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2020

## Red-Lavender Colorblindness: Institutionalized Oppression and American Gay Life

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### Repository Citation

Yung, B. (2020). Red-Lavender colorblindness: Institutionalized oppression and American gay life. *The Expositor: A Journal of Undergraduate Research in the Humanities*, 15, 65-74.

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# Red-Lavender Colorblindness: Institutionalized Oppression and American Gay Life

*Brooke Yung*

**O**n December 15, 1950, a Senate Investigations Subcommittee printed their interim report on an unprecedented and vaguely salacious task: “to determine the extent of the employment of homosexuals and other sex perverts in Government.”<sup>1</sup> Adopting various legal, moral, and medical approaches to conceptualizing homosexuality, this subcommittee sought to identify and terminate employees engaging in same-sex relations. Not only did their report present the government’s belief in the undesirability of homosexuality—depicting it as a “problem” to be “deal[t] with”—it captured the widespread association of homosexuality with subversive activity, a prominent view in the 1950s.<sup>2</sup>

In discussing the challenge of accurately recognizing homosexuals, the subcommittee evidenced a particular interest in the unreliability of appearances. They affirmed that the danger lay not in “the overt homosexual” or those who curbed their deviant inclinations, but in the “very masculine” gay men and the gay women with “every appearance of femininity.”<sup>3</sup> The capacity to mimic heterosexuality, to actively practice and conceal perversion, apparently frightened the Senators; this subversive quality, it would seem, too closely resembled the attributes of communist infiltrators supposedly lurking in government offices. In this way, the subcommittee subtly drew a disturbing parallel between homosexuality and communist subversion. This evolution of

traditional standards of homophobia took root in American society, feeding off the paranoia stoked by politicians eager to spot the commie on the payroll. Seeking to profit by the public's anxieties, the notorious Sen. Joseph McCarthy and his cronies recklessly cited a vast number of subversives infecting the government, effectively launching a national high-stakes blame game. This tense atmosphere of the Red Scare thus set the stage for a new panic, attuning the government to lavender-tinged treachery simmering beneath the surface.

Of course, there was no necessary association of homosexuality with communist subversion in the 1950s. Prevalent assumptions of the Lavender Scare notwithstanding, sexuality and leftist political ideation are not essentially connected. Yet, the absence of such a correlation raises a new, and perhaps more interesting question: what was the actual relationship between American-Russian relations and homosexuality in this period?

The Soviet regime played a role in shaping gay life in America, but not quite in the way that policy makers of the 1950s fearfully envisioned. Contrary to the assumptions underlying national defense initiatives, communist agents did not habitually exploit the vulnerability of morally debilitated "sexual deviates."<sup>4</sup> Neither were gay men and women inherently subversive by virtue of their sexuality. But a profound fear of these possibilities pervaded American society, causing a sudden outbreak of red-lavender colorblindness. The contrived kinship of communism and supposedly aberrant sexuality primarily arose as a politically expedient means of compromising the Truman administration and enforcing a strictly heterosexual, capitalist American identity. Yet, these political machinations had an unintended outcome—by playing upon public fears, orchestrators of the Lavender Scare dragged the gay community out of the political closet and into the fore of the United States' public anxieties. That level of visibility permitted previously disjointed communities of gay men and women to coalesce into a unified front, leading to the formation of an unprecedented national identity. While the conflation of communism and homosexuality resulted from paranoia and political plotting, it enabled a genuine shift in American gay history. From this brutal saga of fear-induced discrimination arose a national gay consciousness, one that sought an identity borne not of politicized ostracization and perceived perversity, but of vitality and love.

Far from erupting organically, the Lavender Scare burst into existence as an engineered accessory to the Red Scare. Certain Republican politicians orchestrated this wave of panic in an attempt to further discredit the Truman administration, characterizing the president's leadership as critically lax in both morality and competency.<sup>5</sup> These fearmongers employed incendiary rhetoric in their efforts to conjure the desired outrage and opposition—yet, curiously,

their critiques focused on homosexuality more as a political transgression than a moral lapse. At the inception of the Lavender Scare in 1950, Republican National Committee chairman Guy George Gabrielson described homosexuals as “subversives,” calling them “traitors working against their country.”<sup>6</sup> In this narrative, not only was homosexuality taken to be a violation of God’s order, but it was also a violation of governmental stability.

