

Introduction

Letter writing is a dying craft. Whether communicating to relatives back home, to a lover during a period of separation, or to the editor of a newspaper, the process of writing words manually on an actual piece of paper has mostly been replaced by the ease and convenience of email, instant messaging, Facebook posts, Tweets, and other new forms of electronic communication. Communication through electronic messaging favors spontaneity and impulsivity, whereas the rituals of formal letter writing require more planning and thought. These rituals include choosing paper (friendly small stationery tinted blue or businesslike white 8-1/2" x 11") and deciding whether to handwrite or type the letter (handwriting evokes intimacy, typing evokes cold professionalism). All of the senses are involved in formal letter writing. The paper has a physical texture in the hands. Ink and pencil lead have distinctive odors; scribbling and typing make distinctive sounds. The gluey taste of envelopes and (in the past) stamps lingers in the mouth. Rather than merely pushing a "send" button, letters require physical effort to mail, time during which an individual might decide to revise the letter once more, or perhaps not send it at all.

The letters you are about to read were written by gay men and lesbians during the 1950s and the early to mid-1960s. These letters were written to the editors of *ONE*, the first openly gay magazine in the United States. *ONE* reached several thousand readers every month from 1953 to 1967. Although *ONE* did edit and publish some letters in its monthly "Letters to the Editor" section, most of the letters in this book have never been published in any form.

Each issue of *ONE* offered a broad range of gay-related contents, including essays, fiction, poetry, satire, and crime reports, as well as reviews of books, movies, and plays. *ONE* was published by ONE, Inc., one of three major American "homophile" organizations of the 1950s and 1960s (gay activists described themselves as "homophiles" until the

late 1960s). The two other major homophile organizations were the Mattachine Society, founded in Los Angeles in 1950, and the Daughters of Bilitis, founded in San Francisco in 1955. *ONE, Inc.*, was founded in late 1952 when several Mattachine members in Los Angeles broke away from Mattachine because they believed that publishing a monthly magazine would mobilize gay men and lesbians across the country more effectively than Mattachine's secretive organizing strategies. *ONE's* approach was highly influential because the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis both began publishing their own magazines modeled after *ONE* in subsequent years. In addition to these American homophile organizations, at least a dozen other homophile organizations existed in Western Europe during the 1950s, many with their own publications. Some of the letters in this book provide interesting details about these American and European organizations that were at the forefront of early gay rights activism, but most of these letters were written by individuals whose only contact with homophile activism was reading *ONE* magazine and writing a letter to the editor. These individuals did not consider themselves "activists" in any formal sense, but they nonetheless represented a growing civil rights impulse that was permeating gay individuals and communities nationwide in the 1950s and 1960s. Academic scholarship on the homophile movement has tended to overlook this grass-roots dimension.¹

Letters to *ONE* usually opened with a request to "please renew my subscription," and then diverged into a variety of topics. Some correspondents gave the magazine soaring praise; others, damning criticism. Some wrote to share news about themselves or their local communities; others wrote just to get a few things "off my chest," in the words of one correspondent.² Some people asked for advice, such as how to find a lawyer, how to handle family problems, or how to meet other gay people. These letters offer a unique window into the collective thoughts and experiences of gay people at a time when their sexual identities and communities were often camouflaged and shrouded in secrecy.

During and after *ONE's* years of publication, Dorr Legg, *ONE's* business manager, kept careful guard over the thousands of letters written to the magazine. After Legg's death in 1994, the letters became part of the *ONE* National Gay and Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles, where I found them in unlabeled boxes while working as a volunteer and researcher. The letters chosen for this book provide the richest descriptions of the writers' lives and feelings.³ These letters tell detailed stories, reveal personal information, and describe the thoughts, fears, and hopes of their writers. I favored letters with distinct voices or unexpected observations. The 127 letters in this volume represent a broad range of viewpoints and experiences, but they are not a representative sample of gay people

across the country and should not be interpreted this way. Each letter represents only the person who wrote it. Together, however, these letters provide a collective mosaic of post-World War II gay and lesbian identity.

