H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

C. Todd White. *Pre-Gay L.A.: A Social History of the Movement for Homosexual Rights.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. xvii + 258 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03441-1; $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07641-1.

Reviewed by Christine M. Lamberson

Published on H-California (March, 2010)

Commissioned by Eileen V. Wallis (Cal Poly Pomona)

Lamberson on White

In January 1953, a small group of tenacious men published the first issue of *ONE Magazine*, the first openly distributed publication focused on issues facing homosexuals in America. In the following years, the magazineâs distribution grew well into the thousands and quickly spawned ONE, Incorporated to produce the magazine and pursue additional research and educational efforts. In his new book, *Pre-Gay L.A.: A Social History of the Movement for Homosexual Rights*, C. Todd White traces the histories of this magazine, ONE, Inc., their founders, and several related organizations in a thoroughly detailed narrative. White posits that although many activists and historians may see New York, with the events at Stonewall, and San Francisco, with its large and iconic gay community, as the epicenters of the gay rights movement from 1969 on, Los Angeles was actually the original home to the modern movement. Consequently, he argues *ONE Magazine* and its founders, who were the heart of this early activism, deserve greater recognition for their work in the 1950s and early '60s. Further and more subtly, he contends that their work paved the way for the later movement and that these organizations and activists did not simply disappear with the split of ONE, Inc. Instead, the two sides of the ONE, Inc division continued their work through new organizations.

White describes his work as âpart ethnobiography and part social historyâ (p. vii). The book indeed merges the two methodologies and disciplines. It is based on a combination of extensive interviews by White, participant observation, and archival work. White immersed himself in the community of aging activists, gathering their individual and collective stories and getting to know the dynamics of their relationships. Additionally, he was able to examine the archives of the organizations in order to verify the details of sometimes conflicting recollections. As he points out, this combination, and particularly his access to the archives (some of which he even helped organize), distinguishes his scholarship from the few works that have looked at these organizations before, namely John DâEmilioâs *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (1983), Eric Marcusâs *Making Gay His-*

tory: The Half-Century Fight for Lesbian and Gay Equal Rights (2002), and Johnathan Ned Katzâs *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in U.S.A.: A Documentary* (1976).

White begins his narrative with a short chapter on the founding of the Mattachine society in 1948. The secretive group was the dream of Harry Hay, but gained in popularity when fellow founder Dale Jennings was arrested for lewd conduct in a public place. He fought the charges and to the surprise of many both inside and outside the movement, had the charges dismissed after his trial resulted in a hung jury. Soon after the trial ended in 1952, Jennings–who White claims deserves more credit for the founding of both Mattachine and ONE than he has typically received–helped found *ONE Magazine* and then ONE, Inc.

The next several chapters, and the heart of the book, cover the founding and growth of ONE, Inc, including the organizationâs rise to national leadership, the addition of new, but generally less successful, publications, and the founding of ONE Institute. Along with these organizational changes, White discusses the magazineâs developing content and several legal battles involving the organization, particularly surrounding the U.S. Post Officeâs refusal to deliver two issues of *ONE Magazine*. In a particularly important development, ONE, Inc. fulfilled one of its founding missions of providing education on homophile issues through the creation of an educational division in 1955. The new division began directing a long-running and successful yearly Midwinter Institute consisting of the corporationâs annual meeting and a series of discussions and expert panels surrounding a theme. Additionally, the new ONE Institute for Homophile Studies offered university seminar-style courses in subjects ranging from literature to history to Introduction to Homophile Studies. White carefully narrates the internal negotiations surrounding these new projects and their ever-vacillating levels of success and failure.

Accompanying these new organizational features were numerous power struggles and consequently, shifting leadership, which White uses to divide the history of ONE into distinct periods before the split. The final era ended with the division of ONE due to intractable differences between Don Slater, the then-current editor of the magazine, and Dorr Legg, the dominate figure on the business side of the organization and a strong promoter of the educational division. In the preface, White states that he set out in this project to discover the bigger reasons behind the organizationâs âinfamousâ split: âI suspected there was more involved than a personality conflict: surely there must have been some deep-seated ideological conflict that pushed the organization toward fissionâ (pp. xii-xiii). In one sense, White succeeds in his goal as he provides a rich multilayered exploration of the events and factionsâ motivations leading up to the division. Yet, the power struggle between Slater and Legg still looms large. White explains how the organization was, and to some extent always had been, split between its educational and publication goals and between those wishing to provide service and guidance to a national versus a local audience. Additionally, he discusses a disagreement that began in Mattachine, characterized by a split between those who favored the term "homophile" and viewed themselves as members of a separate, repressed cultural minority, and those who preferred the term "homosexuals," focused on obtaining equal legal rights, and believed there were no essential differences between themselves and straight men. White maintains a periodic discussion of each of these divisions throughout the book and clearly shows how this last division contributed to the founding of ONE separate from Mattachine. He is adept at describing the existence of complex personalities with multiple motivations–his nuanced descriptions of the activists behind these organizations are the strongest aspect of his book–but he is less clear in explaining how these various disagreements and personal power struggles interacted to lead to an irreconcilable division. This reader was left wanting a few more paragraphs fully explicating the relationship between these various strains of disagreement and a more complete analysis of how they interacted to lead to the split.

In the final chapters, White traces the court battles surrounding ONEâs division and the organizations that emerged from the split. Slater led one faction that founded *Tangents* magazine and eventually became the Homosexual Information Center. Legg and his followers maintained their focus on education and continued to operate under the name ONE, Inc. and as the Institute for the Study of Human Resources. White successfully argues that these two groups, particularly the Tangent Group, continued to thrive after the split.

Pre-Gay L.A. is directed at both an academic and a popular audience interested in the history of this movement. Whiteâs primary success and contribution to the literature is in uncovering the too-often forgotten history of these early, courageous efforts to secure rights for homosexuals. He excels at providing a detailed narrative of these organizations and their accomplishments

and concludes with a few lessons for activists drawn from these groupsâ challenges. Yet, occasionally, there is too much detail and it is possible for the reader (and possibly White) to get mired in the minutiae of board meetings and bylaws, losing the forest for the trees. In general, like the chapters on ONEâs split, *Pre-Gay L.A.* would benefit from a more extensive and clearer delineation of Whiteâs analysis of this movement. White peppers his narrative with smart insights and fascinating discussions about subjects such as the role of women in the early movement or the importance of understanding these activistsâ choice of language. Some readers, particularly those from the academic section of the audience, may find it frustrating that these insights appear for only a paragraph or two, almost as asides, before White returns to the primary narrative.

*Pre-Gay L.A.*âs strengths highlight its weaknesses. Whiteâs ability to distill such a rich history from new archival sources and extensive interviews leaves the reader wanting more conclusions. Early in the book, White discusses the influence of Alfred Kinseyâs conclusions in *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) on the founding of the Mattachine society. This instance of historical context helps the reader understand why the society formed when it did and how it gathered support. This reader would have liked to see more connections to developments during this period or more of Whiteâs analysis carried throughout the book. In the end, *Pre-Gay L.A.* will be valuable to both scholars and a popular audience because it provides a detailed account of a group of activists and organizations that have great importance to understanding both the later movement and this historical moment.

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

https://networks.h-net.org/h-california

Citation: Christine M. Lamberson. Review of White, C. Todd, *Pre-Gay L.A.: A Social History of the Movement for Homosexual Rights.* H-California, H-Net Reviews. March, 2010.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29313

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.