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# NABOKOV'S COLD WAR NOVELS AND THE CONTAINMENT OF AMERICAN SEXUALITY

The memory of pre-revolutionary Russia, the Russian intellectual diaspora in Europe between the wars, America as a newly-found Arcadia, butterfly hunting, an obsessive debunking of psychoanalysis: these are some among the well-known preoccupations in Nabokov's American writings, produced mostly in the 1950s and 1960s, a period in which these concerns appeared distinctly removed from those of the American collective psyche, catalyzed as it was on the one hand with the cult of domesticity and consumption, and on the other by pervasive fears of nuclear annihilation and the ever escalating thrust of containment politics.

Despite Nabokov's occasional professions of ideological alignment with America's Cold War politics, his American writings have appeared to many to deliberately elude any reference to the political and social context in which they were produced. "I am an American writer [...] America is the only country where I feel mentally and emotionally at home", wrote Nabokov in *Strong Opinions*, where he also claimed to "feel a suffusion of warm, lighthearted pride when I show my green USA passport at European frontiers" (Nabokov 1973, 26; 131). And yet, in his literature, the aesthete always appeared to supplant concerns with the temporality of his art.

In this paper I look at Nabokov's most widely debated Cold War novels, *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, seeking out textual clues to that rich and complex period in American culture. I will try to trace the way in which – despite Nabokov's apparent dismissal of its evidence – his outsider's immigrant voice intersects certain crucial nodes of American culture in that period, and especially the way in which sexuality, a highly-charged domain in the early Cold War years, operates in the American novels as Nabokov's distinct marker of his commitment to the politics of the Cold War.

Vladimir Nabokov's American novels – i.e. the novels he wrote during his residence in the U.S., and which include *Bend Sinister* (1947), *Lolita* (1955), *Invitation to a Beheading* (1957), and

*Pale Fire* (1962)<sup>1</sup> – all belong to what cultural historians have defined the “Long 1950s”, an almost mythical period of American prosperity, coinciding with the economic boom of the post-World War II era and characterized – among other things – by a decisive expansion of a middle class, an emphasis on family and domestic values, obsessive fears of Communism at home and abroad, and growing U.S. influence in the world within the context of third-world de-colonization and pervasive anxieties of nuclear doom (Carosso 2012, 16-19). Interpretations of Nabokov’s *oeuvre* have tended to elude the American topicality of his plots, contexts and characters, while rather focusing on issues such as language, word-play, irony, identity, emigration, or on the supposed pervasive concerns for a transcendent, or “otherworldly”, realm (Alexandrov 1991). And yet, upon its long-awaited U.S. release in 1958, *Lolita* was met by generalized prurience as well as widespread chastisement for its explicit treatment of deviant sexuality, but also for its disdainful accounts of American life, especially consumer culture and the drudgery of suburbia – a response that Nabokov himself addressed in his postscript to the novel.

Scholarship over the last decades has attempted to focus more closely on the historical relationship between Nabokov’s themes and their American context. Andrea Pitzer’s controversial new biography, *The Secret History of Vladimir Nabokov* (2013), revolves around the assumption that, far from engaging art for art’s sake, Nabokov’s *oeuvre* detailed “the horrors of his era” (Pitzer 2013, 4) or, as a reviewer well put it, pondered “the oddness of the relationship [that his] writings create between the fictive and the historical” (Ford 2013). Along with Pitzer, scholars such as Brand, Castronovo, Haegert, and Sweeney – just to name a few – have recently steered Nabokov studies towards the American context of Nabokov’s novels (the road trips, American commercial culture, immigration), an aspect of his work that Nabokov once infamously defined “topical trash” (Nabokov 1958, 313). The question I would like to address is whether America is in some way addressed in Nabokov’s novels of the 1950s and 1960s beyond its mere function of context and social commentary, posing the question of whether Cold War America was crucial in shaping those novels. It is my contention that sexuality, its social and political function in Cold War America, and its potential in that context to subvert the body politic, lie at the core of these works, whose political implications remain untapped if we merely submit to Nabokov’s own interpretive prescriptions, i.e. his notorious cant for sending critics to bark up the wrong tree (see Rampton 2008).