ONE received letters from every region of the country. This book contains letters from 25 states and the District of Columbia. Of the 127 letters, 28 came from California; 21 from New York; 7 each from Texas, Illinois, and Pennsylvania; 5 from Florida; 3 from Kansas, New Jersey, and Washington, D.C.; 2 each from Delaware, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Tennessee; and one each from Connecticut, Georgia, Massachusetts, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, Washington, and Wisconsin. The Midwest and Deep South are the least represented regions in the *ONE* correspondence. Internationally, 5 letters came from Canada and 9 from other countries. Four letters gave no address. The letters came disproportionately from large cities such as New York City (19 letters) and Los Angeles (13 letters). Slightly less than one-half of the letters came from midsize towns, suburbs, or small towns.⁴

One might expect these letters to be bleak and depressing. 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. Gay people were undoubtedly victimized in these years, but most *ONE* correspondents did not think of themselves as victims. Their letters are nuanced and complex. They defy many assumptions about gay life in the 1950s and 1960s. Many letters seem strikingly contemporary, as if they could have been written in 2012 rather than 1955 because so many of the problems described in these letters persist today. Gay people still routinely suffer from police harassment, job discrimination, and religious condemnation, as well as everyday harassment, ostracism, and violence.

The letters vividly capture the fears, anxieties, and disasters that befell gay people during these years of McCarthyite repression and institutionalized homophobia, but they also demonstrate a countervailing trend: the significant growth of gay and lesbian communities after World War II. 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, facilitated by the first American publication to declare itself

on its cover a “homosexual magazine” with a “homosexual viewpoint.” Gay people invented many new institutions and experimented with new methods of individual and collective visibility in these years.⁵ Widespread police crackdowns against gay individuals and communities in the 1950s, ironically, reflected the growing scale and visibility of the national gay subculture. More antigay crackdowns occurred because there were more gay institutions and communities to crack down on.

Several large-scale historical events in the mid-twentieth century influenced the growth of gay communities and identities in the United States. The first event was World War II. The war’s massive gender-segregated military mobilization brought persons with homosexual desires together from across the country. In the early years of the war, the presence of gay and lesbian soldiers was largely considered unproblematic, allowing a gay and lesbian subculture to flourish within the military. This tolerance (due to the increased need for soldiers) served to spread the notion of homosexuality as a discreet identity and subculture with its own folkways and history. In 1943 military branches began investigating and dishonorably discharging lesbian and gay soldiers by the thousands. These expelled soldiers and their gay friends were shocked by such contemptible treatment after risking death for their country. According to Allan Bérubé, “The generation of gay men and women who served in World War II grew into adulthood fighting one war for their country and another to protect themselves from their government’s escalating mobilization against them. When they returned to civilian life, some fought for their right to be treated fairly as patients, veterans, and citizens.”⁶ World War II made gay people aware of their large numbers and raised expectations about how they should be treated.

The second event was the 1948 publication of Alfred Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, better known as the male Kinsey Report. Kinsey was a zoologist at Indiana University who compiled thousands of detailed sex histories during the 1930s and 1940s. His published results were a best-selling cultural bombshell that revealed a wide gap between prudish American sexual morality and actual sexual behavior. According to the report, homosexual behavior was surprisingly common among American men. More than one-third of Kinsey’s surveyed men had had adult sexual experiences involving orgasms with other men. The report statistically demonstrated that homosexuality was not some exotic abnormality but rather a routine part of human behavior. Kinsey concluded from his research that social prohibitions against homosexuality had no rational basis.⁷ Similar to World War II, the Kinsey Reports (a female volume came out in 1953) emboldened gay people’s sense of collective identity, reminded them of their large numbers, and indirectly

encouraged protest against antigay laws and attitudes. Fittingly, *ONE* correspondents revered Kinsey. A poem published in *ONE*'s December 1953 issue declared, "You just mark my word: one day it will be *Saint* Kinsey!"⁸

