive’ and ‘subversive’ to society. This national campaign was led by Senator Joseph McCarthy, who is most famous for the Red Scare, a fear-mongering crusade alleging that innumerable communists, communist sympathizers, and Soviet spies had infiltrated important U.S. institutions, including the government.<sup>25</sup> While McCarthy-era book bans often targeted mass consumption, such as widely adopted textbooks, book bans also occurred on a smaller scale, impacting books read for amusement. Regardless of the target audience, McCarthy-era book bans focused on getting out of circulation books relating to communist beliefs and racial justice.<sup>26</sup>

During this time, government figures, such as McCarthy, conflated anti-familial and anti-normative representations of gender and sexuality with communist ideology. The government saw members of the LGBTQ+ community as nonconformists to the traditional Christian rhetoric that they were attempting to reinforce. The government saw their deviation from tradition and norms as a sign of moral weakness and compromised values. Not only did it see members of the LGBTQ+ community as morally defective, it saw them as national security threats. During his speech in Wheeling, McCarthy insinuated that there were communists infiltrating the State Department and that he knew of “57 cases of individuals” who had pledged loyalty to the Communist Party from within the government.<sup>27</sup> By implying that there were individuals with divided loyalties in the government, McCarthy made the argument no longer about just protecting the country’s values but also about protecting the country’s national security. It was no longer a fight between the United States and a foreign entity; it was now a war that the United States had to wage from within.

In “Politics in an Age of Anxiety: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949-1960,” Professor of History K. A. Cuordileone elaborates on this discussion by exploring the gendered dynamics of

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<sup>24</sup> Knox, *Book Banning in 21st-Century America*, pp 11.

<sup>25</sup> Shibusawa, “The Lavender Scare and Empire: Rethinking Cold War Antigay Politics: The Lavender Scare and Empire,” pp 725.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph A. Custer, “Political Climate and Catastrophes: The Effects of Notorious Events on Public Library Collections, Both Then and Now,” *Indiana Law Review* 54, no. 1 (June 16, 2021): 79–121, <https://doi.org/10.18060/25503>, pp 80.

<sup>27</sup> “Document – Joseph McCarthy, Speech in Wheeling, West Virginia (1950) - Patterns of World History 3e Dashboard Resources - Learning Link.”



hard/soft political discourse found in Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.'s *The Vital Center*.<sup>28</sup> Her analysis explores why there was an overt increase in masculine characteristics within American politics and the origins of the association of liberals with “soft” characteristics. By emphasizing McCarthy’s quote, “If you want to be against McCarthy, boys, you’ve got to be either a Communist or a cocksucker,” Cuordileone unveils the erotic language used to describe politics, essentially naming conservatives real men and anti-communists.<sup>29</sup> While it may seem like homosexuals were the subject of criticism in McCarthy’s rather stark commentary, it was actually the “soft” liberals that were the subject at hand.<sup>30</sup> Yet, the lack of masculinity used to describe liberals sparked fear within politics as many feared being associated with homosexuality. Shibusawa also discusses this phenomenon in “The Lavender Scare and Empire,” describing the moment as a political tactic meant to send McCarthy’s counterparts into a “fearful frenzy about appearing ‘soft’ on communism.”<sup>31</sup> No one wanted to be perceived as too soft on communism, and the lavender scare became about “who would control the American empire” in the fight against it.<sup>32</sup>

Senators Joseph Lister Hill (D-Ala.) and Kenneth Wherry (R-Neb.) spearheaded a Senate Investigation into the alleged infestation of loyalty risks that the government employed.<sup>33</sup> Testifying before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Appropriations for the Department of State on February 28, 1950, Secretary of State Dean G. Acheson said that character defects were considered when evaluating employment by the government as a way to assess security risk. He stated in his testimony that a person with “any physical or moral defect” was in danger of having their morals compromised or exploited by “somebody who was attempting to penetrate into the Department.”<sup>34</sup> When asked by Senator Henry Styles Bridges (R.-N.H.) if homosexuals were included in the

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<sup>28</sup> K. A. Cuordileone, “‘Politics in an Age of Anxiety’: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949–1960,” *The Journal of American History* (Bloomington, Ind.) 87, no. 2 (2000): 515–45, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2568762>, pp 515-16.