In a controversial inquiry into Nabokov’s fictional as well as personal sexual attitudes, Eric Naiman has argued that in Nabokov’s novels the figure of the “pervert” functions not so much as a literal signifier, but rather as an allegory of the author’s – and ideal reader’s – basic hermeneutic stance, i.e. the idea that the text must be “twisted” in

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<sup>1</sup> *Pale Fire* was actually completed in Montreux, Switzerland.

order to get to its essence. Lewdness, in other words, according to Naiman, is both a metaphor of Nabokov's textual strategies – which always displace language into the abyss of meaning – as well a central force of desire that constantly governs interpretations of the text. Although I subscribe to Naiman's overall argument, I would also like to suggest that perversion in Nabokov's novels does not only function as a trope of reading, but rather as a timely, historically-conscious response to some of the central preoccupations in American society at the time when these books were written and published. Of Nabokov's five English-language novels, at least four emphasize sexual subversion, i.e. the emergence of a discourse lying outside norms and conventions of the era. *Lolita* is a tale of paedophilia; homosexuality plays a key role in both *Bend Sinister* and *Pale Fire*. And *Ada*, Nabokov's last novel, is a story of incest.

Scholars have pointed out that, in the Long 1950s, masculinity and femininity were rigidly contained within very specific and narrow gender roles, and sexuality was predicated upon the “assumed moral purity of womanhood”, i.e. a series of social expectations that Betty Friedan famously defined, in her 1962 best seller, the “feminine mystique”. While conjuring up images of small screen TVs in wooden cabinets, of Ozzie and Harriet, and comfy suburban homes, the 1950s reflected for many Americans a post-war pattern of newfound prosperity in which Dad went off to work every day, while Mom stayed home, kept house, and devoted herself full-time to maternal duties (Melody-Peterson 1999, 115). A best seller of the decade, Dr. Benjamin Spock's *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (published in 1946, it underwent 144 printings and sold 16 million copies over 20 years) encouraged women to “focus on motherhood”, perceived as an antidote to the larger sexual and economic freedom women had experienced in wartime, when many had worked and earned real money for the first time, replacing the men who had gone off to war. According to Dr. Spock's orthodoxy, post-war education was to centre on following rules and controlling emotions – sexual drives most of all, which his book, as Melody and Peterson have pointed out in their study of American sexuality, “simply ignored” (Melody-Peterson 1999, 117).

In a decade when popular literature mostly shied away from frank discussion of sexual matters, one of the most widely sold books was *A Marriage Manual: A Practical Guidebook to Sex and Marriage* by Hannah and Abraham Stone, a Baedeker to prevailing attitudes to sexuality during the decade. First published in 1935 but completely revised in its 1952 edition, *A Marriage Manual* discussed sexuality as strictly functional to procreation and rigorously bound to marriage. Female sexuality in particular was viewed as divorced from orgasm, since a woman's sexual impulse, the Stones observed, “may normally remain dormant for a long period” (Melody-Peterson 1999, 124).

A slightly less restrictive view of sexuality was held by another popular family planning manual of the Long 1950s, Eustace Chesser's *Love Without Fear: How to*

*Achieve Sex Happiness in Marriage*. Originally published in Britain in 1940 (and acquitted of obscenity charges in 1942), the book appeared in the U.S. in 1947, selling three-quarter million copies in its first hardcover edition. The paperback edition did even better. Although allowing for the view that pre-marital sex might in fact be beneficial to produce what it called a “mature marriage”, Chesser was aligned with the Stones in his suspicion towards feminine sexuality. He in particular chastised sexual promiscuity for women, which it defined “wholly opposed to woman’s true feminine nature” (Melody-Peterson 1999, 124). Chesser seemed to worry that, if unleashed under the wrong circumstances outside marriage, female sexuality might be difficult to control – and hence he stressed, like the Stones, the need for its decisive containment within the boundary of marriage and family.

During the Long 1950s, adultery was illegal in most U.S. states and specifically targeted by the Hollywood Production Code (also known as the Hays Code), which limited Hollywood’s rendition of marital life to the ideal based on the traditional Christian view of marriage, rooted in the idea that “the family that prays together stays together”. The Code explicitly stipulated that adultery, while sometimes necessary plot material, “must not be explicitly treated, or justified, or presented attractively” (Pennington 2007, 153). The Hays Code also banned any positive treatment of homosexuality, in line with U.S. law and social attitude at the time: prior to 1962 sodomy was a felony in every state, and gays were socially stigmatized as sick individuals, both medically and mentally (Eaklor 2008, 77-103).

