

The Journal of Epistolary Studies

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University of Texas, Rio Grande Valley

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Letter from the Editor:

I am happy to report that the journal is back after its COVID-19 hiatus of 2021. We have collected here three articles that have breathed new life back into the journal. Keep those submissions coming in!

Best,

Gary Schneider

Transatlantic Letters and Settler Identities: Jane White Writes to Ireland, 1849–1865

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Wilfrid Laurier University

Abstract: This article reads one side of a transatlantic correspondence, that of Irish emigrant Jane White, who relocated to Canada in 1849, during a time of high migration from Ireland to Canada. The point of reading her one-sided correspondence is because it challenges scholars in both material and theoretical ways. Jane's letters are a richly complicated source for such an undertaking, allowing readers to assess the impact of material circumstances and the "mechanics of colonization" as they shape and inform the epistolary platform upon which Jane White rehearses Protestant and middle-class identities. These identity affiliations—which act as connective tissue to the land of her birth, and which she reinforces in letter writing—are concretely tied to the processes of colonization and settlement, but complicated by being Irish. Despite the relative comfort of her family, Jane's letters to Eleanor Wallace reveal a young Irish woman struggling to maintain her identity in the face of prejudice. The following examination of her letters suggests ways of situating the personal letter in settler histories by focusing on Jane White's engagement with questions of identity, social status, and colonial relations within the epistolarium, the discursive world that is shaped by and created within the dialogic field of the letter and the material factors of its creation.

An archived set of letters from Irishwoman Jane White spanning nearly twenty years, from 1849 until 1865, records her migration to and life in Goderich, Canada West.¹ Seventeen letters survive, most of them written from her new home on Lake Huron, and are addressed to Eleanor Wallace in Newtownards, County Down, south of Belfast. No return letters from Eleanor have yet been found in Canada.² The first surviving letter was written when Jane arrives on June 29, 1849, two years after the height of the potato famine, and it describes her arrival at Grosse Isle, Quebec, the infamous quarantine site that housed so many ailing Irish refugees; approximately 3000 of them died there just as they reached the shores of North America in those last few years of the 1840s. Jane, however, was not among the impoverished and saw with her own eyes how her migration experience was materially different because of her middle-class privilege; it meant she escaped the worst of transatlantic travel, but it also meant she did not have the "stereotypical" Canadian-Irish immigrant experience that her letter is supposed to illuminate. She died at the age of 36, unmarried, in January 1867 just as Canada became a confederated country. Actively negotiating the transatlantic divide in her letters, she clearly struggled to find her footing in waves of change, migration, and colonization.

When the White family sought new opportunities in Canada, Jane was eighteen years old, educated and single. She was an only child. Her hometown of Belfast was a powerful industrial center, more prosperous than Dublin. Even though famine was devastating the west counties in the 1840s, it was not something that personally affected the Whites, who lived comfortably and were able to bring a piano and a servant on the journey.³ After being settled in Canada for a few years,

Jane's father campaigned (unsuccessfully) to be the mayor of Goderich, suggesting he had gained some measure of respect from his adopted community. Although a few historians have used Jane White's first letter to illuminate Irish migration during the famine, the focus on famine migration to Canada actually diverts readers from what can be learned from the entire extant oeuvre of her letters.⁴ White's oeuvre stands out for being the most complete set of letters available at the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) within a limited collection of nineteenth-century correspondence from Canada.⁵ This fairly unique data set reveals a young Irish woman struggling to maintain her identity in the face of prejudice in Canada as the nation was being formed and settled in the years before Confederation. Letter writing proved to be an ideal vehicle through which she teased out the contradictions of her transplanted identity.

Historian Michael Kenneally wrote in 2005 that historiography about the Irish in Canada would be enriched by paying attention to life writing such as letters, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, and travel writing.⁶ One benefit of examining such documents would be to correct "pervasive notions of the archetypal Irish immigrant, derived from the Irish-American experience and reinforced by the specific associations of Irish Famine immigration to Canada."⁷ But the benefits of using life writing as source material go beyond simply correcting the historical record of Irish-Canadian settlement, because life writing also illuminates the formation and delineation of immigrant identities. Kenneally states: "life writing ... calibrated layers of subjectivity and delineated nodes of reference of immigrant identities."⁸ The value of immigrant letters is also evident to historian Kerby Miller, who spent his career collecting and transcribing hundreds of such letters dating from the 1600s to the 20th century, to provide a comprehensive picture of the motivations for and attitudes toward migration to North America. What Miller's impressive investigations do not explore in detail, however, is the value of letter writing itself to the immigrant experience.⁹ How letter writing figures into the process of "calibration" as the immigrant becomes settler is a question that has received attention, best summarized in Liz Stanley's work on settler colonialism and migrant letters. She determined that the migrant letter is not its own genre, different from other kinds of letters; however, she concludes that "exploring letters (and recent variants) sent from and to a range of (historical and contemporary) migratory contexts is a central task for epistolary scholarship."¹⁰

This study of Jane White's letters, then, as one particular kind of life writing in one specific migratory context, shows how immigrant identities are dynamically formed in concert with the realities of transatlantic correspondence and its challenges, which were both practical and emotional. This study answers the call from the editors of *Epistolary Histories*, who wrote that "future epistolary histories will have to attend to ... transatlantic correspondences" and "the mechanics of colonization."¹¹ I read their phrase "the mechanics of colonization" as describing the historically determined and unsettled circumstances that letter writers negotiated: from the practicalities of posting a letter to the complexities of nurturing emotional bonds over vast distances while establishing new identities in settler spaces. I further argue that the process of negotiating these tricky circumstances had an impact on the formation of settler identities and therefore settler culture in a colonial space like Canada. So, to begin: Jane White's letters are misread when examined primarily through the lens of famine migration; instead, this paper seeks to use the entire corpus of Jane White's letters to show her engagement—through the affordances of epistolary writing—with complicated questions of identity, social status, and colonial relations.¹² Jane's letters are a rich source for such an undertaking, and illustrate how she used letter writing as a platform upon which she could rehearse and untangle a historically specific identity that was Protestant, middle class, and female. Laying claim to particular (though sometimes contradictory) identities is how she

weaved connections between the settler space of Canada and the land of her birth. It is an operation performed through and reinforced by letter writing; and it is an operation concretely tied to processes of colonization and settlement in Canada though complicated by her Irishness.

The seventeen letters from Jane White in PRONI comprise a surprisingly substantial record that exists because her friend had saved them.¹³ This statement says a lot. Pre-Confederation “Canadian” records stored in Northern Ireland are a legacy of Canada’s colonial history, but they also demonstrate how the “mechanics of colonization” were underwritten by emotional bonds connecting settlers to the friends and family left behind. Kathleen Venema notes that nineteenth-century letters are a “unique technology for managing family relationships and kinship ties across vast distances in space, time, and ideological orientation.”¹⁴ Perhaps Eleanor Wallace saved the letters because she regarded them as historically significant; however, Eleanor seems to have been one of those people who just saved things.¹⁵ Perhaps Eleanor saved the letters simply because she cared for Jane. Their affection is implied when Jane writes about missing Eleanor eight years after arriving in Canada: “I wish I had you to walk beside, I would like one of those long walks with you up the Belfast road, sometimes when alone and I begin to think, I often wish for my old home.”¹⁶ Indeed, the letter is not only a vehicle for the construction of an emotional relationship but also an object that, itself, evinces emotion. The ties that bound them together nourished their correspondence and prompted Eleanor to cherish the letters as objects. This act exemplifies how the emigrant letter was not only a channel of information but “more often a channel of solidarity and consolation,” as Brenda Hooper-Goranson puts it.¹⁷

In addition, the letter was an instrument of colonial expansion. In her impressive study of settlers’ letters sent from British Columbia to the UK, historian Laura Ishiguro writes that British postal reform in the nineteenth century signaled the importance of letter writing and the circulation of letters as “key practices of colonialism.”¹⁸ “In this sense,” Ishiguro states, “a system for moving letters around the world should be seen as an important form of imperial infrastructure.”¹⁹ By midcentury, there was also a push for a more organized postal system in what is present-day Canada. Similarly, a report in the *Globe and Mail* in 1848 stated that the desire for a better Canadian postal system was “prompted by a growing conviction that the social and commercial interests of the Colonies were intimately connected with the extension of their postal intercourse and that they truly regarded it ... as the means in a new country of extending civilization.”²⁰ The mere survival of the cache of letters from Jane White at PRONI is noteworthy. Considering the haphazardness of the transatlantic postal system before 1850, White’s practical options for getting a letter overseas were sometimes limited.²¹ Accidents meant that postal traffic could be lost at sea, by fire, or by mishandling. The postal system that extended from empire to colony was evidence of an imperial infrastructure, but it was also a technological affordance that materially dictated how much could be written and how often the correspondents could communicate. While we might debate whether the letters of Jane White belong to Canadian or to Irish history, it is more accurate to say they operate in a colonial, transatlantic, and postal space, drawing old cultural norms to the new world; exporting new observations to the old world; extending civilization; all while grappling with the changes to self-concept as a traveler and settler within a metastasizing empire.

Jane White’s first letter was written when her passenger ship, the *Eliza Morrison*, arrived in Quebec.²² White describes the quarantine at Grosse Isle: “There are a great many sheds erected in the island that have been very useful for sick persons. There was a doctor here on Sunday from shore who examined the ship and was convinced there was not any sickness among the cabin or poop cabin passengers.”²³ For the one out of ten passengers that could afford to travel in cabin

class (like Jane), there was of course less likelihood of illness. Deaths did occur aboard the *Eliza Morrison*. Jane's postscript reads:

We have had 4 deaths during the voyage four females from dysentery which was prevalent here and a child lost from smallpox Mr Mawhinney a Presbyterian clergyman lost his wife and had only been two or three months married she died as we passed the banks of Newfoundland at which place the cold became very intense I never felt the like of it before it was strange looking to see the mountains of Newfoundland covered in many places with snow so very late in the spring.²⁴

The image of a new bride dying while the White family encounters the unnaturally cold climate of Newfoundland is a haunting one. However, this funereal coda comes after she has described her happier experience of the quarantine delay. She writes that "the passengers all feel discontented at being kept here," so she walks off to the woods where she meets two "young Ladies" and their servant, and they have a picnic.²⁵ This first letter is also notable for descriptions of the voyage out, and she relates tales of "fearful days" at sea, the "severe heaving of the ship," and the "fearful gales" that brought them close to shipwreck. The letter ends with directions to Eleanor about how to share the information contained in the letter: "Harriet Dobson, please tell her I am safe arrived here and please say I will write to her very shortly and give her my very kind love." She also asks to be remembered to Miss Jane Galston: "tell her I cannot give much information about Canada yet" (in a comment that underscores how important a source of information the immigrant letter was to those left behind). It is true that her first letter is a descriptive document about arriving at Grosse Isle eight weeks after leaving Belfast Lough, but the letter says little else about famine migration aside from the description of the quarantine sheds.²⁶

Historian Stephen Davison writes that Jane White's letters "comment on a wide range of matters including: the voyage from Belfast, the quarantine station at Grosse Isle; the first impression of the country," but his summary focuses on the first letter alone and disregards the remaining sixteen.²⁷ White's first letter is also included in a collection of first-person accounts called *The History of the Irish Famine*.²⁸ Certainly, her first letter has value for its proximity to the tragedy of the famine migration. However, it is not written from the point of view of the steerage class. It hardly describes anything to do with famine migration; and the content of her remaining sixteen letters is not connected to the history of famine migration. In fact, she seems to be mostly unaware of or in denial about the human disaster that preceded her arrival at Quebec (she does not mention any trepidation about undertaking the trip or reports of what she had heard previously about Grosse Isle, if anything). Historians have focused on her depiction of Grosse Isle, but I would argue that the value of her letters, as a whole, is located in the very element that might repel most contemporary readers: the judgmental tone that pervades the rest of her correspondence to Eleanor. It is here, in her unkind generalizations, that we see the operations of identity maintenance within the porous social categories of settler spaces.

Jane's letters do not contain "carefully coded political statement[s]" such as those seen in working-class Irish immigrant letters studied by David Fitzpatrick, "rich in half-articulated signals and warnings, and minutely studied by its audience."²⁹ Instead, she makes overt and direct judgments of perceived social differences. She can be haughty, but I believe her judgmental tone is a reflexive act of self-maintenance. Letters to Eleanor offer a way to perform agency and seek connection in a confusing colonial milieu where social categories were not fully settled; the letters are tactical, used to reassure herself that she retains some of her previous identity, and are a source of comfort because Eleanor understands the nuances of her social position as it was in Belfast.

Writing to a correspondent back home meant that there was much that Jane did not have to explain as she “calibrated the layers of subjectivity,” in Kenneally’s words. Despite the strictures that may have limited how much and how often Jane could write, letter writing gave her a chance to articulate the “nodes of reference” she used to construct a transplanted identity, one that relied heavily on her identification as a Protestant, middle-class woman.

Identifying as Protestant and middle class, Jane White was representative of the bulk of Irish migrants in Canada despite the fact that “the stereotype of the Irish emigrant has been that of the indigent labourer,” and the narrative of Irish migration to Canada, especially when it focuses on the 1840s, generally tells the story of famine and tragedy.³⁰ Jane’s experience as a middle-class Protestant immigrant of the 1840s was more predominant: “we now know that the majority of Irish immigrants in mid-century Canada arrived prior to the Famine were Protestant and rural-based” writes historian Catherine Wilson.³¹ A study of Irish migration to Canada at midcentury by Ruth-Ann Harris also finds that emigrants “were not drawn primarily from the most impoverished group but from those who saw their opportunities declining and sought to re-create in the New World what was slipping from them in Ireland.”³² Miller concurs, arguing that many migrants sought “*personal* economic betterment” and that the majority of them, until the 1830s, were Presbyterian or other Protestants, mostly departing from Ulster.³³ Indeed, in Goderich, where White settled, Protestants were the majority.³⁴

Jane White foregrounds her Protestantism while still at Grosse Isle when she singles out a group of Catholic Quebecois. She finds the scene to be aesthetically pleasing at first, explaining how a group of Roman Catholics in a steamboat “came past here on a pleasure excursion from Quebec, full of people gaily dressed ... it was a handsome sight.”³⁵ However, she quickly notes that they are being recreational on a Sunday: “it showed very bad respect for the Lord’s day. They are only to be excused on account of being Papists.”³⁶ Meanwhile, Catholic passengers on nearby ships were dying without access to a priest because there were simply not enough rowboats to get enough priests to all of the ailing migrants, but she seemed to be unaware of this.³⁷ In subsequent letters, Catholics offer a key point of contrast: “The Roman Catholics seem an enthusiastic people. I never liked any I knew. I was slightly acquainted with a Lady here of that persuasion, my mother advised me to drop the acquaintance. I did so and do not regret it, they are so bigoted and uncharitable.”³⁸ A few years after, she writes to Eleanor: “I join with you in not thinking much of the Roman Catholics. I have known some of them here and think them deceitful. I would be neighbourly with them but would not take them for companions, their bigotry is too much.”³⁹ In this formulation, she bonds with her correspondent: “I join with you.” This has the effect of justifying her own biases and signaling that she still upholds the norms of her original community in an epistolary act of “solidarity and consolation.”⁴⁰ This phrase suggests there was comfort in not having to justify or explain her opinions to a sympathetic audience who understood the worldview that Jane imported to Canada.

White was not alone in using Catholics as a foil in correspondence. Dublin-born Frances Stewart migrated with her Belfast-born husband in 1822, and they settled near Peterborough, Ontario. She left a large set of letters, written to cultivated and educated friends such as novelist Maria Edgeworth, and in which she exhibited prejudices similar to Jane White’s; these letters were published as *Our Forest Home* in 1889. Here she is in a letter to fellow Canadian settler Catharine Parr Traill: “we are at present very quiet here & seem out of the reach of harm,” she writes, “tho’ surrounded by Roman Catholics who are doing everything they can to take the lead & have an upper hand in every public establishment & no doubt are all Fenian, but I hope may be kept down quietly.”⁴¹ In an earlier letter, Stewart singles out Catholics from the south of Ireland for

condemnation: “Certainly, the southern Irish Catholics are the worst---everywhere--& often, if they do get on for a time, do something dishonest which sends them to jail & so to ruin & destruction.”⁴² This letter in particular dwells on the work habits of Scotch people versus those from southern Ireland, and then she articulates the curious success of an Irish family who lived near Douro, Ontario, commenting that hard work and being from the north of Ireland overcame the disadvantages of being “Papists—and very bigoted ones too.”⁴³ Stewart goes on to write: “Wherever Protestant settlers are they certainly do thrive best but they must be of sober steady industrious habits.”⁴⁴ In general, she believed the poverty of the incoming settlers was casting a bad light on all Irish immigrants. Stewart carefully calibrates her Irish identity, weighing it against additional determinants of class and religion. The way in which Frances Stewart aligns her sympathies with the “Scotch-Irish,” the Protestants from the north of Ireland, is both rigidly moralistic and also malleable: it enunciated a flexible Anglo-Irish (or West Briton) identity that might make things easier for an Irish settler transitioning into the colonial space of Canada. It is a finely tuned operation that makes sense to a reader who can understand all of these particularities; it is an act of delineation that needs a sympathetic correspondent from back home.

