C. Wright Mills: A Political Writer and his Fan Mail

Kim Sawchuk
Concordia University

Abstract: This paper examines the “fan mail” received by C. Wright Mills from his readership to better understand the reasons for Mills’ popularity as a public intellectual in the 1950s. The paper documents Mills’ strategic use of magazines and penny press publishers, his deployment of vernacular stylistic forms to express political issues, and the responses of these fans. These writerly readers not only lauded Mills’ efforts but offered their constructive criticism and personal testimony, which Mills sometimes incorporated back into his speeches and articles. Many letter writers assisted in the circulation of Mills’ texts within other informal networks, thus shedding light on the political conjuncture of the 1950s. The paper also attends to the methodological and epistemological challenge of using such letters, typically used to study responses to popular cultural texts, for the study of intellectual history.


I work and live very rapidly these days. I am writing constantly. Mine is a pen from whose point much ink will flow and someday into the brains of the populace. But let that be.

Hope you are both well, and not as busy as I.

C. Wright Mills to his father, March 7, 1937

Kim Sawchuk is an Associate Professor in Communication Studies at Concordia University, 7141 Sherbrooke Street East, Montreal, QC H4B 1R6. E-mail: sawchuk@alcor.concordia.ca
... please excuse my writing to you, but in a way you wrote to me first, in your book, and I hope you will continue your efforts to stop all of the people from being fooled all of the time.

J. Foster to C. Wright Mills, December 16, 1959

C. Wright Mills was a prolific writer. When he died in 1962 at the age of 45 he had penned no less than 12 books and pamphlets, edited 3 collections, and published over 100 articles. Much ink, indeed, did flow from the pen of C. Wright Mills in the two decades that he was active as an academic and very public intellectual. In 1937 Mills, then 21, wrote of his ambition to reach the “brains of the populace.” However, the communication that ensued between Mills and his readership did not only move in one direction—from Mills to his readers. Some of C. Wright Mills’ readers critically reflected on his ideas, commented on his prose—and wrote back. As one “writerly reader” confessed to Mills after reading The Causes of World War Three (1958b, 1960c), “I found it stimulating in the best sense in that it initiates a dialogue with the reader which continues after the book is laid down. Moreover, I expect to reread it—and that is something I can say of few political books these days” (Clairborne to Mills, 1959).

Secondary sources point, in passing, to Mills’ readership and to the presence of these letters. In their respective memorials to Mills after his death both Harvey Swados (1963) and Dan Wakefield (1971) recollect that Mills received a “flood” of mail after he published The Causes. Whilst visiting The C. Wright Mills Papers at the University of Texas at Austin on another matter, I encountered this correspondence. These responses to Mills’ texts—his “fan mail”—will serve as a point of departure for a consideration of C. Wright Mills’ life as a public intellectual and political writer in the period that one of Mills’ close friends, the novelist Harvey Swados, described as “the fat and frightened fifties” (Swados, 1963, p. 40).

I will explore three dimensions of Mills style that appealed to readers: his use of the vernacular style; his appeal to his reader’s morality as a means to incite political action; and his timing. In addition to furnishing “evidence” of Mills’ readership, the responses of these writers address two mythic aspects of C. Wright Mills: the oft-repeated naming of Mills as one of the great public intellectuals of his time. For his efforts to reach “the public,” Mills has been acknowledged, with various degrees of praise and cynicism, as a model academic “who spoke truth to power” (Said, 1996, pp. 20, 23); as the “radical nomad” who inspired the new left (Gitlin, 1987, p. 124); as a “moralist, muckraker, public intellectual” one of the last who made this a integral part of his life and practice (Jacoby, 1987, p. 189). The letters to Mills offer some tangible insights on this matter. Secondly, the letters ask us to revise the idea that in describing the trend towards a “mass society,” Mills understood America as a “populace of dopes, dupes and robots mechanically and monolithically delivered into passivity and conformity by the monolithic channels of the mass media and the culture industries” (Ross, 1989, p. 52). Mills (1960c) did cry out against “mass indifference” (p. 86). He also
believed, fervently, that the mass media, as well as other formal and informal institutional networks, had the potential to convey issues and to stimulate a discussion of those issues. For Mills (1960c), political responsibility “stands opposite to the idea of historical inevitability” (p. 51) The fan mail provided C. Wright Mills with stories and first-hand accounts of some of the political activities in this period.

Using the letters written to C. Wright Mills, this paper begins with an overview of some of Mills’ publishing strategies. I then discuss some of the methodological challenges of using this particular set of archival documents. This is followed by an analysis of who responded to Mills’ texts, what texts elicited this response, the reasons they gave for writing, and some of the political actions that readers—his fans—initiated after reading his texts.

Mills writes

For a moment, recalls Russell Jacoby (1987), “Mills seemed to be everywhere” (p. 117). Two things about Mills as a writer are noteworthy. First, C. Wright Mills published in both academic and non-academic presses in order to reach the widest possible audience. Second, C. Wright Mills never confined his participation in the media to those presses or editors with whom he necessarily shared an explicit ideological position. These strategies made his work—and his name—visible. It was not only his academic writings that drew attention to Mills. Though his academic credentials no doubt helped him to gain access to the media, what catapulted C. Wright Mills into the public eye were his newspaper and magazine articles, public lectures, and radio broadcasts. Two of his polemical monographs, The Causes of World War Three (1958b, 1960c) and Listen Yankee (1960a) were printed by commercial publishers (Simon & Schuster and Ballantine) and subsequently translated into a number of different languages. Excerpts of these monographs appeared in alternative magazines, such as The Nation, and more mainstream venues, like Harpers.

Mills began publishing in non-academic “alternative” papers such as Politics, New Leader, and Labor and Nation in the mid-1940s, soon after he graduated with a BA and MA in philosophy from the University of Texas. This coincided with his move to the discipline of sociology and his work on leaders in the American labour movement, both of which resulted in The New Men of Power (1948b). As C. Wright Mills’ academic interests shifted to questions of the American middle classes and relations of power in America, he continued to contribute to left-leaning presses with smaller circulation figures, such as Partisan Review, Dissent, and The Nation. Mills even toyed with the idea of starting his own small magazine in the late 1940s to fill a void he perceived in the academic publishing scene (Mills, 1948a).