Nevertheless, sexual behavior in America did not seem to mirror its representations in the mainstream cultural outlets. A banner ad appearing in metropolitan areas around the country in the 1950s warned that “1.5 million Americans have syphilis or gonorrhea and don’t know it”, serving as explicit evidence that sexual promiscuity was becoming a problem in society (Vickers 2008, 45-46). Two books published at the turn of the 1950s provided further proof. Alfred Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1953), better known as the Kinsey Reports, made headlines as they disputed some of the widely-held tenets of American sexuality in the Long 1950s. Kinsey’s work presented evidence of attitudes to sexuality in the country that disrupted the Cold War consensus. In particular, it contested notions that women generally were not sexual, and presented evidence that sexuality as practiced in the U.S. was largely an affair that exceeded the sacred boundaries of marriage.

Even more controversially, Kinsey tackled head-on the master taboos of Cold War sexual culture: adolescent and pre-adolescent sexuality, as well as homosexuality. Based on interviews with educators, parents as well as convicted child molesters, Kinsey provided detailed evidence of hundreds of cases of sexual abuse of children by adults (Vickers 2008, 46). In other words, Kinsey exposed an America swarming with subversion to the most widely held tenets of sexual propriety. Cold War orthodoxy

exploited Kinsey's findings as evidence of an attack on America's founding moral and political values (Melody-Paterson 1999, 122).

Although there is no evidence that Nabokov ever met Kinsey, nor that he actually read either of the Reports, scholars have pointed out how *Lolita* makes a number of tongue-in-cheek references to Kinsey and to the larger array of sexual orthodoxy that his Reports debunked. In the novel's Foreword, for example, John Ray, Jr., PhD, remarks that Humbert is one of "at least 12% of American adult males [who] enjoy yearly, in one way or another, the special experience 'H.H.' describes with such despair" (5). Later on in the novel, Humbert cites sexology statistics on "the median age of pubescence for girls" (43), makes reference to "writers on the sex interests of children" (43), and pleads to the "frigid gentlewomen of the jury" (132). These tongue-in-cheek remarks, as Appel has pointed out, "poke fun at the work of Alfred Kinsey" (Appel 1970, 324). In fact, they do more than that: they establish a connecting line between Kinsey, Nabokov and a whole area of early Cold War culture which also includes J.D. Salinger, the Beats, Grace Metalious's middle-brow classic *Peyton Place* (1956) and Nicholas Ray's cult movie *Rebel Without a Cause* (1956) – each in its own way interested in debunking the myths of the Cold War consensus and exploring sexual subversion.

Youth, and adolescence in particular, appeared in American culture as a problematic seat of that subversion in the Long 1950s. Interest in adolescence intensified during this decade, when teenagers emerged for the first time as a prominent sociological category, endowed with specific social roles, as well as specific rights, mostly derived from their newly-acquired power in influencing consumer choices during the post-World War II economic boom. Leerom Medovoi has shown how this new social formation emerged in a cultural space that was distinct from the narrowly-defined social and sexual roles of the pre-war era. American teenagers during the early Cold War years became subversives – or "rebels" – i.e. defined themselves through behaviors not aligned within norms of social containment of the era. The rise of rock 'n' roll (and of Elvis in particular), James Dean's rebellion "without a cause" as the synthesis of the wider social problem known as "juvenile delinquency", as well as the "bad girls" and "tomboys" depicted in popular movies and novels of the period, are all discussed by Medovoi as evidences of a decade in which Cold War confrontation propelled American society to accept, even encourage, teenage rebellion as a marker of its inherent democratic advantage (Medovoi 2005, 167-214).

The deviant girl phenomenon is particularly relevant here. In the second part of *Lolita*, Humbert is described as systematically re-arranging the bed sheets in the various motel rooms in order to conceal any signs of his illegitimate (in fact, criminal) behavior with a minor, "in such a way as to suggest the abandoned nest of a restless father and his tomboy daughter, instead of an ex-convict's saturnalia with a couple of fat ole whores" (138). If "Lolita the tomboy" is to be read, in Humbert's self-delusive construction, as the ideal cover-up for his perversion, *Lolita* in fact matches more closely the other