Every social category was fluid in the colonies. Migration included the promise *and* the threat of social volatility, and middle-class women in particular were keenly aware of the possibility of downward mobility. The middle-class female emigrant, in particular, faced challenges both on the voyage out and in the colonies, where social distinctions were not rigidly upheld and where opportunities for social mobility were different for women than men, who might seek fortune through burgeoning industries or political engagement, like Jane’s father. Marriage was the usual vehicle through which women could maintain or improve their class position, but this was not an opportunity that presented itself to Jane.⁴⁵ The maintenance of her class position, starting from the moment of departure, was necessary because a change in class status could have real consequences. Janet Myers surveyed the shipboard letters written by women that were part of the Female Middle Class Emigration Society (FMCES), a project begun in the 1860s to deal with the “excess” of single, middle-class women in England. These women were socially disadvantaged from the start of the journey because their tickets were bought with assistance; therefore, the founders of the project eagerly insisted that governesses sent to North America were “vastly superior to the hordes of wild Irish and fast young ladies who had hitherto started as emigrants.”⁴⁶ Middle-class status was not evident among these women of uncertain backgrounds and little means, so the founders of the FMCES contrasted the English and the Irish to illustrate the differences. Middle-class status might therefore be further complicated for a young Irish woman like Jane by prevailing prejudices in the colonies about “wild Irish and fast young ladies.” It was even more important for her to cling to a concept of respectable, genteel womanhood (from ship to settlement) to overcome assumptions about her Irishness.

The piano the White family brought from Ireland proved to be a useful tool through which to demonstrate middle-class status; Jane is dreadfully proud of it and her playing skills. The snobbery in her discussion of local piano teachers in Goderich, for example, is revealing: “the only one competent to teach is a Mrs. Charlesworth (I mentioned her name to you before) but she charges £4 per quarter.... I never would give instructions of the kind to anyone. I could do it just as well as her. I soon snapped anyone who asked me for lessons.”⁴⁷ The following year, Jane returns to this subject, telling Eleanor that “there was a tuner up from London this summer who pronounced my very old piano the most substantial he had seen.”⁴⁸ The piano, brought from Ireland, allegedly better than any in the colonies, is a physical reminder of the life left behind. Her haughty

commentary is poignant because, in Goderich, her family's "level of prosperity was very far below that of the town's main families."⁴⁹

As Jane settled into her new home, she created an imaginary shared world through letter writing, the epistolarium, in which she recreated the woman she was, a woman who was still recognizable *to* her correspondent and recognized *by* her correspondent: settler letters therefore imagine identity through a poetics of relation. When writing to a network of friends or family, much does not have to be explained about the nuances of social status, class standing, gender expectations, and religious affiliation. Like other Protestants, Jane relied on a social network that had been developed in Belfast.⁵⁰ Indeed, her letters are rife with allusions to the extended network of friends left behind. Most of her letters end with messages such as "Please remember me to your cousin. My mother is curious to know if Rev'd. H. Moore is still in Newtownards?" or "Please remember us to Mr. and Mrs. Waugh & Mrs. Hill & all enquiring friends."⁵¹ Even in one of her final letters, written in 1864, the network of Irish friends is recalled: "My father would like to know if Mr. Kennedy is living and well. Please remember me affectionately to Mr. and Mrs. Milliken"⁵² Compare these messages, showing stable and varied connections to community, with this poignant letter of 1888 from a Mrs. Welch to John Gamble in Belfast, who dictated it to someone who was literate, and in which Welch is clearly in search of the whereabouts of a family member:

TO MR HUNTER Mrs Welch want to know if you are Margeret Gage's son if you are will you oblige me by writing a few lines to me to let me know if she went home she was married to Daniel Hunter a soldier of the 4th regiment of foot he died in Sydney Australia I am Margeret Gage sister—be good enough to write at once and let me know if she ever went home and oblige.⁵³

Although it is not clear if Mrs. Welch is Catholic, she is certainly cut off from correspondence by illiteracy. I have been suggesting that settler letters imagine identity through a poetics of relation: who am I in comparison to you, and who am I in comparison to the person you knew before I left? Who am I now that I see my original community through fresh eyes? To which community do I properly belong? Have I changed? However, these "poetics of relation" depend on education, literacy skills, access to correspondents who remain at the same address, and the ability to post a letter. Jane White could reach a stable community back in Northern Ireland and conspicuously rehearse her identity in the epistolarium; illiterate migrants, on the other hand, were less likely to contact them. Therefore, they were less able to practice the poetics of relation and identity maintenance.

If Jane White carefully calibrated her Irish identity in letters home, another adjustment was needed when she confronted colonial prejudice. When situating herself within a Canadian context, Jane emphasized a pan-Irish identity. For example, White voices a pan-Irish sentiment in the 1859 letter that denounces Catholics, praising Irish compatriots at the expense of the English: "If they were an English family, I would have no mercy for them, but seeing they are Irish I would put up with their every fault."⁵⁴ What this signals is a shifting register in the functional definition of "Irish." In letters home, Irish identity is parsed out to distinguish between Irish from the north or south; and differences between Catholic and Protestant are brought to the fore in order to cement identity affiliations with those left behind. The subtle differences would be more easily understood by a reader in Ireland, not to mention a matter of local interest to those left behind. She tells Eleanor in the first letter, for example, that there are "two families from County Antrim in the poop."⁵⁵ With reference to Canada, however, where prejudice against the Irish is not nuanced, she wishes to defend any fellow countryman, using a more encompassing notion of what it means to be Irish.

The prevailing attitudes in Canada towards all Irish immigrants (without differentiation) are well illustrated in Susanna Moodie's memoir *Roughing it in the Bush* when she describes Grosse Isle in 1832:

Never shall I forget the extraordinary spectacle that first met our sight.... A crowd of many hundred Irish emigrants had been landed during the present and former day; and all this motley crew who were not confined by sickness to the sheds (which greatly resembled cattle-pens) were employed in washing clothes.... The men and boys were in the water, while the women (were) running to and fro, screaming and scolding in no measured terms. The confusion of Babel was among them ... each shouting ... in his or her uncouth dialect.... The people who covered the island appeared perfectly destitute of shame.... Many were almost naked, still more but partially clothed. We turned in disgust from the revolting scene.⁵⁶

Moodie does not make any distinction between middle-class and working-class Irish or between Protestants and Catholics. They are just "Irish emigrants," but of course Jane White would not have recognized herself in Moodie's description. Much can be said about the class fluidity that provoked Moodie, an educated, middle-class Englishwoman, to emphasize her social distance from the "confusion of Babel," but this is an example of the garden-variety prejudice against the Irish (writ large) that prevailed in Canada at midcentury.⁵⁷ Pan-Irish prejudice meant that Jane sometimes needed to defend her identity using pan-Irish language.

In light of these prevailing prejudices and challenges, the harsh tone of Jane's letters has to be read as a defensive posture. She uses letter writing to demonstrate that travel and migration have not reduced her to the "motley crew" of impoverished Irish immigrants, and her predominant rhetorical mode is to highlight the shortcomings of others. It is not only the Catholics that come under fire, however. She writes, for example, "Methodists are making great progress here. I rather like their doctrine but I think they are a troublesome people to belong to due to a great deal of hypocrisy among them"⁵⁸ She casts a suspicious eye on Americans and worries about Goderich becoming "Yankeefied." "I used to think," she writes "the Yankees were nice people but I don't think so now, this proud mean aristocracy of money is very revolting"⁵⁹ On this topic, she would agree with Susanna Moodie, who feared the Yankeefication of the colonies. "'Yankeefication' functions," writes Oana Godeanu-Kenworthy, "as a shorthand for all the things Moodie struggles to resist both in the backwoods and in the clearings—rudeness, individualism, materialism, lack of principles and honour, rejection of tradition and convention, and an egalitarianism that begets mediocrity."⁶⁰ Carter Hanson argues that, beginning in 1825, "there emerges in English fiction about Canada, and in actual emigrant practice, [the idea] that the true vocation of the middle-class emigrant is to re-create the English class system in Canada."⁶¹ How tricky this must have been for a single Irish woman of uncertain middle-class standing, a woman who is fully dependent on her family's flagging fortunes. One useful antidote to such social disruption was to enact and enunciate gentility through refusal, as White does in her letters. All of Australia is denigrated when Jane writes: "I think it was a strange whim of Mrs. [Crocker] to go to Australia, but she knows best, if I thought I was to go there it would nearly break my heart I detest that country from all I have heard about it."⁶² Her judging eye falls even upon those who dance: "When dancing predominates in a community, there is not much solidarity."⁶³ In sum, the slippery shifting social formation under construction in Canada causes her to reinforce in writing, again and again, her middle-class position: "We ought to feel thankful that we have a sufficiency without going into debt, chiselling, cheating and roguery are the order of the day."⁶⁴ Chiseling, cheating, and roguery are actions

resulting from the shifting social terrain of the colonies that provoke settler anxiety. Letter writing offers an ideal forum where she can rehearse her guardedness and her disavowal of confusing colonial spaces where her own precarious middle-class fortunes might be reversed or upturned.

Another way that White avoided a negative self-representation in the letters was by remaining silent about local stories that might cast Irish Protestants in a poor light. For example, in 1858, the same year the letter in which she condemns cheating and roguery was written, her local newspaper reported on a group of Protestants involved in a riot that resulted in injuries to Catholics and the destruction of a Catholic pub, Keef's House in Biddulph township. The newspaper notes that "The list of the men held to bail ... comprises most of the well-known Protestant Irish names in the neighborhood: Stanleys, Hodgins, Callighams, etc., etc., etc."⁶⁵ Because this paper served the county, Jane very likely had access to it. Irish Protestants involved in roguery do not get mentioned in her letters. Self-maintenance relies on knowing what to say and what *not* to say. Self-maintenance relies on explaining who you are and who you are *not*. Jane needs to articulate her social standing by way of comparison to others because the social differences that granted ease and comfort to the White family in Ireland were only *tentatively* transported to the new world. The precarity of their social standing in a dynamic colonial space catalyzed a rhetorical process of self-maintenance in her letters; she distinguishes herself from other identity categories in order to uphold class standing and maintain social respectability. It suggests a kind of anxiety, produced when settlers could not count on social cues from the old world being easily recognized in the disorganized social hierarchies of settler spaces. Ishiguro cautions historians that "fear and anxiety may not have been the dominant affective lenses through which settlers understood colonial projects," and asks letter readers to look at what affective lenses were actually used.⁶⁶ In a similar way, an early historian of the Irish diaspora exhorted readers many decades ago to "focus on the migrants themselves without preconceptions or discriminations."⁶⁷ What Jane actually expressed was prejudice, which I *do* read as evidence of anxiety about being misapprehended due to her Irishness and about the precarity of her middle-class standing; she assuages her anxiety through expressions of solidarity with a distant correspondent. The letter home is a mirror in which the writer can see reflections of who she is, even when everything else feels uncertain. When navigating a volatile climate, it is a balm to write to someone who understands (without explanation) all the details and nuances of your worldview.

Jane White's correspondence has currency, then and now. Young Jane was in a situation where her eyewitness account of migration was valuable, practical, and compelling. Her letters allude to a network that could help her in material and psychological ways; having access to the tools of letter writing and a stable epistolary audience gave her a way to rehearse and remember social and cultural norms that she then imported into colonial spaces. Transatlantic correspondence was emotionally necessary for her, a way to preserve ties with kinship networks left behind, and a way to revisit and recalibrate old identities in a colonial space where her "Irishness" might be misread.

The currency of her letters now lies in their historical value. It is perhaps ironic that Jane seemed oblivious to the plight of impoverished famine migrants, only to have her first letter reproduced in order to tell that story. Historians have tried, I think mistakenly, to squeeze her into a role as an eyewitness to Grosse Isle, based on her first letter. It is one final, complicating factor of her Irishness that letters that actually emphasize her distance from an indigent experience of migration are used to give witness to it. Her legacy, like her settlement process, is complicated by prejudices about the Irish and about Irish history. It is easy for contemporary readers to dismiss Jane White's

letters as prejudiced, judgmental, and haughty, but to do so misunderstands the difficulty of transplanting her identity into a settler space.

Michael Kenneally sums it up: “life writing texts present the fundamental issues inherent in transplanting identity [and] can offer instructive and poignant perspectives on Irish immigration to Canada.”⁶⁸ Jane White’s letters are a robust source of data, but they tell a story that is partial, local, personal, and biased—evidence of a woman struggling to find her place in a dynamic and fluid social order where she sees cheating and roguery as the order of the day. The tone of her letters can be read as evidence of her anxiety about being misapprehended and about the precarity of her middle-class standing; the haughtiness can be read as a sense of shame about her family’s uncertain social position in the new world; her bigotry is actually a struggle to enunciate a particular (Anglo-)Irish identity, one that might also be the most malleable and most suitable for transplantation. A retrospective memoir could not fully capture or represent the process of transplantation as it evolved over a period of years. Where else to rehearse all of this except with a caring correspondent? Where else except letters? The epistolary form is a useful vehicle for migrants as they engage with processes of settlement and its impacts on personal identity; it is a useful vehicle for historians who want to see the process as it unfolds.

NOTES

¹ Canada West was the name used between 1841 and 1867 to describe an area that had previously been named “Upper Canada” and referred to an area in what is now southern Ontario.

² The first letter from Jane White is digital record D.1 195/3/5 at the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast (PRONI). The finding aid at PRONI indicates that there are two archived letters written from Eleanor, but when a request was sent to retrieve them, they were said to be lost. Many thanks to archivist Michael Molnar at the Huron County Museum and Historic Gaol in Goderich, Ontario, who helped me search for any other evidence of return letters from Eleanor Wallace, even though we had no luck. Cecil J. Houston and William J. Smyth note that not much information exists about the White family in Goderich aside from “Jane’s letters, her father’s will, manuscript census records, and land transfer documentation.” *Irish Emigration and Canadian Settlement: Patterns, Links & Letters* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 288.

³ Houston and Smyth, *Irish Emigration*, 287. Houston and Smyth reproduce six of her letters, those offering the most substantial and penetrating summary to date of White’s social location in the colonies.

⁴ In addition to Houston and Smyth, see also *The History of the Irish Famine*, eds. Christine Kinealy, Gerard Moran, and Jason King (London: Routledge, 2018). A linguistic approach to the letters of Jane White can be found in Carolina P. Amador-Moreno, *Orality in Written Texts: Using Historical Corpora to Investigate Irish English 1700–1900* (New York: Routledge, 2019). Niall O’Leary maps out the transit of the letters (as metadata only) in his visual representation of correspondence, accessible online at Visual Correspondence: Analysing Letters through Data Visualisation https://www.correspondence.ie/index.php?letters_function=4&letters_search_term=9782.

⁵ At PRONI there are letters from seventeen Canadian correspondents in total, but many of the examples are limited to one letter only. A handful of correspondents are represented by two to three letters. See note 13 for additional information. Another useful source for Irish emigrant letters can be found at the Mellon Centre for Migration Studies (Omagh, Northern Ireland) where an online compendium gathers assorted documents connected to North American migration between 1700 and 1950; however, these are not original archival sources. See <https://www.dippam.ac.uk/ied>

⁶ Michael Kenneally, “Irish Immigration to Nineteenth-Century Canada: Alternative Narratives,” *Canadian Issues* (Fall 2005), 39.

⁷ Kenneally, “Irish Immigration,” 38.

⁸ Kenneally, “Irish Immigration,” 39.

⁹ See, for example, Kerby Miller’s *Ireland and Irish America: Culture, Class and TransAtlantic Migration* (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2008); and his *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and Irish Exodus to North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

¹⁰ Liz Stanley, “Settler Colonialism and Migrant Letters,” *The History of the Family* 21.3 (2016): 418.

¹¹ Amanda Gilroy and W. M. Verhoeven, Introduction, *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture*, eds. Amanda Gilroy and W. M. Verhoeven (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 14.

¹² See also scholarship by Julie F. Codell, "Serialized Artists' Biographies: A Culture Industry in Late Victorian Britain," *Book History* 3 (2000): 94, where she observes that "Victorians consumed mass quantities of biographies as collective lives, serialized biographies, letters, reminiscences, [and] memoirs." Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, among many others, note the rise of autobiography among women during the nineteenth century in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Writing about the self in the second half of the nineteenth century was seen as particularly useful, especially if you migrated, as evidenced by a surfeit of emigrant autobiographies both published and unpublished. It is not clear how much this phenomena influenced Jane White (if at all), but perhaps this zeitgeist encouraged her to record her life in letters.