Mills began publishing in the mainstream press in the early 1950. He wrote on political corruption for The New York Times in 1952 (Mills, 1963a) and on work and leisure for the New York Herald Tribune in 1953 (Mills, 1963c). Both of these pieces elicited letters of praise from readers. Mills even made an appearance in a woman’s monthly, the American Magazine, which ran a feature story entitled “Hope for White Collar Workers” (Mills, 1951a) and highlighted Mills as an aca-
demic advice columnist responding to the wife of an unemployed white collar worker. Despite his trenchant critique of mass society and the demise of the public in *The Power Elite* (1956), Mills never gave up on either the public or what he termed “the cultural apparatus.”

By this concept—developed by Mills after *The Power Elite*—he referred to “organizations and milieu in which artistic, intellectual and scientific work goes on and of the means by which such work is made available to circles, publics and masses” (1963b, p. 406). The cultural apparatus, as he argued in an article of the same name, is comprised of “the observation posts, the interpretation centers, the presentation depots” which Mills described as “the lens of mankind” (p. 406). Through this lens we come to see the world and “interpret and report” what we see. It is the source of our identities, our aspirations, and if we desire that the world change, as Mills did, then intellectuals must work within this cultural apparatus to open up dialogue and debate, and push for new standards of “beauty,” “truth,” and “reality” (1963b, p. 407). Given the establishment of a permanent war economy in the United States in the Cold War era, intervening in the cultural apparatus became a matter of “life and death” for Mills (1960c): “Politics, understood for what it really is today, has to do with the decisions men make which determine how they shall live and how they shall die. They are not living very well, and they are not going to die very well either” (p. 172).

However, theorizing one’s participation in such an apparatus, wanting to participate, identifying the issues to write about, researching these issues, writing about them, gaining access to the media, and being read are all distinct—yet interconnected—parts of the laborious process of becoming a public intellectual. Mills later described such people as “cultural workmen.” I will not discuss all facets of Mills’ successes and failures here as this is part of a much larger project on Mills as a political writer and cultural critic. As previously mentioned, this essay focuses on one aspect: the written responses to C. Wright Mills’ publications, speeches, and broadcasts that he kept in his research files. These files were deposited in the Eugene Barker Center for American History, at the University of Texas at Austin, approximately 10 years after his death. Before delving into the actual analysis of the letters, a few comments on the files, and their significance for Mills, to contextualize the research process are warranted.

**The files, the letters, and the archive**

*The C. Wright Mills Papers* are a vaguely indexed collection of over 90 archival boxes containing a variety of documents including: drafts of papers, statistical sheets, grant applications, lecture notes, student papers, clippings, off prints, and, of course, correspondence from a wide variety of people including some of the letters written by the “elusive public.” Arguably, these files are the manifestation of Mills’ method of working, a process that he described in the famous appendix to *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). Mills kept scrupulous files and Yaraslava Surmach Mills, Mills’ widow, recalls that Mills habitually rose at 4:00 a.m. with a pot of coffee to work on his files and to read a number of newspapers and magazines. Mills sorted his files into “topics” and “themes,” a process of continual
classification and reclassification that allowed Mills to build links between past, current, and future projects. These files were sorted thematically, not chronologically, as Mills was not building an archive of his activities for posterity’s sake, nor he did keep each and every item that might some day be considered pertinent. As a result, The Mills Papers are a highly mediated set of working documents that were classified initially by Mills and then placed in boxes by the archivists at the Eugene Barker Center under even more general headings.

The files that I am working with contain a host of fascinating correspondence. Recently, the letters exchanged amongst Mills and his friends, family, and colleagues have been collected from a multiplicity of sources and published by two of Mills’ daughters (Mills, 2000). While connected to this endeavour because of our mutual interest in correspondence, my project differs in two respects. First, I draw from one source only: the letters contained in The C. Wright Mills Papers. Second, I am not, for the moment, concerned with the famous or intimate interlocutor. It is the interlocutor who did not know Mills personally, at least initially, and who wrote to Mills on the basis of a textual relationship that is of interest to me.

I have settled on the term “fan mail” to describe these letters for several reasons. Some of the writers did call themselves fans. As one enthusiast wrote: “I want very much to be included among your fans as soon as possible for your excellent, provocative and much needed articles which have been appearing recently in THE NATION, which are, alas, probably read by far too few people.” (Reardon to Mills, 1958; see also Snow to Mills, 1958; Hagopian to Mills, 1960) Many of these fans sent gifts—a poem, a prayer, a book, a clipping—with their letters. However, one is not a fan because one is a devotee of a show, a book, or a person. Fans are compelled to transform their watching, reading, or listening into some kind of cultural activity. It is this writerly quality, combined with a participatory desire, that Henry Jenkins III (1991) defines as the central attributes of the fan. Jenkins argues that “fans transform personal reaction into social interaction, spectatorial culture into participatory culture” (p. 175). For fans, “consumption naturally sparks production, reading generates writing, until the terms seem logically inseparable” (p. 175). The letters to Mills mixed reasoned critique and affective expression in their responses to his texts. These letter writers also took up Mills’ demand that they first hold representative officials accountable and that they also intervene in political affairs.

This fan mail is located, primarily, in eight boxes in the Mills files. I have coded over 250 letters that respond to his work and, as a result of this initial coding, classified 196 of these letters as “fan mail”: letters from readers writing unsolicited commentary on Mills’ publications, speeches, or broadcasts. Of this total, 190 are in general agreement with Mills while 5 are irate. One cannot know whether this is all the mail that Mills received from his readership. There is, for example, a conspicuous absence of letters from readers regarding Mills’ writings on Cuba, although there is a large packet of press clippings—most of them vehemently negative. At this stage in the research I do not know if this is because: (a) none was sent; (b) Mills did not have time to file all of the letters that he received.
in the early 1960s after suffering his first heart attack; or (c) they were jettisoned by Mills, or by someone else. It is also possible that in the confusing aftermath of Mills' sudden death, some files disappeared from the family garage where they were being stored for a time before being shipped to the archive. In other words, while the sample of letters is large, one must be cautious when using them and making claims about who and what they represent in terms of the general readership or about which texts were the most popular.