<sup>29</sup> Cuordileone, “‘Politics in an Age of Anxiety’: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949–1960,” pp 521.

<sup>30</sup> Cuordileone, “‘Politics in an Age of Anxiety’: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949–1960,” pp 521.

<sup>31</sup> Shibusawa, “The Lavender Scare and Empire: Rethinking Cold War Antigay Politics: The Lavender Scare and Empire,” pp 726.

<sup>32</sup> Shibusawa, “The Lavender Scare and Empire: Rethinking Cold War Antigay Politics: The Lavender Scare and Empire,” pp 726.

<sup>33</sup> U.S. Senate. Committee on Appropriations for the District of Columbia, *Report of the Investigations of the Junior Senator of Nebraska on the Infiltration of Subversives and Moral Perverts into the Executive Branch of the U.S. Government* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1950), [https://ucsd.libguides.com/ld.php?content\\_id=26481487](https://ucsd.libguides.com/ld.php?content_id=26481487).

<sup>34</sup> *Report of the Investigations of the Junior Senator of Nebraska on the Infiltration of Subversives and Moral Perverts into the Executive Branch of the U.S. Government*.

list of people that exhibit moral defects, Secretary Acheson replied, “That would be included.”<sup>35</sup> This testimony exemplifies the phenomenon of queer people being thought of as people with moral weaknesses and as the perfect target for communist infiltration. In Shibusawa’s “The Lavender Scare and Empire,” the lavender scare’s logic was that homosexuality was a threat to national security because homosexuals were vulnerable and potential victims of communist blackmail.<sup>36</sup> This logic, however, was circular because of the increasing homophobic policies that were making the LGBTQ+ community more vulnerable and exposed in society.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, political figures, such as McCarthy, Hill, and Wherry, saw queer people as morally corrupt because they were thought to be leading ‘unnatural lifestyles’ that deviated from the traditional Christian belief that a union should only be between a man and a woman. They posed a threat to the nuclear family, one of the fundamental building blocks of American society, which meant they were a threat to national security. In May’s *Homeward Bound*, she discusses how families instill American values in their children, helping them become exemplary members of society.<sup>38</sup> During the Cold War, families helped reinforce the stereotypical gender roles, with women staying home and raising the children and the men acting as the head of the household.<sup>39</sup> There was a fear that a crisis in gender identity and roles could lead to crime, “perversion,” and homosexuality.<sup>40</sup> As queerness posed a threat to the image of the nuclear family, the American public feared that there were homosexuals in their everyday life that could lead them astray from their roles in society and morally corrupt them. The prevailing assumption was that queerness undermined the traditional family.<sup>41</sup> Similar to communists, conservatives saw queer people as fundamentally immoral, and thus the war expanded to be not only against communists but the queer community as well.<sup>42</sup>

There were multiple efforts to eradicate any association with queerness in Cold War America. The government conducted internal investigations to dismiss any potential loyalty risks and condemned any potential queer person as a “sexual

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<sup>35</sup> *Report of the Investigations of the Junior Senator of Nebraska on the Infiltration of Subversives and Moral Perverts into the Executive Branch of the U.S. Government.*

<sup>36</sup> Shibusawa, “The Lavender Scare and Empire: Rethinking Cold War Antigay Politics: The Lavender Scare and Empire,” pp 725.

<sup>37</sup> Shibusawa, “The Lavender Scare and Empire: Rethinking Cold War Antigay Politics: The Lavender Scare and Empire,” pp 725.

<sup>38</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, pp 136.

<sup>39</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, pp 16.

<sup>40</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, pp 88.

<sup>41</sup> Cuordileone, “‘Politics in an Age of Anxiety’: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949–1960,” pp 528.