¹³ The only other notable collection of correspondence from Canada at PRONI belongs to Ellen Dunlop. Eleven of her letters, written between November 30, 1874, and October 29, 1888, are archived there. Dunlop was born Eleanor Stewart, the second daughter of Frances Stewart. Dunlop was the one who collected and first edited her mother's correspondence into a publication called *Our Forest Home*, ed. E. S. Dunlop (Toronto: Presbyterian Printing and Publishing, 1889). Dunlop was also a friend and correspondent to Catharine Parr Traill, the Canadian author.

¹⁴ Kathleen Venema, "Letitia Mactavish Hargrave and Hudson's Bay Company Domestic Politics: Negotiating Kinship in Letters from the Canadian Northwest," in *Re/Calling Early Canada: Reading the Political in Literary and Cultural Production*, eds. Jennifer Blair et al. (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2005), 147.

¹⁵ Eleanor Wallace also received and saved letters from correspondents in Dublin, Ireland, and Augusta, Georgia. See Niall O'Leary's website Visual Correspondence: Analysing Letters through Data Visualisation https://www.correspondence.ie/index.php?letters_function=4&letters_search_term=9782.

¹⁶ Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, April 1, 1856. Public Records Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast (D.1 195/3/9). All references to White's correspondence are taken from this archive.

¹⁷ Hooper-Goranson, "No Earthly Distinctions: Irishness and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Ontario, 1823–1900" (PhD diss., McMaster University, 2010), 288.

¹⁸ Laura Ishiguro, *Nothing to Write Home About: British Family Correspondence and the Settler Colonial Everyday in British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2019), 39.

¹⁹ Ishiguro, *Nothing to Write*, 39.

²⁰ "Report of the Commission of the New Colonial Postal Arrangement," *Globe and Mail*, March 18, 1848, 1.

²¹ See also Kathryn Carter for a discussion of the practical mechanics of transatlantic correspondence, with an eye to the way in which "socio-technical apparatuses such as the postal system can shape the way in which colonial spaces are imagined" ("Neither Here nor There": Mary Gapper O'Brien Writes 'Home,' 1828–1838" in *Diversity and Change in Early Canadian Women's Writing*, ed. Jennifer Chambers [Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2008], 9).

²² The *Eliza Morrison* officially arrived in Quebec on July 1, 1847, according to the Shipping Intelligence (the date likely reflects when they cleared quarantine); it was 32 days in transit from Belfast and 519 passengers were declared well at Grosse Isle despite the four deaths en route (The Ships List, <https://www.theshipslist.com/1847/shipsjuly1847.shtml>). The ship itself was named after the sister of an industrialist who became a mayor of Belfast, William Pirrie, and the youngest son of Eliza Morrison was the man who would design the Titanic. See Kyle Harris, *Scots in Victorian and Edwardian Belfast* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 59.

²³ Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, "Grosse Isle," June 29, 1849 (D.1 195/3/5) PRONI, Belfast.

²⁴ Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, June 29, 1849.

²⁵ Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, June 29, 1849.

²⁶ A substantial collection of primary documents related to famine migration and Grosse Isle, in particular, can be found in Marianna O'Gallagher and Rose Masson Dompierre, *Eyewitness: Grosse Isle 1847* (Saint-Foy, QC: Carraig, 1995).

²⁷ *Northern Ireland and Canada: A Guide to Northern Ireland Sources for the Study of Canadian History, c. 1705–1992*, ed. and comp. Stephen Davison (Belfast: Queen's University Belfast and the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, 1994).

²⁸ *The History of the Irish Famine*, eds. Christine Kinealy, Gerard Moran, and Jason King (London: Routledge, 2018), 180–83.

²⁹ David Fitzpatrick quoted in Ruth-Ann M. Harris, "'Come all you courageously': Irish Women in America Write Home," *Eire-Ireland: Journal of Irish Studies* 36.2 (Spring/Summer 2001): 175.

³⁰ Houston and Smyth, *Irish Emigration*, 55.

³¹ Catherine Wilson, *A New Lease on Life: Landlords, Tenants and Immigrants in Ireland and Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1994), 4.

- ³² Harris, "Irish Women in America," 183.
- ³³ Miller, *Ireland and Irish America*, 33.
- ³⁴ Personal Conversation, Michael Molnar, July 23, 2021.
- ³⁵ Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, June 29, 1849.
- ³⁶ Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, June 29, 1849.
- ³⁷ See the letter from C. F. Cazeau to the Medical Superintendent of Quebec, August 2, 1847, in O'Gallagher and Dompierre, *Eyewitness*, 235.
- ³⁸ Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, April 1, 1856 (D.1 195/3/9).
- ³⁹ Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, June 29, 1849.
- ⁴⁰ Hooper-Goranson, "No Earthly Distinctions," 288.
- ⁴¹ *Revisiting "Our Forest Home": The Immigrant Letters of Frances Stewart*, ed. Jodi Lee Aoki (Toronto: Dundurn Natural Heritage, 2011), 227.
- ⁴² Aoki, *Revisiting*, 141.
- ⁴³ Aoki, *Revisiting*, 140.
- ⁴⁴ Aoki, *Revisiting*, 141.
- ⁴⁵ It is not clear why Jane never married. On April 1, 1856, she writes "Remember me to Mrs. Harrison tell her I don't know when I am going to get married ... you and I both have plenty of time to wait and should not let ourselves be blind to our own interests" (D.1 195/3/9). The next year she complains of health issues, which may be factors leading to her early death, including rheumatism and "fits of deafness" that her mother attempts to cure by throwing cold water over her head at bedtime (August 1, 1857; D.1 195/3/14).
- ⁴⁶ Janet C. Myers, "Performing the Voyage Out: Victorian Female Emigration and the Class Dynamics of Displacement," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 29.1 (2001): 130.
- ⁴⁷ Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, April 1, 1856.
- ⁴⁸ Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, January 9, 1857 (D.1 195/3/11).
- ⁴⁹ Houston and Smyth, *Irish Emigration*, 288.
- ⁵⁰ Ruth Harris observes that "Most [Irish] Protestant emigrants belonged to extensive social networks based on congregational, mercantile, and extended family links sustained by correspondence. Catholic emigrants, on the other hand, were far likelier to depart as individuals and were much less involved in continuous social networks" ("Irish Women in America," 168).
- ⁵¹ Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, July 19, 1859 (D.1 195/3/19); Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, August 1, 1857.
- ⁵² Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, January 9, 1864 (D.1 195/3/23).
- ⁵³ Thomas Welch to John A. Gamble, May 10, 1888. Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast (D1424/11).
- ⁵⁴ Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, July 19, 1859.
- ⁵⁵ Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, June 29, 1849.
- ⁵⁶ Susanna Moodie, "A Visit to Grosse Isle" in *Roughing it in the Bush*, ed. Susan Glickman (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1989) 29.
- ⁵⁷ See in particular Oana Godeanu-Kenworthy, "Mind Above Matter: Work, Gender and Social Class in Susanna Moodie's Immigration Memoirs," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 56.3 (2020): 370–83; Sherrie A. Inness, "An Act of Severe Duty: Emigration and Class Ideology in Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush*" in *Imperial Objects: Essays on Victorian Women's Emigration and Unauthorized Imperial Experience*, ed. Rita S. Kranidis (New York: Twayne, 1997) 190–210; and Stephen Slemon "Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World," *World Literature Written in English* 30:2 (1990): 30–41.
- ⁵⁸ Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, October 31, 1855 (D.1 195/3/8B).
- ⁵⁹ Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, September 22, 1856 (D.1 195/3/11).
- ⁶⁰ Godeanu-Kenworthy, "Mind Above Matter," 373.
- ⁶¹ Hanson, *Emigration, Nation, Vocation: The Literature of English Emigration to Canada, 1825–1900* (East Lansing: University of Michigan Press, 2009), xi.
- ⁶² Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, October 31, 1855.
- ⁶³ Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, January 9, 1857.
- ⁶⁴ Jane White to Eleanor Wallace, August 27, 1858 (D.1 195/3/18).
- ⁶⁵ "Riots in Biddulph," *Huron Signal*, January 9, 1858. Accessed at <https://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/donnelys/archives/newspaperormagazinearticle/2095en.html>.
- ⁶⁶ Ishiguro, *Nothing to Write*, 97.
- ⁶⁷ D. H. Akenson, *Being Had: Historians, Evidence, and the Irish in North America* (Port Credit, ON: P. D. Meany, 1985), 67.
- ⁶⁸ Kenneally, "Irish Immigration," 40.

Model Letters Declining Arranged Marriages: Changing Formulas for Family Correspondence in Modern China

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Abstract: This paper examines model letters declining arranged marriages exchanged between young people and their elders in Republican China. These new models deserve special attention for creating a subtle tension in the family hierarchy during the early twentieth century. Notwithstanding their common purpose, model letters declining arranged marriages produced by different publishers differ in format and tone. While certain model letters reinforced Confucian patriarchy and positioned the elders superior to the young, other model letters provided the standard lines of appeal that sought to ease tensions between the younger and older generations as the young consciously appropriated the emergent discourse to legitimize their dissent. The marital negotiation thus allows us to glean insights into the changing dynamics of family letters under the influence of new ideals about family and marriage in modern China.

In Qian Zhongshu's 錢鍾書 (1910–1998) satiric novel *Fortress Besieged* (*Weicheng* 圍城, 1947), the college student Fang Hongjian 方鴻漸, who has been engaged under a family arrangement since high school, grows green eyed after seeing couples in love on campus and feels aversion to his fiancée Miss Zhou, who has quit after one year of high school to learn housekeeping at home in order to serve her future in-laws and husband. Fang begins thinking of how to ask his father to release him from this arranged marriage without infuriating him. In his first family letter regarding this issue, he fabricates his physical discomfort as an excuse, which requires him to sever this marital contract since his poor health may cause a lifetime of regret for Miss Zhou. Although Fang's letter is "couched in an elegant style without incorrectly using any of the various particles of literary Chinese," his father still reads his thoughts and gives him a severe scolding in reply, criticizing Fang for neglecting his filial duties and threatening to cut off his funds.¹ As a result, Fang has to send a second letter immediately begging for his father's forgiveness and reluctantly accepts this marriage but asks "that it be postponed until after his graduation. For one thing, it would interfere with his schooling; for another he was still unable to support a family and would not feel right about adding to his father's responsibilities."² His father, nevertheless, is satisfied to prove his authority over his distant son in college and grants Fang's request for the postponement.

Sarcastic as it may sound, this scenario, which is set roughly in the late 1920s or early 1930s, was not entirely groundless in reality, since letters seeking to cancel or postpone marriages arranged by parents or grandparents were common family correspondence from young people in modern China, as evident in extant letter-writing manuals published primarily for teaching purposes.³ Epistolary knowledge has long been inculcated into a general audience to meet their communicative needs across various cultures.⁴ In China, the history of model-letter collections dates back to at least early medieval times; these were prone to situate epistolary etiquette within broader social norms and were developed in a great many ways through the ages.⁵ The late Imperial and

Republican periods, in particular, witnessed an explosive growth of guides to letter writing that remain understudied.⁶ Available fictive model letters from the early Republican period (1912–1949) invite comparisons with Qian’s novel and help present-day readers better understand why Fang’s first letter does not achieve his purpose while his second letter does, thereby capturing changing formulas for family correspondence during the crucial era of transition in modern China.

One noticeable change is that public affairs, rarely documented in letter manuals of the Imperial period, entered the private sphere of personal letters between individual kin and acquaintances, which continually renewed the epistolary rhetoric and complicated the art of epistolary communication. Formal epistolary expressions in Imperial China were largely conditioned by Confucian ideas of ritual propriety and social hierarchy, which were instrumental in constructing and maintaining a harmonious community based on kinship and family.⁷ A notable example of the Confucian influence was the rise of *shuyi* 書儀 in medieval China, manuals that lay down etiquette for letter writing and other occasions, and instruct the performance of rites through decorous words.⁸ The changing epistolary etiquette was shaped by political climates, as manifested in the epistolary textbooks consolidating the concept of Republican citizen.⁹

The writing of family letters was also expected to follow the new fashion, so the authority of the older generation in some exemplars was subtly undermined as the Confucian vision of family was under severe attack since the late nineteenth century, especially during the New Culture Movement (1915–1919). According to the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), one of the Confucian classics, “the ceremony of marriage was intended to be a bond of love between two (families of different) surnames, with a view, in its retrospective character, to secure the services in the ancestral temple, and in its prospective character, to secure the continuance of the family line.”¹⁰ Traditionally, family elders had the legal authority to make a decision regarding the marriage of young people.¹¹ This long-standing tradition was challenged amid the iconoclastic cultural upheaval and serious national crisis in modern China. Denouncing the Confucian extended family as oppressive and callous, the New Culture intellectuals elevated the modern notion of “free love” to a central position and appropriated the ideal of “conjugal family” (*xiao jiating* 小家庭) for their personal and political ends.¹² In their minds, marriage was more than simply a personal or family issue but a matter of national importance, though recent revisionist scholarship has called into question the radical intellectuals’ fervent denouncement of Confucianism and ahistorical assumptions about arranged marriage.¹³ In seeking to escape the strictures of the patriarchy, the young equipped themselves with new ideas, which they invoked in polite dissent against their elders’ wishes. Model letters that focused on declining arranged marriages, which has received little attention in the study of Chinese family history or epistolary culture, thus provide us with a window into the changing rhetoric of family letters and changing thinking on marriage.

Notwithstanding their common purpose, model letters declining arranged marriages produced by different publishers differ in format and tone. These differences point to two major types of narrative based on the youths’ positions in their negotiations with their elders. Model letters depict the young in both disadvantaged and advantaged positions, like Fang’s two letters to his father in *Fortress Besieged*, and indicate divergent views of contemporary publishers on the family hierarchy. To appreciate the nuanced dynamics, this paper will situate examples of both positions within more general epistolary traditions by incorporating model letters of relevant topics.

The Young as Inheritors of Confucian Ethics

Examples of family letters appeared early and frequently in household encyclopedias for daily use. In *Comprehensive Collection for Use at Home of Indispensable Matters* (*Jujia biyong shilei quanji* 居家必用事類全集), an encyclopedia that dates back to the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) but was widely circulated in the Ming and Qing periods (1368–1912), there is a separate section on family letter templates (*jiashu tongshi* 家書通式) under the category of “Letters” (*shujian* 書簡).¹⁴ The genre of family letter later developed into a fundamental category in letter-writing manuals. It is conventionally viewed as a gateway to master epistolary skills, and constitutes a site of social practice that prepared individuals for their future.¹⁵ Confucian ideas played a sustained role in the maintenance of the patriarchal hierarchy in family letters of Imperial China.

The expansion of moral content in letters of the late Qing and Republican eras bears some similarities with changes in American letter writing over a similar period. For example, authors of the American manuals of “familiar letters” endorsed letter writing as a new way to “inculcate the younger generation in the values, skills, and habits that would determine both personal character and social status upon adulthood.”¹⁶ Similarly, letter manuals in nineteenth-century American schools presented the dominant culture’s behavior codes for daily living, such as personal discipline, self-sacrifice, duty, and obedience; thus “learning to write a good letter was learning to become, by 19th century codes, a well-mannered person.”¹⁷

In the very different context of nineteenth-century China, the epistolary content of family letters was expanded to suit the new cultural milieu and incorporate pertinent Confucian moral lessons. *An Indispensable Reader for Letter Writing* (*Xiexin bidu* 寫信必讀, the earliest available edition dated 1887), which was popular throughout the first half of the twentieth century, offers a model letter from a sojourning father to his son at home. It reads:

My son, as you know, it has been three months since I left home. Because it is hard to access the postal service, [I] have not been able to send a letter home, which has been lingering in my mind.¹⁸ Your father [i.e., the writer] is forced to travel far away from home. You should be filial to your grandmother and mother. In all matters, you should first accept things as they are at the beginning; your daily expenditure should be frugal. You should pay respect to your seniors and neighbors and must keep away from licentious acquaintances and gambling friends. Go to bed early and get up early. It is most important to keep the household safe, do not become slack, and be especially vigilant towards fire risks. For other matters such as food and drink and the usual pleasantries, you should remain attentive. You must remember my words, and do not disobey my instructions.