That said, these letters are still a rich source of information on Mills’ activities as a writer, his fans, and the general conjuncture in which he wrote. The letters provide a connection to the recent past of the 1950s, a response that, on my part, demands interpretation but also a confrontation with the limits of interpretation. As historian Carlo Ginzburg (1994) argues, historical documents do not offer either a transparent window onto an unmediated reality, as positivism claims; nor should they be considered as impenetrable walls that bar researchers from the past, as the postmodern epistemological position would have it. I have no “third” term to pose as a solution to the dichotomy set up by Ginzburg. Rather, one can elaborate Ginzburg’s suggestive characterization of evidence as a kind of “window” onto a period and into lives. Windows, whilst enabling one to see beyond the borders of one’s own location, place limitations on one’s perspective. They circumscribe one’s vision because of their location, their height, their dimensions, and their degree of opacity. These letters, then, are the material traces of C. Wright Mills’ activities, the actions of his readers, and his conjuncture. These traces are “partial” and “situated” (Haraway, 1991, p. 188) They do not speak for a whole readership or period yet they are located within a specific historical conjuncture and set of conditions.

To break away from the ocular-centrism of this metaphor for a moment, this written testimony of Mills’ fans can be understood as the texts of “historical informants.” I borrow this term from Gaye Tuchman (1994), who argues that historical informants are those who can supply testimony and information to researchers on past events. These “informants” furnish some of the details missing from the accounts that describe Mills’ fans in passing. These voices are not, perhaps, the final word on the topic of Mills’ vocation as a political writer but they must be considered if we are to make sense of Mills’ place as a writer in the conjuncture of America in the “fat and frightened fifties.”

Statistically speaking . . .
Letter writers are a confessional lot, and Mills’ letter writers either intentionally or unintentionally supplied information on who they were, where they were writing from, what sex they were, their religion, and their occupation. They also indicated which of Mills’ texts they had read, referring to specific excerpts and favorite concepts in their letters. Finally, because these letters are almost always dated, they indicate when Mills received the bulk of this mail. With few exceptions, the majority of responses located in The Mills Papers refer to a series of texts that Mills published on war and peace, written just after the publication of The Power Elite (1956): “Program for Peace” (1957b); “A Pagan Sermon to the Christian
Clergy” (1958a); and The Causes of World War Three, first published in 1958 and republished with a new preface and section called “The Balance of Blame” (which also had appeared in article form) in 1960.

From this information, one can discern the temporal flow and volume of the correspondence. The above-mentioned works were cited in 33 letters in 1957, 56 in 1958, 66 in 1959, 45 in 1960, and 15 in 1961. The circuit these letters travelled is worth noting given that many of the letter writers did not write directly to Mills, but to Mills via his editor or publicist. I would suggest that this was for three reasons: first, many writers did not know how to reach Mills through any other means; second, there were those who explicitly wanted their letters published in the magazine’s letters column; and third, some of these writers used their letters to commend the editors for publishing the text, to demand more of the same type of article, or to request reprints. The editor of The Nation, Carey McWilliams, diligently had his staff forward these letters to Mills. The gap in the correspondence for Listen Yankee might be explained by the possibility that the editor for Harpers did not pass on the letters.

The letters also reveal the location of the letter writers. The majority of the letter writers were from the east coast, followed by the mid-west, the west coast, and, finally, the American south. Eighty-eight percent of the letters are from the United States, but Mills also received mail from England, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Italy, and Poland. Letter writers from outside of the United States often compared their situations and experiences with those described by Mills and extended his analysis to their political situation. Letters from ex-patriots living abroad often acknowledged Mills’ description of the perception of America abroad—a perception that they did not become aware of until they themselves travelled outside of the United States.

Finally, the letters give basic information on the identities of Mills’ fans. The vast majority were male—approximately 85%. Half of the writers identified their occupation, either overtly stating their profession or by writing their letters on letterhead where their name and profession were printed. Most were from Christian ministers and university professors who were clearly interpellated by Mills’ discourse. Mills also received letters from journalists, students, activists, teachers, librarians, doctors, farmers, scientists, soldiers, mothers, businessmen, carpenters, workers, “wives,” and artists. Some who did not specify an occupation described themselves as “ordinary” or average citizens who longed to make a difference: “Even people like myself, of very modest education, cannot help speculating on present and future events.” (Wade to Mills, 1959). Fifty percent of the letter writers identified themselves by religion. In particular, Mills seemed to attract attention from Unitarians, followed by Quakers, Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Jews, and the occasional militant Catholic.

If these statistics paint a general portrait of the people who wrote letters to C. Wright Mills over a 10-year period, they provide but a panoramic shot—a bird’s eye view. As Tuchman (1994) argues, this kind of data does inform us of general patterns and reveals silences and gaps that call for further research and
interpretation. These patterns do not tell us anything about the content of these letters. A closer look at the letters does provide detail on just what C. Wright Mills readers found so compelling in his work that they were moved to write.

