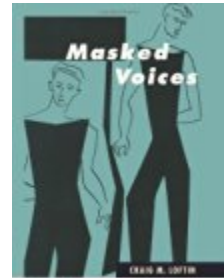


Craig M. Loftin. *Masked Voices: Gay Men and Lesbians in Cold War America*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012. xiii + 310 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4384-4014-9; \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4384-4015-6.

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Unmasking the Masked Voices

This is an important book that makes a significant contribution to gay and lesbian historiography. It is also one that examines a subject—the organization and magazine dubbed ONE—that is examined most commonly as a small part of broader studies; Craig M. Loftin tangentially offers us the most comprehensive history of ONE to date. Based on his PhD dissertation, Loftin offers a unique look at the lives of ordinary gay, lesbian, and questioning Americans during the 1950s and 1960s by utilizing the letters such people wrote and mailed to *ONE* magazine. These letters are held by the ONE Institute and Archive—a progeny of the original *ONE* magazine—which is, today, a part of the University of Southern California library system. (It is important to note that Loftin has also recently published with the State University of New York Press *Letters to ONE: Gay and Lesbian Voices from the 1950s and 1960s* [2012], an edited volume of the very letters he researched for the book reviewed here.) In total, Loftin read “several thousand” letters, which he discovered while volunteering his time to help process the ONE Institute’s unorganized collections, but narrowed those letters down to 1,083 that he actually used as the primary basis of his study; these letters were dated between 1953 and 1965. He set aside letters that merely dealt with subscription issues and similar sundry topics. More specifically, Loftin singled out letters that offered insight into the lives of the letter writers themselves, provided personal information, or described how these ordinary people lived their gay lives and how they viewed the society in which they lived.

This historical source is an important, and rare, one. Given the strong homophobia of the 1950s and 1960s, many if not most gay and lesbian Americans lived isolated, quiet lives, making it challenging for historians today to reconstruct their histories because of the difficulty in finding primary source evidence. Hence, many studies of the homophile movement of the 1950s and 1960s have focused on prominent civil rights crusaders—such as Harry Hay, Frank Kameny, Del Martin, Hal Call, etc.—because they were very active in that period and left a paper trail. The letters ordinary people sent to the offices of *ONE*, from every state in the Union save two, therefore open a door to reveal how people not in the forefront of organized political activism were living their lives and reacting to the events of their times. Loftin, significantly, admits the limitations of this primary source, such as recognizing that the letters “are not necessarily representative of all gay Americans during these years” (p. 4). He also notes that, unlike more in-depth oral history interviews, these letters offer but “a fragmentary glimpse” into the lives of gay Americans across the country, and only of those who were motivated to have contact with *ONE* magazine. Nevertheless, because the letters represent the views of over seven hundred ordinary Americans and because all the letter writers to *ONE* reflected, proportionally, the populations of their respective states, Loftin has made a significant find. Unearthing this resource, alone, makes this study an exciting and revealing contribution to the field of gay and lesbian history.

In his book, Loftin makes several challenges to the conventional gay and lesbian historiography. First, he challenges the notion that most Americans in the period he covers lived their lives in the closet, as the popular, if simplistic, metaphor would have it. Instead, he demonstrates conclusively and with multiple examples that many more people, beyond the small handful of homophile civil rights activists of the time, worked in many different ways and were interested in improving the lives of gays and lesbians. He also challenges the popular notion that gay life in the 1950s was a “dark age” where gay men and women lived in the closet and faced nothing but visceral, hostile attitudes. In the letters, he finds that reactions typical gay people faced about their sexuality ran the spectrum from hostility to compromise to acceptance. Loftin further contends that the very use of the more modern (1960s) term “the closet” is inappropriate for the homophile period. In only one letter, in fact, did he find a reference to the closet and it was one referencing sex in general and not gays in particular. Instead, he argues correctly that scholars need to reference the ordinary lives of men and women in this period as they, themselves, saw it: living life from behind a mask rather than hidden away in a closet. As such, Loftin’s book—as he puts it—serves to “bridge” the scholarship looking at homophile social activists with more recent social history trends that examine gay life in various American cities (where one commonly sees the notion of a gay dark age advanced). In this sense, Loftin takes the scholarship from specific individuals and specific cities to a broader and more democratic perspective, a refreshing achievement.