某兒知悉，余自離家，迄今三月，以郵便難逢，無從一致家書，念念。汝父遠違鄉井，亦非得已，爾當孝養祖母，侍奉母親。凡事必先忍耐，日用尤宜從儉。親長鄰居，務須尊重，淫朋賭友，切勿相交。早眠早起，門戶最要小心，勿怠勿惰，火燭更當謹慎。餘如飲食寒暄，自宜留意。切記余言，勿違是囑。¹⁹

The content of the above model letter possesses a didactic tone and engages in moral cultivation. This father’s exhortation, as the “letters of familial admonition” examined by Antje Richter, reads in a similar fashion to family instructions (*jiajie* 家誡 or *jiaxun* 家訓) and testaments (*yiling/yan* 遺令/言) in terms of their content by showing “Confucian in character,” in particular “the focus on self-cultivation and humility as well as the choice of worthy friends,” thereby contributing to the honor of one’s family.²⁰

Model letters to family members upheld the Confucian hierarchy even after the founding of the Republican regime. For example, the *New Letters for Republican China* (*Gonghe xin chidu* 共和新尺牘, dated 1913) suggests a proper letter should avoid pretentious language and make sure all words come from the heart; nevertheless, the diction of family letters should be adjusted accordingly: writing to elders should be reverent, which is called *feng* 奉; writing to brothers should be sincere, which is called *yu* 與; writing to juniors should be dignified, which is called *ci* 賜.²¹

While moral instruction was often imparted by the elderly to younger family members, a reverse situation was possible in model letters written by a junior to a senior, aiming to uphold the Confucian family hierarchy. A sample letter to one's eldest brother (first edition dated circa 1921), for example, endorses the concept of filial piety by criticizing the recipient for often disobeying the instructions of his "kind mother" (*cimu* 慈母). Two reasons are offered to support the writer's criticism: for one thing, based on "the propriety of a son" (*renzizhili* 人子之禮), one should accord with his or her parents' orders in everything rather than improperly taking the liberty to act independently and hurting the parents' feelings; for another, the young should not obstinately defy their parents' opinions since the young are considered naïve and inexperienced while their parents are more circumspect and farsighted. In the case that the parents' opinions are off the mark, the author insists, young people should seize the chance to explain themselves tactfully instead of infuriating their parents and hurting their parents' feelings.²²

While the above letter does not specify the disobedient behavior of the recipient, I have identified one noticeable example of disobedience—declining arranged marriage—by combing through letter-writing manuals published in Republican China. *Grand Treasury of Classified Patriotic Letters* (*Fenlei Aiguo chidu hongbao* 分類愛國尺牘鴻寶, dated 1916) offers a set of fictive letters between a nephew named Dunxiao 敦孝 (literally, sincere and filial) and his uncle (*gufu* 姑父), the husband of his paternal aunt; it touches upon the issue of declining arranged marriages and implicates the power relationship based on seniority. On a recent trip to Shanghai by sea, Dunxiao experiences a severe windstorm and his ship sinks at midnight. He survives but makes use of this adventure to turn down the marriage arrangement made for him by his paternal aunt, citing how the potential bride must have brought him bad luck. Moreover, he claims he is too young to get married and should wait for another two years. He writes to his uncle to convey this message in the hope of obtaining his aunt's understanding.

This letter contains four basic components of a formal letter: 1) the opening (*qishou* 起首), 2) the compliments (*gongwei* 恭維), 3) the narration (*xushi* 敘事), 4) the closing (*jiewei* 結尾).²³ These are numbered in the following translation:

1) My Venerable Uncle the Great Person in front: It has been three years since I [literally, your nephew] bade you farewell and returned to the South from Tianjin and was unable to receive your kind instructions.

姑父大人尊前：竊姪自津沽拜別回南，不奉慈訓，於今三載。

2) From afar I hope your journey is safe, your good fortune is increasing, and your wellbeing is steadily advancing—this is what I am more than happy to pray for.

遙憶旅祉安祥，升祺迪吉，曷勝忻頌。

3) Here I state: I recently traveled to Shanghai for a job appointment. My ship encountered a severe windstorm and sank at midnight, which almost took my life. Fortunately, now I got away in a whole skin. I am writing to let you know and alleviate your concern. As for

my aunt's marital proposal, let us forget about it. [I suspect] the potential bride's fortune must be bad; otherwise, how could this mishap befall me while the marriage was under discussion? I am still young, so it is not too late [for me] to consider about marriage after one or two years. Please convey my decision to my aunt, ask her forgiveness and not to blame my straightforwardness. This [I consider] fortunate.

茲稟者：姪日前赴滬就業，適值大風為災，半夜輪沉，幾喪性命。今幸安然無恙，馳書特報，藉抒遠注。惟承姑母作伐之事，可作罷論。緣該女命必不佳，不然姪何以甫經議及，便出門不利也？侄年尚幼，即再過一、二年議婚，亦不為遲。務祈轉達姑母。請其恕侄伉直，勿加嗔怪。是幸。

4) I respectfully send [my letter] and greetings for the autumn [to you]. Your untaught nephew, Liu Dunxiao, sincerely sends [this letter].²⁴
肅此佈上，並請秋安。愚表姪劉敦孝謹上。²⁵

While following the layout of an elegant, literary letter and correctly applying epistolary commonplaces, like Fang's first letter, Dunxiao's letter fails to justify his refusal of the elders' arrangement of his marriage.²⁶ The "narration" part of his uncle's reply, which declines Dunxiao's request, is translated as follows:

Your aunt is especially fond of you and would like to conclude a marital arrangement for you in response to your parents' request. However, you do not understand her careful thoughts and remain unsatisfied with her arrangement. Now science is booming, eclipsing the theories of geomancy and fate, but you adhere to superstitious ideas and ignore your aunt's kind consideration. Isn't this a double mistake? I have no intention to intervene in your aunt's arrangement. She is living with other relatives and has not returned. She said she would send another letter when she is back.

汝姑母對汝感情尤厚，欲為汝締婚，以盡兄嫂之託。特何汝不解事，依然為前憤憤。況今日科學發旺，從無關風水命運之說，而汝猶拘執迷信，不諒親情，豈非誤而又誤。汝姑母事我本不管，現已往親戚家不回。言旋時當另函報。²⁷

As the reply reveals, his uncle speaks not only for Dunxiao's aunt but also for his parents, who had asked his aunt for help. Therefore, by declining this arrangement, Dunxiao is also perceived as going against his parents' will, thereby breaching his filial duty. Resorting to Confucian patriarchal tenets to justify the elders' authority, Dunxiao's uncle criticizes his nephew, recalling the aforementioned younger brother who admonished his eldest brother against hurting their mother's feelings, which would constitute a breach of familiar ritual propriety. The criticism from a younger brother also resonates with how Dunxiao's uncle, who appears more rational, dismisses Dunxiao's superstitious excuse as naïve by citing the emergent discourse of science. Like Fang's first letter requesting to cancel the arranged marriage, Dunxiao's letter lacks the acceptable justifications to legitimize his resistance to his family obligations, and his first letter was considered a challenge to his elders' authority, which was undermined but still paramount in the deep-rooted Confucian family hierarchy of the day.

The Young as Advocates of Civil Codes

As a means of disseminating new theories, epistolary manuals were probably no less effective than other print media in terms of spreading practical applications of their instructions to people, such as those communicative strategies used by young readers to release them from arranged marriages. The contemporary rhetoric of resisting the intervention of senior family members in young people's decisions about marriage was developed in tandem with the prevailing discourse of banning "early marriage" (*zaohun* 早婚). The official regulations of the marital age existed throughout Chinese history, but it was not until the twentieth century that issues of early marriage caused considerable controversy.²⁸ In his far-reaching essay *Debates on Banning Early Marriage* (*Jin zaohun yi* 禁早婚議, 1902), Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) categorized the detriments of early marriage according to five components of individual and public well-being: 1) physical health, 2) reproduction, 3) national education, 4) personal academic pursuit, and 5) national and household economy.²⁹ Liang deemed early marriage to be an institution that would cause excessive sensual pleasure and therefore responsible for the Chinese's lack of vitality, bravery, and fortitude.³⁰ Liang's criticism of early marriage reflects the liberal nationalist orientation that imagined, planned, and designed the "advanced" and "modern" nation-state in early twentieth-century China.³¹ While the view that Liang "started" the discourse against early marriage, as some conclude, is not accurate, Liang's essay was likely the most influential.³² In many articles published during the first decades of the twentieth century, subsequent writers frequently revisited these themes, either by reinforcing or questioning them.³³

A review of various reasons for declining or postponing marriage in model letters suggests their correlation with Liang Qichao's criticism of early marriage.³⁴ The earliest extant example (dated 1907) of a text invoking the harm of early marriage was published by the Commercial Press (Shangwu yinshuguan 商務印書館).³⁵ The most comprehensive example in my collection was published by the Chinese Press (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局), *New Letters in Vernacular Chinese* (*Yuti xin chidu* 語體新尺牘, dated 1935), which covers four detriments discussed by Liang, but omits the one concerning the poor early education provided by ignorant young parents.³⁶ An older brother, Maoru 茂如, cautions his younger brother, Zhuoru 卓如 (who is mocked as "not old but so eager to have a grandson"), against the harm of arranging a marriage for his only son Lan 蘭 too early. In arranging a marriage in accordance with the Confucian idea that "men are born with the wish to have a family," there are four issues to consider.³⁷ First, young men and women should reach marriageable age; otherwise, the timing will not be right, and they will not have adequate knowledge of love and sex, which would be harmful to both men and women since they would not be able to control their sexual desire. Second, the bodies of the young should be completely mature; otherwise, they will not have sufficient stamina to engage in the sudden experience of sexual activities following their marriage, which would affect their lifespan and the strength of their children. Third, the young should be academically accomplished; otherwise, they may indulge too much in the "land of warmth and tenderness" (*wenrou xiang* 溫柔鄉)—a seductive realm—after they marry, and it would therefore be very difficult for them to make any academic progress. Fourth, the young should be economically independent; otherwise, it will be difficult for them to make ends meet after marriage. Even if their father and brothers are of means, the young cannot rely on them forever. Maoru gently criticizes Zhuoru for being too eager and persuades him to delay the marriage of Lan, who is only eighteen years old and has not yet graduated from high

school. Although Maoru is sympathetic with Zhuoru about having a grandson to carry on the family line, which compelled Zhuoru to arrange a marriage for Lan, Maoru warns that an early marriage would hurt Lan eventually and suggests that he defer it for two years.

Apart from the emergent intellectual orientation, the profound changes in the lives of the young in early twentieth-century China also provide contexts to understand the reasons against arranged marriages. In his book tracing the life of Chinese students (mostly males) from 1890 to 1920, Jon Saari demonstrates that young students faced the dilemma of negotiating between their independent individual consciousness and their traditional family obligations.³⁸ Since students were away from home for further schooling, they were released into a peer group in a nontraditional urban setting. Some upper-class students sought to escape their family's control, and they were considered to be "patrician rebels" armed with new ideas emphasizing the individual and the nation as the most significant matrix of social life. They challenged the old family system with a revolutionary consciousness motivated by progressive books and peer contacts outside the family. Young students who were able to receive civic education and citizenship training came to observe a new "civic ritual": a "symbolic collective performance that organizes social and political relationships, produces cultural patterns, and serves as a context for negotiating social power."³⁹ The idea of declining early marriage, an outcome of civic education, can be regarded as a type of civic ritual. The new civic ritual, different from Confucian rituals, reshaped the minds and behaviors of young students. Both marriage and career choices were regarded not merely as personal issues but also as matters of national import. Some students, inculcated with the new ideas of civic education and citizenship, determined to prioritize their academic studies and careers over marriage arranged by their family. Many model letters utilize the reforming discourse and civil codes to bolster the young in their negotiations with elders in their family.

Model letters for both men and women apply similar reasons for declining a marriage, such as not having completed one's academic studies and established one's own career, to teach the young how to decline marital engagements. The repetitive occurrences of such reasoning indicate their importance as rhetoric in letter writing, whether the young agree to the engagement or not. Two models from popular letter manuals, first edition dated 1920 and 1921, are translated as below:

My Father the Great Person for your kind reading 父親大人慈鑒：

I have received and read your serious instructions. I know with respect that you, [Father] the Great Person, love me [literally, this boy] very much and would like me to get engaged to the lady from a certain family. Our family backgrounds are certainly similar, and this lady's virtue and learning are said to be well known. I have never disregarded this engagement as a fortunate opportunity.

接讀嚴諭，敬悉大人愛男心切，欲為男定婚於某家，彼此家世，固屬相當。某氏女德性學問，聞亦可觀，男固未嘗不引為幸事。

However, for a matter like marriage, one should not undertake it until he becomes independent from his family. Otherwise, if he still relies on others, how is he able to take good care of his wife and children? I am not twenty years old and haven't finished my studies yet. At this moment, my most urgent task is to seize the time for learning and to foster my morality. This is not yet the time to get married.

但家室之事，須俟自立有餘然後行之。否則自身尚須依賴他人，有何能力顧其妻子耶？男年未及冠，學亦未成，以目前論，正宜及時力學，增進德性，卜婚之事，尚非其時。

Moreover, the lady from a certain family is already grown up. If we were to be engaged, it would hardly be possible for her to wait for a long time [to consummate the marriage]. I hope you, [Father] the Great Person, can go to decline this marriage. After I accomplish my academic goals and grow mature enough to establish myself, it is still not too late to think about it.

況某氏女，年已長大，定婚之後，萬難久待。望大人即往婉言卻之，俟男學業成就，年齡長大，足以自立，再言婚事，未為晚也。

I reply in a respectful manner and wish you good health. This boy So-and-so sincerely reports.

肅覆，敬請鈞安。男某某謹稟。⁴⁰

My Uncle the Great Person for your valuable reading 伯父大人鈞鑒：

I have just read your handwritten instructions and felt honored by your consideration regarding the fact that I [literally, your niece] am fifteen years old and thus should be betrothed immediately according to conventions. You love me more than words can express, for which I am very grateful. As for Mr. Chen, who is now available, you mention that the property of his family reaches more than one hundred thousand. If I married into his family, there would be no need to worry about clothing and food for the rest of my life.

刻誦手諭，敬悉大人以姪女年屆及笄，按女大當嫁之旨，急應擇配。愛我之忱，溢於言表，感何能已。但大人所謂現已物色得陳家公子，家產有十餘萬之鉅云云。姪女得歸陳家，固屬一生不愁衣食。

However, my lifetime pursuit is not gold; moreover, I am a student and have not yet graduated. Now it is not yet the time for marriage.

然姪女生平立志，不在黃金，況在校讀書，又未畢業。締婚聯姻，尚非其時。

If we were to be engaged, the formal wedding ceremony ought to be postponed until I am twenty years old. Early marriage is harmful to both men and women, which I am acutely aware of.

即慾舉行，非至二十歲以外不可。男女早婚，有害無利，姪女固知之有素也。

I am taking the liberty of writing to you in the hope of obtaining your forgiveness, which [I consider] fortunate. I reply in a humble manner and wish you good health. Your niece Peihua sincerely sends [this letter], February 4th.

冒昧上陳，諸乞鑒諒為幸。尚此奉復，敬請鈞安。姪女佩華謹上，二月四日。⁴¹

These two letters follow the same protocol: first, while the assumed letter writers firmly decline an early marriage arranged by their seniors, they unanimously express their reverence or gratitude at the beginning of the letters, as a way to confirm the elders' authority and to better achieve their purposes; second, they depict students who are worried about being distracted from their pursuit of academic progress and their preference to prioritize their success in studies before graduating from school; third, they further touch upon marital expectations—models for men tend to cancel the arrangement while models for women tend to postpone the arrangement. They are both from letter manuals published by the World Press (Shijie shuju 世界書局), a Republican center of letter manuals that reprinted certain titles more than two hundred times.⁴²

Model Letters Declining Arranged Marriages

The latter example from the fictional correspondent Peihua was constantly adapted by other publishers with minor differences and accompanied by additional instructional content. One example is followed by a notice, reminding the reader that disagreement with the proposals of their seniors should be expressed in a respectful and polite manner.⁴³ Another example from the late Republican period is followed by a reply from the uncle, the core of which is translated as below:

As for the marriage, you have your own plan and others should not intervene. I [literally, the untaught] will help you achieve your aim. You can make your own decision [on your marriage] in the future. I hope you work hard at school, and do not let your parents down. This is my instruction.

關於婚姻事，汝既有志，不能相強，愚當成就汝之志願，他日由汝自決可也。望汝在校勤奮攻讀，毋負汝父母之期望為囑。⁴⁴

Unlike the aforementioned uncle of Dunxiao, who scolds his nephew for his superstitious excuses, Peihua's uncle replies with understanding and encouragement, which suggests model letters for family correspondence underwent significant changes in accordance with the new ethos. Model letters not only provided legitimate reasons for young people who wanted to pursue their academic studies but also offered an excuse for those who intended to escape from their elders' intervention in their decisions about marriage while still maintaining proper relations.

Conclusion

Family correspondence was an important and common element of letter-writing manuals, and they communicated Confucian ritual practice and ethical norms throughout Chinese history. Modern China witnessed a gradual transformation in epistolary models from reflecting norms and values of Confucian patriarchy to the ideal of the free love and conjugal marriage, as seen in model letters by young writers to family members that sought to postpone or cancel arranged marriages.