model of psychopolitically independent femininity of the 1950s, the “bad girl”, whose sexuality is enacted outside the rigid moral boundaries of the era, yet whose freewheeling eroticism opens her to exploitation and predation by immoral men (Medovoi 2005, 270). Humbert and Quilty stand as ultimate proof that Lolita’s carefree sexuality, removed from the constraints of the Cold War consensus (“She saw the stark [sexual] act merely as part of a youngster’s furtive world, unknown to adults. What adults did for the purposes of procreation was no business of hers”, 133), will make her the victim of sexual exploitation. Lolita the “bad girl” closely resembles other prototypes of juvenile delinquency in 1950s culture, from Silver in Mamie Van Doren’s *Girls Town* (1959) to Sarah Jane in Douglas Sirk’s seminal film *Imitation of Life* (1959), where sexual rebelliousness appears “initially as a source of strength”, soon reverting to an awareness that when girls play the sex card they leave themselves exposed to rape and sexual exploitation (Medovoi 2005, 270). If “it was [Lolita] who seduced me” (132), as Humbert staunchly proclaims to the jurors, it is Lolita who ultimately succumbs to her male predators.

It is within this larger cultural framework that Nabokov’s American novels require further attention. *Lolita*, for one, seems to rise out of Nabokov’s interest/obsession for subversive sexuality in Cold War America. Lionel Trilling argued that in writing the novel Nabokov explicitly sought to shock his readers and managed to do so by breaking “one of our unquestioned and unquestionable sexual prohibitions”: the taboo of “the sexual inviolability of girls of a certain age”, compounded with “what amounts to [impious] incest” (Trilling 1958, 92). Oddly enough, however, Nabokov refused any notion that *Lolita* was in any way a lewd or immoral book. In his famous postscript to the novel, “On a book entitled *Lolita*”, he went to great lengths in directing the hermeneutics of the book to specific sexually-neutral images in a novel which, he argued, offered “special delectation”. Famously, Nabokov claimed in the postscript that *Lolita*’s true theme was its author’s “private tragedy” of having had to abandon his “natural idiom” – the Russian language – “for a second-rate brand of English” (Nabokov 1958, 316-17).

Readers who rushed to buy the novel after it was finally published in the U.S. in 1958, amid fears of an obscenity trial which never materialized, saw it otherwise. *Lolita*’s extraordinary success, and Nabokov’s resulting wealth, came in the wake of the scandal the book had unleashed following its first publication in France in 1955, a scandal well encapsulated in the public quarrel between Graham Greene, one of the book’s early admirers, and the chief editor of the British newspaper *Sunday Express*, who pronounced *Lolita* “the filthiest book I have ever read” (see Vickers 2008, 49). The problem with emphasizing moral perversion in *Lolita* was that, if read from this perspective, the novel, which explicitly engaged pedophilia, “deviant” sexuality, prostitution, and sexual promiscuity, ran a collision course against the orthodoxy of the Long 1950s which located sexuality safely within the bond of marriage (May 1988, 114-

32). As Fredrick Whiting has well pointed out, critical reactions to the novel's publication in the U.S. (including Trilling's) aimed at neutralizing the sexually subversive plot, by emphasizing a formalist reading (i.e. in line with Nabokov's explication of the book as his "love affair with the English language"), in order to defuse the novel's symptomatic subversion of the logic of the Cold War consensus (see Whiting 1998). *Lolita's* scandal, as well as its appeal, lay precisely in the fact that the novel opened a space for a representation of sexual subversion which denied the integrity of the American home as nation on which the Cold War consensus was postulated.

The paratext of John Ray's fictional introduction, ironically inscribing the narrative within the framework of pseudo-clinical confession, allowed *Lolita* to tread the delicate space between the Cold War consensus and censorship, a space which proved crucial to the book's success. Ray denounces *Lolita* as a tale of "horrible", "abject", ultimately "abnormal" sexual behavior (Nabokov 1958, 5) – yet he does so within the logic of psychiatry and psychoanalysis whose authority the novel constantly seeks to undermine. And Humbert's fate, condemned not as a pedophile, but as a murderer, underlines the novel's ever present critique of the Cold War consensus: Humbert is jailed not for rape – his unspeakable crime becoming public only upon the publication of *Lolita*, and hence after his death – but for the murder of Claire Quilty, his rival in perversion. And in noting that, if he were his own jury, he would dismiss his murder charge and sentence himself to 30 years for rape, Humbert acknowledges that the problem with Cold War America lies in its incapability to healthily address discourses of sexuality.

