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February 1, 2013

Found History: Letters to *ONE* Magazineby [Chris Freeman](#)

The words rang out over the Mall in Washington and across the globe at President Barack Obama's second inaugural, on Martin Luther King Day, 2013: "We, the people, declare today that the most evident of truths—that all of us are created equal—is the star that guides us still; just as it guided our forebears through Seneca Falls and Selma and Stonewall."

These historical touchstones are, in effect, rhetorical shorthand. Seneca Falls stands in for the women's rights movement, especially on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. Selma represents ongoing debates, soon to be decided by the U. S. Supreme Court, regarding affirmative action in college admissions and federal supervision of certain counties in the South that cannot yet be trusted to allow fair access to African-American voters.

But what does Stonewall stand for? Pat Buchanan, whose overt homophobia is perhaps surpassed in American culture only by the members of the congregation of the Westboro Baptist Church, was, unsurprisingly, offended by the mere mention of Stonewall. On Fox News, he said, "What's he talking about—Stonewall? That's a barroom brawl in Greenwich Village in 1969. Does that belong in a presidential inaugural?"

Nonetheless, the fact that Buchanan sort of knows what Stonewall was—is—reassures us that queer history has seeped into the mainstream, even to its rightmost flank.

Stonewall, to a glbtq audience, has a more nuanced resonance, but it is not altogether unproblematic. Some of us hear it as a great moment of inclusion—President Obama gave a shout-out to the gay community, under the umbrella of equality! And, after all, our place as a protected class under the Fourteenth Amendment could very well be a deciding factor in the upcoming same-sex marriage Supreme Court decision. But some younger members of the "community"—can we still use that word?—actually felt ambivalence, resistance, and even *exclusion*.

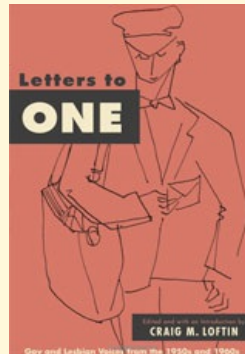
I can report from a few of my own students' reactions that Stonewall felt too "last generation" to include, for example, transfolk or genderqueer individuals who are suspicious of what to them feels like a kind of official appeasement, the President throwing a bone to the lavender part of the electorate, the upright gay citizens' brigade.

However, if we recognize that "Stonewall" is a stand-in, like the other terms in that alliterative trio, what does it mean? And whom does it represent? This is where the study of queer history can help us unpack the shorthand for gay inclusion into the story of this country and its civil rights battles.

The Making of a Homosexual Minority

When John D'Emilio was a graduate student at Columbia University in the 1970s, he knew of only one out, gay professor in the history department. He became involved with the Gay Academic Union—an affiliation group of students, faculty, independent scholars, and activists—which helped establish the study of queer history as a discipline. When D'Emilio set out to explore the beginning of the gay rights movement, he thought, like everyone else, that the Stonewall riots in June of 1969 was where it all began.

He quickly realized, however, that there was a pre-history, a couple of decades of activism and organizing that called itself the "Homophile Movement." Fortunately, D'Emilio followed through on the revised version of his project and interviewed as many of the pioneers of the gay movement in the United States as he could get to, most of whom thought that they and their legacy had already been relegated to the dustbin of history.

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D'Emilio ultimately published his findings in a book called *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*.

The book's introduction opens with an account of a meeting: "On a Saturday afternoon in November 1950, five men convened at the home of Harry Hay in the Silverlake district of Los Angeles. They gathered to discuss a proposal written by Hay that had as its purpose 'the heroic objective of liberating one of our largest minorities from . . . social persecution.'"

D'Emilio notes that "out of their meeting eventually came the Mattachine Society, the organization whose founding heralded the beginning of the gay emancipation movement in the United States."

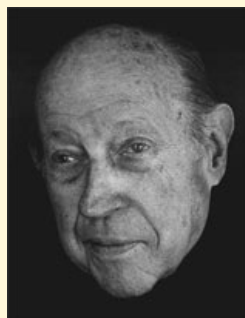
Hay had, in effect, drawn up a document that could well be called the first "gay agenda." And thus began what President Obama succinctly called "Stonewall."