<sup>42</sup> Cuordileone, “‘Politics in an Age of Anxiety’: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949–1960,” pp 528.

pervert.” Public education emphasized the importance of gender and family roles within their curriculum — prioritizing the enforcement of the nuclear family.<sup>43</sup> Even television reinforced Cold War ideology, with the 1950s bringing stricter and even more rigid gender roles onto the screen.<sup>44</sup> Books were no exception when it came to the banishing of anything queer-adjacent. Book bans and book banning attempts rose dramatically during the McCarthy-era. McCarthy’s fear-mongering and Red Scare encouraged the everyday members of society to help censor books that encouraged communism and communist-adjacent themes, lumping queer literature in with pornographic material, violence, drug use, and other sexual perversions. Thousands upon thousands of books were pulled from library shelves across the United States because they exhibited some sort of threat to the public’s morals. These texts were deemed either too inappropriate, too profane, or too unpatriotic for public consumption.<sup>45</sup>

### ***WOMEN’S BARRACKS: PUBLISHERS VERSUS THE GATHINGS COMMITTEE***

In the midst of book banning efforts, Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn (D-Texas) appointed Representative Ezekiel Candler “Took” Gathings (D-Ark.) to spearhead the House Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials, often referred to as the Gathings Committee. Founded in 1952, the committee sought to investigate the potential effects of “comic books, pocketbook literature, and other ‘immoral, obscene, and otherwise offensive publications’” on the morals of American society.<sup>46</sup> While relatively little scholarship has been written about Representative Gathings and his eponymous committee, the committee’s majority report, published in 1953, summarizes their investigative efforts, which concluded with a recommendation that the federal government should censor material deemed inappropriate.

The select committee was composed of nine members of the House of Representatives: three from the Committee on the Judiciary, three from the Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, and three unaffiliated representatives. The committee was formed with no more than five members being of the same political party in order to facilitate a fair and productive investigation. Their main task was to determine the extent to which current literature “containing immoral, obscene, or otherwise offensive matter or placing

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<sup>43</sup> Elaine Tyler May, “‘Family Values’: The Uses and Abuses of American Family History,” *Revue française d’études américaines* 97, no. 3 (2003): 7–22, <https://doi.org/10.3917/rfea.097.0007>, pp 12.

<sup>44</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, pp 44.

<sup>45</sup> Knox, *Book Banning in 21st-Century America*, pp 11.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Bowman, “‘Immoral or Otherwise Offensive Matter’: Took Gathings’ 1952 Investigation of Broadcasting,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (2016): 50.

improper emphasis on crime, violence, and corruption” was being made available to the American public through any form of distribution.<sup>47</sup> All of the themes investigated were referred to in their report as ‘pornographic materials,’ hence their official title of House Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials. Their task also included assessing whether or not the laws in place were sufficient to prevent the publication and distribution of such books. If they found that the laws in place were insufficient, then the committee was to include their recommendations for legislation in a report.<sup>48</sup>

As a result of their investigation, the Gathings Committee found that there was an alarming amount of pornographic materials at the disposal of the American public. Their investigation enlisted the help of the Post Office Department, the Library of Congress, the Department of Justice, police departments from various cities, and the attorney generals of the 50 States as well as Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. The committee also surveyed people that were likely to be in favor of censoring such material, including representatives of religious and civic groups like parent-teacher associations. This extremely thorough investigation also included the voices of book publishers and independent retail booksellers.<sup>49</sup> The committee needed all of the evidence necessary to make the claim that literature with pornographic elements was degrading the very youth supposed to become the face of American morals.

In their majority report, which was a culmination of their investigation, the committee submitted a list of books that expatiate homosexuality and queer themes. Among the list of perpetrators, they included *Women’s Barracks*, written by Tereska Torrès.<sup>50</sup> Published in 1950 by Fawcett Gold Medal, the book follows accounts of what life was like in the Free French Army women’s barracks during World War II in London. The pulp fiction heavily drew upon Torrès’ own accounts as a secretary to the Free French leader Charles DeGaulle in London.<sup>51</sup> While the book was considered to be mostly autobiographical, the story that unfolded within recounted multiple homoerotic instances between the women. The sexual encounters in the book defied the conventional ideologies behind

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<sup>47</sup> United States Congress House Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials, *Report of the Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials, House of Representatives, Eighty-Second Congress, Pursuant to H. Res. 596, a Resolution Creating a Select Committee to Conduct a Study and Investigation of Current Pornographic Materials* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952) pp 1.