The third event was the cold war. As tensions mounted between the United States and Soviet Union in the late 1940s and early 1950s, many robustly anticommunist politicians (such as U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy) claimed that gay and lesbian government employees weakened national security because homosexuals were allegedly mentally unstable and uniquely susceptible to blackmail, thus more likely to divulge sensitive government secrets to Soviet spies. In 1950 a Senate subcommittee conducted hearings into the employment of "homosexuals and other sex perverts" in government. Thousands of lesbian and gay federal employees lost their jobs and careers in the following decades.⁹

ONE catered to a disproportionately middle-class, white-collar demographic that was more likely to feel the impact of cold war-related job anxieties compared to blue-collar workers. Many *ONE* correspondents were government employees who feared discovery of their homosexuality by government investigators. Others worked as engineers or secretaries for government-contracted private companies in the military-industrial complex, and thus were subject to the same extensive background scrutiny and antigay policies as government workers. A high number of *ONE* correspondents worked in education, a profession noted for rampant political blacklisting and loyalty oaths during the peak years of cold war hysteria. According to a 1961 readers' survey, approximately 20 percent of *ONE*'s readership worked in education as teachers, professors, or librarians, or were college students, and about 40 percent worked in white-collar jobs outside of education (including many government and government-contracted workers). Approximately 27 percent were blue-collar or agricultural workers, and the remaining 13 percent worked in creative professions such as music or art, or were unemployed.¹⁰

The fourth major historical event to influence the rise of gay and lesbian communities and activism was the post-World War II black civil rights movement. The black civil rights movement provided inspiration for gay people to contemplate their own collective power and to think about similarities between society's treatment of gay people and black people. World War II brought each group's second class status into sharper focus and resulted in more organized and vocal demands for full inclusion into American society. Both the black civil rights movement and the homophile movement sought to challenge prevailing stereotypes by depicting their constituencies as respectable, dignified, hard-working, patriotic, and nonthreatening. Yet important historical differences existed between the two groups as well. The black civil rights

movement was much older, dating back to abolitionism before the Civil War. Gay Americans had no comparable tradition of formal activism on which to draw. In addition, most gay people in these years were able to “pass as heterosexual,” whereas most black Americans could not pass as white. Homophile activists (who were predominantly white, as were *ONE*'s contributors and correspondents) thus adopted cautious strategies for fear that too much sudden visibility or noisy protest might incite a cataclysmic backlash. Some *ONE* correspondents advocated more aggressive protest strategies, such as street marches and public demonstrations, but at least as many feared that *ONE* magazine might already be pushing the boundaries of tolerance and might get shut down, its mailing lists seized, and subscribers arrested. To the early homophile activists and *ONE* subscribers, one of the lessons of the black civil rights movement was that significant change took a long time. It had been a long journey from slavery to *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. Major changes in social attitudes about gay people would take a long time as well. But change was possible.

These four events—World War II, the Kinsey Reports, cold war national security hysteria, and the black civil rights movement—created a social context ripe for the widespread growth of a civil rights impulse among lesbians and gay men during the 1950s. These events brought gay people together, validated their identities as gay men and lesbians, and gave them courage to challenge (individually and collectively) many of the long-held biases and bigotries against same-sex attraction and behavior. These events also made them scapegoats and targets to a variety of repressive forces, particularly McCarthyites adept at exploiting national security anxieties. Under the shadow of these events, a generation of lesbians and gay men tried to make sense of their lives, their growing feeling of community, as well as their marginalization. In their letters to *ONE*, their civil rights impulse is reflected in their increased confidence to assert their right to live their lives as they saw fit in a manner that felt natural and right.

The letters in this book are organized into five chapters reflecting several major recurring themes. Their categorization is somewhat imprecise, however, because individual letters often discuss multiple themes.