**Mills provokes**

*The drive toward war is massive, subtle, official, and self directed. War is no longer an interruption of peace; in fact, peace itself has become an uneasy interlude between wars; peace has become a perilous balance of mutual terror and mutual fright.*

C. Wright Mills, *The Causes of World War Three* (1960c, p. 17)

*We have heard portions, and read all of your series of lectures on culture and politics on the British Broadcasting network. My reaction is one of despair at the accuracy of your scalpel; awe at the vitriol of your words; and deep disquiet at your indictment of American freedom . . .*

Mrs. S. Passow to C. Wright Mills, April 19, 1959

In the articles and monograph he wrote on militarism, Mills argued that the United States of America was engaged in an economically costly and morally aberrant arms race. He further elaborated the theses of *The Power Elite* (1956), describing how a concentration of power and decision-making in the military, in corporations, and in government had made this possible by investing in permanent war and pursuing politically "irresponsible" policies. In vivid terms he articulated the unnecessary escalation of tension between the United States and the Soviet Union, and he warned that if real diplomatic solutions were not found, that a Third World War—possibly a nuclear war—would ensue. Politicians in America, he asserted, had made a clash between "democracy and communism," "freedom and totalitarianism," seem inevitable and the American public were acquiescing to this cold war rhetoric, leaving "history to fate." Mills questioned the very construction and meaning of those oppositions. One of the ways that he did so was by appropriating the apocalyptic moral discourses circulating in the media at the time. For example, the phrase "World War Three," used by Mills as the title of his book, may have been adapted from a comment by Lt. General Matthew Ridgway. In response to the North Korean "violation" of the 38th parallel—the line on a map drawn by President Harry Truman's War Office in 1945—Ridgway had commented that it might be "the beginning of World War Three . . . Armageddon, the last great battle between East and West" (Halberstam, 1993, p. 69). With some members of the military vocally demanding that the White House take a hard line and consider using nuclear weapons in North Korea, Armageddon did indeed seem possible. The Soviet Union, after all, had exploded a nuclear device in 1949. Bomb testings were public events in Los Alamos in 1952, and in 1954 news stories applauded the testing of a 15 megaton hydrogen bomb, one thousand times more powerful than the bomb that devastated Japan, in the Marshall Islands in the Pacific.

Mills used this language to intellectually convince and emotionally prod readers out of their complacency. Americans, he said, know little about the world's
poor or the role their policies play in the perpetuation of misery: “they just don’t give a damn” (1960c, p. 82). He exhorted Americans to pressure their governments to advocate for peace individually and collectively. He demanded, for example, a NATO retreat from East and West Germany; a policy of unilateral disarmament; and an end to missile testing and a halt to the production of nuclear weapons. He asked that Americans accept the presence of the Soviet Union and Red China. He demanded that the money put into this war economy be spent on food, shelter, and education and detailed the consequences of the arms race in other regions of the world—impoverishment. He specifically addressed the moral responsibility of intellectuals and members of the clergy to be involved in these major issues. He accused liberal intellectuals, like Daniel Bell, of capitulation and “cultural default.” He charged the clergy with hypocrisy for their preaching of brotherly love, and their complacency in taking up social issues with their sermons.

Readers were provoked and their letters vary in length from a few sentences scrawled on the back of a postcard to pages and pages of text. Their letters echo back many of the specific issues mentioned by Mills: the arms race, the threat of nuclear war, overdeveloped societies, nationalism, and American foreign policy in the Middle East. The focus of many of these letters, which I will deal with here, was not just what Mills said but the way that he said it.

The fans write: Mills’ style and timing

What I am proposing, I think is a sort of moral guerrilla movement. Your book would then represent at least the first draft of a knapsack manual of arms.

R. Clairborne to C. Wright Mills, May 15, 1959

Each letter is as unique as the individual handwriting on the page, yet my initial analysis of the letters points to three features that readers identified as distinctly Millsian and worthy of comment: his “hard-hitting” style, his use of vernacular language, and his moral tone and mode of argumentation.

To his readers, the name C. Wright Mills came to represent moral courage, intellectual honesty, and a willingness to speak to them in a language they understood. Mills was down-to-earth, an American and not just an ivory tower academic. One member of the clergy put it this way: “your linguistic style, forthright expression, ‘hard-punching’ and incisive concern intrigues me” (Bankston to Mills, n.d.). Although his position was towards disarmament, Mills was figured as a fighter, ready to take on members of the “power elite” who were leading America on the road to a war. “The article really packs a wallop and I am grateful and also very humble” (Finlater to Mills, 1958) It is possible that his prose style, a style Mills struggled with all his life, a style that Theodore Roszak in The Making of a Counter Culture (1968) called his “aggressively activist sociology” (p. 24), helped constitute a largely male audience for C. Wright Mills. Mills’ texts, and Mills the author of those texts, were often endowed, in these fan letters, with exemplary moral fortitude. In this interpretation of Mills, his anti-war stance
was taken not as a sign of weakness but as a badge of courage. This critique of American militarism did not mean giving into “the Russians.” It was a matter of defending American values of decency.

U.S. policy, wrote Mills (1960c), “has become part of the moral debasement of the meaning of Americanism at home and abroad” (p. 20). Letters to Mills from Americans living abroad affirmed this assessment and the feeling, shared by some of his readers, that the United States was not necessarily welcome in all parts of the world. As one expatriate wrote from London: “I have been deeply homesick for America. Yet, after seven months in London, I wonder if I am homesick for a chimera. It is impossible to ignore the fear that we have created among our friends, for example the British” (Passow to Mills, 1959). Mills gave expression to a deep disquiet that his mostly American readership had with the actions of the United States government at home and abroad—and here a brief comment on the conjuncture.

Recall that the United States was at the height of anti-Communism in America: Julian and Ethel Rosenberg were executed for selling secrets to the Soviets in 1953; Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy had lead the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) since 1948. McCarthy was ousted from the Committee in 1954, but J. Edgar Hoover kept close tabs on “subversives” at home. This internal communist threat, often depicted as a “cancer” in the popular media, was mirrored, supposedly, by an external, worldwide communist threat to democracy—a position pursued by President Harry Truman after the war. With the election of General Dwight D. Eisenhower as President in 1953, the Central Intelligence Agency assumed a new role as a paramilitary covert force to bypass some of the domestic restraints on American involvement on the world stage. Eisenhower’s Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, was particularly keen to justify a new American interventionist foreign policy using communism as a rhetorical strategy. In 1953, a few months after Eisenhower took office, Allen Dulles, head of the CIA and John Foster Dulles’ brother, engineered the first of a series of coup d’État—that of newly elected Iranian president Mohammed Mossadegh, a left-leaning politician who was replaced by the Shah of Iran (Halberstam, 1993).