<sup>48</sup> Materials, *Report of the Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials*, pp 1.

<sup>49</sup> Materials, *Report of the Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials*, pp 2.

<sup>50</sup> Materials, *Report of the Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials*, pp 16.

<sup>51</sup> Yvonne Keller, “‘Was It Right to Love Her Brother’s Wife so Passionately?’: Lesbian Pulp Novels and U.S. Lesbian Identity, 1950-1965,” *American Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2005): 385–410, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40068271>, pp 388.

Materials, *Report of the Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials*, pp 9-10.

relationships at the time, and the Gathings Committee found the material pornographic.

The title of Torrès' pulp fiction appears in the majority report over 30 times.<sup>52</sup> Not only did the committee submit this title as an example of pocketbooks containing unjustifiably lewd, queer content, they used the book as a main focal point in their argument that low-cost paperback books were some of the worst offenders of the moral code imposed by the United States.<sup>53</sup> By the time the hearings for the Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials in the House of Representatives began on December 1, 1952, *Women's Barracks* had sold over 1 million copies, quickly becoming one of Fawcett Gold Medal's biggest hits. Throughout the hearings, the committee engaged with members of the publishing company in an attempt to classify the book as obscene literature.

They used a previous hearing that took place in Carleton County Court in Ottawa, Canada, to further support their case. Judge A. G. McDougall of the Carleton County Court declared that *Women's Barracks* was a book of obscene nature that "deals almost entirely with the question of sex relationship and also with the question of lesbianism."<sup>54</sup> He further explained that the material is one that deals with "unnatural" relationships, and its content could only be seen as something that could "deprave and corrupt" any audience.<sup>55</sup> In the committee hearing, Mr. Burton, part of the general counsel, used this information to support his claim that *Women's Barracks* contained pornographic materials and, therefore, should be removed from the market. However, Ralph Foster Daigh, the editorial director and vice president of Fawcett Publications, Inc., defended *Women's Barracks* against the allegations presented. He maintained that it was not only a "good book" because of the sales it had made for the company but also because of the "entertainment and education it imparts."<sup>56</sup> As the book discusses Torrès' experiences with the Free French Army, Daigh maintained that the book's content was merely giving insight into what life was like as a woman soldier in the French Army. When asked by Mr. Burton, if the majority of the story took place in the women's barracks, Daigh gave a cheeky response, stating, "That takes a considerable portion of the book, yes, sir."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> U.S. Congress, *Report of the Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials, House of Representatives, Eighty-Second Congress, Pursuant to H. Res. 596, a Resolution Creating a Select Committee to Conduct a Study and Investigation of Current Pornographic Materials.*, 82d Cong., 2d Sess. House Report no. 2510 (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1952), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/006765383>.

<sup>53</sup> Materials, *Report of the Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials*, pp 36.

<sup>54</sup> Materials, *Report of the Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials*, pp 169.

<sup>55</sup> Materials, *Report of the Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials*, pp 40.

<sup>56</sup> Materials, *Report of the Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials*, pp 37.

<sup>57</sup> Materials, *Report of the Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials*, pp 37.

Along with maintaining that there was value in the content of the book, Daigh provided a letter of approval for the book from John Bakeless, a well-known author and professor from New York University.<sup>58</sup> In his letter, Bakeless argued that it would be insincere and hypocritical to not describe the homoerotic events that happened in the women's barracks. He states in his letter, "These literary forms are based on conflict. Much of that conflict is between good and evil."<sup>59</sup> Essentially, Bakeless argued that if Torrès had not included the lesbian sex interactions in the book, it would no longer mimic the sordid and evil aspects of life, and it would lose the realistic, autobiographical element that gave it merit. Thus, sans homoerotic content, *Women's Barracks* would no longer be a faithful adaptation of Torrès diary but an artificial, sugar-coated retelling of her life.