As seen in Fang's letters in *Fortress Besieged*, both personal excuses and public-spirited justifications existed in contemporary model letters, which bespeak nuanced dynamics between the older and younger generations. If young correspondents were in disadvantaged positions, they were supposed to assent to their elders' authority in knowledge and experience, and the elders were considered superior to the young. If young correspondents were in an advantaged position, they were taught to tactfully decline elders' marital arrangements by providing tenable reasons regarding the harm of early marriage. The most popular models notably provided the standard lines of appeal that sought to ease tensions between the younger and older generations as the young consciously appropriated the emergent discourse to legitimize their dissent. This forceful yet subtle dissent in the 1920s reflects different threads of ongoing social reforms. Specifically, it uncovers the highly fluid nature of epistolary knowledge in accommodating new ideas with the traditional Confucian tenet that instructs the young to comply with their elders' wishes. These model letters offered reform-minded young students a decorous communicative strategy to release them from arranged marriages and provide us a window into the changing formulas of family correspondence in modern China.

NOTES

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¹ Ch'ien Chung-shu [Qian Zhongshu], *Fortress Besieged*, trans. Jeanne Kelly and Nathan K. Mao (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 9.

² Ch'ien [Qian], *Fortress Besieged*, 10.

³ Fang Hongjian has spent four years in college in Peking and four years in Europe before returning to Shanghai in 1937.

⁴ Letter-writing manuals have attracted scholarly attention since the 1930s. For letter manuals beyond China, see, for example, Katherine Gee Hornbeak, "The Complete Letter-Writer in English, 1568–1880," *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages* 15 (1934): 1–150; Janet G. Altman, "Teaching the 'People' to Write: The Formation of a Popular Civic Identity in the French Letter Manual," *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture* 22 (1993): 147–80; *Correspondence: Models of Letter-Writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Roger Chartier; trans. Christopher Woodall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Lina Bernstein, "The First Published Russian Letter-Writing Manual: Priklady, Kako Pishutsia Komplementy Raznye..." *The Slavic and East European Journal* 46.1 (2002): 98–123; Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Markus Rüttermann, "So That We Can Study Letter-Writing: The Concept of Epistolary Etiquette in Premodern Japan?" *Japan Review: Journal of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies* 18 (2006): 57–128; *Letter-Writing Manuals and Instruction from Antiquity to the Present: Historical and Bibliographic Studies*, ed. Carol Poster and Linda C. Mitchell (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007).

⁵ On the only extant epistolary guide from early medieval China, see Antje Richter, *Letters and Epistolary Culture in Early Medieval China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 139–45.

⁶ For recent studies of these epistolary guides, see, for example, David Pattinson, "The Market for Letter Collections in Seventeenth-Century China," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 28.1 (2006): 125–57; Dániel Z. Kádár, *Model Letters in Late Imperial China: 60 Selected Epistles from 'Letters from Snow Swan Retreat'* (Munich: Lincom Europa, 2009); Oi Man Cheng, *Model Missives: Epistolary Guidebooks for Women in Early Twentieth Century China* (MA thesis, Hong Kong Baptist University, 2013); Danni Cai, "Power, Politeness, and Print: Children's Letter Writing in Republican China," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 13.1 (2020): 38–62; Christina Kilby, "Printing Tibetan Epistolaria: A Bibliographical Analysis of Epistolary Transformations from Manuscript to Xylograph," *Journal of Epistolary Studies* 2.1 (2020): 19–33.

⁷ Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Confucianism and Family Rituals in Imperial China: A Social History of Writing about Rites* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 14–44.

⁸ Patricia Ebrey, "T'ang Guides to Verbal Etiquette," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 45.2 (1985): 583–84.

⁹ For an example, see Henrietta Harrison, *The Making of the Republican Citizen: Political Ceremonies and Symbols in China, 1911–1929* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 51; on sample letters encouraging new modes of female social and political engagement, see Oi Man Cheng, "Epistolary Guidebooks for Women in Early Twentieth Century China and the Shaping of Modern Chinese Women's National Consciousness," *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 14.2 (2012): 105–20.

¹⁰ *The Book of Rites* in Chinese Notes, trans. James Legge, <http://chinesenotes.com/liji/liji044.html>, accessed June 5, 2022.

¹¹ Chen Guyuan 陳顧遠, *Zhongguo hunyin shi* 中國婚姻史 [A history of Chinese marriage] (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2017), 113–15.

¹² Free love served as “the key trope of universal subjectivity” through which a new national community could be imagined due to “the relationship between the modern subject and the modern political community.” See Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900–1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 7, 18. For an in-depth study of “*xiao jiating*,” see Susan L. Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State, 1915–1953* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). For a recent study of family reform during this period, see Zhao Yanjie 趙妍傑, *Jiating geming: Qingmo Minchu dushuren de chongjing* 家庭革命：清末民初讀書人的憧憬 [The quest for family revolution in late Qing and early Republican China] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2020).

¹³ Weijing Lu, *Arranged Companions: Marriage and Intimacy in Qing China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021), 3–22.

¹⁴ Anonymous, *Jujia biyong shilei quanji*, in *Mingdai tongshu riyong leishu jikan* 明代通俗日用類書集刊 [A collection of encyclopedias for daily use in the Ming dynasty], vol. 4, ed. Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan lishi yanjiusuo wenhuashi 中國社會科學院歷史研究所文化室 (Chongqing: Xinan shifan daxue chubanshe, 2011), 4–5.

¹⁵ As a gateway to master epistolary skills, see Anonymous, *Gonghe xin chidu* 共和新尺牘 [New letters for Republican China], vol. 2 (Shanghai huiwentang, 1913), 1; as preparation of individuals for their future, see *Zhonghua putong xuesheng chidu* 中華普通學生尺牘 [Chinese letters for general students], 14th ed., vol. 1 (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1926), 19–20.

¹⁶ The category of “familiar letters” encompassed “letters of business and letters of news, as well as letters of friendship, family, amusement and courtship.” For more explanation, see Bannet, *Empire of Letters*, 42–53. In this article, I focus on letters between family members. See also Konstantin Dierks, “The Familiar Letter and Social Refinement in America, 1750–1800,” in *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, ed. David Barton and Nigel Hall (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 1999), 33–34.

¹⁷ Lucille M. Schultz, “Letter-Writing Instruction in 19th Century Schools in the United States,” in *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, ed. Barton and Hall, 118–19.

¹⁸ The original Chinese text omits the subject “I,” a common practice in classical Chinese letters and in the following examples. For an explanation, see “Notes on the Grammatical Characteristics of the Traditional Correspondence,” in “Lexicon of Chinese Correspondence of Literary Style with English Translation and Notes” at <https://www.brandeis.edu/grall/chinese/a-lexicon-of-chinese-correspondence-of-literary-style-with-english-translation-and-notes-1.pdf>, accessed June 5, 2022.

¹⁹ “Guijie” 規誡 [Exhortation], in *Tangzhu xiexin bidu quanbi* 唐著寫信必讀全璧 [Complete collection of an indispensable reader for letter writing compiled by Mr. Tang] (1912), reprinted in *Chūgoku gogaku shiryō sōkan: Sekidoku hen* 中國語學資料叢刊：尺牘篇 [A collection of Chinese language sources: The section of letters], vol. 2, ed. Tarō Hatano 波多野太郎 (Tokyo: Fuji shuppan, 1986), 501.

²⁰ Antje Richter, “Between Letter and Testament: Letters of Familial Admonition in Han and Six Dynasties China,” in *A History of Chinese Letters and Epistolary Culture*, ed. Antje Richter (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 269–70.

²¹ Anonymous, *Gonghe xin chidu*, vol. 2, 1.

²² “Guishou muxun” 規受母訓 [Exhorting the older brother to accept mother’s instruction] in *Chudeng xin chidu* 初等新尺牘 [New letters for elementary education], new 14th ed., vol. 2, ed. Huang Kezong 黃克宗 (Shanghai: Shijie shuju, 1948), 36.

²³ On the four basic components, see “Xiexin yaojue 寫信要訣” [Essential skills for letter writing], in *Zuixin zengguang zhujie zihui chidu quanbi* 最新增廣註解字彙尺牘全璧 [Newest expanded complete work of annotated letters with a vocabulary list] (1902), ed. Tang Zaifeng 唐再豐, reprinted in *Chūgoku gogaku shiryō sōkan: Sekidoku hen*, vol. 2, ed. Tarō Hatano, 402.

²⁴ The writers of classical Chinese letters apply self-deprecatory terms like “untaught” (*yu* 愚) to show their deference to the recipients.

²⁵ *Fenlei Aiguo chidu hongbao*, vol. 3, ed. Jiqing shi 霽青氏 (Shanghai: Jiangdong shuju, 1916), 16a–16b.

²⁶ On the conventionality of epistolary topoi, see Richter, *Letters and Epistolary Culture*, 117–38.

²⁷ *Fenlei Aiguo chidu hongbao*, vol. 3, ed. Jiqing shi, 17a.

²⁸ See, for example, Zhang Guogang 張國剛 and Jiang Aihua 蔣愛花, “Tangdai nannü hunjia nianling kaolue” 唐代男女婚嫁年齡考略 [A survey of marital age in the Tang dynasty], *Zhongguo shi yanjiu* 2 (2004): 65–75.

²⁹ Liang Qichao, “Jin zaohun yi,” in *Yinbing shi wenji dianjiao* 飲冰室文集點校 [Writings from the Studio of Ice Drinking with annotation] (Kunming: Yunnan jiaoyu chubanshe, 2001), 652–57.

³⁰ Liang, “Jin zaohun yi,” 653.

³¹ Wang Hui, *China from Empire to Nation-State*, trans. Michael Hill (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 30–60; On Liang’s transformation from a Confucian intellectual to a liberal nationalist, see Joseph Richmond Levenson, *Liang Ch’i-ch’ao and the Mind of Modern China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).

³² On the view that Liang “started” the discourse against early marriage, see, for an example, Yubin Shen, “Too Young to Date! The Origins of Zaolian (Early Love) as a Social Problem in 20th-Century China,” *History of Science* 53.1 (2015): 93. Early marriage was in fact banned by local officials long before the publication of Liang Qichao’s essay. See, for example, Huang Bao 黃葆, “Jie zaohun bei” 戒早婚碑 [Stele exhorting early marriage] (1892), in *Shenxian wenshi ziliao: Shenxian beiwen daguan* 莘縣文史資料：莘縣碑文大觀 [Records of literature and history of Shen County: Stone inscriptions of Shen County], vol. 19, ed. Shenxian zhengxie xuexi xuanchuan wenshi weiyuanhui 莘縣政協學習宣傳文史委員會 (Shandong sheng xinwen chubanju, 2004), 74–75.

³³ Lü Wenhao 呂文浩, “Zhongguo jindai hunling huayu de fenxi: Cong Qingmo zhi 1930 niandai” 中國近代婚齡話語的分析：從清末至 1930 年代 [An analysis of discourse of the marital age in modern China: From the late Qing to the 1930s] (2005), in *Shehui shenghuo tansuo* 社會生活探索 [Exploration of social life], ed. Liang Jinghe 梁景和 (Beijing: Shoudu shifan daxue chubanshe, 2010), 3–16.

³⁴ Model letters against early marriages in my collection include “Quehun” 卻婚 [Declining marriage], in *Dingzheng xinzhuang xuesheng chidu* 訂正新撰學生尺牘 [Revised new letters for students], new 7th ed. (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1938, first edition dated 1907), 51; “Yan biaomei buyi zaopin” 言表妹不宜早聘 [Younger female cousin should not be engaged early], in *Dingzheng xinzhuang nüzi chidu* 訂正新撰女子尺牘 [Revised new letters for women] (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, date unknown, first edition dated 1907), 37b–38b; “Yan zi buyi zaohun” 言子不宜早婚 [Son should not be married early], in *Xinzhuang nüjie chidu zhinan* 新撰女界尺牘指南 [New epistolary guide for women], 11th ed. (Shanghai: Jinzhang tushuju, 1922, preface dated 1915), 9b–10a; “Quan you buyi yuzi zaohun” 勸友不宜與子早婚 [Dissuading one’s friend from arranging the early marriage for one’s son], in *Shiyong xin chidu* 實用新尺牘 [Practical new letters], vol. 2, ed. Sun Xusheng 孫虛生 (Andong: Chengwenxin shuju, 1915), 364–66; “Quan wu zao hun” 勸勿早婚 [Dissuading one from early marriage], in *Xinzhuang gaodeng xuesheng chidu* 新撰高等學生尺牘 [New letters for advanced-level students], 9th ed., vol. 2, ed. Wang Quansun 王荃孫 (Shanghai: Guangyi shuju, 1919), 2b–3b; “Lun zaohun zhi hai” 論早婚之害 [On the detriment of early marriage], in *Xin shidai xuesheng chidu daquan* 新時代學生尺牘大全 [Complete collection of letters for students in a new age], 26th ed., vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shijie shuju, 1933), 77–78; “Lun zaohun zhi hai” 論早婚之害 [On the detriment of early marriage], in *Nüzi xin chidu* 女子新尺牘 [New letters for women], 23rd ed., vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shijie shuju, 1928), 22–24; “Quan wu wei zhi zaohun” 勸勿為姪早婚 [Dissuading one’s brother from arranging the early marriage for one’s nephew], in *Yuti xin chidu* 語體新尺牘 [New letters in vernacular Chinese], ed. Jin Zhanlu 金湛廬 (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1935), 37–38.

³⁵ “Quehun,” in *Dingzheng xinzhuang xuesheng chidu*, 51.

³⁶ “Quan wu wei zhi zaohun,” in *Yuti xin chidu*, ed. Jin, 37–38.

³⁷ This quote was attributed to Mencius (Mengzi 孟子), a famous Confucian philosopher. See *Mencius* in Chinese Notes, <http://chinesenotes.com/mengzi/mengzi006.html>, accessed June 6, 2022.

³⁸ Jon L. Saari, *Legacies of Childhood: Growing up Chinese in a Time of Crisis, 1890–1920* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1990).

³⁹ Robert Culp, *Articulating Citizenship: Civic Education and Student Politics in Southeastern China, 1912–1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), 209–10.

⁴⁰ “Su juhun zhi you” 訴拒婚之由 [Explaining the reasons for declining marriage], in *Xin shidai xuesheng chidu daquan*, vol. 3, 23.

⁴¹ “Wan ci zuofa” 婉辭作伐, in *Nüzi xin chidu*, vol. 1, 10.

⁴² For more statistics, see “Fulu: Yi” 附錄：一 [Appendix: I], in Cai Danni 蔡丹妮, *Minguo xuesheng de shuxin jiaoyu yanjiu* 民國學生的書信教育研究 [A study of epistolary instructions for students in Republican China] (MA thesis, Xiamen University, 2014).

Model Letters Declining Arranged Marriages

⁴³ “Fandui dinghun” 反對訂婚 [Rejection to engage], in *Xiandai nüzi shuxin* 現代女子書信 [Letters of modern women], new 2nd ed., ed. Tao Qiuying 陶秋英 (Shanghai: Shijie shuju, 1941, first edition dated 1930), 11.

⁴⁴ “Dang chengjiu ru zhi zhiyuan” 當成就汝之志願 [I will help you achieve your aim], in *Nüzi qianjin shuxin* 女子淺近書信 [Plain and simple letters for women], 2nd ed., ed. Shi Lang 施琅 (Shanghai: Guoguang shudian, 1948), 44.

“I wrote letters? To you?”: Letters as Memory Prompts in Dementia Care

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Abstract: This paper explores a collection of letters that brought my mother and me together when physical distance separated us and, twenty years later, brought us some measure of togetherness in the face of dementia’s erosions. I worked as a volunteer teacher in post-war Uganda from 1986 to 1989, communicating with family and friends almost exclusively by handwritten letters. My mother promised to be my most faithful correspondent and she was. When my mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease in 2005, I knew that the more than two hundred letters we had exchanged in the 1980s would offer a version of her life before dementia’s processes began. This paper examines how reciprocity, relationality, interrupted presence, space-time, identity, gift, and voice resonated throughout 2007–8, when I used the letters as memory prompts during my weekly visits with my mother. The memory project extended the letters’ already complex temporality by juxtaposing two worlds: the cross-cultural world my mother and I were navigating in the late 1980s, and the unpredictable world of dementia care, where the letters sometimes elicited profound engagement, and sometimes—by their very epistolary nature—failed to bridge the unfamiliar distances opening up between my mother and me.