Readers made explicit reference to this context and to the particularities of the moment they were living. As one writer in Australia put it: “to thoughtful people the World over the foreign policy of the United States since Hiroshima appears increasingly psychopathic” (Jacobs to Mills, 1959). Many of Mills’ fans voiced their angst about American politics in visceral terms: America was mad, sick, and rife with lunacy. Mills’ “program for peace,” a 14-step program that echoed the idea of the 12-step program of groups such as Alcoholic Anonymous, could cure this disease. He was not only the doctor providing the cure; he was the cure: “The Mills type of antibodies are badly needed to help fight the sickness—the madness—that has over the past decade laid hold of America” (Broderick to The Nation, 1958). Mills spoke “painful truths” and was a man of reason who could speak with passion. Mills was the man of reason who could speak with a commitment, strength, and restore moral values that would heal America and
Americans. In the words of one reader, Mills made “a contribution to the otherwise inept, deceitful, and mostly non-existent political literature of our time. It is just such a book that is needed now, a clarification from the ground up of the basic issues, and what could be done” (Kuerti to Mills, n.d.). He offered not just words on a page, but ideas about how they could act.

What is key here is the “moral economy” that Mills presented to his readers. This moral economy operated within the discursive boundaries of the period that cut across traditional political lines of left and right. Mills offered an alternative view, a view from the left, but he did not express it in ideological terms but in a language of right and wrong. In his analysis, he presented readers with a terror greater than the fear of communism: their fear of death in a third world war that Mills said would be “total” and “absurd” (1960c, p. 19). He provided these readers of The Causes of World War Three with another enemy, in no uncertain terms: “the only realistic military view is that war, and not Russia is now the enemy” (1960c, p. 119). In other words, there are a series of displacements at work in Mills’ rhetoric: from the fear of communism to the fear of death; from the fear of Russia to the fear of the war that would lead to more death. These displacements and articulation of these fears, their fears and their anger, moved his readers to write.

In giving expression to these sentiments, Mills not only spoke to his readers; he spoke for them. “Actually what you have done is verbalize . . . many of the feelings not just some, but each of us has” (Bankston to Mills, n.d.). To indicate that they had understood him, fans integrated his pet phrases such as the “higher immorality,” “the power elite,” and “the drift and thrust to war” into their letters. For some, acknowledging this distinctive terminology meant that they occupied the moral high ground with Mills, that they had transcended a mass culture of mass indifference. As one dancer colourfully suggested to Mills, those others who refused to take heed could “burrow cheerful moles, pirouette unmindful lemmings, blindfold tightrope walker, dance to kingdom come . . .” (Kirov to Mills, 1959). This sense that Mills not only spoke to them, but spoke for them, was no doubt reinforced by C. Wright Mills’ penchant for the vernacular or, as one writer described it, his “plain speaking on matters of life and death” (Lund, 1958).

For those readers concerned about war and peace, political corruption, over-development, and the growing gap between rich and poor, C. Wright Mills offered a diagnosis of the situation as well as “moral guidance.” Here was a person who could advise them on political matters as they affected their daily lives. Some explicitly turned to him with their questions, such as a self-identified Jewish housewife who wrote “The purpose of this letter is to respectfully suggest that sometime when you are in the mood, to write an article intended for people like me; the mothers and fathers of young people who look to us for guidance” (Wallman to Mills, 1958).

These writers lauded him for what he said, how he said it, and when he said it. His message was deemed timely.
During the years I have been a subscriber to the Nation. I have read nothing more timely, more level-headed, and more worth your issuing reprints of than C. Wright Mills’ THE BALANCE OF BLAME. You have an obligation to do so, and you should do so at no great cost as what he is saying is so important that everyone must read it. (Svec to Mills, 1960)

The clergy who wrote in response to his “pagan sermon” conveyed this timeliness in metaphoric terms consistent with their profession: Mills had issued “a clarion call” (Calhoun to Mills, 1958); he “rang the gong” (Miller, 1958). They confirmed to Mills his prophetic and professorial abilities: “we greatly appreciate the prophetic strain of moral indignation and your shrewd analysis” (Potent to Mills, 1958). He was even given oracular powers by one writer who wanted to know what year he thought world war three would start.

Mills’ rhetorical moves appealed to these readers and provoked them into writing to him. In this conjuncture, communism was associated with atheism and godlessness, and American democracy with having “God on our side.” Mills turned this around. Politics, in Mills’ vocabulary was still “the locale between good and evil” (1960c, p. 172). However, in his analysis evil was not communism but the actions of those engaged in the preparation of war, those causing economic grief and human misery in the “new world encounter” (p. 77). By overtly calling himself a pagan, yet writing in the tone of a preacher and the format of a sermon, Mills gained legitimacy with radical factions within the various Churches because he did not parody or mimic this style. He took it on, and called them to task within their own terms. Those ministers who agreed with his description of the responsibility of the Churches to alleviate problems in this world saw him as one of theirs. Indeed, addressing Mills as “Dear Fellow Pagan” and then pronouncing him as a fellow traveller was a subtext in several fan letters (e.g., Johnson to Mills, 1958).