Without specifically enumerating the traitorous qualities he thought to be inherent to homosexuals, Gabrielson went on to associate them with communist subversives. While this move seems arbitrary, it worked as a somewhat natural ideological extension. Homosexuality existed in opposition to heteronormativity, just as communism existed in opposition to capitalism. As both heteronormativity and capitalism constituted vital aspects of the mid-twentieth century American identity, communists and homosexuals fell in together under a single antithetical umbrella. By promoting a reductive definition of the American identity, Gabrielson and other promoters of the Red/Lavender Scare categorized deviations as automatically un-American, and thus automatically suspect. Political alarmists played upon this line of thought, exacerbating public fears of the comrade under the bed (or, perhaps better, under the sheets) and situating homosexuality as a threat equal to that of communism itself. Gabrielson, like other politicians, explicitly assured American citizens of this dread certainty, claiming that “sexual perverts who [had] infiltrated our government” were “as dangerous as the actual communists.”<sup>7</sup>

Though Gabrielson primarily sought to undermine the public’s faith in Truman’s liberalism for the sake of his own party’s gain, his depiction of the homosexual incursion seems to have resonated with many Americans on a more personal level. The Lavender Scare was largely a product of the Republican Party’s campaign to discredit the Truman administration, but its rapid onset reflected a very real terror pervading society. To the American public, communism was not merely an alternative form of governance—it was a voracious ideology diametrically opposed to their own, a combative threat to their livelihood. The iron grasp of the Soviet Union seemed to extend inevitably through Eastern Europe, an insatiable machine consuming independent state after state. Its totalitarianism existed in direct opposition to American democratic ideals, its atheistic stance offended America’s Christian base, and its economic structure irreconcilably clashed with American capitalism. Thus, the continued dissemination of Soviet power was taken to entail the degradation of the American way of life.

In the 1950s, homosexuality was commonly seen as having the same destructive power. According to this line of thought, same-sex relationships undermined the traditional family unit. (Of course, marriage and children were at this point available exclusively to heterosexual couples.) Much of the fam-

ily's value stemmed from its capacity for self-propagation, and by extension its capacity to perpetuate the established social order. The social security afforded by the family unit assumed a heightened significance in the ideological battlefield of the Cold War, making "the inherited values of the past relevant for the uncertain present and future."<sup>8</sup> As these "inherited values" were vastly heteronormative, pre-existing biases against same-sex relationships intensified. Americans generally endorsed a vision of "family as rooted in time-honored traditions" of heterosexuality so as to "[allay] fears of vulnerability" in a time of tenuous ideological warfare.<sup>9</sup> They supposed that in a heterosexually structured social environment, citizens could easily reproduce and indoctrinate their offspring into the system, whereas homosexual romances were counter-productive if not outright toxic to society.<sup>10</sup>

Those who perceived homosexuality as detrimental to the nation chiefly drew upon conservative Christian moral views, which categorized sex between members of the same gender as a "spiritual affliction."<sup>11</sup> The religious majority claimed that heedless sexual indulgence was paramount to ignoring God's will, a transgression spelling biblical disaster for a society that allowed it to proceed unchecked. Clinging to its Christian ties in the face of the atheist Soviet menace, the American public sought to target compromising secular elements in their society.<sup>12</sup> Within this hyper-religious context, homosexuality functioned not only as a failure of the American family, the bulwark against ideological decay, but as a failure of Christian tenets, America's moral backbone. Homosexuality was thus taken as presenting an unpardonable threat to the United States' moral integrity, constituting a danger to rival that of the Soviet Union itself.