Bakeless further supported the publishing and dispersal of the book by stating that many of the great classics "have required reading for school boys," meaning that books often include entertainment for men; why, therefore, should there be pushback on entertainment for women?<sup>60</sup> He demonstrated this by noting that *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* also draw upon the themes of murder and adultery and how *Hamlet* even goes further by depicting instances of incest. He also states that the lesbian scenes in *Women's Barracks* are less descriptive than those found in Plato's *Symposium* and as graphic as those found in the *Iliad*. By bringing into the conversation classic pieces of literature, Bakeless put into perspective the frequency with which books with obscene and morally degrading themes are praised by the general public and intellectuals alike. And, since the classics do not face backlash for depicting such scenes, argued Bakeless, neither should *Women's Barracks*, which dealt with real-life happenings rather than fantasy.

*Women's Barracks* is a product of its time and a reflection of how relationships and times were changing. Daigh further pushed back against the committee by stating that "homosexual inquiries into the State Department and other governmental agencies" sparked curiosity in the public. He claimed that the investigation and repression actually drove interest in homoerotic literature.<sup>61</sup> For this reason, Daigh elaborated, the public should have access to *Women's Barracks* and other books that touch on such themes, for it would be 'immoral' to not satisfy the public's interest in knowledge of such topics. Furthermore, it was an opportunity to expand readership and publish stories that appealed to the LGBTQ+ community. Daigh continued to emphasize that the scenes in the book were comparable to heterosexual sex scenes in popular books such as *Gone With*

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<sup>58</sup> Committee on Current Pornographic Materials, "Investigation of Literature Allegedly Containing Objectionable Material," December 1-5, 1952, pp 11.

<sup>59</sup> Materials, *Report of the Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials*, pp 12.

<sup>60</sup> "Investigation of Literature Allegedly Containing Objectionable Material," pp 12.

<sup>61</sup> "Investigation of Literature Allegedly Containing Objectionable Material," pp 32.

*the Wind* and that “sex relations will have had good sales” no matter the audience it is intended for.<sup>62</sup>

Although Daigh and Bakeless defended the right to have *Women’s Barracks* on the bookshelves and out for distribution for the general public to enjoy, the Select Committee for Pornographic Material did not allow for persuasion in their verdict. Daigh and Bakeless’ counterarguments against the allegations of obscenity that plagued Torrès’ book failed to sway the conservative committee. The committee decided that the contents of the book were, in fact, pornographic material that was too obscene and morally disruptive for the general public’s consumption. In order to prevent the book from being banned nationwide, the publishers agreed to add a narrator that disapproved of the interactions between the characters.<sup>63</sup> This newly added voice was used as a method to deter people from committing the same so-called mistakes as the characters in the book. It was meant to teach the reader that homoeroticism was immoral and problematic. Even then, multiple states pulled the book off the shelves and banned it for containing obscene material.<sup>64</sup> The homoerotic relationships in the book were found to be “unnatural” and contradictory to the American way of life. The book was considered as propaganda glorifying lesbian relationships, therefore, it was not an acceptable moral influence on its consumers.

While the committee’s verdict denounced *Women’s Barracks*, the book continued to sell despite — or perhaps because of — its negative connotations. Instead of deterring the public from the book as originally intended, the trial drew more attention to a book that otherwise would have gone largely unnoticed. Pulp fiction books like *Women’s Barracks* were supposed to be a cheap read, only costing around twenty-five to thirty-five cents.<sup>65</sup> For reference, according to an article in the *Evening Star*, a carton of eggs went for fifty cents at the time.<sup>66</sup> *Women’s Barracks* was never expected to become as popular as it did. It drew attention to the new sub-genre of lesbian pulp fiction and became a trailblazer in books with overtly lesbian themes. The book emboldened authors and publishers alike to produce literature with content that might be judged obscene or immoral. While a shocking book at the time, *Women’s Barracks* left a long-lasting impact on queer literature and representation, giving hope and reassurance to a new

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<sup>62</sup> “Investigation of Literature Allegedly Containing Objectionable Material,” pp 29.