Not all were so laudatory in their praise of Mills’ demand for immediate action or his deployment of the language of good and evil. For instance, Harold Lasswell may have ended a letter to Mills with the comment “all power to you” but the rest of his text was somewhat ambiguous: “I am fascinated by your new role of polemicist on behalf of decency in a world-wide emergency” (Lasswell to Mills, 1951). It was Mills’ position on this “world wide emergency” and his prescriptions for change in The Causes of World War Three that initiated the famous dispute with Irving Howe, the editor of Dissent, who accused Mills of “analytic carelessness and moral disequilibrium” (1959, p. 189). Howe said: “Many of his specific proposals are fine, many of his specific observations valid; but the mode or style of thought to which he has recently turned seems to me unacceptable for the democratic left” (p. 189). In an open debate on the pages of the magazine, Howe accused Mills of overemphasizing the similarities between the USSR and the U.S.A.; Mills replied by asking Howe how his position differed from that of the U.S. government (Mills, 2000). In a longer unpublished draft of the open letter written to Howe, Mills directly countered Howe’s critique of his moralism arguing, “I am against subordinating morality to ‘politics’ or political policy to military strategy” (Mills to Howe, 1959, n.p.).
Mills’ fans responded with enthusiasm to this moral tone, one that worked within the limitations of this conjuncture. The current national climate placed firm boundaries on acceptable modes of political rhetoric. Mills negotiated those boundaries, advocating a political position and platform that was part of the agenda of the left without declaring itself as such—a declaration that would have led to his dismissal by a broader audience. He appealed to an American sensibility in a distinctive voice that, for his fans, combined argumentation and analysis with rhetorical force. In his memorial to Mills, Harvey Swados (1963), his long-time friend, reflected that Mills’ detractors could not comprehend “how it was that he was not merely respected but looked upon as spokesman and mentor by many of the best young academics and by many thousands of plain readers, nor how he is avidly attended by millions in Japan, in Russia, in Mexico, as a refreshingly different voice of America” (p. 40). Swados adds that Mills “did not need statistical buttressing or the findings of research teams in order to be apprehended by sensitive Americans as corresponding to their own sense of what was going on about them . . . ” (p. 40). C. Wright Mills offered concepts with conviction and presented them in a vernacular language, and often an epistolary style, that worked within the moral economy of his day.

The fans criticize
If Mills was acknowledged by his fans as “educated,” the fact that he chose to “speak from the ground up” indicated his accessibility and allowed him to pass as “one of theirs.” When Mills failed to get the balance right, however, he was taken to task. For example, when Mills spoke at Stanford University in 1959 a couple left disappointed and angry: “We came, I [sic] twenty-five miles, because we needed to hear your splendid ideas; we needed to understand your ideas, Dr. Mills, yet many of us left more frustrated than fulfilled” (Dunbar to Mills, 1959). They went on to tell Mills why they came, and what they left with:

Desperately we desire new concepts, Dr. Mills, and we grow excited at the prospect of having a thinker of your stature in our area—then to have a profound percentage of your message lost in nomenclature sets up feelings of hostility inside of us, Dr. Mills, and we begin to doubt if you really want to share your ideas with us . . . (Dunbar to Mills, 1959)

They then offered him advice: “leave your sophisticated vocabulary and your involved rhetoric for professional societies” because, as they added “Average people don’t want to be discouraged . . . ” Note the underlined words for emphasis and the repetition of “Dr. Mills” to underscore their anger, to catch his attention and to convey direct address.

Praise for Mills’ perspicacity was often followed by suggestions, criticism, and examples meant to assist Mills in his future writings. Mills received three types of critique: of a particular issue; of emphasis or degree; for over-generalizing. Sometimes fans disagreed outright with Mills. To take but one example, Mills’ suggestion that the United States should move towards unilateral disarmament was debated on the pages of *The Nation*, and *Saturday Review*, as well as in
private letters: “your prescription is so violent as to leave me breathless. Why in
the world do you expect the total withdrawal of American forces from Europe to
revivify that into the bell weather of civilization?” (Ritner to Mills, 1957; also,
Kennedy to Mills, 1959). Arguing that unilateral disarmament would leave a
power vacuum that the Soviets would step into, other readers offered their solu-
tions including the use of United Nations forces as a mediators (Hubbell, 1958).
Mills was accused of over-emphasizing by his readers in a number of specific
ways. He castigated the Soviets too much (Sager to Mills, 1958). He had too much
faith in government and politicians (Loomis, 1959). He overemphasized the inter-
national importance of Russia, the United States, and Europe, ignoring other
countries (Ritner to Mills, 1957). He made too much of “intellectuals as agents of
change.”

The following excerpt captures the way that these fans situated their criti-
cism: as a minor point, but one that they felt Mills should address or respond to, if
not directly, then in future works:

This leads me to be bold enough to make a minor criticism; it seems to me that
there is too much emphasis on the intellectual, as being the only possible agent
for action. I think that all literate people of some intelligence and sensibility,
could be shocked into consciousness of what is going on, and I am afraid they
may be alienated, should any of them read your book, by your constant
pre-occupation with “the intellectual.” (Kuerti to Mills, n.d.)

These suggestions were issued as constructive criticisms from concerned
readers who saw themselves as fellow political travellers. Their fear was that by
over-emphasizing his points, he discredited his general message and that this
would lead other readers to abandon his writing. This accusation of over-emphasis
is distinct, I think, from the charge of over-generalizing. In over-emphasizing,
Mills was accused of taking one portion of his analysis and giving it too much
weight. In criticizing him for over-generalizing, his readers told him he erred by
covering over details, causing him to miss the finer distinctions to be made in an
argument.

To make their point, and to assist him with future work, this particular group
of fans often supplied Mills with anecdotal evidence and testimonies of their own
experience. The most common type of counter-evidence given was names of spe-
cific ministers fighting for peace. It is “not quite accurate to imply that there have
been no voices for peace within the churches” (Miller, 1958). From the testimo-
nies of these “historical informants,” a picture of some of the more nefarious leg-
islative practices that were put into place by federal and state governments in the
U.S. is painted that warrants further investigation. One little-known aspect of the
pressures on American churches was the enforcement of the Loyalty Oath. For
speaking out against “nuclear madness, social injustice,” and working to “an
honest integrational congregation,” one Californian couple wrote:

Our minister has been called before the House Unamerican [sic] Activities
Committee and the loyalty oath has forced us to pay full taxes on our building.
We have appealed for an end to the staggering burden and our case is now
before the United States Supreme Court; this is the price we have to pay to have a free pulpit . . . (Weymouth to Mills, 1958)

The letters to C. Wright Mills open the window to more research on these forms of covert censorship and overt repression of internal dissent in the 1950s. These testimonies also remind one of what topics Mills did not touch that were very present in America—the silences in his texts on issues such as racial integration of schools, for example, in 1956 in Arkansas.