The letter writers to *ONE* touched on many subjects, including society’s and the government’s targeting of them as threats that needed to be purged from government employment or beyond. All too often, however, Loftin conflates the unique targeting of gays—which historians have dubbed the Lavender Scare—with the targeting of communists and leftists, under the imprecise term “McCarthyism.” He continually refers to the targeting of gays as “McCarthyism.” To fully appreciate the nature and scope of the government’s targeting of gays, the two should not be conflated, and this is, in my view, a problem with some current and popular understandings of the Lavender Scare. While the Lavender Scare and McCarthyism may have been conflated in the popular mind in the 1950s, and particularly by politicians advancing their own selfish agendas, the targeting of communists and gays were, in fact, unique and separate events even if they did closely parallel one another.[1]

Even the term “McCarthyism” is imprecise when it comes to anti-communism, because Joseph McCarthy was nothing more than a political hack trying to advance his own career, when it was internal security bureaucrats, like J. Edgar Hoover (and others), who really advanced and piloted the anti-communist cause (including propping up McCarthy himself). This has led at least one scholar to comment that the more appropriate term for the anti-communist witch hunt should be “Hooverism.”[2] Just as Loftin makes the important point in his book about the differences between the mask and closet in the 1950s, his thesis would be better served by also making the fine distinction between McCarthyism/Hooverism and the Lavender Scare.

Speaking of Hoover, Loftin offers a quixotic view about the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director’s presumed sexuality and relationship status. After discussing the broader concept of the homosexual “marriage” at mid-century, where gay men lived lives committed to another of their own sex but masked it with various pretenses, Loftin contends that Hoover fits this mold. He writes that “a strong case can be made that Hoover and [Associate FBI Director Clyde] Tolson should be considered a gay married couple, especially considering the broader patterns of gay marriage in these years” (p. 177). Yet this “strong case” can only be made first with the assumption that Hoover was, in fact, gay. And like all the other so-called evidence of Hoover’s sexuality, Loftin’s is, and can only be, based on nothing more than conjecture and supposition: the two were inseparable, working together, dining together, vacationing together; Hoover willed Tolson almost his entire estate upon his death; Hoover’s presumed life as a heterosexual “makes no sense”; and Hoover’s targeting of gays may have been an “unconscious effort to pass as heterosexual and quell such suspicions” (p. 178).

None of this is evidence, in any convincing way, of the man’s sexuality or the specific nature of his relationship with Tolson. The reality is we just do not know what Hoover’s sexuality was, whether gay or straight or repressed, and we cannot make any firm conclusions about it beyond speculation. That Hoover worked with his associate FBI director is hardly surprising. That they dined together tells us only that they dined together. Is it completely out of the ordinary that someone would vacation repeatedly with a friend, or is this somehow evidence of a relationship and someone’s sexuality? Is it only committed, sexual couples that bequeath their belongings to each other? Why does someone’s life, whether heterosexually or homosexually, have to make sense? Per-

haps Hoover was a very strange person who got along with very few; we already know that he was judgmental, vindictive, mean-spirited, puritanical in his morality, and had few friends. And the fact that Hoover targeted gays is hardly evidence of passing. The FBI began targeting gays for very specific reasons in 1937 that had nothing to do with suspicions of Hoover or anyone trying to pass as straight.[3] Besides, it was not only Hoover and the FBI that were targeting gays but also, by the 1950s, almost the entire federal government. The point is that we cannot make conclusions about individuals based on behavior stereotypes. What we can do, however, is note that because Hoover's life did not fit the expected stereotype for a heterosexual in the 1950s, he was very concerned with his image and threatened those who dared to suggest he was homosexual. And as the head of one of the leading agencies helping to purge gays, Hoover could never allow rumors of his own life to threaten his position or the stature of his bureau. Hoover's concerns and even the very rumors about his sexuality actually tell us more about the homophobia of the era and the gender roles one was expected to play than it does about one curious person's actual sexuality. While the speculation about Hoover's sexuality is compelling, indeed, in the end it remains only speculation and, hence, not very helpful in

understanding the period.

Criticism with the use of "McCarthyism" and Hoover's sexuality aside, this is still an important book. Often, many people think that the gay civil rights struggle began only after 1969 and Stonewall, and they typically regard the movement before it as conservative, cowardly, and hidden. But anyone wanting to understand the real work that led to Stonewall, beyond prominent homophile civil rights activists and gay life in particular municipalities, one should start here (and, indeed, with Loftin's edited volume of letters) to see how ordinary people across the country lived their lives and actually dealt with their particular situations nationwide during the 1950s and 1960s.

Notes

[1]. For a more in-depth discussion of the issue, see my article "Communist and Homosexual: The FBI, Harry Hay, and the Secret Side of the Lavender Scare, 1943-61," *American Communist History* 11, no. 1 (2012): 101-124.

[2]. Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (New York: Little, Brown, 1998), 203.

[3]. On targeting gays in 1937, see Charles, "Communist and Homosexual."

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-histsex>

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