Like *Lolita*, Nabokov's other novels of the Long 1950s rely on sexual subversion to organize their main narrative tropes. After a brief release in his next novel, *Pnin* (although a few of Nabokov's very imaginative scholars have managed to argue to the contrary, see Naiman 2002, 89-117), Nabokov's most hermetic and sophisticated novel, *Pale Fire*, published in 1962, returns to the theme of subversive sexuality at the time of the Cold War. Although *Pale Fire* has long been read as an "old-world aesthete's novel of wordplay and allusion", recent scholarship has converged on the notion that the very wordplay has allowed Nabokov "to engage cultural narratives that prescribed the limits of mid-century reality" (Belletto 2012, 62). If the Kinsey Report chose not to take sides as to the morality of homosexuals and presented its findings from interviews with over seventeen thousand subjects in an apparently neutral, fact-based manner, the public polemic on the perceived "heinous abnormality" of homosexuality raged during the Cold War years. While heterosexual love was subsumed, but rarely displayed, under that decade's cult of marriage and family (D'Emilio and Freedman 2010, 280), homosexuality held an even more complicated status, as it came to be construed as the form of sexual rebellion that most directly infringed on matters of domestic security. Unlike heterosexual love, which was never the topic of public conversation,

homosexuality turned out to be the perfect site to turn private stigma into a matter of national concern. In his *From Perverts to Fab Five* (2009), Rodger Streitmatter has studied the treatment of gays and lesbians in the U.S. after World War II, and has shown that the media in America were instrumental in bringing homosexuality under public scrutiny beginning in 1950, as Senator Joseph McCarthy's crusade against communist spies at home intersected a homophobia campaign aimed at alleged Communist sympathizers working for the State Department. Dubbed as the "Perverts on the Potomac" campaign, it helped demonize homosexuals not only as sexual deviants, but also a threat to the integrity of the nation. Homosexuals were described as emotionally unstable, immoral, and hence "very susceptible to Communism" (Streitmatter 2009, 8-11) – and therefore targeted, alongside with Communists, in the same category of national threats against which McCarthyism waged its infamous campaign.

In this context, Nabokov's *Pale Fire* becomes of even greater interest. In essence a story of misreading, in which Charles Kinbote – a homosexual college professor at a campus quite resembling Cornell (where Nabokov taught for most of the 1950s) – gets hold of an unpublished manuscript by the poet John Shade and sets out to write a long commentary of it, *Pale Fire* is construed to elude its own constraints. A text which ostensibly appears to address its fictional author's marriage, his suicide daughter and his own mortality, Shade's poem is transformed by Kinbote's delusional commentary into the tale of the deposed King Charles II of Zembla, an imaginary king from an imaginary land in the remote European North that the king was forced to flee following a Bolshevik-style revolution. King Charles – who, according to Kinbote's own fantasy, is no less than Kinbote himself – has found shelter in the U.S. Northeast in order to evade Jacob Gradus, a Communist-like "extremist" assassin who is hunting him across the globe and tracks him down at the end of the commentary, fires at him but misses his target, while mortally wounding Shade.

Recent criticism of *Pale Fire* – in particular Steven Belletto's *No Accident, Comrade* (2007) and Andrea Pitzer's *The Secret History of Vladimir Nabokov* (2013) – has argued, with ample references to news sources from the late 1950s and early 1960s, that *Pale Fire* is actually a sly commentary on the Cold War, and that its events and characters are rooted in Cold War-era news reports. Pitzer has noted that early reviews of *Pale Fire* had already made the connection between Kinbote's homeland of Zembla and the real-life Arctic Islands of Nova Zembla which, at the time *Pale Fire* was being written, had been chosen by Khrushchev as testing sites for thermonuclear bombs. Pitzer makes the argument that Nabokov

during his daily reading of the New York Herald Tribune in Switzerland [...] would have seen more than a dozen front-page stories mentioning Nova Zembla. Nova



Zembla appeared on maps in newspapers around the globe, with fall-out patterns noted. (Pitzer 2013, 78)

The figure of King Charles, the exiled homosexual, is therefore embedded in a tale explicitly evoking a Cold War scenario.