The fans act

In her study of letters from fans of the television show Dallas, Ien Ang (1996) remarked that: “A text functions only if it is read. Only in and through the practice of reading does the text have meaning (or several meanings) for the reader” (p. 468). Mills’ fans did much more than read his words. They wrote down their responses to what he read, they offered him testimonies, advice, clippings, and their own artistic and political productions. They requested guidance on politics and their personal lives. These fans not only saw themselves as readers but as “fellow travellers” and potential participants in his intellectual process and in the politics which his writings inspired. This brings me to my final, brief, account of how readers responded to C. Wright Mills. I am interested in not only what readers said, but what they did after reading these texts. The letters hint at some conjuncturally—and textually specific political practices.

In The Causes of World War Three, Mills transformed the classic Leninist question “What is to be done” into the morally inflected inquiry: “what, then, ought we to do?” (1960c, p. 111). He suggested to his readers that “Democracy requires that those who bear the consequences of decisions have enough knowledge to hold decision makers accountable” (p. 185). He suggested that now was the time to “open the way for ideas, and for their debate by publics” (p. 156). Many of Mills’ readers took up his challenge—and told him about it.

In the first instance, these fans were keen to “spread the word.” Mills fans were so convinced by his arguments that they wanted it to be made available—at a reasonable price—to others. Readers wrote to Carey McWilliams, the editor of The Nation demanding reprints for themselves and for others. Professors asked for reprints for use in their classrooms, clergy men for their congregations, ordinary citizens to give to their friends (Engberg to Mills, n.d.). They told Mills of how his work was being distributed. They described buying the book for friends, or receiving it as a gift, or reading it out loud at parties. They reported back the responses to Mills. It was suggested that his books should become “the rallying point for some organized movement to forestall disaster and initiate some constructive politics” (Kuerti to Mills, n.d.). Some readers tried to do just that. Clergymen and activists organized events where his writings were made available and used as a springboard for discussion.

For this particular group of writerly readers, concerned with war and peace, letter writing itself was their main form of political activity. One minister sent Mills copies of the clippings from the media campaign he organized against a Life
magazine interview with Secretary of State Dulles (Tetons to Mills, 1959). Another reader mimeographed over 700 letters to politicians (Pinney to Mills, 1959a, 1959b). Still others sent Mills copies of letters they had written to the President of the United States requesting that the United States support a worldwide moratorium on the testing of nuclear weapons (Stock to Mills, 1959). Mills also received correspondence from members of “the power elite,” including the industrialist Cyrus Eaton, Senator Michael Mansfield from Montana (Mansfield, 1960), and Admiral Snowden Arthur from the United States Navy, all of whom agreed with his positions and promised to exert influence in their circles. Perhaps the most unusual, and historically unique, practice relayed by these readers was the dissemination of Mills’ texts in Sunday sermons. This is written to thank you for your recent nation articles and to inclose [sic] evidence of the strange fruit they have borne.... Thank you again for your courageous and timely address to the clergy. I believe that neither letters or the reprints begin to suggest how influential and provocative the articles have been.” (Sweet to Mills, 1958)

These clergymen sent Mills copies of their texts and often confessed the results of their efforts on the members of their congregation (Crane, 1961a, 1961b; Sweet, 1958). After hearing Mills speak, another lay Christian initiated a day where Mills’ Pagan Sermon would be addressed by a whole group of ministers in his region (Larkin, 1958). One cannot measure the influence, reach, or impact of Mills’ texts in the 1950s from these letters but, as the Reverend Charles Sweet mentions above, these testimonies do give a sense of some of the many communications channels used to disseminate the writings of C. Wright Mills. **Mills writes back** Irving Louis Horowitz (1983) has argued that Mills was a “radical conservatism,” a position that Horowitz says enabled him to pick up support from an odd assortment of populist types. He then speculates on what this support meant to Mills: “that support must have been as disturbing and unnerving to Mills as lack of support from the critics he had come to depend on” (p. 291). If by radical conservative Horowitz is referring to Mills’ ability to cloak his radical proposals within a moral framework recognizable to those living in this conjunctural moment, then I would agree. However, my research on Mills’ readership and his letter writers suggests a far more complicated relationship between Mills’ and these readers. And here I turn to the evidence in the archives: Mills’ responses to his readers. While it is impossible to know exactly how many of these letters he answered, he did mark many of them with “ans” or “not ans” or “reject,” and he kept approximately 20 mimeographed copies of his responses in his files. These letters from Mills offer a window onto the tricky question of how Mills understood his readership, and how he used their letters for inspiration and information.

Letters from readers challenged Mills’ characterization of the human type, living in the overdeveloped societies, as “cheerful robots.” When a woman from Athens, Virginia, penned a letter telling of how her protests on the folly of civil
defense in the U.S. had led to an investigation of her husband by the college's authorities at his college, Mills wrote back his thanks, and requested feedback on his work:

Getting letters such as you wrote me last September, which I have only now received upon returning to the United States, is one reason why one continues to write. I am most grateful to you, Madame, for sending it to me. This March I am going to deliver the Sidney Hillman Lectures “On War and Peace” and if I may I should very much like to send you mimeographed copies of these lectures about that time for your criticism. (Mills to Dahlke, 1957)

The comments, and the letters he wrote back, suggest that Mills thought that some of his readership capable of critically reading his work. His handwriting on the mail indicates that he not only filed these letters—he sometimes explicitly engaged with the issues raised in these letters, underlining them or noting key points in the margins. Mills was, however, not a consistent respondent, even to those in political power. Harvey Swados wrote a long letter to Mills in June of 1960 in which he confronted Mills on some of his proposals in *The Causes of World War Three*, in particular, his silence on the Soviet invasion of Budapest. At the end of the letter, Swados admonishes Mills for characterizing America as a land without politics, and of ignoring the political activities of “the Liberal Project” in Washington. He relays the story of “a kid” involved in the project who had twice written to Mills, asking him to come to Washington to speak to well-placed members of the project: “I begin to believe, he said that Mills is a phony in his talk about their being no politics. I offer him the chance to move in on these young congressman and them and he doesn’t even reply” (Swados to Mills, 1960). “Well?,” asks Swados, to which Mills replied: “I can’t join the Liberal Project.” He added: “On that I’ve made my decision: I am an analyst and a writer about politics, not a politician or a consultant. I’m too damned busy to do anything else. In fact, I am overwhelmed trying to do this. And I think it is the most important political act of which I am capable, in this country at least” (Mills to Swados, 1960). Mills gave no explanation for not writing, but his emphasis on his understanding of his vocation was consistent and reiterated in other letters to other readers who entreated him to become directly involved in politics: It is my job to write; that is where I can be politically effective. That is what I do.