The letters in chapter 1, “Biography and Self-Analysis,” are autobiographical and self-analytical in nature. These letters include “coming out” stories as well as opinions about the role of homosexuality in biology, society, and history. During the years these letters were written, homosexuality was listed as a “mental illness” in the first *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, published in 1952. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its

list of mental illnesses, mainly because of protests by gay activists.¹¹ The letters show that most *ONE* correspondents rejected the “mental illness” diagnosis long before 1973. Furthermore, the letters show that many psychologists, doctors, and therapists in the 1950s and 1960s also rejected the belief that homosexuality was a disease. Many correspondents told *ONE* that medical professionals had helped them accept their homosexuality and live happier lives.

Some of the letters in chapter 1 discuss the complex relationship between gender and sexuality. Gay people had long used manifestations of “gender inversion” as a means of recognizing one another, and scientific theories proclaiming that homosexuals were persons trapped in the bodies of the opposite gender were common before World War II. After World War II, the belief that homosexuality was a form of gender inversion declined because of the Kinsey Reports, which rejected any biological association between sexual preference and gender behavior. In addition, a middle-class model of homosexual identity that emphasized gender conformity rather than gender inversion became more prominent after World War II (reflecting the broader growth of middle-class identity in American society after World War II).¹² This postwar gay emphasis on gender conformity is expressed in several letters, sometimes in the form of animosity and loathing toward effeminate gay male “swishes.”

Several correspondents noted that gay men tended to dominate discussions of gay civil rights and that lesbian voices seemed marginalized within the homophile movement. Only 18 percent of the letters in this book came from women. This is an overrepresentation of the actual percentage of letters *ONE* received from women, which was somewhere between 5 percent and 10 percent.¹³ *ONE*'s editors continually struggled to attract more female readers. Most of the magazine's contributors were men, however, so its contents emphasized gay male experiences.

Some of the autobiographical letters in chapter 1 also touch on religion. Several *ONE* correspondents suffered religious conflict and church ostracism over their homosexuality, but resolved these conflicts by accepting their homosexuality as God's will. Interestingly, several ministers wrote lengthy letters praising *ONE* magazine and condemning antigay bigotry. Christian churches, overall, were certainly not in favor of homosexuality in the 1950s and 1960s, but they were not very noisy about it until the rise of the political “religious right” in later decades.¹⁴ African-American churches in particular tended to avoid the topic of homosexuality in the immediate post-World War II years.¹⁵

Chapter 2, “Love, Sex, and Relationships,” contains letters discussing more intimate aspects of gay life. From the letters received, sexual gratification (for men, at least) was not difficult to find in these years,

even in unlikely places such as small towns. But finding relationships more substantial than “‘blow-jobs’ and one night stands,” as one correspondent wrote, was exceedingly difficult in the antigay social climate.¹⁶ Although the word “marriage” was not used often in the letters, a repeatedly expressed desire for long-term and permanent relationships foreshadows the current struggle for legal recognition of gay marriages. Many gay people were clearly thinking about their relationships in political terms in the 1950s and 1960s. They were coming to understand that gay equality meant the right to pursue romance, love, and companionship (whether or not they called it “marriage”) on an equal footing with heterosexuals. Unlike today, however, long-term gay couples in the 1950s usually went to great lengths to ensure that civic authorities did *not* recognize their relationships because they could be arrested and jailed.

Chapter 3, “Repression and Defiance,” contains letters describing antigay persecution, such as getting arrested for a homosexual offense, getting kicked out of the military, or having “suspicious” mail seized by postal authorities. Homosexual behavior, described by various state laws as “sodomy” or “the crime against nature,” was illegal throughout the United States during the 1950s. In 1961 Illinois became the first state to decriminalize homosexual behavior, followed by Connecticut ten years later in 1971. During the 1970s, about half of U.S. states decriminalized homosexual behavior, and in 2003 the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Lawrence v. Texas* declared all laws criminalizing homosexuality as unconstitutional.¹⁷ A few lonely *ONE* correspondents in the 1950s and early 1960s were unable to overcome their fears of arrest and consequently avoided contact with other gay people. Most of *ONE*'s correspondents, however, accepted varying degrees of risk in order to participate in gay life. Their letters describe sporadic and inconsistent police enforcement against gay bars and other gathering places. Police raids often occurred after years of relatively peaceful free association. The possibility of getting arrested frightened everyone who walked into a gay bar.