<sup>63</sup> “Tereska Torrès,” *The Telegraph*, accessed November 22, 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/culture-obituaries/books-obituaries/9566294/Tereska-Torres.html>.

<sup>64</sup> Natasha Frost, “The Lesbian Pulp Fiction That Saved Lives,” *Atlas Obscura*, May 22, 2018, <http://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/lesbian-pulp-fiction-ann-bannon>.

<sup>65</sup> “Fresh Eggs Reign Supreme,” *Evening Star*, May 10, 1950.

<sup>66</sup> “Fresh Eggs Reign Supreme.”



generation that there were other people out there that shared the same sense of desire for love that they had.

### ***GIOVANNI'S ROOM: OVERCOMING PUBLISHING OBSTACLES AND PUBLIC PUSHBACK***

The House Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials was one of — if not the most — public forms of prosecution against queer literature during the Cold War era. Its aim to censor publications with pornographic themes that discussed topics such as queer interpersonal and sexual relationships had a chilling effect. Publishing companies who had previously produced these types of books started to restrict content and write guidelines around what could and could not be published. No one wanted to be put on trial and become an example of what not to do, nor did they want to be known for publishing morally compromising and degrading literature. Yet, publishers who did print “pornographic” material did not want to deviate from the content that had established them a loyal readership, as new subject matters put them at risk of alienating themselves from their already-established audiences.

In 1953, the same year that the House Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials published their majority report, James Baldwin broke into the literary scene with Knopf, Inc’s publication of his debut novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.<sup>67</sup> Baldwin established himself as a voice that spoke with the pain and struggles experienced by the Black community in the United States. His book is a semi-autobiographical text that uses his experiences growing up in Harlem to portray the various ways in which Black Americans grapple with their everyday lives.<sup>68</sup> It sheds light on how religion plays an important role in their lives — whether it plays an inspirational or an oppressive role. In the audience and publisher’s eyes, the well-received and praised novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* set a precedent for the type of literature Baldwin would release in his career.

However, in 1956, Baldwin departed dramatically from his previous work and published *Giovanni’s Room*, which focuses on an American man living in Paris and his journey of self-discovery. The book touches on the themes of homosexuality, bisexuality, gender, and interpersonal relationships, which were considered too taboo for public consumption at the time. The book’s main character, David, is often in conflict with himself as he is simultaneously trying to

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<sup>67</sup> Josep M. Armengol, “In the Dark Room: Homosexuality and/as Blackness in James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 37, no. 3 (March 2012): 671–93, <https://doi.org/10.1086/662699>, pp 671.

<sup>68</sup> “Go Tell It on the Mountain by James Baldwin: 9781101907610 | PenguinRandomHouse.Com: Books,” PenguinRandomhouse.com, accessed November 22, 2022, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/249847/go-tell-it-on-the-mountain-by-james-baldwin-introduction-by-edwidge-danticat/>.



figure out how to establish his masculinity and explore his sexuality within a society that believes the two could never coexist. The book follows David in his attempt to find himself through sexual and romantic relationships and addresses his dilemma of whether or not to succumb to societal expectations. This was the first book in Baldwin's career that discussed the themes of homosexuality, bisexuality, and queer relationships.<sup>69</sup>

While there is not much scholarship written about the negative discourse that arose from the publication of *Giovanni's Room*, it is known that Gathings Committee had instilled fear into many publishers. Indeed, after the majority report was published, many companies were against publishing literature with any queer cogitations. To that end, Baldwin encountered difficulty when he was in pursuit of a publisher for *Giovanni's Room*. While he had already developed a relationship with Knopf, Inc. because of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Alfred A. Knopf rejected *Giovanni's Room* due to its explicit depictions of homoerotic relationships and queerness throughout the book.<sup>70</sup> Knopf even went as far as to say that the book "would ruin his reputation...and he was advised to burn the manuscript."<sup>71</sup> Knopf's reaction to the book was representative of the publishing world's prevailing thought — if you published a book with queer cogitations, your career, and your reputation would be on the line.