The letters shed some light on some of Mills’ political activities, and the contradictions between his aspirations to be a political writer and his desire to make money from his vocation. Mills was inundated with requests to speak at political rallies, church conferences, on radio shows, and, later, to make television appearances. He granted requests for free reprints of his materials, and allowed himself to be quoted liberally, if the cause was one he could support. Mills signed petitions, and let his name be used for public campaigns. For example, the anti-nuclear group SANE organized a public letter that was published in *The New York Times*, to which Mills lent his support (Pickett to Mills, 1958). Mills also participated in the opposition to the anti-communist propaganda film *Operation Abolition*. Mills did do some pro bono speaking (Jack to Mills, n.d.) but he also asked
at least one organization to pay $500.00 for a single engagement (Mills to

Mills was practical when it came to using information from the letters to help
distribute his work to the right reviewers and the right audiences. When asked by
his publicist for “persons in the public eye to whom we might send advance copies
of your book with a reasonable hope of receiving in return an endorsement or
other quotable comment,” Mills replied: “I’d plug hard away 1) liberal Protestant
ministers 2) student-locals 3) peace groups, esp. The Friends-F.O.R.” (Mills to
Brown, n.d.). The collection of letters he had received for The Causes of World
War Three told Mills who his supporters might be, and where to market his books.
In his later theoretical work on The New Left, they also furnished him with evi-
dence of social movements in the United States that crossed the political spectrum
on particular issues.

A political writer and his fans
In “The Infinite Contradiction,” French political philosopher Etienne Balibar
(1995) contemplates his own writing practice as one that “constantly endeavours
to untie and retie from the inside, the knot between a conjuncture and writing”
(p. 144). It is a double move, writes Balibar, and one analytically dismantles in the
hopes that in treating an issue, it can be re-assembled into something else. One
must “untie the elements of a conjuncture” and work from within the conjuncture
“to retie the conditions of writing” (p. 144). And, as Balibar admits, his own
interest in particular philosophers is that “no philosopher has ever held any
interest for me as long as I was aware only of his ideas, and not his practice”
(p. 143). Balibar’s comments resonate with my interest in C. Wright Mills’ writ-
ings, the writings of his readers, and the relationship of this writing to this con-
juncture. As I have argued, the letters that C. Wright Mills received from his
readers gave him a sense of his audience and supporters. By actively furnishing
information on events and issues, by engaging in a dialogue with Mills after he
wrote his books, they participated in his life as a cultural workman or public intelle-
tual. Dan Wakefield (1971) recounts a story Mills told him of a confrontation
with a publisher: “You gentlemen do not understand what publishing means. You
think the verb ‘to publish’ means ‘to print,’ but that is not so. It means ‘to make
public’” (p. 70).

Mills wrote of the duty of intellectuals to take a stand, to understand the
salient issues of the day, and to bring them to the attention of “the public.” Mills’
official occupation may have been “sociologist,” but his unofficial vocation was
that of a political writer. In an unpublished note dated 1957, C. Wright Mills
defined the political writer as one who says no:

This is the idea of the man who stands up to nonsense and injustice and says
no. Says no, not out of mere defiance or for the sake of the impudent no, but
out of love of truth and joy in exercising intellectual skills. My task is to shape
and work with this role in such a way as to make it more satisfying . . . (Mills,
1957a)
Mills believed, increasingly, in the potential of the publishing industry not only to reach a public, but to stimulate public discussion, which could then bring about social and political change. His rhetoric addressed American readers dissatisfied with the policies of their country and gave them ideas on what they not only could do, but should do. As the letters show, many took up his call.

By describing C. Wright Mills’ “writerly” readers as fans, I do not wish to demean the political dimension of the responses to Mills, nor do I want to imply that Mills’ were wide-eyed and uncritical in their devotion. On the contrary, as my study of the content of these letters indicates, Mills’ respondents were an informed and testy lot. Spurred on by his words, many saw it as their intellectual duty to argue with him, to discuss his works with friends, to become politically involved. This movement from isolated individual to a social, or cultural, or political sense of belonging to a group larger than oneself is an important aspect of fandom. As Henry Jenkins III (1991) has written of the female fan cultures of television,

Many fans characterize their entry into fandom in terms of a movement from the social and cultural isolation doubly imposed upon them as women within a patriarchal society and as seekers after alternative pleasures within dominant media representations, toward more and more active participation in a “community” receptive to their cultural productions, a “community” within which they may feel a sense of “belonging.” (p. 175)

I would revise this and say that the majority of Mills’ (male) fans desired to break their felt social and cultural isolation within America and they sought solutions to the hypocrisies and contradictions of America in the 1950s. Rather than seeking alternative “pleasures,” they wanted an alternative politics, a more active political life, and a different America. These fans did not desire escape into a fantasized life. They longed for a way out of the fantasies they thought were meant to lull them into complacency; in the words of one fan, as we “munch our krispy, kruchy Krispies and gaze at the brilliantly colored ads for the new ‘58 cars in Life and Time” (Newman to Mills, 1957).

In taking up their pens, these writers also took up the causes of C. Wright Mills. His fans tried to enact transformations on the world. They organized. They told others about his work and convinced others to become politically “responsible.” They wrote letters to politicians and to newspapers—and they reported back their activities to him in their fan letters.

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Note
1. All of the letters to Mills are a part of the C. Wright Mills Papers located at the University of Texas at Austin. Permission to use the archive has been granted by the Estate of C. Wright Mills.

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