D'Emilio's first footnote, at the end of that quotation about "social persecution," points to another great historical chapter in modern queer history: "See 'Remarks Made by Harry Hay to First Discussion Group,' November 1950, typescript, personal papers of James Kepner, Los Angeles."

Kepner is the original homosexual hoarder, lucky for us and lucky for history. He clipped, filed, stacked, and saved everything, as did a few of his confreres. He also was a joiner and a community-minded person.

Within a couple of years' time, these folks created the Mattachine Society and, in what was the first of many internecine battles, some members split off to form One, Incorporated, the first ever "homosexual" non-profit in the state of California.

Part of their mission was to provide a public forum for this newly articulated homosexual minority. And so, *One Magazine* was born. It was available on newsstands across the country by January of 1953, and it sometimes included a subheading—"The Homosexual Viewpoint"—on the front cover.



[W. Dorr Legg](#), one of the founders of *One*.

With that magazine, and with the clipping and preserving of people like Kepner, we have an incredible record of pre-Stonewall gay American history. The "personal papers" D'Emilio refers to became the basis for what is now known as the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archive, the oldest and largest glbtq archive in the world.

The collection is now part of the University of Southern California Libraries. For more than a dozen years, ONE has been located, ironically or coincidentally, in a former fraternity house adjacent to the USC campus, and graduate students and others—community members, scholars, memoir writers—have made great use of its holdings.

One of those community volunteers, Craig M. Loftin, was also a graduate student working on American history and Gender Studies. As part of his cataloging work, he discovered a treasure trove: thousands of letters written to *ONE Magazine* from all over the world.

Loftin has assembled an impressive, revealing sample of those documents into an important new book, *Letters to ONE: Gay and Lesbian Voices from the 1950s and 1960s*.

Resilience and Strategic Adaptation

Loftin is a good historian and a fine writer, as his informative introduction demonstrates. He provides a brief but detailed account of the letters, how they arrived and survived, and he gives a helpful overview of their contents.

"One might expect the letters to be bleak and depressing," Loftin acknowledges. "According to conventional wisdom, gay men and lesbians suffered relentlessly in the 1950s and 1960s because of the repressive practices of the federal government, police, medical profession, and churches. Some letters certainly conform to these expectations. In most letters written to *ONE*, however, the general tone is not despair, but rather resilience and strategic adaptation with a sense of irony and even humor despite the serious challenges many writers faced."

To tell the tale, Loftin includes 127 letters, helpfully grouped within five chapters, based on the style and content of the letters: Biography and Self-Analysis; Love, Sex, and Relationships; Repression and Defiance; Incarceration; and Representations and Stereotypes.

Loftin makes a persuasive case for the significance of this archive.

"The very existence of the letters reflects the developing sophistication of a national gay subculture in the 1950s and 1960s. No comparable body of correspondence from so many self-identified gay men and lesbians is known to exist from earlier decades. The letters represent an unprecedented national dialogue about the status of gay people in the United States."

This is the very national dialogue—a sixty-year-old conversation and debate—that President Obama evoked in his inaugural remarks.

Four key conditions, in Loftin's estimation, created the environment out of which this dialogue began: World War II, which the pioneering work of D'Emilio's friend and colleague Allan Bérubé has shown to have been instrumental in the formation of urban gay and lesbian communities across the country; the publication of the Kinsey Reports on human sexuality, on men in 1948 and on women in 1953, which ignited an international conversation about what people do and with whom and showed that homosexual activity was much more common than anyone ever thought; the Cold War and its McCarthyite witch hunts and persecutions of homosexuals as threats to national security and morality; and the Black Civil Rights movement, which ushered in a fight for freedom and social justice on a massive scale in the 1950s and afterwards.

Loftin closes the introduction with some analysis of the concept of "the closet," which today seems to be the definitive trope of this era. In the 1950s and 60s, as the story goes, most gay people lived "in the closet"; in the 1970s, many of them finally began to "come out of the closet."

Loftin fully expected to find that kind of language throughout the thousands of letters he read as he chose material for the book. However, that was not the case.