On August 16, 1986, I am hunched uncomfortably over my meal tray on a nine-hour flight from Amsterdam to Nairobi, writing the first of more than one hundred letters that I will send to my parents over the next three years. I am twenty-five years old, and I will not read Janet Gurkin Altman’s analyses of epistolary form for another twenty years. Exactly like the letter writers that Altman examines, though, I locate myself in relation to my addressees by mapping my temporal, spatial, emotional, and intellectual coordinates.¹ Under the letter’s date, I write, “4 pm (Holland); 10 am (Akron); 9 am (Winnipeg),” simultaneously aligning myself to the Netherlands, where the flight originated; to Akron, Pennsylvania, where I have been at orientation training for the past week; and to Winnipeg, Manitoba, where my parents live and where I grew up. “Dear Mum and Dad,”² I write to begin the letter proper, “Here I am at well over 30,000 feet and somewhere south of Greece. ... I’m stuck in the middle of a capacity-filled 747, three seats and an aisle away from a window and have lost my bearings quite completely. I do know that I’m farther from home than I’ve ever been before.” When I land in Nairobi, I travel on to Ndejje, Uganda, where I will live for the next three years, working at a teacher training college in the aftermath of a civil war.

In 1986, email is still science fiction. In 1986 in Uganda, telephones are difficult to access and well beyond the budget of a volunteer teacher, and so, for the next three years, I communicate with family and friends almost exclusively by handwritten letter. Especially at first, before I begin to integrate into the community that is rebuilding at Ndejje, I use almost every moment that I am not teaching to write. The ironies of the situation are not lost on me. I could not have averaged more than two handwritten, 3000-word letters every week if I had been occupied with the considerable work of teaching science and mathematics to several hundred young women in a four-year

training program at a highly respected teachers' college. But the war left the college a ransacked shell and rehabilitation work is slow. Our first term began on August 29, 1986, with just fifteen students. Ironically, the war that created the conditions to which I had responded in Canada also created conditions in which I could write more, and more constantly, than I had ever written before.

I wrote because I was lonely, and I wrote because almost everything around me was unfamiliar, and I wrote because I was afraid. Some aspects of post-war life were deeply unnerving, but what frightened me most was the possibility that—separated from family and friends by 13,000 kilometers and excruciating postal delays—I was not real. Culture shock, especially in the first year, was a distraction from the alarming prospect that without my people, I no longer existed. “Please write soon,” I wrote again and again to my family and my friends, “I miss you terribly.” “Please write,” I repeated, “It’s a good thing I didn’t know how much I’d miss you, or I never would have come.” My life at Ndejje improved immensely, of course, with time, but the correspondence was never not freighted with existential anxiety. Will my letters make it to Canada, I wondered, the moment I relinquished them to the post? Will the responses arrive in Ndejje and when? And how will I continue being myself in the meantime?

I kept careful notes of when I mailed letters and to whom and equally careful notes of the letters I received and when they had arrived. The precarious, unpredictable communication of those three years never managed to be anything like what Liz Stanley calls “ordinary letter-writing,” and I returned to Canada in 1989 carrying every scrap of every missive that reached me.³ Most of my friends and family members saved my letters, too, so that when I created an informal archive of my time in Uganda, it housed over 800 separate pieces of correspondence.⁴ I saved the letters because my friends told me I should write a book, but I got busy with life in Canada and my archive went untouched for fifteen years. And then, in 2005, we learned that Geeske Venema, my jauntily intellectual mother, had Alzheimer’s disease.

My mother and I had been exceptionally close all of my life, our relationship characterized by animated, informally philosophical conversations on almost every subject imaginable. In 1986, knowing that I would be lonely in Uganda, my mother promised to be my most faithful correspondent, and she was, despite how much she disliked the physical work of writing. My mother was born left-handed in 1936 in the Netherlands, and she was forced to write with her right hand at school throughout the 1940s. The long-term effects of that misguided policy were her terrible handwriting and the fact that she never afterward wrote with any kind of physical comfort or pleasure. But from 1986 to 1989, she wrote anyway, faithfully, often at length, on average once every ten days, sending more than one hundred letters to me in Uganda, more than twice as many as my next most-regular correspondent.

The Alzheimer’s diagnosis confirmed my family’s worst fears and underscored the fact that I no longer had unlimited time to enjoy the mother I had known all my life. I had been reading about dementia care for several years before we received the formal diagnosis, and I knew that social and mental activity are crucial to retaining cognitive and physical functioning for as long as possible.⁵ Over the next years, I learned more, too, about the profound benefits of being present with people, paying attention to them, validating their feelings and experiences, and engaging them in activities they enjoy.⁶ Quality dementia care, it turns out, is not unlike letter writing, with its basis in what Kylie Cardell and Jane Haggis call “dynamic relational connectedness,” and its eagerness to maintain connection in the face of separation.⁷ Two years after the diagnosis, I designed a creative / research project to learn as much as possible about my mother’s life before our capacity for intimate conversation disappeared.⁸ For the next five years, I spent Friday afternoons with my mother, taking long walks and recording what we said as we told and retold family stories,

discussed the news, sang old songs, played word games, completed crossword puzzles, and read aloud. Over the years of our project together, my mother and I read parts of many books, but we began by focusing on the letters we had written to one another in the late 1980s, when we were farther apart than we had ever been before.

Among its many other effects, the Alzheimer's diagnosis shone an unexpected light on my letter archive. I knew that my mother had rarely kept records of her life. She was reticent in most of her relationships, she was averse to the physical work of writing, and she understood herself to have few reasons to write. She carefully documented our family road trips, but those notebooks revealed little beyond mileage, gas costs, overnight destinations, and motel prices. By contrast—and almost miraculously—the 200+ letters my mother and I exchanged in the 1980s recorded a version of my mother's life at least a decade before dementia's processes began.⁹ By a lucky fluke, these were also the years during which my mother completed her undergraduate university degree, likely the most intellectually stimulating period of her adult life. In the months that followed the Alzheimer's diagnosis, I began to imagine that our decades-old letters might be an entry back into the world my mother and I had shared during a vital era in both our lives. For almost one year, my Mom and I used our twenty-year-old letters as memory prompts in order to remember ourselves together. Reciprocity, relationality, interrupted presence, space-time, identity, gift, and voice resonated throughout that year. The letters sometimes elicited profound engagement, as I had hoped they would, but occasionally—sometimes because of their epistolary nature and sometimes for other reasons entirely—they failed to bridge the unfamiliar distances opening up between my mother and me.

Gaps, Absence, Lapses, Lacunae

If my early letters betrayed my extreme homesickness, my mother's letters reflected an acute sense of loss. "This morning, August 26 [1986]," she wrote in her second letter, "I went to U of Winnipeg to pay my registration fee and so on. Since I was downtown I picked up another ball of that purple wool in order to finish the sweater you were knitting for me. I didn't have much heart for knitting lately; I still have to get used to you being all the way in Africa and then I can't knit right away. That doesn't make much sense, perhaps; I know I'll get back into it in a little while." My mother frames our separation in space and time as the reason she cannot access the usually intense, embodied pleasure she takes in knitting. I will not know this, though, until September 19 when Mom's letter reaches me. By September 19, however, I will have written to my parents, my siblings, and my grandmother eight times, and I will have tasked numerous friends to make additional connections. "Could you let [my mother] know that I'm definitely not sick anymore?" I write on August 19 to a close friend shortly after reaching Nairobi (Letter #1 to Tracey), and on August 29, I end a long letter to another close friend with a similar request (Letter #1 to Nathaniel). Six days afterward, on September 5, I confide to a third friend that I sometimes worry about how much my mother may be worrying about me. "If you think of it," I suggest, "you might surprise her with a call" (Letter #2 to Sharon).¹⁰

Mom's early letters and my own are suffused by our shared desire for reciprocity.¹¹ "Write soon," Mom implores me multiple times in both her first and her second letter, guessing but not yet knowing how excruciatingly lonely I am at Ndejje. At Ndejje, meanwhile, I am urging her to "write often or I'll feel too far away" (Letter #2 to Mom and Dad, August 21, 1986) and, pathetically, one week later, "I feel a terrible need to believe that you miss me and are thinking of me the

way I miss you and think of you” (Letter #6 to Mom and Dad, August 28, 1986). On September 7, Mom begins her third letter with the news of the week: “We’ve received your first letter,” she writes, meaning the letter I wrote on August 16, on the flight to Nairobi. But I will not get Mom’s letter letting me know that my *first* letter has arrived until October 3, while I am finishing my tenth letter to her. My mother and I wrote constantly because we wanted connection, but a closer look at our correspondence reveals that connection to have been an exchange of constantly scrambled messages, messages confused in and by space and time, messages that constantly gestured toward, but only rarely achieved, direct communication. Our correspondence is an extreme form of what Antje Richter calls a “staggered type of communication,” which is characterized throughout by acute “temporal polyvalence.”¹² And those were the letters that arrived.

On average, my letters to Canada took about two weeks to reach their destinations. Letters sent to me typically spent three or more weeks in transit, but some arrived months after they had been posted and some were late by over a year. A small handful arrived stamped with glorious excuses: “Missent to Manila,” or “Missent to Jakarta,” and once, most thrillingly, “Missent to Funafuti.” Because my regular correspondents and I numbered our letters, I was able to determine later that all my letters reached their intended recipients. At least one-sixth of the letters sent to me, however, failed to arrive. “[L]etters,” says Altman, as if she were speaking to the point, “are both permanent words and losable words.”¹³ When the final tally was in, I knew that sixteen of my mother’s 105 letters were gone forever.

In 2007, when I begin re-reading my correspondence with my mother from twenty years in the past, I am struck by the ways it accidentally mimics Alzheimer’s, with its gaps and its weird delays, its distortions of memory and time’s passage, its irretrievable losses. Later in the project, after I have read more broadly, Cardell and Haggis’ methodological questions about the letter and the epistolarium resonate. “Do we recognize the letters that are not there?” Cardell and Haggis ask; and, “If so, how do we deal with the epistolary presences of the ‘not there?’”¹⁴ Later yet, I will read Margaretta Jolly describing Liz Stanley’s work as focused on “the unsaid and lost as well as the saved and said,” and I will be reminded, again, of the irony of using a letter archive this full of holes in a project aimed at restoring and re-storying my mother and me.¹⁵ But that is not until later.

In the summer of 2007, I am, in equal parts, anxious, keen, and full of hope. “Mom,” I say, broaching the project, “Shall we read the letters we wrote while I was in Uganda and see what that helps us remember?” Mom’s quick agreement spurs my optimism. We have always deeply enjoyed one another’s company, and she appreciates the long afternoons I spend with her now, focused on her life. “I’ll have to record our visits,” I explain, “or I’ll never remember everything we say.” The archive may be littered with absence, but the letters remain, unarguably, an unparalleled source of my mother’s history and mine. I am about to learn, though, just how difficult it is to read letters after the fact, with their built-in barriers: the peculiar present tense of a letter’s first-person “voice,” the very specific relationship between a letter’s “I” and its second-person addressee, and, of course, letters’ complicated temporality.¹⁶ I worry, too, that Altman, whom I have now read cover to cover, may be correct when she speculates that “[p]ushed to its logical extreme, epistolary discourse would be so relative to its I-you that it would be unintelligible to an outside reader.”¹⁷ And I recognize that Altman’s analysis assumes full cognitive capacity. What happens to letters, I wonder, once Alzheimer’s is in the picture?

Letters, Memories, Dementia, Desire

Because my project involves human subjects, I complete an ethics application, which is approved and finalized in early 2008. My mother agrees to the project on a fully lucid afternoon in late summer 2007, and she signs the consent form on January 11, 2008, another fully lucid afternoon. When we sit down together to record what we read and remember, though, she often surprises me. “These were *letters* that I wrote?” she asks sometimes, when I reintroduce the project, or, slightly differently, she asks, “*I* wrote letters?” At the beginning of one memorable afternoon, she eyed me skeptically and multiplied the emphases: “*I* wrote *letters*?” she asked. “*To you?*” Before it had even officially begun, that is, my project betrayed its origins in desire. I knew that the letters preserved a priceless history of my relationship with my mother, but I realized very quickly that what I had been hoping for was magic. Whatever else the letters *can* do, I admit very soon after starting, they cannot bring the mother I remember back to me.

Mom and I continue anyway, improvising our way around impediments we have identified and impediments as they arise. By the fall of 2007, Mom is already having a great deal of difficulty reading on her own, and I realize, after several attempts, that I cannot ask her to read the letters I wrote to her. They are too idiosyncratic, too non-linear, too “voiced,” to make sense to a memory that is disappearing. My second letter, for example, quickly stymies Mom. It is written on an oversized postcard, and while my handwriting is tidy and legible, it is tiny and takes up every space that is not used up by the stamp, the airmail sticker, or my parents’ address. “Dear Mum and Dad,” I write, starting in the top-most left corner, “(Aug. 21/86—Kampala, 9:40 pm—I don’t know how much room the stamps will need so I won’t push my luck!) There are so many things to tell you about that I’m afraid I’ll have to flail around a bit and hope you get some kind of connected picture from the bits and pieces I blurt out.” My excitement and urgency are readily discernible two decades on. I cram words around the printing on the postcard, insert information into parentheses, and at one point insert parentheses into parentheses. When I run out of horizontal room on the postcard, I write vertically along the postcard’s midline. The postcard is a perfect instance of what Richter calls “a letter’s peculiar ability to draw attention to itself,” with its “self-referentiality,” its “manifold and recurring references to time, place, and other circumstances of ... writing.”¹⁸

By 2007, I need patience to attend to my younger self’s intensity. Mom, for her part, can no longer construct coherent pictures from the “bits and pieces” of other people’s long-ago writing. So we refocus our efforts on the letters she wrote to me, and she looks up from them frequently, saying, “I remember that,” or, “I would never have remembered that if we hadn’t read these letters.” Still, we proceed haltingly. Alzheimer’s is an unpredictable disease, and its effects are notoriously non-linear. I can never guess from one week to the next how Mom will be feeling when I arrive, what she will want to do, what she will be able to do. I learn by trial and error to follow her lead on our afternoons together and only learn later that these are best practices in dementia care.¹⁹ I always arrive with letters at hand, but if Mom is keen to talk about a newspaper article, or a radio program, or a Bible study she has attended, that is where we focus instead.

On one memorable afternoon, Mom met me at the door reciting a Dutch poem she had memorized in preparation for our visit, and we spent all of that week and the next talking about the poem, about how much she loves the poem, about how we might translate the poem into English. Dutch was my mother’s second language, the only official language of the Netherlands when she was growing up, though she spoke Frisian, her first language, at home with her family. “Goede Dood,” the poem Mom has memorized, appears almost exactly halfway through *Merijntje Gijzens: Jeugd en Jonge Jaren* (*Merijntje Gijzens: Youth and Young Years*), a 1000+ page coming-of-age novel that Mom repeatedly identifies as the most treasured of all her treasured books.²⁰ A literal

translation of the poem's title renders "Good Death," but I understand from what my mother explains that it would be more accurate to say "beloved death," or perhaps "welcome and welcoming death," or "steadfast and reassuring death." The poem's speaker addresses Death as not just an inevitable but a paradoxically enriching, essential element in living, as *the* element, the presence, the fact without which life would not be worth living. During the weeks when Mom and I discuss the poem, I come to understand its complexity and its existential longing as a startling gift, a glimpse into the radiant melancholy, the passionate, pantheistic, death-embracing visions that have sustained my mother most of her adult life.

Annelieke Driessen, a medical anthropologist specializing in dementia, notes that people with dementias are conventionally assessed and measured in terms of what they can still do, including, repeatedly, whether they still recognize others, a question that Janelle S. Taylor also reflects on extensively.²¹ Both researchers argue, on the basis of fieldwork and personal experiences, that these may be the wrong questions entirely, the wrong orientations to take in relation to dementia and certainly in relation to best care for those with dementias. Put into epistolary terms, I have embarked on this project wanting my mother to *reciprocate* in the ways she did when we were writing letters to one another. Best practices in dementia care, however, urge me to shift my focus, away from what may no longer be possible in order to value and nurture what is—like this invitation of my mother's on November 30, 2007, to enter the unsettling world of existential Dutch poetry, where she is in her element and I am dependent on her for translation and meaning.

So I arrive each week prepared with letters and prepared to be surprised, training myself to be less curious about what Mom *remembers* and more curious about what we might discover together *because* she no longer remembers.²² And sometimes, on weeks that Alzheimer's is dormant or dozing, Mom and I carve out hours at a stretch to read letters and reflect on the memories they prompt. The afternoon of February 22, 2008, for instance, is almost magical. In preparation for our visit, I selected my maternal grandmother's letters. My mother's mother wrote three letters to me in Uganda, all in the first year I was there, during the time I was most homesick and while my mother was imploring everyone she spoke with to, *please*, please write to Kathleen. Except for a few English phrases, my grandmother—whom I called *Beppe*—wrote to me in Frisian, my mother's mother tongue. Frisian is an older language than either Dutch or German, complete with its own long literary history and still spoken by about four hundred thousand people, most of whom live in Friesland, one of the Netherlands' twelve provinces, the province from which both my maternal and paternal families originate. I guess, correctly, that Mom will be rivetted by her own mother's words from more than twenty years ago, but she reads hesitantly. Beppe's cramped, old-fashioned handwriting is a challenge, but Mom also keeps forgetting whether she is supposed to be reading or translating, and she shifts from Frisian to English at every few words. Mom has spent her life wanting to do anything connected to school *right*—anything that involves reading and writing and learning—and she looks up from the letter repeatedly, wondering if she is doing it correctly. I encourage her to continue in whatever way she feels most comfortable: Frisian was my first language, too, and I follow my mother's shifts with ease.