Written in mid-1950s America and in the middle of the Cold War, the negative reactions to *Giovanni's Room* were considered normal. The country was constantly protecting the American identity and anything associated with it. American Cold War ideologies directly opposed communism and homosexuality, making Baldwin's association of homosexuality and the American identity a slap in the face to his American audience. Publishers' critical reactions to the novel were almost predictable. Many of them simply disregarded or dismissed the manuscript, as the deviation from traditional gender and sexuality norms was considered too explicit to publish.

Finally, Dial Press, a New York City based publishing house, accepted *Giovanni's Room* and agreed to publish it.<sup>72</sup> Although a publishing house had finally agreed to publish the book, Baldwin still had to face another obstacle — the public. Public reaction came swiftly and critically in the form of extremely vocal discontent with the material and negative reviews of the book. One such review was titled "The Faerie Queenes," and was published in *The Crisis* magazine, the official publication of the National Association for the

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<sup>69</sup> James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, First Vintage International trade paperback edition. (New York: Vintage International, 2013).

<sup>70</sup> Armengol, "In the Dark Room," pp 671.

<sup>71</sup> William J. Weatherby, *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire: A Portrait* (D.I. Fine, 1989), pp 119.

<sup>72</sup> Armengol, "In the Dark Room," pp 671.

Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).<sup>73</sup> The author, James W. Ivy, claimed in his review that *Giovanni's Room* strayed from the “religious passion” that *Go Tell It on the Mountain* had profusely gloried and, instead, had decided to tackle “the scabrous subject of homosexual love.”<sup>74</sup> Ivy reviewed the novel with disgust, stating that it was “a pity that so much brilliant writing should be lavished on a relationship that by its very nature is bound to be sterile and debasing.”<sup>75</sup> Ivy’s response was a reflection of Cold War rhetoric that criticized the “unnatural” nature of the queer relationships in the novel. He emphasized that not only was the relationship morally degrading to the characters but to anyone that agreed with that lifestyle. Ivy was not the only one to publicly denounce the novel. Although the negative reactions to *Giovanni's Room* have largely been forgotten due to the book’s modern popularity, the majority of the public’s reaction at the time mimicked Ivy’s disappointment in the queer themes present in Baldwin’s writing. Many found the themes to be incongruous with Baldwin’s prior writing and were shocked that he had even dared to make such a jump from *Go Tell It on the Mountain* to *Giovanni's Room*.

In a book review published by *The New Yorker*, Anthony West emphasizes the dangers of flirting with homosexuals that the book presents.<sup>76</sup> He cannot stress enough that those that flirt with David are just trying to convert him into one of them, implying that this is not confined to the book but is also possible in real life. His commentary plays on the Cold War ideology that queer people are of low moral grounds and that they pose a threat to society. West feeds the public’s fear by implying that there were queer people in society that would attempt to infiltrate them with the “homosexual agenda.” He concludes his review by stating, “It is to be hoped that Mr. Baldwin . . . will soon return to the American subjects he [has] dealt with so promisingly.”<sup>77</sup> West’s hope for Baldwin’s return to American themes is indicative of the American public’s aversion to queer themes explored in the novel. West insinuates that if Baldwin does not return to writing books that the American public can relate to, he will lose his audience, just as Knopf warned when rejecting the manuscript for *Giovanni's Room*.

Yet efforts to deter the public from reading the novel failed. While the reviews of the novel were unfavorable or limited in their praise, it has now become a symbol of early queer literature. Baldwin became immortalized as a “father figure of the mid-century male gay movement,” and *Giovanni's Room*

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<sup>73</sup> *The Crisis* 1957-02: Vol 64 Iss 2 (The Crisis Publishing Company, 1957), [http://archive.org/details/sim\\_crisis\\_1957-02\\_64\\_2](http://archive.org/details/sim_crisis_1957-02_64_2) pp 123.

<sup>74</sup> James W. Ivy, “The Faerie Queenes,” *The Crisis*, February 1, 1957, 64.2 edition, sec. Book Reviews, Internet Archive, pp 123.

<sup>75</sup> W. Ivy, “The Faerie Queenes,” pp 123.

<sup>76</sup> Anthony West, “Review of ‘Giovanni’s Room’ by James Baldwin,” *The New Yorker*, November 10, 1956.