Politicians likewise sought to address their apprehensions over the potential disintegration of a heterosexual society by constructing excuses for the marginalization of gay citizens. In the popular imagination, homosexual men were "weak-willed" and lustful, constantly "pleasure-seeking."<sup>13</sup> Wildly susceptible to seduction or blackmail, since it was thought that they would "[stop] at nothing to gratify their sexual impulses," gay men were seen as the perfect target for communist agents' covert intelligence operations.<sup>14</sup> Gay women, in contrast, intimidated the public for their dangerous independence and contempt for traditional femininity. Much like communist women, lesbians "mocked the ideals of marriage and motherhood" upon which the United States supposedly relied.<sup>15</sup> This mentality would lead them to assist in the degradation of the American family unit as they pursued Sapphic pleasure over their feminine duties. Worse, lesbians were thought to possess an alarming propensity to morph into "mannish" career women like those seen in the Soviet Union, "show[ing] few of the physical charms of women in the West."<sup>16</sup> Through such rhetoric, political leaders converted flat stereotypes of homosexuality into presumably

legitimate reasons to bar gay men and women from government employment and public life.

In fabricating justifications for homophobic policies, American politicians confirmed an institutionalized bias against gay citizens for possessing supposedly subversive behaviors. However, rather than dispatching the “homosexual menace,” this political oppression aided in the development of a national gay consciousness. By designating them as the object of governmental discrimination, the promoters of these policies indirectly encouraged gay men and women to craft their own political and cultural self-definition. With the Lavender Scare, in other words, “homosexuality assumed significantly greater visibility” than it had in previous generations.<sup>17</sup> Police officers and FBI agents rooted out tightly knit gay micro-communities in horrific raids, but once they were brought to light, these groups became “seedbeds for a collective consciousness.”<sup>18</sup> By forcefully removing gay men and women out of bars, small social gatherings, and dim cruising spots, law enforcement forcibly enlarged what had previously been “exclusively private” homosexual spaces.<sup>19</sup> Encouraged by such brutal measures, vocal opponents of homosexuality “broke the silence surrounding the topic,” bringing gay men and women to national attention.<sup>20</sup> Ironically, then, these efforts to discourage the homosexual population essentially “hastened the articulation of a homosexual identity.”<sup>21</sup> In attempting to quash sexual deviation, fearmongering politicians inadvertently made homosexuality into a political topic, providing gay men and women the opportunity to realize a national consciousness.

At first, however, this consciousness derived not from a sense of community, but from a feeling of common persecution. The general public and legal system condemned homosexuality harshly, distinguishing the burgeoning group as medically and morally debilitated. Print media of the 1950s advanced the notion of same-sex attraction as “an illness” that “can be treated successfully,” if properly quarantined.<sup>22</sup> Public health committees perceived homosexuality not simply as a disease, but more specifically as part of the “increases in salacious literature and venereal disease” occurring in urban areas.<sup>23</sup> In addition from its supposedly physically deleterious effects, homosexuality was seen as an “aberration” of morality in its departure from Christianity’s heteronormativity.<sup>24</sup> For these reasons, legislators including Senator John H. Hughes advocated the continued criminalization of “deviate sex,” at the same time that legal prohibitions on such behavior served “as an expression of society’s disapproval.”<sup>25</sup>

Though initially defined by their presumed medical and moral deficiencies, members of the gay community sought to transcend the boundaries of such narrow-minded and negative conceptions. The popular image of the homosexual as a sick, spiritually depraved individual in need of legal intervention constituted neither a desirable nor accurate identity for gay men and women.

Therefore, the American gay community soon developed a collective effort to construct a cohesive, positive identity for itself. As part of this effort, a crucial role was played by the work of the artist known as Tom of Finland.