Beppe writes for the first time on September 24, 1986, almost exactly one month after I have arrived at Ndejje. Beppe begins by thanking me for writing to her, reiterating some of what I have written, and explaining that my descriptions of life in Uganda have put her in mind of her experiences on first arriving as an immigrant to Canada in the early 1950s. I have known all my life that my Beppe's immigration experience was not a happy one, and she underscores it here by writing it out in English: "I nearly died of homesickness!" I guess that Beppe used English to ensure that I would not misunderstand her, but what she omits from her letter—and what my

mother promptly adds—is that if Beppe had died of homesickness, it would have been at her own hand. And then my mother retells a story I have heard before but understand more deeply now. My mother was 16 when her family emigrated. If they had stayed in the Netherlands, she would have begun the post-secondary studies that she longed for, training to become a teacher of languages.²³ Instead, the girl who would later be my mother was obliged to come to strange, cold Canada, where she spent almost a year on suicide watch, ensuring that *her* mother did not follow through on what she threatened, to throw herself into the frigid river racing past their first Canadian home. So, it was what my grandmother had *not* written that prompted my mother's deepest musings, on the regrets, the constraints, and the unfulfilled dreams of immigration. "Sometimes," Mom says, when I ask her what she is thinking, "I think it never should've happened. I really do. The whole thing." "Do you mean emigration?" I ask. "*Jah*," Mom says, "It never should've happened." And then she pauses. "Well, anyway," she adds resignedly, contradicting every impulse that drives this memory project of mine, "you can't go back in life."

My grandmother's second letter prompted sweeter memories. Writing me again just two weeks later, on October 9, 1986, Beppe reflects again on my situation in Uganda in terms of her own experiences, but this time she goes all the way back to a golden age, several years before she married, when she lived independently and studied and then worked as a nurse. Beppe writes about the inevitability, in unfamiliar circumstances, of an adjustment period, but, she concludes enthusiastically, "*it is ien fen de moaiste tiiden yn myn libben west*." "It was one of the loveliest times of my life." This, too, is a crucial part of our family mythology, the bliss with which my grandmother recalled her work as a nurse. "Beppe should never have married," my mother and each of her sisters have told me on different occasions; my mother tells me again on this afternoon of remembering: "Beppe should have spent her life with her friends from nursing school. The three of them should have just lived together."

On this particular afternoon, Beppe's writing prompts Mom to add a shocking story I have not heard before, about one of my grandmother's beloved nursing colleagues. Mom and I muse somberly on the events she recounts and then I ease her toward less traumatic topics. About ten minutes later, though, she suddenly veers back, entirely of her own volition, recalling a story about Rina, Beppe's other especially close friend. This, by contrast, is a funny story, and it is a story Mom adores because it hinges on wit and wordplay, in this case, wit and wordplay in Dutch. "She was visiting a lady," Mom says of her mother's friend Rina, "a lady in an old folks' home, and that lady, that woman said to her, '*Sla mij maar dood!*'" (A rough translation, which attempts to capture both the meaning and the comedy of the syncopation might be: "Just hit me already, hard enough to kill me!") Mom switches from animated Dutch back to English to explain, "Because the lady, the woman didn't any longer want to live." And now Mom laughs helplessly, anticipating the excellent joke. "And then Rina," she explains, "who was the care woman, said"—and here Mom shifts back to Dutch, taking on the voice of a seasoned nurse, someone who has seen it all before: "*Ja, dat dach je maar: jij lekker in de hemel, en ik levenslang in de gevangenis!*"

I am exhilarated to realize that I still know enough Dutch to get the joke's caustic play with linguistic and existential possibilities. "Sure," Rina might have said if she'd been speaking English, "you go ahead and imagine that: you nicely in heaven" [by implication, "for all of eternity"] "and me in prison for the rest of my life!" "I've always found that so hilarious," Mom says when we finally catch our breaths, and then she adds, "I'm lucky. That's one of the things I remember. I don't remember what I did ten minutes ago, but that I remember!"

The Multifaceted Networks of Desire

In “The Epistolary Gift, the Editorial Third-Party, Counter-Epistolaria: Rethinking the Epistolarium,” Liz Stanley describes epistolary writing as a form of gift exchange, which, she says, “involves the circulation and symbolic gifting of relationships—the reciprocity of correspondences. There is the gift of the letter itself,” she elaborates, “but more importantly, there is what it metonymically stands for and symbolises about the ongoing social bond between writer-giver and addressee-receiver”; Stanley goes on to describe the process as circulatory, proposing that “its in-built extension to third-party relationships produces continuous flows and multifaceted networks, in which the hope or expectation of response comes to take on an obligatory and constraining character.”²⁴ Like Stanley’s multifaceted networks, the project of reading and remembering and discovering with my mother extends again and again to third parties, long-ago relationships, almost forgotten friendships. On October 9, 1986, the same day that my grandmother writes her second letter to me, I begin my eleventh letter to my parents using a beautiful greeting card, and I comment that I bought the card while I was shopping for a friend’s wedding, someone I name, someone my parents know. Several paragraphs on, I assure my parents that I am eating well, unlike a former aid worker whom we had met before I left, who had lived in Uganda throughout the war and described the spartan menu to which she had been limited. Most telling of my dependence on epistolary networks, I reference a car accident that I have been in but breezily offer few details, assuring my parents that I have described the events twice already, in long letters to one of my close friends and to one of my mother’s sisters, both of whom—I assure my parents—have been instructed to telephone when those letters arrive.

The project itself is multifaceted in ways that often exceed my managerial abilities. There is the work of organizing the letters, the work of transcribing the letters, the work of finding reliable transcribers when I realize I cannot do all the transcribing myself. When the transcribers begin to send in their work, I realize how much easier typescript is to read than handwriting, and I do not know whether to regret the time Mom and I have spent deciphering originals. There is the work of recording our weekly conversations and the time-consuming work of transcribing our conversations, all while teaching full time, researching dementia care, and trying to keep up with the demands of actual dementia care. Throughout all the kinds of work, I continue to reel, emotionally, every day, at the realization that **m-y m-o-t-h-e-r h-a-s A-l-z-h-e-i-m-e-r’s** and she cannot be cured. And I am struck repeatedly, as I dive deeper into this memory project, by what I have remembered about my three years in Uganda, what I have misremembered, and what I have forgotten completely.

I discover that while I can *tell* extended versions of pivotal events at Ndejje, I have written about them in bits and pieces—early versions to one recipient, additional details to another, final episodes complete with punchlines to a third. I am disappointed by how few of the letters are self-contained narratives because it is these scattered bits and pieces that make letters so difficult to comprehend after the fact. I discover that I have remembered accurately the unexploded landmine on the college campus, the anxiety of being assigned to teach Ugandan agriculture, and the thrill when I have learned all my students’ names, but I have forgotten my determination to learn Luganda and how I would practice in my letters home. I have remembered accurately the timeframe during which I began experiencing the first mild symptoms of what would later become a serious illness, but I have forgotten how hard I worked to keep the worst details from my parents. And I discover with some surprise how much of my mother’s time and energy during those years were spent looking after her own mother.

My mother was not close to her mother the way she and I were close, but Mom was diligent in her care for Beppe, adhering dutifully to the schedule that she and her siblings had drawn up to meet their mother's needs. Because Beppe's apartment was less than three kilometers from my parents' home, my mother was almost always the first of her siblings on the scene in cases of grocery shortages, unscheduled outings, big and small emergencies alike. Questions of best care for Beppe emerge repeatedly in my mother's letters, I discover, and I am struck by the resonances, as I struggle every week to determine how best to care for my own mother now. On March 28, 2008, about a month after we read Beppe's letters, I arrive at my parents' home with my mother's 41st, 42nd, and 43rd letters. Mom's Letter #41 includes some of her responses to my first descriptions of illness, but in Letter #42, she writes about my grandmother's alcoholism. Sometime after my grandfather's death in 1972, Beppe began to drink to ease the pain of loneliness. Sometime during the next decade, it got to be a habit. Until I had unearthed the letters, I had forgotten completely. Mom writes on August 9, 1987, the day after we had managed to have a brief telephone conversation:

From our conversation yesterday I realize I must have written something about Beppe, but I can't quite remember what. In any case, I'll expand a bit, so you won't worry about her unnecessarily (spelling?). As you know, she's liked her drink for a long time already, certainly since before Pake died.²⁵ Over the years as her arthritis and deafness became worse and her isolation increased and her dependence on others, she began to drink more, and more often and certainly the last 5 years (and maybe longer) she put away at least two 26 ounce bottles of whisky per week. Eta bought one for her every Thursday after they'd been out for brunch, but unbeknownst to Eta, Louis bought her another on Fridays when he did her grocery shopping. (And Louis didn't know about "Eta's bottle".) (Letter #42 from Mom and Dad)

On March 28, 2008, Mom and I are aghast at the quantities. Two twenty-six-ounce bottles in a week? "Whisky?" Mom asks, deciphering her own handwriting. "Did Beppe drink *whisky*?" And she chuckles as Beppe's scheme reveals itself: the bottle my aunt bought for her on Thursdays after their weekly brunch; the bottle my uncle brought over with the groceries on Saturdays. "Beppe had quite a scam going, didn't she?" I say and we explode with laughter. "Holy Dinah," Mom muses, subdued by the time she has read to the end of the section. "Now that I read it of course I remember. And I remember that I found her fallen off her bed, you know. I remember that, and of course, I was the nearest daughter. Holy Dinah," Mom repeats, and then she switches to Frisian. "*Achhhhhh*," she begins, an untranslatable expression of compassion, "I feel so sorry for her even now. Poor soul. She was so homesick."

Altman writes about the letter as an "instrument of revelation and discovery" and the ways in which "the act of reading in epistolary fiction often corresponds to the classical moment of recognition."²⁶ I'm intrigued on this afternoon by the way that re-reading her decades-old letter prompts Mom to an encompassing compassion for her mother, for the loneliness she now recognizes as suffusing her own mother's life. Mom's compassion strikes me forcefully that afternoon because it expresses a quality and depth of empathy that she rarely accessed while Beppe was alive. And then our conversation morphs, away from the letter, to speculations about how Beppe might have found alternatives to her loneliness, how Mom is dealing with her own loneliness, how awkward and nervous Mom finds herself now in conversations even with old friends, how she feels most comfortable when she attends meetings at the Alzheimer Society because, she says, "We're all the same; we don't have to hide it; everybody *knows* we're forgetting stuff!"

We laugh as we do so much of the time, but Mom's insight into Beppe's loneliness provides me an insight into hers. My mother was an introvert and notably reserved all her life. She had a few close friends from university, she had her six buoyant sisters, she had me, and she had a talent for making friends with my friends. On returning to our letters, I had been struck many times by how frequently they reference my friends, how frequently one or another of my friends contacted my mother while I was in Uganda. So on my next visit, I deliberately arrive with Mom's 43rd letter again, which I am eager to read because it begins with the visit Mom had had just the day before with one of my friends. "Shannon took me out for lunch yesterday, to a place in Osborne Village," Mom announces enthusiastically on August 18, 1987, after assuring me that my letters have continued to arrive, "(Osborne Village Inn, it's called, I think ...) it's a neat place, and I had 'blintzes' for the first time in my life."

I have deliberately brought this letter again because I want to remember out loud with Mom how gallantly my closest friends worked to fill the gap of my absence. "Before you left," Mom muses, after adding details about her lunch with Shannon, "I could always count on you to take me out. Now it's catch as [catch] can. But," she adds reassuringly, "that is not the only reason why I miss you." This is what I specifically wanted to get to, and when we read the letter 21 years later, I try repeatedly to prompt memories of this sweetness. "Do you remember how we'd sit and talk over lunch Mom," I ask her, "all those little places we'd go to in Osborne Village?" Mom tries to say, "Osborne Village," at the time a popular restaurant district in Winnipeg, but she struggles with the consonants and shakes her head. "Do you remember our lunches," I ask, and she answers valiantly, "Vaguely." What Mom remembers, as we talk, is that "The ladies, the ladies I worked for, didn't they live in Osborne Village?" For about five years, beginning in the early 1970s, my mother cleaned house for three older women, all of whom lived in the Osborne area. Because these are the memories the letter has prompted, we take our time on this afternoon together to remember each one of "the ladies" in as much detail as we can. And when it seems we have assembled as many details as possible, I ask, "Mom, when you wrote me this letter, you hadn't worked for the ladies for more than ten years. Do you have a clearer recollection of that than of the time I was in Uganda?"

Mom considers the question a long time and her answer is startling for its insight. "In a way," she says, hesitantly, because she doesn't want to hurt my feelings, "yes. Because it has more to do with your body than your thought processes. When you were in Uganda, there wasn't a lot I could do except think of you. And a thought," she says, "you cannot conjure. But a thing you can think of. ... If you arrive to clean someone's house and then you drive back home—you can see that in your head: 'now I was *there* and now I'm going *there*.'" And then my mother tells me again the poignant thing she has begun to tell me during this first winter of conversation: "You have no idea what I've forgotten. You have no idea how much I've forgotten."

Remembering Forgetting

It is tempting to underscore the uncanniness of my mother's experience, the way she seems to simultaneously both forget and remember forgetting, and it is tempting to imagine that this uncanniness is somehow unique to people with Alzheimer's. It is worth asking, though, as some researchers and activists do, why we hold people with dementia to such high standards.²⁷ And it is worth remembering, as those researchers prompt us to do, to contextualize the uncanniness of dementia within a framework that acknowledges the frailties of our own "normal" minds.²⁸

On Friday April 25, 2008, two weeks after my conversation with Mom about “the ladies,” I am more than usually flustered and under-prepared. I have not yet chosen letters for today’s visit, so I simply pick from the top of a stack of typed transcriptions as I dash. Once on the bus, I realize these are Mom’s first two letters, and I marvel that I have not yet thought to bring them. Before Mom and I begin reading later that afternoon, I ask her what she remembers about the summer I left for Uganda. Mom is alert this afternoon and eager to engage. “Didn’t we take you to the airport?” she asks. “Weren’t some of your friends there?” They were, five of them, hilarious, disbelieving, none of us able to imagine three years without one another. Mom and I enjoy the memory, but it is painful to see how hard she has to work to remember my friends’ names, despite the efforts each one of them made to stay in touch. And then we turn to Mom’s first letter:

I had a call this morning at 9 am from MCC to inform me that they had received a telex from Nairobi to inform us that you had arrived safely and everything was going well, which I was very glad to receive of course. Dad had suggested that I start keeping a diary, ... so I bought a smallish notebook and have scribbled in it a few things every day.... I think I mentioned to you on the phone that Kim called, that I gave her your address and that she will be teaching in Baldur, MB, grades 5 and 6, I believe. ... On Tuesday, August 12th, I took Beppe to her hairdresser’s for a perm.... While she was there I went to visit Annie, where it was bedlam as usual, but then, I guess it’s no wonder with three foster children and three of her own.... Later in the evening I had a long telephone conversation with Sandy. She told me all about her work. She had been to Stony Mountain Penitentiary to interview two inmates, which was quite interesting. ... Saturday we had the two weddings to go to as you may recall. The ceremony in Calvary Temple was not very long and a large part of it seemed to be devoted to the show of the entrance of the various attendants and the bride herself who was not “given away” by either her father ... nor by her grandfather. Annette walked into the church alone, for which she has my respect. I don’t think that is the usual thing to do in their circle. (Letter #1 from Mom and Dad, August 18, 1986)²⁹

Our afternoon of reading and remembering, on April 25, 2008, proceeds with a distinct measure of success. “Who is Kim?” Mom has asked, when she reads that “Kim called,” and promptly asks, “Where is Baldur?” when she reads where Kim will be teaching. Mom has to work to remember that “MB” is the abbreviation for Manitoba, puzzles briefly over who Annie might be (with all the foster children and “bedlam as usual”), but she pronounces “penitentiary” perfectly when she reads about my sister’s articling work for her law degree. Mom is stumped, though, when we reach the description of the two weddings that she and Dad had attended. “*Annette walked into the church alone,*” Mom repeats several times, gathers enough momentum to finish the sentence—“*for which she has my respect*”—then looks up and asks, “Why did Annette walk into the church alone?” It is a marker of Mom’s cognitive loss that she no longer remembers that in some wedding traditions, fathers “give their daughters away,” a further indicator that she no longer remembers the vehemence with which she once deplored the tradition. But it takes just a few moments of conversation before Mom declares, “So it means, ‘Now I’m rid of her and now you own her’!? Good grief, it sounds like slavery.” She pauses and then reflects with considerable humor, “So I said that already then, eh?” She pauses again and adds, “Well, you know me. I was pretty sharp in those days with my pronouncements! Pretty harsh in my judgments.” She pauses one more time, unrepentant. “I still am,” she says, and we both laugh.