Antigay crackdowns by the U.S. Postal Service were of particular concern to *ONE* subscribers and correspondents. Many *ONE* correspondents relied heavily on the Post Office to participate in gay life. They joined pen pal services and got to know one another, they ordered books and publications with gay themes, and some gay men acquired large collections of homoerotic male physique photos through the mail. Federal law, however, gave Post Office officials broad power to seize mail they considered obscene. For some postal officials, this could include anything pertaining to homosexuality. Getting caught with “obscene” mail (however defined) might result in fines, penalties, and unwanted publicity that could lead to professional ruin. When *ONE* first appeared

on newsstands in 1953, its legal status was uncertain.¹⁸ From the editors' standpoint, as long as they avoided erotic contents, the magazine should be constitutionally permissible. Twice, however, postal officials in Los Angeles seized all copies of individual *ONE* issues on obscenity grounds, once in 1953 and again in 1954. Postal officials reversed the first seizure after further review. *ONE* fought the second seizure to the U.S. Supreme Court, which, in 1958, ruled that the magazine was not obscene.¹⁹ This ruling opened the way for dozens of other gay and lesbian publications in subsequent years.

The letters in chapter 3 not only express anger and frustration over police and postal harassment, but also a desire to do something about it. The cumulative impact of gay arrests, firings, and unwanted exposure fueled a civil rights impulse among gay and lesbian Americans in the 1950s and 1960s. I use the word "impulse" because most *ONE* correspondents did not know exactly *how* to improve their status, but believed *something* must be done and that they could contribute in some manner. Facing injustices and indignities, gay people increasingly came to believe that they were as deserving of equal civil rights—the right to associate with one another, the right to work for a living, the right to fair treatment from police and courts, the right to a family life, the right to pursue happiness—as any other American citizen.

While *ONE* magazine's civil rights-oriented contents probably influenced the resilient tone of many letters, we cannot assume that every correspondent's civil rights impulse came primarily from the magazine. Some of the letters in this book were from die-hard readers who dutifully absorbed every issue, but other letter writers seem to have barely looked at the magazine. Some correspondents obtained *ONE*'s address from a friend or acquaintance and never even saw the magazine. The letters give the impression that most of these people did not need a magazine to tell them how poorly society was treating them and that something needed to be done about it. They learned this from their own experiences, from people they knew, or from reading about the latest gay arrests in their local newspapers. *ONE* did, however, inspire people to express their frustrations in writing, thereby sharing these frustrations with others—a member of *ONE*'s staff, at least, and possibly *ONE*'s entire readership. *ONE*'s contents influenced the vocabulary and tone of the letters, while at the same time *ONE*'s readers influenced the vocabulary and tone of the magazine because *ONE* frequently borrowed ideas for essays, stories, and reviews from its readers. The popular "Tangents" column in each issue, which reported gay news from around the country, drew heavily from information provided by readers in letters. Thus, the influence between *ONE* and its readership went in both directions.

Chapter 4, “Incarceration,” continues the persecution theme by featuring several lengthy letters from gay men who served time in prisons or mental hospitals. These represent worst-case scenarios. Even though most gay people avoided incarceration, news of such stories made their way through gay social grapevines and put a chill in gay social life.