As the Lavender Scare raged on in the United States, an unassuming veteran in Helsinki quietly balanced a clean public image with a scandalous private avocation. By day Touko Laaksonen (d. 1991) worked as a respectable advertising executive, but in the evenings he cast off his mask of heterosexuality and devoted himself to what he called his “dirty drawings.”<sup>26</sup>

Initially undertaken as a hobby in his teens, Laaksonen’s sketches of preposterously muscled men immersed in “the tumbles of rough sex” rapidly became a life-long passion.<sup>27</sup> Influenced by his service in the Finnish army during World War II, Laaksonen styled his hypersexualized figures’ clothing and positioning after his enemies: the Soviet invaders and Wehrmacht. The romping, vigorously copulating men in his drawings typically appeared in militarized clothing, controversially appropriating symbols of totalitarian oppression as emblems of their own power. In a technique perhaps even more evocative of his authoritarian muses, Laaksonen consistently depicted his figures as engaged in heated sadomasochistic encounters, with the dominant figure totally overpowering his partner. Without exception, however, the men in Laaksonen’s sketches exude an undeniable joviality. Despite the turbulence of their activity, each man looks upon his partner with sincere affection, suggesting a tenderness that sweetens the roughness of sex.

While the post-War atmosphere of Finland proved far too tense to permit domestic publication of Laaksonen’s work, the American muscle magazine *Physique Pictorial* proved to be a viable outlet. Laaksonen broke out of obscurity in the Spring issue of 1957, when one of his lumberjack drawings appeared on the magazine’s cover, establishing the newly dubbed “Tom of Finland” as the preeminent purveyor of homoerotic art.

Though his dirty drawings began as a pornographic exercise, they gradually evolved into a lustful expression of Tom’s sexual fantasies and his greater aspirations for the gay community. In Tom’s eyes, his sexualized subjects emblemized the true gay identity: he exclusively depicted “free and happy gay men” who were “as handsome, strong, and masculine as any other men,” defying popular perceptions of male homosexuality as furtive and effeminate.<sup>28</sup> Seeking to overturn such stereotypes, Tom lovingly crafted a fantasy world in which “those damn queers” so often subjected to the public’s vitriol simply did not exist.<sup>29</sup> The spirit of Tom’s work resonated with his new audience in the United States. Fresh off the heels of the Lavender Scare, the American gay community sought to resist the bigoted labels foisted upon them in a political panic—and these drawings offered a compelling way to redefine themselves.

Within the corpus of Tom's art, homosexuality was "celebrated, proudly performed, never hidden" from public view.<sup>30</sup> Challenging the expected attitudes of the time, "there [was] never a trace of shame" marring the activities of Tom's subjects.<sup>31</sup> They pursued their pleasures with pure enjoyment, imbuing same-sex attachments with the wholesomeness previously denied by moral naysayers. As contemporary artist Silvia Prada puts it, Tom of Finland's work created "a huge utopic fantasy" of gay acceptance, one that deftly combated the oppressive reality outside the page.<sup>32</sup>

Tom's drawings offered a visual approach to the kind of identity gay men craved, one constituted of vitality, love, and masculinity. To men such as Robert Pierce, a reviewer of one of Tom's gallery shows, this "work wasn't pornography, it was salvation," a way of escaping the shackles of internalized homophobia.<sup>33</sup> Hungry for this liberation and keen to embrace its positive valuation of their sexuality, groups of gay men in America began to model themselves on Tom's characters. The tight leather, motorcycle caps, and jackboots of these dirty drawings became "a blueprint for the appearance of gay men in the latter part of the twentieth century."<sup>34</sup> With the ubiquity of this outfitting came an easier identification of other gay men within the community. This form of "gaydar" could "pick out at a hundred paces whether a man was gay or straight just by external signs," at one and the same time making it easier to find potential partners and strengthening hypermasculine visions of homosexuality.<sup>35</sup> In this way, the "leatherman" look popularized by Tom's drawings extended beyond the realm of fetishism to form an affirmative visual identity for gay men in the United States.