"The word 'closet' neither appears in any letters in this book, nor in any *ONE* correspondence in its current usage," Loftin writes. "The modern closet metaphor did not exist in the 1950s and early 1960s because there was no expectation that gay people would reveal their homosexuality to anyone except other gay people. . . . 'The closet' is a condescending term associated with being ashamed, frightened, or unhappy about being gay. Most of *ONE*'s correspondents were none of these things. They did not imagine themselves dwelling in some vast closet, but imagined themselves wearing masks that enabled them to pass as heterosexual when necessary to avoid antigay persecution."

The masks, by the way, were also the emblems of the Mattachine Society, whose name is taken from medieval jester figures who always appeared in disguise.

Dear *ONE*

The letters Loftin has selected are personal, confessional, intellectual, argumentative, sad, and occasionally desperate. Some are quite critical of the magazine's content or point-of-view. Many of them seem to have been written under palpable duress. A sampling of the letters, focusing on one or two from each chapter, will perhaps indicate the range of the writers' concerns as well as the variety of the book's main content.

In the "Biography and Self-Analysis" section, a man called Larry from Texas sent a letter to *ONE* dated August 7, 1961. He expresses his wish that he could have included some money to support the organization and the magazine—many readers did in fact contribute a few dollars here and there—and then goes on to say that he's "writing . . . because I must get some things off my chest."

Larry is a deeply lonely man, one who says he has "been a homosexual all my life and yet I haven't had any experiences. . . . I do not have a friend to my name. . . . I am emotional and upset most all of the time." Like many readers, Larry asks for a reply and for information about life in California, before closing with a post-script, in all caps: "PLEASE HELP ME BEFORE MY LIFE IS TORN TO PIECES AND I HAVE TO FACE THE MENTAL WARD."

A "Miss D" wrote to the magazine in July 1955 to express her disdain for an "expert" article by noted sexologist and psychologist Albert Ellis. "The homosexual has to 'adjust' to his homosexuality no more than he has to adjust to the color of his eyes. . . . There is nothing quite like compounding a neurosis to send an individual 'running to his analyst' to be adjusted out of his adjustment."

An eloquent and witty thinker, Miss D concludes with a flourish, one that still sounds quite reasonable and apt nearly sixty years later: "But, to achieve a personal and social identity does not require life-long subservience to society-conceived, unproven theories of what constitutes a normal, well-adjusted human being; all this being based on the probability that there is or should be such a thing. . . . It is a waste of effort to pursue the study of human vagaries and behaviors without considering the social, intellectual and probable sexual evolution of the whole human species."

A queer theorist in the 1990s could not have said it better.

The chapter on "Love, Sex, and Relationship" includes letters about cruising, questions about terminology, and inquiries about meeting like-minded folk through contacts among the readership at *ONE*. The magazine, alas, was not the personal ads of the *Village Voice* or *The Advocate*.

In October of 1964, Neil from Oakland, California wrote in with a query about a remark made by a drag queen depicted by John Rechy in the Los Angeles section of his classic novel *City of Night*: "In Sept. 1964 issue, Miss Destiny says, 'I slept with a lot of fish.' What is a 'fish'?" The inquisitive Neil is also "curious about Anal Copulation."

A spirited note came from Megan, writing from Canada in the summer of 1956, asking about finding a pen pal: "I do not know if this is possible, but could you pass along my name and address to someone or a Club you would know that would be interested in exchanging correspondences with the writer as I would like very much corresponding with some American Lesbians about my age."

"Repression and Defiance" features the most explicitly political letters and views. A short note dated April of 1958 from "A New England State" was sent in by "Mr. J., House of Representatives," urging the magazine to "keep up the good work. It is a long hard pull to enlighten people, but we do have a few scientists on our side. There is a solid wall of Puritan superstition under ages of make-believe that society seems to think is the truth. But by gradual and persistent enlightenment it will give way to the light of knowledge."

Censorship and seizure of *ONE* magazine were not uncommon. Stephen from Ontario, Canada wrote in 1958 to describe how the local postmaster opened his mail and confiscated the magazine. He was furious: "When I got outside I got good mad at these stupid laws over here and it spoiled the rest of the day for me. . . . No matter what happens, I do want to keep up my membership, I guess I needed this jolt by the customs here, to realize that I look forward to *One's* magazine, always, but not quite realizing it that way."