<sup>77</sup> West, “Review of ‘Giovanni’s Room’ by James Baldwin.”

became an example of the “white homosexual abroad.”<sup>78</sup> His novel created space for people identifying with non-normative sexualities in the U.S and abroad, allowing them to find solidarity within the narrative.<sup>79</sup> The book’s reception demonstrates how American culture during the Cold War associated same-sex desire with moral corruption, carefully breaking down the restrictive politics of American culture.

The public’s reception of *Giovanni’s Room* was a reflection of the Cold War ideology being reinforced by the government. Although the House Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials failed to instill a nationwide ban on queer and queer adjacent themes, their efforts inculcated fear in both publication houses and writers alike. Many refused to publish such books, fearing that they would be put on trial or ruin their reputation. Those that did choose to publish queer books faced public criticism and, like Baldwin, were shamed for giving such obscene material a platform. The public shaming and censoring of materials was a direct result of government-led book banning efforts that deemed queer themes as morally degrading and conflated them with communism.

## CONCLUSION

Queer book bans during the Cold War were an attempt to erase literature and texts that amplified queer voices at a time when they were considered taboo and morally deviant. It was an attempt at erasing foundational texts essential to queer history and representation in literature. While somewhat successful in its efforts to censor these texts, the United States ultimately failed to suppress the genre completely. Instead, the government’s focus and drive to erase such themes actually brought attention to them. The themes that were considered ‘unnatural’ and a threat to the nuclear family provided comfort to those who felt persecuted by the government, strengthening the sense of community that queer people once lacked.

In a time when women were married to their kitchens, *Women’s Barracks* provided a sense of escapism to those who longed for female desire. As Daigh mentioned during the trial, it is a book that provided the audience with a realistic and honest recounting of what was going on in the world. By omitting the obscene material, the book would have no longer been an honest reflection of the author’s experience but instead a censored version of it. Although the trial forced the publishers to add a condemning narrator to the book, it actually brought pulp fiction more popularity than it was ever supposed to achieve. The openness of

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<sup>78</sup> Magdalena J. Zaborowska et al., “Rebranding James Baldwin and His Queer Others: A Session at the 2019 American Studies Association Conference,” *James Baldwin Review* 6, no. 1 (September 29, 2020): 199–229, <https://doi.org/10.7227/JBR.6.13>, pp 200.

<sup>79</sup> Zaborowska et al., “Rebranding James Baldwin and His Queer Others,” pp 202.

lesbian relationships in the book brought forth a new genre in queer literature — lesbian pulp fiction — inadvertently helping define American lesbianism for closeted women.

Similarly, *Giovanni's Room* provided solidarity to its readership by centering a narrative that queer people could relate to. Although the novel was originally met with disdain and disgust, it has become a symbol of early queer literature in contemporary times. Its deconstruction of America's political climate during the Cold War communicated to its readers how restrictive it was to be a man or a woman. David's struggle with masculinity while simultaneously being queer personified the emotional turmoil that some people had to go through in order to protect themselves from being perceived as a threat to national security. *Giovanni's Room* depicted the sense of alienation that many underwent, giving a voice to those who could not outwardly speak out about it.

The House Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials' attempt to restrict books with obscene and demoralizing material, such as *Women's Barracks* and *Giovanni's Room*, ultimately failed. Although their majority report resulted in a culmination of reasons why the government should go ahead with censoring books with pornographic materials, their efforts were ignored. Their efforts to deter the public from such books eventually drew more attention to them and brought a larger audience to them than intended. During a time when Cold War ideology was silencing overt expressions of homosexuality, books offered an escape and solidarity to queer members of the public, assuring them that their feelings were not unnatural. The texts offered a space where people could get rid of their homosexual shame. They also provided a space where they could walk through that shame with characters experiencing the same thing. Although not often acknowledged, Cold War book censoring gave a platform to queer literature, eventually leading to some of the most formative texts in contemporary times. The government's attempt to silence gave way to a new generation of rule breakers, giving a sense of community to those that often hid behind a mask of conformity.

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