By emitting a "positive message of respect, tolerance, and sexual freedom," Tom proposed a conceptualization of homosexuality as love rather than delinquency.<sup>36</sup> Yet, as mentioned above, much of his imagery paradoxically found inspiration in symbols of totalitarian oppression. While some critics claim that this style brings with it the "suggestion of gay self-loathing," such a conclusion is hard to reconcile with the jovial spirit evinced by Tom's men.<sup>37</sup> Rather, as one reviewer noted in 1989, Tom "conjures up images of authority not to worship at their feet, but to subvert them" for his subjects' gain.<sup>38</sup> Tom alluded to tyrannical political bodies in order to rob them of their potency, claiming their power instead for the men in his drawings. In their (apparently very capable) hands, such symbols served as a costume with dramatic "transformative power," allowing these men to reconfigure emblems of "legendarily heterosexual homophobic forces" as weapons of gay empowerment.<sup>39</sup> To be sure, Tom's work only represented one very specific portion of the gay community, essentially erasing lesbians and non-binary queers from the narrative, but it triggered a broader cultural phenomenon that impacted the entire community.

Tom's drawings thus supported "a more complicated discourse than those that are the concern of standard smut," and their use of fascist symbols seems to fit well with the larger (and surprisingly positive) impact of political repression on the development of marginalized identities.<sup>40</sup> Tom's tactic bears a strong resemblance to the origin story of the community in which his drawings first found fame. His work repurposed symbols of oppression to restore power to the oppressed, just as gay men and women in the United States repurposed their public persecution to form a cohesive whole. Labeled as communists for their supposedly subversive nature, the homosexual population drew on this conferred power to develop a greater sense of unity. In a political environment designed to dominate and denigrate perceived deviants, the gay community transformed its sanctioned image of depravity into a positive identity of pride. Putting the theory behind Tom's sketches into lived experience, the American gay community reconfigured the terms of their oppression, achieving national solidarity and consequently empowerment in the midst of an institutionalized assault on their liberties.

With the conflation of political anxieties and threatening identities arises a kind of cultural power. Such a response was almost certainly not anticipated by American policymakers of the 1950s, who sought only to employ prevailing homophobic sentiment as a political weapon. Fearmongering politicians endeavored to connect the straight-passing, active homosexual to the looming Soviet threat out of political expediency, justifying themselves with faulty rationales. Viewed as inherently subversive and immoral (in addition to their potentially red sympathies), gay men and women in the United States found themselves subject to a massive campaign of institutionalized homophobia. However, this widespread effort to target sexual deviants unwittingly produced a burgeoning national gay consciousness—and this newfound community would not be satisfied with a definition based on its supposed deficiencies. Instead, the gay-positive work of artists like Tom of Finland was used to codify an affirmative identity characterized by unapologetic visibility. Ironically, Tom's personal history and artistic choices similarly reflected the scars of a national terror of totalitarian incursion. Yet, within Tom's sketches, symbols of authoritarian domination are appropriated by the original objects of oppression, just as the American gay community secured their emancipation in the midst of sociopolitical persecution.

There was, then, a connection between homosexuality and communism in the 1950s—but not one resembling anything projected by Republican politicians or feared by the American public. Attempts to process the Soviet totalitarian threat, both in the United States and in Finland, significantly influenced the developing trajectory of American gay life. Homosexuality and authoritarianism share an odd and complicated history: rather than impeding

the development of a marginalized community, political and social oppression paradoxically spurred the solidification of an American gay consciousness and the codification of its visual identity.

*Brooke Yung in a junior majoring in English and History. She prepared this essay as part of Professor Lauren Turek's seminar on US Society and Politics since 1945 (HIST 2440) in Spring 2019.*

## NOTES

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- 3 *Ibid.*
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- 12 May, *Homeward Bound*, 249.
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- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Ibid.*, 22.
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- 18 *Ibid.*, 33.
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- 31 *Ibid.*
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- 33 Snaith, "Tom's Men," 78.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 79.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 81.
- 36 Nodell, "Tom of Finland."
- 37 Rechy, "Tom of Finland," 32.
- 38 Snaith, "Tom's Men," 85.
- 39 Rechy, "Tom of Finland," 32.
- 40 Snaith, "Tom's Men," 85.