Significantly, the magazine had been seized by the postmaster in Los Angeles in 1954. *ONE* sued, and a federal district court supported the postmaster, but ultimately, in 1958, the United States Supreme Court reversed the decision, which was an early landmark case on homosexuality in the American legal system.

This was not the first legal wrangle the homophile movement had engaged in. In 1952, Dale Jennings, a founding member of *Mattachine*, was arrested by the Los Angeles Vice Squad on trumped up solicitation charges.

Hay, Rudi Gemreich, and the others encouraged him to fight rather than meekly plead guilty as was the prevailing custom. Jennings' acquittal was a huge boon for *Mattachine* and for other homosexuals around the country who were paying close attention to this kind of unfair prosecution. The law was, sometimes, our friend.

However, the "Incarceration" section of *Letters to ONE* includes many bleak stories about men who were arrested and served time for reasons related to their sexuality. Loftin found no evidence among the thousands of letters of any women who were arrested for similar reasons.

A pair of letters with a happy ending highlight this section. Richard and Darren, a couple in Pennsylvania, were arrested in 1964, to much humiliation. They were disowned by their families and without the means to fight the bogus charges made by a group of local thugs.

Richard, in the first letter, writes, "There is no one Darren and I can turn to for help. Then I remembered *ONE*; it was worth a try. . . . what we are really hoping for is help to fight this case—a most profound injustice!"

Two months later, Darren wrote: "You were kind enough to put us in touch with the Janus Society in Philadelphia who in turn procured for us a very good attorney that handled our case on credit. . . . We were released. . . . Without your help we would probably still be awaiting trial without legal council [sic]. . . . Please keep up your good work in the homophile movement."

As this situation indicates, the people who worked at *ONE* often replied to the letters, and, fortunately, as good packrats and archivists, they saved copies of what they sent, which show the various ways they intervened. According to Loftin, while some of the responses may seem formulaic or a bit rushed, others, especially those sent to correspondents who seemed to be in crisis, were more personal and empathetic.

Often, those letters were passed on to an expert, such as the psychologist Blanche Baker, who wrote columns for *ONE* for several years. She reached out to many troubled souls and offered much-needed help and advice.

The final section, "Representations and Stereotypes," provides a

sense of the images and perceptions of homosexuals and homosexuality in this era.

A defiant "Miss J" wrote to *ONE* from Brooklyn in 1958, "It is extremely difficult for the average woman to find congenial people. . . . I have written two novels about the homosexual woman and feel that my books are true-to-life, realistic and interesting. . . . I do NOT pull that old switch at the end where in most gay books, the one girl goes off with a man, thus settling the 'problem' of her homosexuality once and for all! . . . My novels contain no such lulling conclusions."

The fictional representations of gay people, as Vito Russo argued persuasively in *The Celluloid Closet*, his encyclopedic study of gays in cinema, often featured punishment or even death for gay characters. Miss J refused to play that game.

Conclusion

Reading *Letters to ONE* makes me so thankful that these documents, until now hidden from history, have come to light in this highly readable, informative book.

Imagine one of the correspondents stumbling across a copy of this book at a local Barnes & Noble, thumbing through it, and finding her letter printed.

That survival—of the writer and the letter—is a huge part of this story, and it is now included in the great national conversation with the enthusiastic endorsement of our first African-American president.

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Letters to ONE: Gay and Lesbian Voices from the 1950s and 1960s. Edited with an Introduction by Craig M. Loftin. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012. The book may be ordered from the publisher [here](#).

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Chris Freeman holds a Ph.D. in English and Gay and Lesbian Studies from Vanderbilt University. He teaches at Dornsife College at the University of Southern California, and he is a member of the Advisory Board of the Monette-Horwitz Trust and a board member at ONE Archives. With James Berg, he edited *The Isherwood Century*, which won a Lambda Literary Award in 2001. They have also co-edited *Conversations with Christopher Isherwood; Love, West Hollywood*; and a forthcoming volume on Isherwood for the University of Minnesota Press. Freeman is a regular contributor to the *Gay and Lesbian Review*.



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