Within this perspective, it can be argued that *Pale Fire* presents a discussion on the intersection of Cold War fear of Communism and homophobia, in a way that parallels the McCarthy crusade of the early 1950s. According to Belletto, *Pale Fire* is the one Nabokov novel that addresses the writer's obsession with homosexuality, deriving from his unresolved relationship with his younger brother Sergej, whose "odd behavior" (as Nabokov termed it *Strong Opinions*) led him to an early death in a Nazi concentration camp. As Pitzer has noted, "[t]his lost, forgotten, and sometimes secret history suggests that behind the arts-for-art's-sake facade that Nabokov both cultivated and rejected, he was busy detailing the horrors of his era [...] in one way or another across four decades of his career" (Pitzer 2013, 6).

Belletto has contended that the tale of mythical Zembla, to which Kinbote gives over hundreds of pages of his commentary, "functions, in part, to manage the open secret of Kinbote's own homosexuality". (Belletto, 2007, 61). Whereas Zembla was, before the Extremists' coup, a land where sexuality could be practiced in all forms and King Charles himself was openly homosexual, he finds himself compelled to disguise his political as well as sexual identities after the coup. According to Belletto, this secret makes him the object of persecution by a Cold War community "that displaces a patriotism based on anti-Communism with a patriotism based on something equally destructive – homophobia" (Belletto 2012, 61), in much the same way in which at the height of McCarthyism anti-Communism and homophobia operated as parallel strategies of political control and repression. In a way directly associated with the politics of McCarthy's witch-hunts, *Pale Fire* emphasizes the American Cold War practice of eliding differences among the perceived enemies of democratic freedom in such a way that homosexuals came to be treated as political threats on a par with Communists (Belletto 2012, 62).

If *Pale Fire* can be read as a distinct engagement with leading Cold War concerns of anti-Communist paranoia and homophobia, it remains to be seen where exactly Nabokov positioned himself on the issue. In *Bend Sinister*, the novel Nabokov was working on when he learned of Sergej's death in 1945, the hero – like Sergej – pays with his life for speaking out against a brutal and repressive regime. Nabokov's conflicting feelings towards his brother veer *Bend Sinister* towards a skewed rendition: it is not the hero who is gay, but rather the tyrant who orders his death. In this regard, *Bend Sinister* is textbook Cold War material. In *Pale Fire*, however, this paradigm is upended. Having established Kinbote/King Charles as a homosexual from the book's very foreword (beginning with Kinbote's repulsion towards a "pulpous pony-tailed [waitress]" working in the college faculty lounge, *Pale Fire*, p. 449), the commentary

goes on to integrate homosexuality and Cold-War politics in a non-normative way. The “lithe youths diving into the swimming pool” that King Charles observes from afar while in captivity after being dethroned by the revolution (*Pale Fire*, p. 521) create one of several moments in the novel where the sexually “deviant” individual is cast as the victim, not the agent, of a totalitarian regime. The same dynamics applies in America, where King Charles/Kinbote finds himself compelled to keep a lower profile – not only sexually but also politically. He is clearly not a Communist, but his somewhat effeminate posturing, unknown identity (making him a potential spy within the Cold War paranoia about possible infiltration) and illicit behaviour (Kinbote steals Shade’s manuscript which he then publishes with his own commentary) all come together to make him the object of persecution by a Cold War community whose sinister conflation of sexual and political subversion Nabokov now appears finally ready to confront.

In *Containment Culture*, a seminal study of the pervasiveness of Cold War rhetoric in cultural narratives of the American 1950s, Alan Nadel has argued that those narratives “made personal behavior as part of a global strategy at the same time as they personalized the international struggle with Communism”. By constantly reminding Americans that “the Soviet Union was a Godless place [...] while in America ‘the family that prays together stays together’ (although mom and daddy do so in separate beds)”, Nadel has pointed out, American narratives of the Cold War contributed to frame culture within a space that was at all times relevant to that era’s political agenda. In the readings I have suggested in this paper, Nabokov’s American novels are no exception to the Cold War landscape they inhabit. They diverge from normative narratives of the Cold War, as I have attempted to show, in the fact that rather than highlighting what Nadel has described as “a normality in all things that I absolutely believed existed, although I could find no observable examples in my home or anyplace else” (Nadel 1995, viii), Nabokov’s Cold War novels appear precisely to challenge such call to “normality”. By establishing sexual subversion as a central narrative trope, Nabokov’s American novels at the same time reflect and resist the Cold War consensus in which they are inscribed: they submit to it by raising the specter of Communism as the least desirable of Cold War outcomes; yet at the same time they resist that rhetoric by denying the very social foundation of Cold War America: the nuclear, heterosexual family that prays and stays together.

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