It is a delightful afternoon, not only because of Mom’s pleasure at discovering resonances with her earlier self’s strongly-held opinions. I will not have time, though, to transcribe our conversation for over a year. I have learned that while I can hire people to help transcribe the letters,

I have to transcribe the conversations myself. I am the only one who can consistently make out what Mom is saying, especially when she switches amongst languages, the only one who can guess accurately at what she is trying to say when she struggles for words, the only one who can decipher what we are talking about when our words overlap or get lost in laughter. Besides, Mom and I sometimes speak candidly, and I need to be able to protect her privacy and the privacy of people she speaks about. But the work of transcribing is painfully slow. Over the years and on different devices, I record more than 150 conversations with my mother, each, on average, two hours long. Extrapolating from shorter experiments, I determine that it takes about eight hours to render an accurate word-for-word, pause-for-pause transcription of a two-hour conversation. That includes time to record the details as Mom switches amongst languages and to spell correctly in languages I have never formally learned to read. My husband urges me to try a word-recognition program, but I look askance. What on earth would such a program make of intermittent Frisian, Dutch, and German, and Mom's multiple attempts to pronounce tricky syllables in English?

In mid-December 2009, I block out several days to review and add to my collection of first-draft transcriptions, and I observe, again, the multiple levels at which this project exemplifies epistolary writing's unique ability to "portray the experience of reading."³⁰ Yes, I think: reading and then re-reading, recording the re-reading, transcribing the recordings, and reading the transcripts. I am deep into the ontological complexities that Stanley describes in her article on epistolary gifts, though the article will not be published for several years.³¹ On the second day of my transcribing marathon, I select the recording of our third official visit, January 25, 2008, because that was the first time Mom and I officially read letters to one another. I want to remember our exact words. Headphones adjusted, document open at the precise spot that the manuscript begins, I prepare to amend at top speed and press "play." Nine minutes in, I stop typing, hit "pause," and peer at the details I have just added:

Mom: So where am I now? [pause] Oh. Mmmmmm. "*Tuesday August 12. I took Beppe*"—that's Mom of course—"to her hairdresser. While she was there, I went to visit Annie, where it was bedlam as usual." [pause] Annie? Who would that have been?

Me: Who would that be, Mom, Annie?

Mom: [pause] Annie Venema of course!

I re-read what I have edited so far and review what I drafted the first time through. Mom is reading from her first letter, and it is all there, or mostly there and mostly in the correct order: Nairobi, telex, Dad, diary, notebook. Kim, Baldur, Sandy, Stony Mountain, penitentiary (tackled three times, then pronounced perfectly). Beppe, bedlam, foster children, and misogynist undertones in wedding rituals that require fathers to give their daughters away. "I was already pretty blunt then!" Mom says on the recording of our January 25, 2008, visit, admiring, half-embarrassed, mostly pleased to remember her spritely, opinionated younger self.

But I am baffled. I have just read this exact conversation somewhere else. I scramble through the documents I have been creating and refining. Here it is, the transcript for April 25, 2008. I was just looking at this. Mom and I are reading a typed version of her first two letters to me because handwriting is so hard to decipher. This happened exactly three months after the conversation I have just been reviewing and rendered a transcript implausibly similar and frequently eerily exact. Uncannily exact. Word for word, pause for pause, puzzled question for puzzled question, Mom and I had almost exactly the same conversation on the twenty-fifth day of both January

and April 2008, and neither of us remembered. “Oh my goodness,” I type slowly into the middle of the January transcript, “this is so weird.”

And only now, as if this were a letter that had been posted in the best of faith but accidentally misrouted to Manila or Marseille or Melbourne and therefore very late arriving, I add missing and necessary information. On February 22, 2008, the same afternoon that Mom and I read Beppe’s letters with so much pleasure, doctors discovered that my baby nephew, Harry, had an exceptionally rare form of liver cancer. Ten-month-old Harry was my parents’ only grandson. For the next six months, baby Harry’s urgent journey with cancer overshadowed any other story our family might tell. My husband and I took on various roles as soon as we heard the news, helping to organize hospital visits and meal donations, setting up a blog to keep family and friends informed, supporting my parents emotionally. Every moment of our days was inflected by Harry’s illness: the stomach-churning wait for a precise diagnosis, the numbing details of carefully calculated chemotherapy, the need to get accurate updates to everyone in our widening circles of support. Every visit with my parents was suffused with concern about Harry, and then, as the weeks passed, cautious, breath-held optimism when Harry responded well—better than anyone could have predicted or imagined—to his first, his second, his third round of chemo.

I was grateful to be on a research leave, but I was always scrambling, including on the morning of April 25, 2008, when I laid my hands on the first letters I could find as I dashed for the bus, the typewritten letters at the top of the stack on my desk. I was late that morning because my sister-in-law had called from the hospital just as I was leaving, with an update on Harry’s progress, and I needed to make careful notes to ensure that my next blog post would be accurate. Mom and I read her first letters for the first time on January 25, 2008, in a world that seems idyllic now, because in that world we had no reason to believe that baby Harry was not perfectly healthy. Exactly three months later, on April 25, 2008, we read a typescript of the same letters in the shadow of Harry’s cancer and neither of us remembered our afternoon together in January. It is important to me to remind myself that I do not have Alzheimer’s but my mother and I *both* forgot that we read the same letters twice and had almost exactly the same conversation about them both times.

Harry was so healthy when his sixth round of chemo began that we fervently believed he would qualify for a liver transplant soon. The CT scan the day after chemo ended staggered us with its news. The cancer had not just returned but spread itself throughout Harry’s liver and re-entered his lymph nodes and both of his lungs. Harry’s heartbroken medical team discharged him to his parents on July 18, 2008, with a palliative program. Two weeks and two days later, Harry died. Months afterward, my shattered family began resuming some of our routines, including my weekly visits to my parents, but on the first, and then the second, and again on the third attempt to read letters with my mother, the results were gibberish and incomprehension.

After Harry died, I was not able, ever again, to read letters with my mother. It was certainly because of Alzheimer’s ongoing deteriorations, but it was also because of grief that my mother was suddenly unable to do the extra cognitive work that letter reading requires. Margaret Lock, a medical anthropologist who examines how mind, body, and environment are entangled in any individual’s life course, sketches a plausible explanation. Lock is clear that “mind” cannot cause “the terrible neurological devastation of A[lzheimer’s] D[isease],” but she is equally clear that “mind as consciousness,” which she understands as involving both shared social life, and, at times, enormous trauma, “can undoubtedly make an indirect contribution to neuropathology.”³² In 2008, in the wake of my nephew’s death, the abrupt end of letter reading with my mother left me doubly bereft. For a very long time, I imagined that the epistolary aspects of the project had failed, ending almost before they had begun. By now, though, I treasure every moment of our attempts, every

memory of the afternoons that Mom and I read our old letters and of what the letters prompted us to remember and to discover, and of all the laughter we managed before the letters ran out. Every one of our letters was a gift when we exchanged them throughout the mid-1980s over thousands of kilometers' distance. Twenty years later, in the face of dementia's erosions, and if only for a while, they brought us the gift of togetherness and a surprising amount of joy.

Conclusion: The Gifts of Even Imperfect Correspondence

Mom and I first discovered the immense pleasure of talking together about literature in the mid-1970s, when she began reading the novels I was bringing home from my high school English classes. Thirty years later, facing Alzheimer's, I knew that our memory project would involve as much reading out loud as possible, and as much talking as possible about what we were reading. My fondest hope was that our reading would encompass the 200+ letters we had exchanged in the 1980s while I was living in Uganda and my mother was completing her undergraduate degree. I imagined those letters, from a vital time in both our lives, as a kind of portal, one that would take us back, together, into our shared past. Letters, though, are difficult to read after the fact, more difficult yet when dementia is at play. Alzheimer's disease works at its own erratic pace, and I learned repeatedly to let go of my plans and follow my mother's lead on the afternoons that she wanted to do and talk about something else entirely.

But the letter reading that Mom and I managed, and the memories and discoveries that our reading prompted, intensified our already rich connection to one another. When I look back on our project now, moreover, I see its deep rootedness in reciprocity and relationality—not coincidentally core features of the epistolary genre. In an ideal world, the project would have begun when Mom still understood much more of what she was reading. In an ideal world, we would have had typed transcripts of the letters at our disposal, with strong narrative passages excerpted and contextualized. But there would be no Alzheimer's in an ideal world as there was in ours, and so I am glad I learned in time to stay flexible, open to Mom's directions, including on all the afternoons when she asked, after we had finished eating lunch: "Are we reading letters today?"

*

More than four years after Harry's death and just two months before we admit my mother into permanent care, letters make one last appearance in our memory project. By November 2012, I could borrow Stanley's wonderful term "interrupted presence" to describe every day that I spend with my mother.³³ By now, our activities and games are so much diminished from what they once were that I often simply dream up words and ask Mom what they mean. My mother is not who she once was, but our delight in language play goes on, evidence, as Lynn Casteel Harper assures me, that my mother is not "gone."³⁴ Even this deep into dementia's waters, my mother is palpably real, as real as I was in 1986, despite my fears and the 13,000 kilometers that separated me from everyone I had known. On our afternoon together in 2012, the word "enterprise" makes Mom too anxious to answer, so I quickly propose "vacillate" instead. Mom tackles "vacillate" after a long, thought-filled pause, and though her definition is garbled, I understand some parts of it and assure her that she is absolutely correct. When I propose "correspondence" next, Mom answers without hesitation. "Correspondence," she says confidently. "That is when—say you have something and then something else. And you have something, and you say, that looks like the same thing." I tell her that she is exactly right, that if one thing corresponds with another, it means the two things are

quite a lot alike.” “*Jah*,” Mom says, “and then if, say, you are living here and someone else is living there, and if you want to communicate with them, maybe you send them something, like a message.” I am amazed. Even now, more than seven years after the Alzheimer’s diagnosis, Mom can still conjure both main meanings of “correspondence.” I tell her again that she is exactly right, that that is exactly what “correspondence” means. I praise her enthusiastically. I am thrilled to see her happy and to make her happy. And then I say, “Do you know Mom, when I lived in Uganda, we would send each other letters. We wrote each other letters every week and those letters were *our* correspondence.” And now Mom dazzles me with a smile.

“We did, eh?” she says. “That’s good.”

NOTES

¹ Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 119.

² During the 1980s when I wrote these letters, I spelled the word I called my mother “Mum,” though my mother always signed herself “Mom.” For several decades now, I have used the latter spelling to refer to her.

³ Liz Stanley, who studies letter collections en masse, describes “ordinary letter-writing” as occurring when people who are together but frequently and transitorily apart “use notes, letters and related means to bridge their face-to-face encounters.” “The Death of the Letter? Epistolary Intent, Letterness and the Many Ends of Letter-Writing,” *Cultural Sociology* 9.2 (2015), 243.

⁴ On the advice of experienced development workers, my regular correspondents and I all numbered our letters, so that we would always know when letters arrived out of sequence or when letters were lost. Numbered, the letters were easier to organize chronologically when I returned to Canada. My informal archive comprises two file boxes filled with manila folders, each of which contains a collection of letters and is labelled either, “Letters to [name]” or “Letters from [name].” In some cases, the folders also indicate the letter-range (e.g., “Letters from Mom and Dad #1-30”). I kept detailed notes in my journal of when I posted letters and when I received letters, which made it easier, later, to determine how long specific letters had spent in transit.

⁵ Among many other sources, these stood out: Virginia Bell and David Troxel, *The Best Friends Approach to Alzheimer’s Care* (Towson, MD: Health Professions Press, 1997); Joyce Dyer, *In a Tangled Wood: An Alzheimer’s Journey* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1996); Steven R. Sabat, *The Experience of Alzheimer’s Disease: Life through a Tangled Veil* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); Richard Taylor, *Alzheimer’s from the Inside Out* (Baltimore: Health Professions Press, 2007); Peter J. Whitehouse, *The Myth of Alzheimer’s: What You Aren’t Being Told about Today’s Most Dreaded Diagnosis* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2008).

⁶ For example, from Naomi Feil and Vicki de Klerk-Rubin, *The Validation Breakthrough: Simple Techniques for Communicating with People with “Alzheimer’s-Type Dementia,”* 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Health Professions Press, 2002).

⁷ Kylie Cardell and Jane Haggis, “Contemporary Perspectives on Epistolarity,” *Life Writing* 8.2 (2011), 130. See also Liz Stanley, “The Epistolary Gift, the Editorial Third-Party, Counter-Epistolaria: Rethinking the Epistolarium,” *Life Writing* 8.2 (2011), 136; Stanley, “Death of the Letter,” 243.

⁸ The completed project was published as *Bird-Bent Grass: A Memoir, in Pieces* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018).

⁹ It continues to be difficult to pinpoint the origins of dementia’s processes, but it is likely that damage to the brain starts a decade or more before cognitive problems appear. If that is the case, even the last of Mom’s letters, the ones from June 1989, were written before she began experiencing the first early symptoms of Alzheimer’s. “Symptoms and Diagnosis of Alzheimer’s Disease,” National Institute on Aging, <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/what-are-signs-alzheimers-disease>, accessed May 16, 2017.

¹⁰ Some names in this article have been changed.

¹¹ Antje Richter uses the terms “dialogicity” or “reciprocity” to denote textual features that reflect “a writer’s sustained efforts to engage a specific, usually absent addressee.” “Literary Criticism in the Epistolary Mode,” *The Journal of Epistolary Studies* 1.1 (Fall 2019), 9.

¹² Richter, “Literary Criticism,” 9; Altman uses the term “temporal polyvalence” to describe the fact that any epistolary statement is always relative to multiple and sometimes multiplying moments in time: “the actual time that an act

described is performed; the moment when it is written down; the respective times that the letter is despatched, received, read, or reread” (*Epistolarity*, 118).

¹³ Altman, *Epistolarity*, 135.

¹⁴ Cardell and Haggis, “Contemporary Perspectives,” 130.

¹⁵ Liz Stanley and Margaretta Jolly, “Epistolarity: Life after Death of the Letter?” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 32.2 (2017), 230.

¹⁶ Altman, *Epistolarity*, 117.

¹⁷ Altman, *Epistolarity*, 120.

¹⁸ Richter, “Literary Criticism,” 9.

¹⁹ See Feil and de Klerk-Rubin, *The Validation Breakthrough*, 27–48. See also Lynn Casteel Harper, *On Vanishing: Mortality, Dementia, and What It Means to Disappear* (New York: Catapult, 2020).

²⁰ I do not know when my mother would first have read A. M. de Jong’s novel, originally published in 1925. Her copy bears the copyright date 1977, when she would have been 41 years old.

²¹ Annelieke Driessen, “The Dementia Letter Project: Writing Good Futures with Dementia,” *Disruptive Inequalities*, <https://disruptiveinequalities.com/2021/04/14/the-dementia-letter-project-writing-good-futures-with-dementia/>, accessed April 14, 2021; Janelle S. Taylor, “On Recognition, Caring, and Dementia,” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 22.4 (2008), 313–35.

²² I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to both of the anonymous readers of this article for their warm encouragement and for the suggestion that I make more explicit the extent to which my work with my mother was frequently a process of *discovery* rather than a process of remembering.

²³ In addition to Frisian and Dutch, my mother spoke English, German, and French, learning the latter three languages at school beginning in what would have been the equivalent of Grade 7 in Canada. In 1988, she graduated from the University of Winnipeg with a Bachelor of Arts degree, having majored in French.

²⁴ Stanley, “Epistolary Gift,” 140.

²⁵ “*Pake*” is the Frisian word for “grandfather.” My mother and her siblings frequently referred to their parents as “Beppe” and “Pake.”

²⁶ Altman, *Epistolarity*, 92.

²⁷ Mary Fridley and Susan Massad, “Play, Performance and Philosophizing: Social Therapeutics in the Context of Dementia.” Interactive Webinar, March 12, 2021. Recording available at <https://vimeo.com/524024437/af92f25dde>.

²⁸ Casteel Harper, *On Vanishing*, 161–75.

²⁹ MCC is the Mennonite Central Committee, the organization for which I was volunteering.

³⁰ Altman, *Epistolarity*, 88.

³¹ Stanley, “Epistolary Gift,” 141–44.

³² Margaret Lock, *The Alzheimer Conundrum: Entanglements of Dementia and Aging* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 5–8 and 232.

³³ Stanley uses the phrase to describe what it is that catalyzes or produces ordinary letter writing (“Death of the Letter,” 243).

³⁴ Casteel Harper, *On Vanishing*, 84–88.