To avoid arrest and incarceration, secrecy was very important. Gay people “came out” to one another in the 1950s and 1960s, but usually not to heterosexual family members, employers, or friends. *ONE* magazine itself challenged these secrecy patterns through its open sale on public newsstands, which accounted for a majority of the issues sold.²⁰ In other ways, however, *ONE* did try to conceal itself. Subscription copies were mailed in plain brown envelopes showing only *ONE*'s address. *ONE*'s staff and writers usually used pseudonyms, and the magazine did not publish its letter writers' names (these names remain confidential even today). Many of the letters in this book convey a secretive tone, as though the writer was revealing special, privileged information—“I will briefly tell you something I want kept in the strictest of confidence,” wrote a man from Connecticut, for example.²¹ Letters written to *Life* magazine or *Popular Mechanics* lack such secretive urgency.

The letters in chapter 5, “Representations and Stereotypes,” discuss representations of gay people in popular culture and the media. Popular culture influenced how gay men and lesbians understood their sexuality in complex ways during the 1950s and 1960s. On one hand, the lack of positive, openly gay role models in the media, combined with recurrent negative images of gay-identified people as crazy, suicidal, or villainous, certainly wreaked havoc on the self-esteem of many gay men and women.²² On the other hand, the letters show that gay people routinely rejected the disparaging stereotypes and representations of them in popular culture. In addition, despite the censorship of overt references to homosexuality in movies, television, and other mass media, *ONE* correspondents found no shortage of gay, lesbian, and queer images, insinuations, and associations in mass media. Some *ONE* correspondents railed against negative gay stereotypes and expressed worry over the social harm such stereotypes caused. At the same time, some correspondents found positive representations in surprising places. A writer from Pasadena, California, for example, described an article about homosexuality in the sleazy tabloid *Hush-Hush* as “quite good and unprejudiced.”²³ Another letter writer praised talk show host Johnny Carson's handling of Liberace's effeminate flamboyance during a *Tonight Show* appearance in the early 1960s. Another writer enthusiastically offered gay interpretations of several current movies. In each of these cases, the let-

ter writers challenged the invisibility of gay people in the media as well as the negative assumptions that so often permeated public discussions of homosexuality.

Throughout this book (with several notable exceptions, however), the letter writers were neither conflicted about their sexual desires, behavior, and identities, nor were they apologetic. One finds in these letters, if not gay pride itself, then at least an immediate precursor to the more politically formalized gay pride that would flourish later. Gay pride is usually assumed not to have existed in the gloomy “pre-Stonewall” 1950s and 1960s. The letters challenge the idea that the 1969 Stonewall riots should serve as such a stark divider between two supposedly distinct historical eras. The heavy academic reliance on phrases such as “pre-Stonewall,” “before Stonewall,” or “since Stonewall,” tends to minimize the important continuities in gay identity and politics from the 1950s to the present.²⁴ Certainly gay culture experienced major breakthroughs in the 1970s, especially with the widespread legalization of homosexuality and the redefinition of “coming out” to include heterosexuals. But other developments, such as the growth of gay activism and gay pride, were around long before Stonewall. Overall, in letters to *ONE*, the similarities between gay life before and after Stonewall seem stronger than the differences.²⁵

The letters also challenge the common perception that gay men and lesbians spent the 1950s “in the closet.” The word “closet” neither appears in any letters in this book, nor in any *ONE* correspondence in its current usage.²⁶ 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 to other gay people. “Coming out” to heterosexuals was a political strategy introduced by gay activists in the late 1960s and early 1970s. “The closet” emerged as the binary opposite of this new definition of “coming out”; hence the phrase “coming out *of the closet*” replaced the older phrase “coming out to gay life.” It is misleading when the closet metaphor is applied to the 1950s and 1960s because the term has so many negative connotations. “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 in order to avoid antigay persecution.²⁷ A “mask” is a very different metaphor than a “closet.” Closets are dark places where people hide. Masks imply subterfuge, resistance, defiance, and perhaps most importantly, human agency. Despite the hostile social forces at play

in these years, these letter writers ultimately maintained control over their lives and destinies, including when to wear a heterosexual mask and when not to wear one. In these letters, the correspondents unmask themselves and tell us about their lives.